

*'This book could not be more timely. I believe it to be one of the most important parenting books of our time. If you are a parent, carer, or work with children in any capacity, I would urge you to read it.'*

Rob Parsons OBE, Founder and Chairman, Care for the Family.

*'In the 15 years I have been working with and parenting traumatized children in care, I have seen first hand how vital it is to provide mental health support and to nurture resilience – even for the very youngest of our children. In a post-COVID world, where all children everywhere have experienced trauma, disruption and insecurity to some extent, Katharine Hill's book is more important than ever. It offers so many hopeful and practical ideas, and I commend it warmly.'*

Dr Krish Kandiah, Author, social entrepreneur and Chair of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board.

*'Authoritative and actionable, with every chapter subtly steeped in the science of mental wellbeing and distress, this book breathes confidence into parents that they have what it takes to help their children grow into emotionally healthy adults.'*

Dr Samantha Callan, Director, Family Hubs Network.

*'As a psychologist and a mum, I can confirm the latter is much harder! Reading this is like sitting down with a wonderfully experienced, well informed, beautifully calm and practical friend. Full of practical tips as well as empathy and stories shared by many other parents who have journeyed through things before you, it will help you hold your nerve when times are hard, and give you great ideas for positive steps to open up possibilities and break unhelpful patterns so you can feel more in control and help your children model healthy emotions and learn the skills they need to navigate the complex but exciting world they are growing up in.'*

Dr Kate Middleton, Psychologist and Director of the Mind and Soul Foundation.

*'We have known Katharine for many years and have seen that she has practised what she writes about. Any parent will find her advice easy to read and her practical suggestions difficult to ignore. A Mind of their Own is both important and timely. It is full of ideas that any parent can implement to bring small changes to their family life that can have a huge impact on their child's wellbeing. We recommend it to every parent who wants to help their child develop character, emotional resilience and healthy relationships.'*

Nicky and Sila Lee, co-authors of *The Parenting Book*  
and *The Marriage Book*.

*'It has never been more important to think about children's resilience and wellbeing and this book is a great place to start. Katharine Hill has delved into the psychological literature so that you don't have to. The result is a short and punchy overview of the evidence that stays firmly rooted in the realities of family life. All served up with wisdom, common sense and lots of practical suggestions. What more could you ask for?'*

Glynn Harrison, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry, University of Bristol  
and retired consultant psychiatrist.

A MIND OF  
THEIR OWN





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**THEIR OWN**

KATHARINE HILL



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*For my sister Elisabeth –  
one of the most resilient people I know.*





## FOREWORD

Young people are the future. So how important must it be to make sure they grow up mentally healthy and flourishing? This means both the absence of specific traumas and unnecessary stress, but also the presence of good mental health and an excitement about what lies ahead.

However, what it means to grow up seems to have changed overnight. Much of life now is happening online, especially since the outbreak of COVID-19, and instant accessibility to almost all information humans own poses additional risks. How can we parent in a way that nurtures our children's emotional wellbeing with all this going on?

In this groundbreaking book, Katharine Hill, the UK Director of Care for the Family, brings a fresh and helpful look at how we can best equip our children in this area. In my work, I often see people once they have been mentally ill for some time, and I wonder if things would have been different if they had got help sooner. This book isn't about defining mental illness or how to treat clinical conditions, but it is about key strategies for parents that we know work in the home, at school and in everyday life.

It is also about putting this topic on the table. We can't talk about flourishing families without talking about good mental health. And, once the issue isn't made taboo or treated dismissively, it is much easier for the child or young person to speak up about any struggles they may be having. We cannot have situations where they wonder if their emotions are 'OK' or if the possibility of failure will be allowed.

And finally, it's about being honest with each other, to admit that we are in a new era of parenting, and to commit to journeying with others. The material that Katharine has so helpfully provided in this book is a great place to start.

