



Sanitized Generation: Gen-S

On clean childhoods, rough worlds, and the training a human being needs

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Uncompressed Thinking

Opening Note

I was reading this article in *WSJ* a couple of weeks ago, “Healing the Invisible Scars of Gen Z’s Over-Sanitized World,” and was stricken by an analogy of the subject with something bothering me for a long time, something very similar while worlds different in space and time — my childhood in the Soviet Union. The article itself was medical, or at least began there. But very quickly it opened into something larger, and I felt it at once. It touched a nerve.

Then another article appeared, also in *WSJ*: “A Former Navy SEAL on How to Raise Confident, Risk-Taking Kids.” That second one moved me to sit down and write. It approached the same matter from a different direction, from a more “physical” side, one may say, but ideologically just as important. One article was about immune systems, microbiomes, inflammation, and a generation growing up too biologically clean. The other was about parenting, risk, confidence, discipline, and children not being allowed enough contact with hardship, mess, and consequence. To me they converged almost perfectly. One of them says, almost in passing but not really in passing, that “my

generation is in trouble.” That line stayed with me, because the problem described there is medical, but the feeling behind it is much larger.

I am writing this not as a sociological treatise and not as an attack on hygiene, medicine, or reasonable safety. That would be foolish. Antibiotics save lives. Clean water saves lives. Safer childhood conditions save lives. But there is another question here, and it is not a small one. What happens when protection is no longer a practical measure against serious harm, but becomes a full philosophy of childhood? What happens when the child is not only protected from disaster, which is good, but also protected from roughness, friction, managed danger, physical challenge, and the ordinary mess of real life? What happens then to the immune system, and what happens to the soul?

This subject feels personal to me. I feel strongly about it. I would like my children to read this, and perhaps one day pass it on to their children. Because beneath the medical details and beneath the parenting advice there is, I think, a very old human question: how does a human being become strong, not in the brutal sense, but in the alive sense — resilient, proportionate, capable, not easily shattered, not easily inflamed, not defeated by the normal roughness of life?

The Core Idea

This essay argues that two very different modern concerns — the weakening of the human microbiome in over-sanitized biological environments, and the weakening of human resilience in overprotected social environments — are not identical in substance, but may be strikingly similar in process. The first WSJ article describes a young man whose near-fatal childhood infection, heavy antibiotic treatment, later inflammation, and research into microbiome decline led him to a broader concern about his generation’s health and its difficulty dealing with messiness. The second article, through the voice of a former Navy SEAL, argues from a parenting perspective that confident children are not formed by comfort alone, and that some hardship, some dirt, some consequences, and some real challenge are necessary to build character.

My position is that these two lines of thought converge to one conclusion. Human systems are trained by contact with reality. Immune systems learn through exposure. Judgment learns through risk. Courage learns through manageable danger. Social intelligence learns through friction. Resilience learns through recovery. A childhood stripped too clean — biologically, physically, socially, and emotionally — may produce not a stronger human being, but a more fragile one. Not because the young are inferior, but because the field of training has been over-sanitized. Thus, Gen-S: Sanitized Generation.

Some Background

When I was growing up in the 1950’s, the world provided us, the kids, with a great many experiences unfiltered through the eyes of safety, and yes, with risks: at play, on the streets, in our street games and fights, in rough interactions with other kids, often older kids. To survive and

establish your little zone of relative personal safety and comfort, you had to be alert, responsive, physically capable, and socially awake. You had to read danger. You had to know when to move forward and when to step aside. You had to notice tone, body language, numbers, speed, mood. Nobody gave you a seminar on this. Life itself was the seminar.

The playgrounds had equipment long gone now, and perhaps rightly gone in some cases. There were see-saws. There were giant steps — a long rope connected to the top of a high pole; you grabbed it and ran around the pole making huge steps and flying pretty high and pretty fast, landing not always gently. Very rarely were we seriously hurt. Somehow we knew how to handle that exhilarating fun with minimal harm. You had to be fast and strong, and daring. But what breathtaking fun it was. Night games with your friends, hours on end. Whole evenings of movement, shouting, hiding, chasing, laughing, testing yourself and testing each other. Parents were busy too; services were close to nonexistent. And yes, it was in the former Soviet Union at that.

