

# WOUNDED CHILDREN, BROKEN ADULTS

## 受傷的孩子和壞掉的大人

*As school environments change, so do the burdens that fall on students' shoulders. High expectations and the stimulus of the digital age mean many young people are born into an "age of powerlessness" that traps them in patterns of negative behavior. But helping our children requires saving ourselves first.*

As author Chen Chih-Heng astutely points out, raising children is hard because "everyone knows the problems, but no one knows the solutions." Apathy, insolence, reclusion, and other difficult child behaviors are familiar to every parent, but the unique pressures of today's school environment can make it very difficult for parents and children to bridge the knowledge gap. So we end up talking past our children, teaching them inappropriately or even abusively, all while our children are silently learning from our very imperfect example.

In *Wounded Children, Broken Adults* Chen Chih-Heng employs over a decade of firsthand experience as a school counselor to describe in plain language the trials that today's children are facing at school and at home, and how parental guidance can intensify or ameliorate the effects of that experience. Excessive schoolwork and testing burdens plus authoritarian, fear-based parenting teach children to turn off their creative minds, engage as little as possible, and steal rest whenever they can, all while setting them up to enforce those same standards as adults.

Chen reminds us: helping our children primarily involves helping and improving ourselves. We model engagement, curiosity, and fluent communication to inspire it in them. We show them how to pause, how to appreciate the present moment, and how to pursue ideas. Then we give them the power to make their own decisions and opportunities to earn our trust.



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## Chen Chih-Heng 陳志恆

After more than ten years of experience as a high school counselor, Chen decided to apply his understanding of the school environment to the other half of the home-school balance. He is now a professional psychiatric counselor for parents who are having difficulty raising their children.

# WOUNDED CHILDREN, BROKEN ADULTS

By Chen Chih-Heng

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#### **Chapter 1: An Age of Powerlessness?**

Out of curiosity, I once asked a child obsessed with online games what he found fun about them.

He enthusiastically told me about several games: what was special about each one, and how to beat it. It was clear these games gave him a sense of achievement. Then, abruptly, he lowered his head and gazed blankly at the floor, no longer excited.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “What are you thinking about?”

“I’m fine!” he told me.

I pushed him. “Your head’s down, and you look unhappy. What’s wrong?”

He hesitated, then said: “Well... I don’t know how to say it, I mean, I don’t actually think online games are that much fun. It’s exciting at first when you’re making progress, but then it gets boring.” He went on: “So sometimes I wonder if I should just stop playing?”

When I was in senior high school, our whole class spent the run-up to the university entrance exams buried in our books, preparing for what we knew would be an arduous test. Once lessons ended, the classroom would fall silent: we were either looking over our textbooks or slumped on our desks, catching up on sleep.

One day we were disturbed by a noise from outside: a student outside our room was rushing down the stairs, flip-flops slapping against the soles of his feet, making no effort to keep quiet.

One of my classmates woke up and stormed out onto the stairs, where he grabbed the offending student and punched him in the face. The flip-flop wearer was small and the blow sent him sprawling to the floor, from which point he looked up at his assailant in confusion, blood flowing from his nose.

My classmate shouted at the victim: “Do you have to make so much noise going down the stairs? You know people are trying to sleep?”

Unwilling to submit, the other boy clutched his nose and shot back: “What business of yours is it how I go down the stairs!? If you want to sleep, go home!”

The two 17-year-olds hurled abuse back and forth at the top of their lungs until both ended up in the principal’s office.

## **Powerless Children**

I often run weekend workshops at school for the children. If the space we're using allows them to sit on the floor they'll start off sitting upright, then slowly become horizontal. Add in some light background music and their eyes will gradually close.

If I ask why they seem so tired, they tell me it is because they really are that tired.

And I'm sure they are exhausted. Junior and senior high school students are constantly losing sleep because of academic pressure, which makes them physically tired. Yet they are also emotionally tired.

Long-term observation of the school environment has brought me to this conclusion: *Children today appear to be living in an "age of powerlessness." Though society is becoming more diverse and open and curriculums are being constantly rewritten to include new innovations, yet in their inner world, children feel almost utterly powerless.* I often ask myself why this is.

Chronic feelings of powerlessness can produce certain consequences in the long term, such as:

### **1. Desensitization to Novelty**

Many teachers point out that students are becoming more and more demanding. Even the newest and most engaging of lessons may fail to get their attention, activities which aren't novel and entertaining enough meet with a lack of interest, and guest speakers without some unique selling point are ignored.

