

EconoFact Chats: Helping Young Adults Thrive
Lisa Lawson, Annie E. Casey Foundation
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Michael Klein

I'm Michael Klein, executive editor of EconoFact, a nonpartisan, web-based publication of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein

The epigraph of Lisa Lawson's new book *Thrive* is a quote from Frederick Douglass: "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." *Thrive* uses research from brain science, data, and anecdotes to argue for the importance of supporting adolescents, and to offer programs and policies to build strong, resilient young people. Many young Americans face daunting challenges. Supporting them is an urgent issue, both for their well-being and for the future of this country. Lisa comes to this issue from her personal experience, as well as from her current position as the President and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Annie E. Casey Foundation has, for over 75 years, promoted and supported programs to develop a brighter future for children and young people. In the interest of full disclosure, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is a financial supporter of EconoFact. Lisa, thanks for joining me once again on EconoFact Chats.

Lisa Lawson

Thanks for having me, Michael.

Michael Klein

Lisa, one of the key themes of your book is that we need to consider a longer period of development for young people—not just from birth to age five or ten—but for an extended period during which their brains are developing. Can you relate how you draw on the science of the brain and its development to come to this conclusion?

Lisa Lawson

Well, as you mentioned in the intro, this book is really about adolescence, which is a period that serves as a bridge between childhood and adulthood, and it lasts much longer than people imagine. People often think puberty is really the beginning and end of adolescence, but this stage really starts around the age of 14 and goes through about age 24—so a full ten years of development around cognitive skills, emotional development, and social skills. And so that really is what we want people to understand through this book; that the brain develops much longer than people imagine that it does, and so as a result of that, we ought to use this window of opportunity to help young people build the skills and strengthen relationships and prepare for the future in a way that I don't think we often imagine. We've spent a lot of time as a country understanding early childhood development, which is absolutely essential, but we need to continue to build on those investments by supporting young people throughout the fullness of adolescence, because it's not until that process is complete that young people are actually really fully prepared to lead fully independent, successful lives.

Michael Klein

I really like the anecdote in the book that your daughter used what you taught her about brain science to rebut your reprimands.

Lisa Lawson

She—she actually had a biology teacher in the ninth grade who taught her about brain science. I think that's something we ought to do for more young people. But the last part of the brain to develop is called the prefrontal cortex, and that's where all your executive functioning lives, which is around emotional regulation and judgment and reasoning. And so I can't remember what it was I was asking her to do, but using her new knowledge, she says, 'well, I couldn't do it—my prefrontal cortex isn't developed yet.' So I say in the book, I guess knowledge is power. I'm glad she knew what was going on in her brain. And she's still just 22 and has a couple more years left, but we joke that maybe her brain development is right above her eyebrows at this point.

Michael Klein:

Well, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, I guess—for the parents in this case. Lisa, what does the science mean for adolescents' behavior? What can it teach us?

Lisa Lawson

Well, it explains so many things that adults often get frustrated about. Teens being impulsive or moody or overly influenced by peers. This really isn't by choice of young people. It's really a part of their development. Their brains are under construction. What we know is that teens are becoming. They are figuring out how to be who they want to become. And as I mentioned, with these brains still under construction, a lot of the parts that are responsible for decision-making or judgment or impulse control just haven't been wired up yet. But we know a number of things about adolescent development that should inform how we develop programs and policies and even interact with young people. So just for example, we know they're wired for rewards. Young people are naturally drawn to things that feel exciting or meaningful, not because they are reckless, but because their brains are trying to seek out new experiences that provide a ripe context for that development that we were talking about. That's how they learn. And so if we want to change how they respond, we ought to build in motivation, which is what motivates them, inspires them, rather than just punishment. They learn best by doing. Teens are craving real-world experiences. They need chances to try, and to mess up and learn and try again. So programs like apprenticeships that give young people hands-on learning really leans into how their brains grow, rather than just assuming they're going to get all the content they need sitting in a classroom. We think they're just listening to their peers, but they actually listen to us as adults as well. And so they're deeply shaped by the connections that they have with adults in their lives, because they know they need guidance and connection and coaching. And so our presence in their lives is really important. We shouldn't turn away, even when they do things we don't like. And so if we understand how teens are wired, we shouldn't be surprised when they test limits. That's actually a part of how they learn to be independent from us. And instead of blaming them for being difficult or moody, I think teens just deserve a lot more empathy—that they are going through significant changes. I've been comparing this to toddlers, you know, in the same way toddlers learn to walk, we don't berate them when they fall. We hold their hands

and we encourage them to keep going. And adulting is somewhat of the same process. A little progress and bumps in the road.