School? Of course. A half-hour walk in winter, carrying your bag and a small portable inkpot, always leaking in your bag and on your books and notebooks. And on the way you had to walk through some neighborhoods “owned” by local kids, not always friendly. Even geography was social. One street was one thing, the next street another. You learned quickly that a child lives not in abstract “society” but in concrete territory, with concrete faces, moods, and pecking orders.

Bacteria and viruses? Plenty. Scratches and cuts? Plenty. Antibiotics were getting around, but the main medicine for our frequent scratches and cuts was iodine solution, burning the skin and leaving long-lasting brown marks on the skin. The immune system was busy learning non-stop. Looking back, I can still see those brown stains. They were ugly, they stung, and they passed. But they were also part of a world in which the body, like the person, was constantly meeting reality and adjusting to it.

Now, I am not romanticizing all of this. The old world had needless roughness in it, indifference in it, and unfairness in it. I do not want serious infection back. I do not want children neglected. I do not want stupidity dressed up as toughness. That is not what I am saying. But I am saying something else, and I think it matters. A living system is not formed by protection alone. That applies to the body, and I suspect it applies to the human being as a whole.

The First Parallel

That is why the first *WSJ* article hit me so strongly. The author, Nathan Shatz, writes about almost dying at eight years old from necrotizing fasciitis, about surgery, about antibiotics that saved his life but may also have devastated the microbial ecosystem he had been building since birth, and about the long aftermath — inflammation, strange chronic problems, skin trouble, and the sense that something deeper had been disturbed. He contrasts his generation with parents and grandparents who had run barefoot outside and exposed themselves to the kinds of things that helped form a richer microbiome. He points to the rise of allergies and chronic inflammation in the young, and then, importantly, he extends the issue beyond biology into a wider mood of defeatism and

fragility. Later, as a student, he even sampled bacteria from classmates' faces and found skin microbiomes, as he puts it, **"stripped of diversity."** That image stayed with me. Reduced. Thinned out. Undertrained.

And here, immediately, came the parallel that had been bothering me for a long time.

What if the same thing is happening socially?

What if children growing up in a super-protective, no-risk, socially "sterile" environment are being formed in a way analogous to immune systems raised in environments too clean, too controlled, too poor in challenge and diversity? Physical confrontations, rough games, unmanaged danger, unsupervised negotiation with other kids, independent movement through space, real-life consequences — are you serious? The child must be watched, padded, guided, protected, escorted, emotionally buffered, pre-explained, and reassured. The whole environment must be controlled. The edges must be rounded off. The roughness must be removed.

But if the immune system is trained by exposure, what trains courage? What trains judgment? What trains the ability not to panic? What trains the child to distinguish between discomfort and damage, between fear and danger, between insult and catastrophe, between a bruise and a wound? Not every challenge is trauma. Not every risk is abuse. Not every roughness is harmful. Some roughness trains. Some danger trains. Some boredom trains. Some conflict trains. Some falling down trains. A child who never meets anything hard except in abstract language may become very articulate about difficulty and very weak in front of it.

That old childhood, for all its defects, trained proportion. You learned how much fear belongs to a given situation. You learned how much pain can be tolerated. You learned that embarrassment passes. You learned that some bigger kid's threat is serious and some is theater. You learned how to recover, how to rejoin the game, how not to make everything final. The world was not soft, but it was very educational.

From Another Direction

And then, as if to underline the point from a second direction, comes the other *WSJ* article, this time through the voice of a former Navy SEAL. He tells a story about his small son wanting to jump into a dirty mud puddle and his own first instinct being the usual modern one — don't you dare. Then he checks himself and realizes that what he really wants is to raise a child who jumps into mud puddles, because that is a joyful, confident child who wants to **"jump into life."** That line is simple, but it says a great deal. He is not talking about recklessness. He is talking about appetite for life. He is talking about a child not already overmanaged out of spontaneity and nerve.