DR ROB WALLER MA MSc MBCh FRCPsych

Edinburgh, January 2021

*Dr Rob Waller is a Consultant Psychiatrist working for the NHS in Scotland and a Director of The Mind and Soul Foundation.*

## PREFACE

In my work as UK Director of the charity Care for the Family, I have become increasingly aware of the growing pressure on family life today. While media reports of rising referrals and overstretched mental health services are troubling, what has moved my heart to breaking is hearing real-life stories of parents who feel helpless as they watch their happy, easy-going children being overwhelmed by a tsunami of pressure and anxiety. Real concerns about the wellbeing of stressed 6-year-olds and frazzled 15-year-olds are keeping parents up at night.

I began to write this book as a response to that need, wanting to put messages of confidence and hope in parents' hands for the season ahead. That was at the end of 2019.

Enter 2020.

Could anyone have foreseen how quickly the world was about to change? At the beginning of the year, perhaps most of us would not have heard of Wuhan, the city in central China where the pandemic is believed to have originated. But within weeks it seemed to be mentioned in every news bulletin as the COVID-19 virus spread across the world and our lives were turned upside down. 'Social distancing', 'shielding', and 'self-isolation' became household words. Shopping malls emptied, schools and businesses closed, and family life at home 24/7 became the new normal. With the death toll continuing to rise, many are suffering the trauma of losing family members to the disease. And although everyone has been affected,

the pandemic has dealt a very heavy blow to our children's emotional wellbeing, and, in some cases, their already fragile mental health.

As I read through my draft manuscript, I realized two things. The first was that the pandemic has thrown up a whole new set of challenges and pressures for families to navigate, and so I decided to write a special chapter simply focussed on unpacking the impact of COVID-19 on our children's wellbeing. Second, I realized that the principles in this book are timeless. Taken and applied in the context of the pandemic and its aftermath, they will help develop resilience and emotional wellbeing in our children at a time when they need it most.

A 'liminal space' is a phrase used to describe a waiting area between one point in time and space and the next – the threshold between the old season and the new. COVID-19 has catapulted all of us into such a space, unsettling family routines, and forcing us to realign our priorities and recalibrate our lives. For many, it is a difficult space, but it has given us the rare opportunity to take stock of our lives – to pause and think about what things are important to us. In particular, we have the opportunity to consider how, in post-pandemic life, we can prioritize the things that will build our children's emotional resilience and enable them to step into the future with confidence and hope.

KATHARINE HILL

Bristol, January 2021

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This has been a challenging book to write and simply would not have been possible without the wisdom and input of so many people.

First, thank you to Rob Parsons and to Care for the Family's Senior Editor, Sheron Rice. The proverb says 'Iron sharpens iron'; thank you for the vital role you played in the honing process, and Sheron for your superb editing skills.

Thank you to Samantha Callan and to Nick Philps for expertly compiling the research that underpins this book, and Nick also for your careful editing and continual encouragement.

I am grateful to those who read and commented on the manuscript, particularly Rob Waller and Kate Middleton, and to Rob for writing the foreword.

A huge thank you to the wonderful teams at Care for the Family and at Kilfinan Press, and especially to Stephanie Heald.

Thanks also to David McNeill who once again lifts the copy with his great cartoons.

I am especially grateful to those families who so generously shared their experiences of joy and struggle in the ups and downs of family life. I have changed details so you remain anonymous, but your stories make all the difference and ground this book in reality.

And last but by no means least thank you to my own family – Richard, George, Ellie, and Eva, Charlotte, Will, Ezra and Tabitha, Ed, Catriona, Finn, and Henry. The family is the best place to learn so many of life’s lessons, and I love still learning so much from you all!

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*'I don't understand how it was so much better when you were younger AND you think I have it easy?'*





## CHAPTER 1

# YOU WERE NEVER THEIR AGE

It was one of those moments that nobody in the room will forget. A child psychologist was talking to a group of parents about what she was seeing in the young people who came to her for counselling and the special pressures she felt they were under. A woman who had already been pretty vocal in a question-and-answer session suddenly interrupted: ‘I think some of them just need to toughen up a bit,’ she declared. ‘When I was their age ...’

She never did get to finish the sentence because the psychologist put up her hand – a clear signal to her to stop – and said very slowly and deliberately:

‘Madam, you were *never* their age.’

