

# THE EMPOWERING OF THE AMERICAN MIND:

## 9 PRINCIPLES FOR PREPARING K-12 STUDENTS TO THRIVE IN A DIVERSE DEMOCRACY

By Greg Lukianoff

The following list of positive principles is a resource for parents and educational leaders committed to inculcating empowering mental habits that prepare students for success in a free and democratic society. Parents may wish to ask leaders at their children's schools if they endorse each of these principles. If they do not, it is worth asking which ones and why. Educational leaders planning to reform existing K-12 institutions or create new ones can use these principles as a guide to creating a curriculum that teaches democratic virtues.

**Note:** This list expands on the themes explored in my 2018 book with Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure*. A previous version of the list included the principle, "Teach students why the 'Three Great Untruths' are wrong." We removed it because the "Three Great Untruths" are better explained in the book.

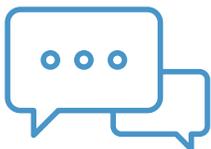


### PRINCIPLE 1: RESPECT STUDENTS' SANCTITY OF CONSCIENCE.

There is a realm of personal conscience that those in authority have no right to invade.

If we are to have a truly free, diverse, pluralistic society, K-12 educators should do no more than persuade: They should not force adherence to any ideology.

Further, it is usually bad to tell someone what they cannot say, far worse to tell someone what they *must* say, and always wrong to tell someone what they must think or believe. Thus, there should be no compelled speech, thought, or belief in American classrooms



### PRINCIPLE 2: ENCOURAGE CURIOSITY, CRITICAL THINKING, AND DISCOMFORT WITH CERTAINTY.

If we want to educate citizens to navigate the limitless ocean of information available to them, we should cultivate a thirst for knowledge and promote the intellectual habits that transform information into knowledge.

Our collective knowledge is nowhere near complete, yet it vastly surpasses the competence of any one individual, field, or even community. As the great jurist Learned Hand [said](#) in 1944, "The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right."

A dogmatic moral certainty among teenagers entering college — and into full voting citizenship — undermines free speech, freedom of inquiry, and democratic compromise. After all, if you're already certain that you know the complex moral truths about the world, why discuss and debate ideas, or further educate yourself?





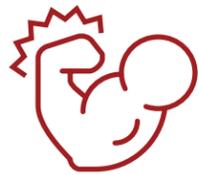
### PRINCIPLE 3: DEMONSTRATE EPISTEMIC HUMILITY AT ALL LEVELS OF TEACHING AND POLICYMAKING.

Curiosity should not merely be taught: It is most effectively learned by example.

Demonstrating epistemic humility — knowledge of the limitations of what you know and what is possible for anyone to know — is one of the best ways to do that. A teacher’s willingness to say, truthfully, “I don’t know — let’s find out,” does not undermine that teacher’s authority in the classroom: Instead, it cultivates in students an awareness that there is always more to learn.

As Chief Justice Earl Warren [wrote](#) in 1957:

No field of education is so thoroughly comprehended by man that new discoveries cannot yet be made. Particularly is that true in the social sciences, where few, if any, principles are accepted as absolutes.... Teachers *and students* must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die.” (emphasis added).



### PRINCIPLE 4: FOSTER INDEPENDENCE, NOT MORAL DEPENDENCY.

Free societies must promote individual responsibility and independent conflict resolution.

It is hard to overstate the dangers of encouraging students to reflexively call upon authority figures to resolve life’s difficulties. This certainly does not mean that K-12 faculty and administrators should never intervene, but that they should not be too eager to intervene in nonviolent interpersonal conflicts among students.



### PRINCIPLE 5: EXPLAIN COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS AND HOW TO CORRECT THEM.

Distorted, counterproductive patterns of thinking should be identified and demystified so healthier habits of thought can grow.

The concept of “cognitive distortions” comes from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and refers to exaggerated patterns of thought that are out of line with reality. All people engage in cognitive distortions to some degree, but if you engage in too many, too often, you may become anxious, depressed, or both. Not coincidentally, learning to correct cognitive distortions is also a good way to learn the critical thinking skills necessary for engaging in productive debate. An understanding of cognitive distortions prepares students to argue fairly, not only with themselves, but also with each other.

