Hothouse Parents, Shrinking Violets

"A Nation of Wimps" by Hara Estroff Marano, in *Psychology Today* (Nov.–Dec. 2004), 115 E. 23rd St., 9th fl., New York, N.Y. 10010.

"Get off my back!" was once just lip from a defiant kid. Now those huffy words have the backing of psychologists. "Hothouse parenting" is harming a generation of children, asserts *Psychology Today* editor Marano.

Today's controlling baby-boomer parents aren't willing to let their children deal with the mess of life without constant intervention. "With few challenges all their own, kids are unable to forge their creative adaptations to the normal vicissitudes of life," Marano writes. "That not only makes them risk-averse, it makes them psychologically fragile, riddled with anxiety. In the process they're robbed of identity, meaning and a sense of accomplishment, to say nothing of a shot at real happiness. Forget, too, about perseverance. . . . Whether we want to or not, we're on our way to creating a nation of wimps."

The result is evident in new levels of psychological distress among the young. Depression was once a malady chiefly of middle age, but during the 1990s children's rates of depression surpassed those of people over 40. And in 1996, anxiety overtook traditional—and more developmentally appropriate—relationship issues as the most common problem among college students. Binge drinking, substance abuse, self-mutilation, anorexia, and bulimia afflict college campuses with new intensity. Marano sees the cell phone as a particular culprit: This "virtual umbilical cord" connects kids directly with Mom and Dad well into their college years, infantilizing them and keeping them in a permanent state of dependency.

The "fragility factor" is incubated at young ages. Harvard University psychologist Jerome Kagan found that about 20 percent of babies are born with a high-strung temperament, detectable even in the womb by a fast pulse. But some overexcitable kids can grow up with normal levels of anxiety—if their parents back off while they're very young. For the vast majority of kids, who fall somewhere between invulnerable to anxiety and very fearful, overprotective parenting can be the decisive factor.

Yet a third of parents pack their young ones off to school with sanitizing gels. They pursue learning-disorder diagnoses so their kids can take tests—including the SAT—with no time limits. Play is so scripted that kids lack the know-how to conduct a neighborhood pick-up game, sans shouted instructions and coordinated uniforms. Recess has been scotched altogether at more than 40,000 U.S. schools.

Marano blames hothouse parenting on adults' perception that the playground is as cutthroat as the boardroom. Perfectionism rules the roost, and parents can't refrain from mother-hen behavior long enough to let kids puzzle through math homework or tie a shoe by themselves.

Without breathing room, kids are simply taking longer to grow up, tacking on their "playtime" in their twenties and waiting to achieve classic benchmarks of adulthood such as a steady job, marriage, and parenting. In other words, playtime needs to happen on the playground, even if it means the indulgence of an occasional skinned knee.

America the Ordinary

"American Exceptionalism Revisited" by Daniel T. Rodgers, in *Raritan* (Autumn 2004), 31 Mine St., New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

As the United States embarks on a campaign to promote freedom and democracy around the world, the idea of "American exceptionalism" has come back into parlance. To many academic historians, however, it's an idea whose time has passed.

"Anticipations of escape from ordinary history run deep in the American past," as far