Our Mental Health Crisis is a Heart Issue


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Jill Garner | Manners of the Heart

COMMENTARY

Something is terribly wrong.

We see it in the rising rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-harm, addiction, violence, and suicide among our children. In every category of well-being, statistics show today's children are in trouble. We see it in classrooms marked by disrespect and emotional fragility. We see it in families struggling to hold relationships together, and in a culture increasingly defined by anger, division, and despair.

No one disputes that a crisis exists. The evidence is painful and overwhelming. From the emptiness of poverty to the excess of privilege, our children are suffering.

We have chased a solution for decades. Why then, after pouring unprecedented resources into the problem, are children not getting better?

We Are Not Unaware of the Problem

We've studied it. Diagnosed it. Labeled it. Medicated it. Funded it. Legislated it. Normalized it. Destigmatized it. And yet the numbers continue to move in the wrong direction.

Children are more anxious than ever. More confused. More discouraged. More hopeless. Lonelier, even though they're connected 24/7.

The prevailing explanation is that we are facing a mental health crisis. Certainly, the mental and emotional struggles of today's children are real and deserve our compassion and attention. But what if mental health is not the root issue?

What if we have misdiagnosed the *symptoms* as the underlying disease?

The Underdeveloped Heart

I believe we are witnessing the consequences of a heart crisis.

For generations, we have invested tremendous effort in educating young minds — while neglecting the formation of their hearts. We teach children what to think but spend far less time teaching them how to live. Schools prioritize information over wisdom. Parents cultivate self-esteem rather than self-respect. Society pushes children to succeed without significance.

The modern approach has failed. Armed with good intentions, we have created a "Formation Gap" in America's youth — a devastating divide between intellectual development and heart development. A gap between head knowledge and heart formation. A gap between the problem and the solution.

We must face the fact that more time, effort, and dollars spent on programs and new therapies is just more time, effort, and money invested in the problem, not the solution. We must fill the Formation Gap.

I'm angry that children are hurting. We look past the answer that is right in front of us yet continue to be surprised by their misery.

The truth is...

- Knowledge can tell a child how to make a living but not how to make a life.
- Knowledge can teach a child to compete but not how to consider others.
- Knowledge can increase capability but not how to love.

A child may know advanced mathematics, master technology, and excel academically without acquiring the skills that truly keep him afloat. Academics alone will never produce self-control that governs impulses, resilience that endures hardship, humility that honors correction, or moral courage that withstands worldly pressure. It is only through the intentional formation of a child's heart that such fruit can be cultivated.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, “To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to produce a menace to society.” And I would add, a menace to himself.

In his book “The Abolition of Man,” C.S. Lewis similarly argued that omitting moral values from education simply produces “clever devils” rather than good citizens. From streetwise kids who steal to book-smart kids who scam, I call these kids “brilliant monsters.” On either side of the pendulum, heart needs are not being met, which is yielding young adults with cold stone hearts.

The Solution Is in the Education of the Heart

Scripture has always placed the heart at the center of our being. “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Proverbs 4:23). Everything. Not some things. Not a few things. Everything.

This biblical understanding of the heart challenges our contemporary approach to cultural and behavioral issues. While our society often concentrates on controlling thoughts, Scripture emphasizes shaping the heart, because the condition of the heart ultimately determines the course of a life.

Our attitudes, choices, relationships, words, and actions flow from the content of the heart. Jesus taught, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45).

This truth should cause us to pause.

The Cure

Paul David Tripp said it best, “An effective cure is always attached to an accurate diagnosis.” The correct diagnosis? It’s a heart issue. Nothing changes until the heart changes.

The crisis before us is not primarily educational, political, social, or even psychological. It is a crisis of formation.

A crisis of the heart.

Perhaps the most important question facing our nation is not how much our children know, but who they are becoming.

For parents, educators, pastors, and leaders, this truth carries an important lesson. Information alone is not enough. Knowledge without wisdom can be dangerous. Intellectual development without moral and spiritual formation leaves the heart unguarded and underdeveloped.

Closing the formation gap begins by recognizing that lasting change does not start with policies, programs, or punishments. It begins within the heart of a child. The future of our nation will not be determined by the intelligence of the next generation, but by the wisdom that governs it.

If we don’t close the gap, our children won’t have a future.

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Jill Garner, author, speaker, and founder of *Manners of the Heart*, has devoted more than two decades to restoring respect and cultivating character in the next generation. Through her groundbreaking approach to *Heart Education*, she equips parents, educators, and churches to reach beyond outward behavior to shape the hearts of children. Jill's parenting books include *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* and *StrongHeart: Cultivating humility, respect, and resiliency in your child.*

In her thought-provoking series, *The Formation Gap*, Jill boldly challenges the cultural assumptions shaping today's children and families—from the loss of manners and morals to the dangers of a self-esteem-centered culture. With biblical conviction and practical wisdom, she calls us back to a timeless truth: The content of the heart determines what we think, say, and do. To change our culture, we must first change our hearts.

Learn more at mannersoftheheart.org and jillgarnercontent.org.