Make them happy this time, and you'll need to try even harder the next. *Children are searching for intense external stimulation instead of settling down to study and learn, and thereby experience the joy of acquiring new knowledge and understanding.*

### **2. The Boredom Syndrome**

I've heard more than one internet-gaming-obsessed child say the games aren't actually that much fun: they might be hugely exciting in the first stages of progress, but after a while they become dull.

With some children, you just can't find anything they're particularly interested in. They seem numb and incurious to all aspects of their lives. The bulk of their time is spent completing tasks set by their teachers, or either idling, daydreaming or sitting mindlessly in front of one screen or another.

It is no surprise that the most common utterances we hear from these children are "not bad," "all right," "never mind," "don't know," and "whatever."

### **3. More Thinking Than Doing**

The teenage years should be when a child's dreams take shape. Though children often admire those who pursue their dreams and may think about doing so themselves, they rarely do.

They appear unmotivated, unwilling to explore the world and rarely organizing activities. *In the end they may even stop thinking about it, as they don't believe they are capable.*

For example, many senior high students want more than anything else to know what their “direction in life” is, yet are unwilling to think proactively about it. They tell me: “Even if I knew, I might not be able to make it happen, so I just don’t think about it.”

### **Busy Schedules**

So what is it about their situations that has left children of this “age of powerlessness” feeling unenthusiastic about the world, incurious and unmotivated – or even without self-confidence.

The focus on entering higher education means that study is the leading source of stress for children. *Despite countless reforms and improvements to the system, there are still countless tests to take and homework tasks to complete.* And even now many teachers continue to have students copy texts as a form of learning.

Schools need to offer various ways of studying in order to foster a wider range of abilities and qualities in children. This means children today have to participate in extracurricular activities which would have been unimaginable to the previous generation of students.

The children simply don’t have the energy to meet the demands placed upon them, either inside or outside of the classroom. Inevitably they appear uninterested and exhausted, and of course are unable to venture out into the world.

### **No Sense of Control**

If their lives are already full of obligatory activities, all equally important, how much time do our children have left for making their own plans?

Apropos of time management, I often find that it isn’t that children are unable to do it, they simply don’t have any time left to manage.

We want children to take the initiative and have creative ideas, yet we constantly impose our schedules on them. When children lose all sense of control over their lives they stop resisting and become numb. Why think of changing things if you know you can’t?

### **The Consequences of Teaching through Fear**

The elder generation suffered as they grew up, and so use fear as a whip to drive their children forward. *Their children will therefore do things not because they want to, but to avoid the consequences of their parents’ threats. This is “teaching through fear.”*

*“If you don’t... (do something), then... (dire consequences).”*

We’re all very familiar with statements such as these, and over time, children internalize this mode of thinking. They tell themselves there’s no point in enthusiasm or in maintaining hope or dreams; all one can do is desperately try to avoid failure, unemployment, mockery, being ignored, or any other unpleasant end.

*When children feel they can’t do things, that they can’t achieve things, they naturally become unmotivated. It’s not that they lack dreams – they just don’t dare to think about their dreams.*

### **Taking Back Control through Anger**

Worryingly, as children become numb they also fail to respond to setbacks, hardship, and injustice. Their silent mantra becomes: “Don’t worry. If you don’t think about it, it’s not a problem.”

But we all know that *refusing to acknowledge our emotions does not free us from them. Our children store up anger until something triggers an outburst.*

We often see usually calm students suddenly lose control over some small issue, screaming and provoking to teachers and classmates. The more powerless someone feels inside, the more they need to use their voice, anger, and body to affirm their power – this is the only way to exercise control over their lives.

### **More Choice, More Pauses, More Calm**

If you’re a parent or teacher, you might be feeling helpless by this point. That’s normal: we all know what the problem is, but not the solution. Adults often find ourselves constrained and exhausted by the trials of daily life.

But we can still choose not to pass that sense of powerlessness on to our children. While changing the current system might be difficult, there are several ways we can help them.

*Give children more choices and greater decision-making power over their own lives, and let them earn more trust.*

*Teach children to give as well as take. Slow down and make more time in busy schedules for resting, rather than blindly cramming the diary with activities.*

*Teach children to calm themselves and engage with their senses, keeping their faculties of sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch sharp; to reconnect the internal and external worlds, and to notice and appreciate the beauty in every moment.*

*Encourage children to listen to their hearts, to dream big and then pursue those dreams without worrying about what others will think.*