Michael Klein

You have a great example in the book that illustrates this. It's of someone who, early on, seemed to be on the downward path but then achieved great success. And I'm referring to Wes Moore, the Governor of Maryland, who wrote the foreword to your book. How does this story show the broader points that you make in *Thrive*?

Lisa Lawson

Well, Wes has a unique connection to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. His mother worked at the foundation for more than a decade, and his story really is *Thrive* in action. He talks in the book about, you know, getting in trouble and not being on the right path early, but he really explains how the power of consistent support, and adults who supported him, even in the messiness of his adolescence, helped him to realize the potential that was inside of him. He didn't start out on a straight path. He was getting in trouble. His mom sent him to military school, and he was even running away from military school. But the adults around him did not give up on him, and they kept talking to him in ways that he says finally broke through, and helped him think about respect and about honor and about purpose, and that really changed the trajectory of his life. And so while Wes says in the book, you know, military school isn't the answer for all young people, he really tries to put it in context and explain that it was really the people who helped him get on track. Not punishment. It was people. His relationships with adults, that really helped him realize his capacity for greatness that lived in him.

Michael Klein

In *Thrive*, you write about the challenges faced by adolescents, particularly those who are raised in an environment that continually presents them with adversity. And this discussion reminded me of the conversation I had with Arline Geronimus in an EconoFact Chats episode about her book *Weathering*. Can you describe how trauma and ongoing stress affect the development of young people?

Lisa Lawson

Yes. The constant strain of growing up in difficult conditions doesn't just wear on your spirit, it affects your body and your brain in very real ways, which I know that book *Weathering* describes. In the book, I talk about ACEs—Adverse Childhood Experiences. They could be anything from abuse to neglect or growing up around violence or addiction, and they really do shape young people's lives for years to come. And the more of these adversities young people face, you can imagine, the more challenging it is for them to be well, and successful and achieve important milestones in education, and work long term. So toxic stress—when young people are put in these situations for years at a time—it really does affect their brain development and alters the way that healthy development unfolds. You can imagine young people in these situations are so focused on surviving that they are in a flight-or-fight response constantly, and so they can't focus on thriving...all of the positive experiences that enable young people to figure out who they are and who they're going to be. So I certainly agree that the 'weathering' young people might experience when they're growing up in adversity is challenging, but it's not...they are certainly able to overcome it, and adolescence is actually a great time for that to happen because

of all of the continuing development that's happening in young people's lives. With the right supports, and having stable housing, caring relationships, and meaningful opportunities, they can build resilience and really overcome those situations.

Michael Klein

In fact, you list five components needed for a young person to fully develop: meeting basic needs, forming permanent connections, having a good education, enjoying financial stability, and learning how to earn and manage money, and finally, having personal agency. Let's talk about each of these, starting with basic needs. We know that many young people do not have the essentials like safe housing, food, or health care. How many young people face this challenge, and what are its consequences?

Lisa Lawson

Well, I'm glad to start here. You know, a large share of young people live without financial security. About 17% of Generation Z, who are those young people who are still in adolescence—roughly ten and a half million young people—live in poverty. So that's, you know, a significant amount of them. Even more are living in low-income households. Thirty-five percent of Gen Z in 2023, or about 22 million young people had family incomes that were below 200% of the federal poverty line, which is how we think about young people being low income. Many of them lack secure health coverage. About one in ten of them don't have health insurance, and the consequences are deep and compounding and long-lasting. It affects their health and development. Missing meals or unstable housing can lead to poor nutrition and stress and untreated illness or developmental delays. It affects their brain and cognition. When they are worried about where they will sleep or whether or not they can see a doctor for a toothache that's persistently bothering them, they can't focus. They can't regulate their emotions, or engage in school. Students who face basic needs instability are very often falling behind in school. Their families are often moving a lot in order to find stable housing, and that affects...you know, they're changing schools and falling behind in school. And then, mental health issues. We know our young people today are really facing an epidemic of mental health issues, and so much of that results from the instability and stress that poverty causes. So not being able to meet your basic needs has far-reaching consequences for adolescents.