I think the psychologist was right. Behind her words lay the realization that our children are growing up in a fast-changing world, light years away from the one most of us grew up in. Some of the unique pressures they are facing were graphically illustrated in a campaign by The Children’s Society in which an online ‘shop’

displayed objects designed to reflect modern childhood.<sup>1</sup> The iconic items exhibited included a child's stab vest, a self-hate notebook containing dark thoughts, anxiety concealer make-up, and mobile phone cases covered in messages of fear and worry to represent the threat of cyberbullying. That was before the pandemic presented them with the challenge of schools being closed for months, having to deal with online and blended learning and the uncertainty of cancelled exams.

In my work at Care for the Family, every week I hear from parents who are dealing with the challenges – both small and great – of bringing up children in today's world.

- 5-year-old Ben has started school. He's worried about the end of term tests and has started wetting the bed again.
- 9-year-old Rosie sees her dad every weekend but has become clingy and developed a nervous tic since he moved out.
- 11-year-old Andre has been feeling the pressure ever since his mum told him that as a black boy he will need to work harder and play harder than his white friends if he is to succeed in life.
- 12-year-old Kareena is having nightmares about the future of the planet. She campaigns about climate change on social media, joins marches and strikes to demand urgent action, but feels overwhelmed by the scale of the problem.
- 13-year-old Hailey was given a smartphone for her birthday. She knows she doesn't look her best in the photo she's just taken, but she posts it on her social media account anyway. Later, she sees that one of her friends has drawn red rings around her freckles.

<sup>1</sup> Monica Greep, 'Shocking images of children wearing STAB vests over school uniforms sweep social media as part of a hard-hitting charity campaign', *Daily Mail Online*, 31 August 2019, [dailymail.co.uk](http://dailymail.co.uk).

- 14-year-old Mia is confused about her identity and wonders if she may be trans. She is worried about talking to her parents about this. Her friend has started self-harming and said that it helps her feel in control. Yesterday, on the way home from school, Mia bought some razor blades.
- 15-year-old Liane gets together with her friends after the exam and talks about how badly she's done. A few weeks later, she is inconsolable when she misses an A grade by two points.
- 16-year-old Jack is smaller than his peers. He has joined a gym and works out fanatically, obsessing over pictures of bodybuilders on Instagram and spending all of his money on body-building protein shakes.
- 17-year-old Bella is worried about the future and whether she will be able to get a job. She has been told she can do anything, but she feels the pressure to be everything.

While this list is enough to make any parent feel concerned, it's not all bad news. We certainly don't have to stand by helplessly wringing our hands and looking wistfully back to a bygone era. Our children are growing up in a world of incredible opportunity. The digital age means that at the touch of a screen they have access to a world of information and the possibility of connections and relationships across the world. There are increasing opportunities to study, and many young people are far more socially and globally aware than previous generations at a similar age.

The difficulty our children face is how to navigate this complex world full of both opportunity and challenge, potential and risk. In this, we can take heart from the fact that the people most able to help them are us, their parents. But if we are to do this, it's not enough for us to be aware of the potential issues and their impact on mental health. We also need to know what action we can take to help our children be confident, resilient and emotionally healthy adults.

Before considering what, as parents, we can do, let's first take a brief look at the issues and the extent of the problem. Young people's mental health has attracted increasing media focus in the last few years, even before the pandemic. Hardly a week would go by without attention-grabbing news headlines about escalating numbers of children with mental illness:

Young people's mental health is a 'worsening crisis'.<sup>2</sup>

Surge in children seeking mental health support from cash-strapped councils ...<sup>3</sup>

Mental health problems among children have hit 'crisis point', say teachers.<sup>4</sup>

Child mental health unit referrals up nearly 50%.<sup>5</sup>

Ten thousand young people on mental health waiting lists.<sup>6</sup>

Research commissioned by the NHS found that one in eight 5- to 19-year-olds now have at least one mental health disorder. That's at least three in every classroom.<sup>7</sup> Nine out of ten children, some as young as 11, worry about 'adult issues' including climate change, poverty, homelessness, terrorism and inequality; while four in

2 Mary O'Hara, 'Young people's mental health is a "worsening crisis". Action is needed', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2018, guardian.com.

