Teen Empowerment Can Help Combat the Youth Mental Health Crisis

Kerry McDonald

August 27, 2022

Many children and teenagers were struggling emotionally before 2020, but the lockdowns, school closures, and overall societal disruption over the past two-plus years have left more of them confronting widespread anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

The CDC reported earlier this year that the number of adolescent girls who were visiting hospital emergency room departments for mental health conditions rose dramatically since 2019, with more girls experiencing anxiety, depression, eating disorders, tics, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors. Emergency room mental health visits for adolescent girls rose 31 percent in the fall of 2020 compared to 2019. Increases in pediatric emergency room mental health visits have remained steady into 2022, even as COVID policies relaxed and schools reopened. According to the CDC, "visits for overall MHCs among all children and adolescents accounted for a larger proportion of all pediatric visits during 2020, 2021, and January 2022 than during 2019."

This trend has continued throughout 2022, with a separate March CDC study finding that more than 40 percent of high school students reported feeling "persistently sad or hopeless" within the last year. And in June, a *Boston Globe* article reported that at one large regional hospital system

in Massachusetts, "almost all of the pediatric emergency beds were occupied by children who were suicidal."

To combat this surging mental health crisis among children and teens, President Biden announced during his State of the Union Address in March that he would launch a national initiative to address declining youth mental health. Last month, his administration added to this plan by allocating the first $300 million toward school mental health programs. Some governors are following suit, with California Governor Gavin Newsom announcing last week his administration's "Master Plan for Kids' Mental Health," that will cost taxpayers $4.5 billion.

Activating the government to solve a problem that the government was at least partially responsible for exacerbating will not fix the youth mental health crisis.

Let's not forget that California closed their playgrounds in 2020 over fear of coronavirus spread, and filled skateboard parks with sand to prevent their use, even as Governor Newsom dined maskless with a gaggle of supporters at the upscale French Laundry restaurant. Children were prevented from playing and teenagers were prevented from interacting with their peers, negatively impacting normal child and adolescent development and contributing to worsening mental health disorders.

Additionally, using schools as a primary government tool for alleviating the youth mental health crisis, as the Biden Administration is doing, could make matters worse. As Boston College psychology professor Peter Gray has repeatedly said, schools are often the main source of youth anxiety and depression.

Many children and adolescents are ailing now, but more government is not the cure. Decentralized, bottom-up solutions are more likely to tackle the problem efficiently and successfully. One example of a bottom-up solution to restoring teen mental health and well-being is the work that Lainie Liberti does. An adolescent life coach, author, and longtime self-directed

education advocate, Liberti works closely with teens to provide them with tools for self-inquiry and reflection that enable them to regain agency and independence, discover their passions and purpose, and feel more confident on their pathway toward adulthood.

Liberti was my guest on this week's episode of the LiberatED podcast and we talked about the emotional struggles that many teens are confronting, as well as her new book, *Seen, Heard & Understood: Parenting & Partnering with Teens for Greater Mental Health*.

In terms of worsening teen mental health, "the big change was the restrictions due to the pandemic," said Liberti. "I talk about the Covid trauma train, especially to a teen and those that are older teens that are physically, biologically, socially, and mentally preparing to launch in a time where the world doesn't support that. Financially it's very difficult because the economy has changed so much, and the restrictions of being able to get out and test their independence, it's just made that virtually impossible."

Helping teens regain greater control over their lives and learning can alleviate those "persistently sad or hopeless" feelings that so many teenagers have been experiencing. Liberti believes there are a lot of things we as parents can do to reinforce a message of youth empowerment and agency, beginning with recognizing that some of the adolescent qualities we may find difficult, such as defiance of authority and a proclivity toward risk-taking, can be strengths if we support and encourage our teens in meaningful ways.

Many children and teens are struggling now with poor mental health and they need help. Creative, personalized, bottom-up solutions, especially those focused on individual empowerment and agency, are likely to help them heal faster and better than top-down government programs.

Kerry McDonald is a Senior Education Fellow at FEE and host of the weekly LiberatED podcast. She is also the author of Unschooled: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom (Chicago Review Press, 2019), an adjunct

scholar at the Cato Institute, and a regular Forbes contributor. Kerry has a B.A. in economics from Bowdoin College and an M.Ed. in education policy from Harvard University. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts with her husband and four children.