Michael Klein

The second need that you identify is to form permanent connections with adults. Why do young people need this?

Lisa Lawson

You know, everybody needs a champion in their corner, and that's the role that adults play in the lives of young people. It certainly starts with parents, but it could also be teachers, and coaches and mentors, and neighbors, or extended family. I like to say nobody crosses the bridge of adolescence alone. We all need someone. The best connections have a few things in common. Young people need somebody who will listen to them without judgment, who wants to know them for who they are, who sees their potential in them even when they can't see it in themselves, and who helps them recover from mistakes, because we all make them as young people. Rather than defining them by the mistakes that they make. So relationships are really the foundation of development. And we worry most about those young people who are in child

welfare systems or juvenile justice systems and are disconnected, often from their families of origin. And so that's why I talk about it taking a village. All of us have to see a role in creating a support system for the young people in our lives, because without these bonds, young people are much more vulnerable.

Michael Klein

Education is important as well, and I would argue both for what you learn and for learning how to learn. Would you agree with that?

Lisa Lawson

I absolutely would. You know, I think education matters not just for the education you gain but the skills you practice in the process: problem solving, persistence, curiosity, and figuring out how to learn in new situations. Those are skills that all of us use for the rest of our lives. But you know, during adolescence, there are things we can do to keep young people engaged and create flexible pathways for them. Not every student thrives in a traditional classroom, so having multiple ways to [earn] credentials, whether it's community colleges or apprenticeships or online courses, we've got to create multiple avenues for young people to get the information and skills that's going to work for them. And to even give them second chances. You know, not everybody progresses in a straight line. Some young people have dropped out of high school, or don't make it their first attempt at college. So finding ways to reroute them and to support them as they navigate things that might be challenging them from staying on course is really important.

Michael Klein

Lisa, you've talked about financial stability for young people living with their family, and you also write about the importance of work and learning how to manage money. But job opportunities can be very scarce for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. What are the consequences of that for their development, beyond living in a financially precarious situation?

Lisa Lawson

Well, I think all of us can appreciate that early work is more than just a paycheck. It's when you learn responsibility, you learn time management, being in a team, and learning how to take direction and constructive feedback. That's a huge confidence builder for young people, and it helps teens see themselves as contributors, and not just as dependents. So money skills are life skills, and we want all young people to have that so that they enter adulthood knowing how to budget, and how to save and how to manage their credit, because we know that can have a long tail in terms of their financial stability. And when those opportunities aren't there, the costs are really high. Without early work experience, young people struggle to get a foothold in the labor market. Employers often want experience, and those who don't have it just fall further behind. Unfortunately, there are about 4.2 million young people, who are between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. And so these are the young people I think we most need to wrap our supports around, to make sure that they both get the workplace skills we want them to have, but also those other life skills that come with it.

Michael Klein

You mentioned personal agency—and I take that to mean that someone understands their own worth, and can advocate for themselves. And you also write that personal agency looks very different at 13 than at 23. What do you mean by that?

Lisa Lawson

Well, you know, I think young people developing personal agency is one of the most important parts of adolescence, and it's probably the part that frustrates adults the most. It is during this process where they are finding their voice and asking "why," and not taking for granted what an adult says about a decision. That is really young people practicing their own agency. And unfortunately, as adults try to pivot from telling younger children what to do, that negotiation that happens with teens is often what we find frustrating, but that's really some of the most important development that's happening. And you know, agency is about voice and power. It's about the ability to understand your own worth, make choices, advocate for yourself, even if your early arguments might not be grounded in the best critical thinking, but it grows and changes over time. And so that's why, you know, I say at 13, agency is just emerging. Teens are experimenting with independence, and it might show up in small ways like wanting more privacy, or pushing back on rules or choosing new friends. But that's them testing that normal and healthy development. But then by the time they get to be around, you know, early 20s—like 22 or 23, their agency is more developed. They've got more life experience, that prefrontal cortex is almost wired up, and so they can better manage their emotions, and not get moody when their ideas are met with resistance. They can think ahead, they can weigh consequences better, and advocate in more thoughtful and consistent ways. And so it's really that brain development that explains the difference between a 13-year-old's argument, and a 23-year-old's argument. But both stages matter, and the agency they're developing is critical.

