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Why are children today so unhappy?, on: 2007/7/17 3:45

Why are children today so unhappy?

by SUE PALMER - Last updated at 22:45pm on 16th July 2007

We live in one of the wealthiest, most technologically advanced nations on earth. We've had 60 years of peace and prosperity with free education and medical services for all.

Our homes are crammed with labour-saving devices and electronic entertainment that previous generations couldn't even dream of. Surely our children should be growing happier every year?

Well, no. According to figures released last month, one in ten now suffers from a clinically-recognised mental health problem, and earlier this year a UNICEF report on "childhood well-being" found that out of 21 nations across the developed world, British children are the unhappiest.

A damning survey by the National Consumer Council, reported in the Mail, revealed that children who watch too much television and spend hours on the internet are "greedy and unhappy".

"These children argue more with their families, have a lower opinion of their parents, and lower self-esteem than other children," the report said.

Even Gordon Brown has been moved to comment on his determination to halt the "erosion of childhood".

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Bored Girl

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So how is this unhappiness manifesting itself?

Well, there's increasing evidence of mushrooming behavioural problems in our schools, these days even among the very youngest pupils in primary schools. But many unhappy children lie low, bottling up their misery, and the symptoms don't become apparent until the teenage years.

There again, we see the evidence: the UK has the worst problems with drugs, binge-drinking and under-age sex in Europe.

We're also near the top of international polls for anti-social behaviour, self-harm and eating disorders.

And, according to figures from the Institute for Public Policy Research, last year 24,000 youngsters tried to kill themselves - that's one every 22 minutes.

So what IS happening? After researching the state of modern childhood for over five years, I'm convinced that, as our country has grown richer and more "advanced", we've lost sight of certain fundamental truths about child-rearing.

We've come to believe that 21st century children are different from children in the past - that they can get by with less parental time and attention, skip stages in their development and cope with pressures and emotional burdens children shouldn't have to cope with.

The brutal truth is that they can't. Life may have changed enormously over the past few decades, but the human brain evolves much more slowly - in fact, it hasn't changed since Cro-Magnon times.

All babies are born as little Stone Age babies, and it's up to their parents - supported by their wider community - to help them towards maturity, gradually equipping them with the inner strength, skills and knowledge they need to live in a complex technological culture.

We can't rush this business, we can't opt out of it as individuals or as a society, and we can't miss bits out.

Every adult in Britain - including the politicians and businessmen who determine so many aspects of our daily lives - has to recognise that children's basic developmental needs have not changed over the millennia.

The most obvious ones are the physical ones: food, shelter and sleep.

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play

We've come to believe (falsely) that 21st century children are different from children in the past

The "obesity explosion" of recent years shows that society - parents, manufacturers, marketers, even the schools that fed children turkey twizzlers - lost sight of the importance of wholesome food in recent decades.

As for shelter, we've confused that with over-protection, keeping children wrapped in cotton wool to keep them "safe", and thus denying them essential opportunities to learn through real-life experience - actually getting out on their bikes and breathing fresh air.

And in a 24/7 culture, where sleep has been sidelined as electronic entertainment fizzles on throughout the night, children may well be getting less sleep than at any time in human history.

Another essential childhood need is the emotional stability that comes from feeling cared-for and secure.

Tiny babies, who can't feed or look after themselves, need to know someone is caring for them at all times, and are programmed to recognise and become attached to this "someone" by sight, sound, smell and so on.

The carer therefore needs to be a constant and consistent loving presence in the child's life.

We've comprehensively blown this one by putting so many tiny children into day nurseries, so that both their parents can go out to work and feed the economy rather than the baby.

As children grow older, emotional security is associated with regularity and routine, such as family meals and a familiar bedtime ritual.

Children need adults not only to love them, but to provide regularity and to set and maintain boundaries for their behaviour. So parents have to balance warmth with a degree of firmness.