3 Mary Bulman, 'Surge in children seeking mental health support from cash-strapped councils, figures show', *The Independent*, 30 June 2019, independent.co.uk.

4 Amy Packham, 'Mental Health Problems Among Children Have Hit "Crisis Point", Say Teachers', *Huffington Post*, 17 April 2019, huffingtonpost.co.uk.

5 Noel Titheradge and Ed Thomas, 'Child mental health unit referrals up nearly 50%', *BBC News*, 18 July 2019, bbc.co.uk.

6 Katrine Bussey, 'Ten thousand young people on mental health waiting lists', *The Times*, 4 December 2019, thetimes.co.uk.

7 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017', *NHS Digital*, November 2018, digital.nhs.co.uk.

ten add Brexit, sexism and racism to their list.<sup>8</sup> And if that wasn't enough, the impact of the COVID-19 world pandemic has added another layer of deep concern. Although, as yet, the ongoing effects are unknown, they are likely to be part of our children's future.

Moving the lens away from global issues, many of the burdens on young people are much closer to home. Many black and other ethnic minority children and young people have to face particular pressures that society seems powerless to address. A third of 10- to 17-year-olds worry about having enough money in the future, and more than a quarter worry about getting a job.<sup>9</sup> School life focuses on targets and rankings, and life in general has become increasingly competitive – even the fun stuff. It's no longer enough simply to do their best and enjoy life; young people feel under pressure to *be* the best. Add to this the well-documented worries about family breakdown, body image and relationships, and (ironically) mental health – all exacerbated by the pressures of technology and social media – and we have a perfect storm.

The issues are complex, yet it's interesting to note that the rise in anxiety and depression among young people has coincided with the introduction of the smartphone.<sup>10</sup> The digital age has certainly brought us many advantages: at any time of the day or night we can order a pizza, check our bank balance, watch a film, or connect with family and friends. For our young people, the online world is where social dramas are played out, where relationships are built, and a place where they can access support, follow their interests, and discover more about the world.

8 Nigel Barlow, 'Childhood in crisis: Almost two thirds of parents and grandparents say childhood getting worse – and nearly two million children in the UK agree', *Action for Children*, 9 July 2019, [actionforchildren.org.uk](http://actionforchildren.org.uk).

9 'The Good Childhood Report 2020', *The Children's Society*, September 2020, [childrenssociety.org.uk](http://childrenssociety.org.uk).

10 Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (Atria Books, 2017), p111.

But the many advantages of our always-on culture come at a price. Family life is now permeable with 24/7 connectivity bringing real-time news bulletins. And whether it's a suicide bomber at a pop concert, a terrorist attack on London Bridge, images of people fleeing their flooded homes, or footage from hospital wards showing COVID-19 patients struggling to breathe, our children hear and see all the details.

New research has found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the more time young teenagers spend on social media the greater the impact on their mental wellbeing. The Millennium Cohort Study found that the average 13- to 15-year-old spends one to three hours on social media every day.<sup>11</sup> Our brains are highly tuned to social acceptance and rejection, and the need to accumulate likes and followers means that for the first time in history our children have a number allocated to their worth. Social media provides fertile soil for anxiety and other negative emotions, particularly among those who are the most vulnerable to mental health issues. It is ironic that reducing use of social media has been found to make young people feel less lonely.<sup>12</sup>

While many of us will remember that heart-sinking feeling of arriving at school on a Monday morning and realizing we hadn't been included in the weekend trip to town or to the beach, today's child can watch the event unfold in real time, selfie by selfie.

Cyberbullying is prolific. In a YouGov survey of 5,000 children, parents and grandparents, bullying was cited as the biggest impediment to a good childhood as children deal with it both on- and offline.<sup>13</sup> And Instagram magnifies issues surrounding appearance and body image, which, combined with a lack of strong

11 Holly Scott et al, 'Social media use and adolescent sleep patterns: cross-sectional findings from the Millennium Cohort Study', *BMJ Open*, vol.9, no.9, 2019, [bmjopen.com](http://bmjopen.com).