Michael Klein

So these are the components needed, as Frederick Douglass wrote, to build a strong child who then becomes a strong, productive, and well-adjusted adult. How are we doing as a nation in providing for these needs?

Lisa Lawson

I think the world has changed, and I don't know that our support systems and the ways that we think about things have kept up with the new challenges that young people are facing. They face a very different technology environment than young people did just ten or fifteen years ago. They face a much different relationship environment in terms of so much of life being online versus in person, and so the connections are frayed. And young people are dealing with a lot of loneliness. They are having to recover academically from the impacts of a pandemic that left many of them without good access to an education consistently. And too often, their agency is stifled. Young people want to have a voice in shaping their futures, yet far too many systems see them as problems, or don't want to engage them in solutions. So I think my bottom-line assessment is that we're not keeping up. That our policies and programs are largely designed for a world of the past, and they are not keeping up with the challenges that today's teens face. So I think we've just got to evolve our systems, and I think we'd be well served if we engaged young people more in helping us develop what they need.

Michael Klein

How could governments at national, state, and local levels help provide for these needs of young people?

Lisa Lawson

Well, I think they can do a number of things. First, I think they need to fund proven and promising approaches. There are organizations like Casey and others that are doing all we can to innovate and demonstrate new ways of serving young people. It'd be great if they leaned into that and tried to reflect what we know about adolescent brain science. They can legislate for connection and second chances. Laws can really help strengthen permanent adult connections, particularly for those young people who might be in child welfare or juvenile justice, and create more opportunities for young people to recover from their mistakes, instead of being defined by them. I mentioned talking about putting young people at the table. And I think shifting from a reactive to more of a prevention stage. The more we invest in early opportunities for young people, in summer jobs, in quality out-of-school time, in mentoring that surrounds young people with quality relationships, the more we can prevent problems down the road. So we've got to move from a reactive to, I think, a preventive perspective.

Michael Klein

So that is, I guess, exactly why you use the Frederick Douglass quote as the epigraph to your book.

Lisa Lawson

One hundred percent. I'm all about building strong children.

Michael Klein

What role could private businesses play?

Lisa Lawson

You know, I think businesses need a talented workforce in the future, and often they think they might wait until the end of formal schooling in order to engage with young people. But it'd be great if they recognized the critical role they have in early work experiences. They can give young people their first real-world jobs—from internships to apprenticeships to summer jobs, that can expose them to talent early, and prepare those young people to persist in school and have resources that can help them and their families. They and their employees can be coaches and mentors to young people, both in the workplace and out in the community. And they can partner with schools and community colleges, and four-year institutions, and nonprofits to design the kinds of training programs that are going to enable young people to show up ready when they are looking for their first permanent job. So I think Generation Z gets a bad rap. People suggest they don't want to work, but we see every day across the country young people who are hungry to work, who dream of being entrepreneurs. And I think business has a critical role they can play in supporting these young people in realizing their aspirations.

Michael Klein

Lisa, you're the president of an important and impactful nonprofit. Do you see the role of organizations like the Annie E. Casey Foundation playing a key role in all of this?

Lisa Lawson

Absolutely. I mean, every day we are trying to use what we know about youth development to help support the development of programs that are going to help young people succeed, help policymakers think through today's challenges so that they can enact laws that help our young people succeed, and to certainly engage with the robust nonprofit sector that's providing all kinds of opportunities for young people. But we certainly can't do it alone. And in the book I talk about, you know, the ecosystem and the ways all of us should think of ourselves as bridge builders for young people who are trying to cross this bridge from childhood to adulthood. So, many of the things I've talked about that different sectors can play, business can play, or nonprofit can play, I think apply to all of us. How do we engage young people? How do we support them in their big dreams for the future, and collectively invest early so that we have fewer problems down the road?

Michael Klein

Lisa, congratulations on the publication of *Thrive*. I really enjoyed the book, and I think that it should help shape the conversation about this vital issue of the well-being of young people. And Lisa, also, thank you again for being my guest on EconoFact Chats.

Lisa Lawson

Thank you so much for having me, Michael. We've got 48 million young people on the bridge of adolescence right now, so I am excited, and I hope your listeners will be excited, to do all we can to help them make it across safely and successfully.

Michael Klein

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