This sort of balanced parenting is extremely difficult when adults are exhausted from juggling work and domestic responsibilities or - in a materialistic society based on an "I want" philosophy - unsure where the boundaries ought to be drawn.

If a child gets used to eating dinner with the television on every night, how are you going to tell them they can't do that any more because you've finally realised they never talk to you at all?

Or if, like millions of children, they have a television in their room which they watch late in the evening, how are you to insist it's taken away because they're exhausted every day?

It's even more difficult if, because of the pressures of modern life, a parents' marriage is collapsing or they're trying to bring up a child alone.

Children also need to learn communication skills, another essential element in emotional and social development.

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Child

According to figures from the Institute for Public Policy Research, last year 24,000 youngsters in the UK tried to kill themselves

This starts from the moment they're born, and is an important part of the bond with the carer that underpins emotional development.

As parents sing and talk to their babies, they awaken the language instinct wired deep in the human brain and provide the data through which children will learn to speak their mother tongue.

But if adults don't spend time with their children, communication skills won't develop as they should - and, in a busy modern world, many parents aren't available to play their part in this process.

Many children now spend the majority of their day in institutional care.

At home, babies often sit in front of an electronic babysitter and, as they grow older, there is that problem of older children having TVs in their rooms, which means that even when the family is in the same building, its members are splintered off from each other.

Ironically, in a world where there are more ways to communicate than ever before, parents communicate less and less with their own children.

There's one other absolutely vital ingredient if children are to grow strong in body and mind - one that, to the great concern of developmental psychologists, is being practically eradicated from many children's lives.

They need to play. What's more, they need to play in a relaxed, unstructured way, preferably outdoors with other children and - as they grow older - away from the eagle eyes of the adults.

The need for play is built into the DNA of all higher animals - lion cubs, for instance, are programmed to play-hunt, play-stalk and playfight to sort out their place in the family pecking order.

If they didn't learn these lion life-skills through play, the species would die out.

Human children develop physical control and co-ordination through running, jumping, climbing, skipping or kicking a football around.

They gain first-hand experience of the world they're going to live in by making mud-pies or paddling in puddles or messing about in a sandpit, riding a home-made go-kart or climbing a tree.

These experiences underpin the understanding of the world on which human science and learning are based - without play, education is built on very shifting sands.

Without play also, children's imagination and creativity is likely to be stunted.

So, too, their social skills. It's through playing with other children - without adult interference - that youngsters learn how to make friends, resolve quarrels, work collaboratively and, indeed, avoid small enemies.

They also learn how to take "safe risks" and make their own judgments, thus developing independence and self-reliance.

As far as play is concerned, our society hasn't just taken its eye off the ball, we've completely lost track of it.

Our paranoid obsession with "health and safety" means many parents now keep their children cooped up indoors living a sedentary, screen-based existence.

"Play" happens on a PlayStation, games on a GameBoy, and children often spend their day mindlessly gazing at TV.

That appalling scenario was the focus of this week's National Consumer Council report, which found that in millions of households "the screen appears to be ever-present, particularly during meal times".

As the Prime Minister pointed out, this "exposes children to the pressures of very aggressive advertising".

That, in turn, creates a generation of mini-consumers who want everything they see on screen and equate happiness with materialism.

"Safe" in their bedrooms, our youngsters are learning about life from the people they see on screens - pop stars, celebrities and other attention-seekers - and from the anonymous army of marketers lurking behind those screens.

And the message those celebrities and marketers sell is that happiness comes from being rich and famous, from ownership of the latest musthave products, and a "cool" lifestyle.

All these changes in children's lifestyles are the unintended consequences of rapid social and cultural change, driven by new technology and an increasingly competitive consumer society.

Nobody planned them - indeed, we've all been so rushed off our feet that we didn't even notice them happening - but together they amount to a toxic cocktail of side-effects of "progress".

The statistics emerging now - which I alluded to earlier - about children's mental health must act as a wake-up call to parents, politicians and the nation as a whole.