12 Jean M. Twenge, *iGen*, p83.

13 Nigel Barlow, 'Childhood in crisis'.

friendships, are driving factors for plummeting happiness levels – for boys now as well as girls.<sup>14</sup>

This toxic trend of unhappiness was highlighted in ‘The Good Childhood Report’<sup>15</sup> which discovered a significant decrease in average happiness for 10- to 15-year-olds in the UK. It found that our 15-year-olds are among the saddest and least satisfied with their lives in Europe. Julie Bentley, chief executive of the national charity Action for Children, said: ‘The country is sleepwalking into a crisis in childhood, and far from being carefree, our children are buckling under the weight of unprecedented social pressures, [and] global turmoil.’<sup>16</sup>

While we are clearly living in unprecedented times, opinion has been divided on whether there is indeed a mental health epidemic or whether we are, in fact, overreacting and the younger generation simply need to toughen up and stop being snowflakes. Student mental health specialist Dr Dominique Thompson argues that both of these views are unhelpful: ‘There is no epidemic, and the young are not (on the whole) overreacting, but they have been raised in a very different society, and this has led to very different outcomes for them.’<sup>17</sup>

We use the term *emotional wellbeing* to refer to the quality of our emotional experience – the barometer of how we think, feel and relate to others and also to ourselves. Our emotional wellbeing affects how we see and understand the world, and it is an important part of our overall health. People who are emotionally healthy are able to cope with life’s challenges, keep problems in perspective and bounce back from setbacks. Poor emotional wellbeing, on the other hand, is related to mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression, which can also affect our overall physical health and

14 Gabriella Swerling, ‘Social media and body image are making our children the unhappiest for 25 years’, *The Telegraph*, 28 August 2019, telegraph.co.uk.

15 ‘The Good Childhood Report’ 2020.

16 Nigel Barlow, ‘Childhood in crisis.’

17 Dominique Thompson and Fabienne Vailes, *How to Grow a Grown Up: Prepare your teen for the real world*, (Ebury Digital, 2019), p246.

set back the emotional growth of young children, stopping them from making friends, taking part in social activities, sitting exams successfully and fulfilling their potential.

When our children are little, we encourage their physical growth and take precautions to keep them safe. We limit sugar and encourage healthy eating, establish appropriate bedtimes, regulate screen time, install stair gates, child locks and car seats, and teach them to swim and to cross the road safely. And it's important to be equally intentional about helping them grow emotionally strong and healthy. Just as they get a few bumps and bruises on the outside, they will inevitably get a few knocks inside as well.

Of course, there are no guarantees. Mental ill health can occur for all kinds of reasons, and if we suspect that our children are suffering from serious anxiety or depression, or that they are at risk of self-harm, it's important to seek the advice of a GP or other professional.

Before we begin, let me make two general observations. First, research underpins this book and I have used scientific evidence in relation to the brain to illustrate particular points. However, it's important to acknowledge that scientists have been trying to understand how the brain works for centuries; it's an extraordinary organ and we are still far from fully understanding its complexity.

Second, I have written this book to help all parents and children, but I am very aware of the extra and complex challenges of families where there are children with additional needs and where parents are dealing with other very difficult parenting issues. At Care for the Family, in our projects to encourage and support parents of children with additional needs, I am continually humbled and inspired by their courage, strength and resilience. My hope and prayer is that you are able to take and apply the principles of the book in a way that meets the needs of your individual family.

Along with key principles for parents with regard to nurturing their child's resilience, this book gives parents messages that we can pass on to our children. Weaving these messages into our children's



consciousness can buffer them against life's challenges and build a solid foundation of emotional wellbeing.

Our goal isn't to bring up children; it is to bring up adults who are confident, resilient and secure in their identity – adults who have *a mind of their own*. And we – their parents – are well placed to do this. Libraries of research demonstrate that we really are the biggest influence on their lives.

We have everything to play for!