He goes further. **"Some hardship builds character,"** he says. He says the world is tough and not always fair, and children have to learn to deal with that. He distinguishes discipline from punishment, which I think is an important distinction. Punishment comes from the parent's emotional reaction; discipline comes from thought and consequence. He says not to bluff, because

children know when you are bluffing. He says some successful parents love their children very much but give in too much, or focus on career and outsource the actual work of parenting, and then wonder why their children are drifting in dark directions. He says some parents need, in effect, a splash of water in the face. Again, this is not Soviet street life, not at all, and it is not a microbiome paper either. But ideologically it arrives at the same place. The child cannot be developed in a vacuum of ease.

The World We Give Children Now

There is another layer to this, and it makes the whole thing even more troubling. Today's children are not only protected from many older forms of roughness; they are often overexposed to newer, more poisonous forms of pressure. Less rough play, but more screen pressure. Less real-world conflict with clear boundaries, but more digital judgment without boundaries. Less walking through actual neighborhoods, more living inside endless invisible ones. Less healthy training, more unhealthy stimulation. In that sense, the trade is terrible. We remove some of the older local, physical, manageable difficulties that built proportion, and replace them with chronic nervous exposure that builds anxiety but not strength.

The old street could frighten you, but it had shape. It was local. It ended. The new environment often follows the child into the room, into the hand, into the nervous system. So we are doing two things at once: we are undertraining the child in one sense and overloading the child in another. Physically overprotected, mentally overflooded. Cleaner skin perhaps, but deeper invisible irritation.

I am aware that some will hear all this as nostalgia. It is not. I do not wish for my grandchildren an exact copy of my childhood. I do not want them crossing hostile neighborhoods in the Soviet winter with leaking inkpots. I do not want flesh-eating bacteria or careless medicine or neglected suffering. But I do want them to be formed as human beings, not merely maintained as protected organisms. I want them to know dirt, manageable risk, consequence, recovery, and the deep confidence that comes from discovering that the world is not perfectly soft and that they, too, are not made of glass.

This, finally, is what I think the two articles together are really saying, though in different languages. The first says that a body raised too clean may become biologically less ready. The second says that a child raised too carefully may become personally less ready. Different substance. Same pattern. Same, otherwise.

And I am sounding an alarm here. Because I think we are overdoing it. I think we are protecting away the training. I think we are making a basic mistake in understanding what development is. We increasingly assume that if an experience is unpleasant, risky, muddy, physically demanding, socially unmanaged, or emotionally hard, then it is probably harmful and should be reduced. But life does not work that way. An organism, and perhaps a person no less, develops not under conditions of total sterility but under conditions of living contact.

For Our Children

I would like my children to hear me clearly on this point. Do not confuse a protected child with a developed child. Do not confuse cleanliness with strength. Do not confuse comfort with readiness. Love your children, of course. Protect them from serious harm, of course. But let them meet the world. Let them climb, fail, wait, recover, get bored, get dirty, hear “no,” deal with consequences, feel small fears and overcome them, handle small conflicts without immediate adult occupation of the field. Let them develop an immune system for life, not only for disease.

Otherwise, we may continue producing what I have come to think of as Gen-S — the Sanitized Generation. Not bad, not inferior, not morally lesser. Simply sanitized: biologically, socially, psychologically. And I am not at all sure that human beings are meant to be formed under such conditions.

Closing Reflection

There are, to my mind, two parallels here for humans and immune systems, medical and social, eerily similar. A biologically over-sanitized environment may leave the immune system less diverse, less seasoned, less ready. A socially over-sanitized environment may leave the child less seasoned, less proportionate, less ready as well. One concern comes from the body, the other from the formation of character. Different in substance, very close in process.

That is why these two articles stayed with me, and why my own childhood came rushing back while I was reading them. They converged to one position. Human beings need protection, yes, but they also need training. They need hygiene, but not sterility as a worldview. They need love, but not a padded exile from reality. If we forget that, the marks may not be as visible as the brown iodine stains of my childhood. They may be cleaner, more polite, more modern, more approved. But they may also be deeper, and much harder to heal.