Cognitive distortions include:

- Emotional reasoning
- Catastrophizing
- Overgeneralizing
- Dichotomous thinking
- Mind-reading
- Labeling
- Negative filtering
- Discounting positives
- Blaming

You can see a full list of cognitive distortions [here](#).



### PRINCIPLE 6: ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH CRISES WITH TARGETED PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTIONS INSTEAD OF GENERALIZED THERAPEUTIC PRONOUNCEMENTS.

If we sincerely care about students’ mental health, we should not be teaching them to internalize guilt, shame, hopelessness, lack of individual identity, and the impossibility of love and friendship across lines of difference.

The mental health of young people as individuals isn’t taken seriously enough, either in K-12 or in higher education. Suicidal, clinically depressed, or otherwise mentally ill students need real professional help beyond that which the classroom is capable of providing.

We know anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide [are up](#) among young people, and up dramatically. In light of this fact, it is cruel to nevertheless advocate political philosophies that assume:

- The majority of students are both oppressors *and* oppressed due to the color of their skin, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and/or national origin, and that therefore not only is life rigged against such students, they are also active participants in harming other students;
- Words, arguments, and images can be so harmful that students must be shielded from many of them in order to prevent serious psychological harm;
- Some students are in a war against oppression, in which they don’t have friends but rather “allies”: This relationship implies a conditional, utilitarian arrangement, not a deep and personal bond.
- Students must always be on the lookout for slights, as these always mean something much more pernicious than a simple faux pas;
- A single bad joke, dumb comment, or unwise tweet at any moment could — or even should — derail one’s future academic or professional career.

Lastly, generalizing ideas on how to protect students with mental illness, by applying such ideas to all students, can have some serious negative mental health side effects, creating — rather than resolving — harm.

We should foster students’ anti-fragility, resilience, and confidence so they can face higher education as empowered, hopeful, and creative thinkers.



### PRINCIPLE 7: RESPECT STUDENT INDIVIDUALITY.

Students must be permitted to decide for themselves how much, or how little, emphasis they wish to place on their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, or economic background. Sorting students into politically useful categories by assigning them character attributes or destinies based on immutable traits circumscribes their potential and hampers their growth.

Self-determination is foundational to the American promise and central to our unique national identity. Americans form a sense of “us” based on a relatively small number of unifying factors, like citizenship, pop culture, and, hopefully, appreciation and respect for the Constitution and democracy — our shared “operating system.” Under this “thin” identity tent, all are welcome.

Other countries have much deeper or “[thicker](#)” ideas regarding what makes unites them. The “thin” model is ideal for a truly pluralistic diverse society, whereas the “thick” model is exclusive, inflexible, and deals poorly with diversity.

Most importantly, humans are naturally tribal: Therefore, children can be easily convinced to see other children as part of a different “team,” or as “them.” We should do as much as possible to extend the moral circle of “us” around all students, remembering that building authentic friendships across lines of difference is the surest way to protect and sustain a truly diverse society.



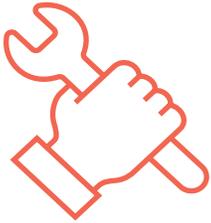
## **PRINCIPLE 8: STRIVE TOWARDS POLITICAL NEUTRALITY IN THE CLASSROOM.**

Professional educators and academics should strive to approximate even-handed political neutrality in the classroom, for a number of sound pedagogical reasons.

All humans have biases and blindspots and teachers are, after all, human. Perfect impartiality and balance is impossible to achieve and maintain at all times. Because we often lack awareness of our own perceptual limits, including varied perspectives helps to compensate, balance, and correct for these inevitable oversights. By looking at issues from multiple perspectives and angles, we are able to spot the relative merits of competing arguments and to refine deficiencies in preferred views.

Students also come from a variety of backgrounds and bring different views with them to class. Including these views in the conversation invites as many students as possible to participate in classroom discussions.

When it comes to moral instruction, schools and teachers should remain neutral, only promoting fairly universal educationally relevant values like honesty, fairness, punctuality, and hard work. Beyond that lies the private realm of the family and individual conscience, to which we must defer in a pluralistic society.



## **PRINCIPLE 9: IF IT'S BROKE, FIX IT.**

Be willing to form new institutions that empower students and that educate them about the principles of a free, diverse, and pluralistic society.

Now is the time for bold experiments in the field of K-12 education involving not only dramatic reforms of the older generation of schools, but also the creation of entirely new models for better, more effective K-12 education.