

You're a total mess!

Do we encourage or repress spontaneity in young people?

It's an embarrassing word: "You're making a mess.... You're so messed up... You look a mess.... Your work's messy.... You're messing up.... Your bedroom's a total mess...." It's a word that provokes primitive anxieties in all of us, taking us back to infancy when we made messes all the time until we learned to clear up our messes and not make them in the first place. It's a word used reproachfully by people who are kind to us and as an insult by people who are not. We're haunted by the messes we've made in our lives, by the ways we messed up relationships and opportunities: precious things now lost to us. At worst, the prospect of ever making a mess of something puts us off trying in the first place because we dread having to revisit old feelings of humiliation and uselessness, of being incompetent, of being a child.

Inevitably, young people have strong feelings about mess, accusing others of making messes in order to deflect attention from their own capacity to do the same. To some extent, their anxieties about mess and messiness are implied in relation to food. Whereas babies are messy with food, spitting it out, choking on it, smearing it around, refusing to eat it or wanting more and more of it, the behaviour of young people in relation to food might usefully be understood in relation to the prospect of emotional and physical messiness, with all the dependent, infantile anxieties evoked in them by food.

Similarly, young people's feelings about anger might be understood in relation to making a mess. Again, if babies scream uncontrollably, making an aural mess of everything, there are some young people who fall back on their own out-of-control anger as a comforting way of relinquishing personal responsibility while there are other young people who are wary of ever being angry for fear of what it represents and of the feelings it might provoke in others.

Young people also have ambivalent feelings about the messiness of sex: some seemingly relaxed about the prospect of making any kind of mess and others panic-stricken, fastidious about keeping everything neat and tidy.

There's another kind of mess that fills young people with anxiety: the messiness of failure. Failure is a word avoided in polite educational circles and yet young people are only too well aware of its existence and of their capacity to fail, to make a mess of things. What makes the prospect of failure intolerable (thereby provoking all kinds of avoidant behaviours in young people) is the thought of other people's disapproval, of making a mess that can't be undone, a mess that betrays something incompetent in a young person who's spent so long trying to be competent, trying to be an adult, trying not to be a baby.

Because young people are always learning how much they can control their lives and how much they can't, they're always - in a sense - learning how to live with mess. So what price spontaneity, with all its potential for making an inappropriate mess of things? To what extent do we encourage young people ever to take risks, knowing that they might mess up? And what price playfulness? To

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what extent do we encourage them to try things out in everyday relationships? And to what extent do we model spontaneity and playfulness for them, confident that if we mess up it won't be the end of the world, that we can laugh off any embarrassment, that we're happy to learn from our mistakes? The way parents and parent-figures relate to the idea of 'mess' will have a profound effect upon the children and young people they so want to support.