Given that they're growing up in a land of peace and plenty, unhappiness is not a natural state for our children.

There are, of course, a few unlucky souls genetically predisposed to depression, but most human beings develop a natural resilience. I fear natural toughness is becoming absent in today's children because the developmental needs described above have not been met.

Unfortunately, the challenges children face today are pretty toxic as well.

Two other side effects of cultural change have been the massive increase in marketing pressure on children and a simultaneous increase in the pressures they face at school. We now live in a winners and losers culture.

Meanwhile, the obsession with competition has also infected primary schools, which abound with tests, targets and even league tables for young children's achievements.

Children now face up to 70 academic tests before the age of 16. We enter our offspring into this highstakes educational rat race at a younger age than any other country, with many embarking on formal learning at the tender age of four.

At this age many children (especially boys) aren't even physically competent to hold a pencil, let alone write with one.

However, now that we've become aware of the problem of childhood unhappiness, there's no reason why we can't find a solution.

Since we know what's necessary for bringing up happy, healthy, successful children (the prescription is now ratified by decades of neuroscientific research), a society as advanced as ours should be able to provide it.

A good start would be to rein in marketing, which is now increasingly predatory towards children, and change the tests-and-targets culture of primary education.

Our consumer culture, along with the breakdown of extended families and far greater mobility, has broken down the trust that in the past held communities together.

Parents, teachers and other members of the community must find ways of reforging an "adult alliance" in their community to support families in raising their young.

The main responsibility for rearing children, however, lies - as it always has - with parents.

They have to wise up, stop being paralysed by a combination of rapid change, uncertainty and guilt, and find new ways to provide a secure, healthy family life for their offspring.

None of this is rocket science, but in terms of our nation's future, it's more important than rocket science.

Unless, very soon, we start attending to the well-being of our children (all our children) and tackle the growing problems with their mental health, the next generation may not be bright or balanced enough to keep our economy healthy and our nation together.

Sue Palmer's book Toxic Childhood is published by Orion Books.

(http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/femail/article.html?in_article_id468866&in_page_id1879) Original Link - Daily Mail UK

Re: Why are children today so unhappy?, on: 2007/7/17 4:10

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD: And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the LORD, and shall not find. In that day shall the fair virgins and young men faint for thirst. They that swear by the sin of Samaria, and say, Thy god, O Dan, liveth; and, The manner of Beersheba liveth; even they shall fall, and never rise up again." (AMOS 8:11-14)

Re: Why are children today so unhappy? - posted by enid, on: 2007/7/17 4:28

It is obvious that the writer is secular and has an evolutionary mindset toward life.

However, Christians should not need secular views to 'find out' about our children and family life.

The word of God is more than enough for this life.

Yes, I know, for those who have to say it, 'we live in the real world', but, since when was being a Christian not real?

It is because the world has kicked God out of their lives that they are reaping what they have sown.

The article does have some good points.

We should not have our children in front of television for hours at a time.

We should not eat in front of the t.v, as if in an act of worship.

If our children are at school for hours, and in front of the t.v for hours, and playing on games and computers, when do they spend time with us and have time for family worship and the reading of God's word?

'Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away', Jesus tells us in Matt 24v35.

Food for thought for one and all.

And maybe some repentance.

God bless.

Re: Why are children today so unhappy? - posted by ginnyrose (), on: 2007/7/18 12:00

Interesting article. Too long :-(to suit me. I did quickly perceived it was written by an educated city slicker who actually would likely agree with *my* theories on child rearing! lol

My simple answer to the entire dilemma would be for parents to move out into the country, have enough acreage to raise some farm animals for food; grow food for human consumption; and have plenty of trees for children to climb without adult supervision. Let them run and play without fear of incurring injuries. They will get hurt and children must learn to live with that possibility and inevitability and how to respond when it does happen. In all this make your child responsible for the care of the animals and garden.

There you have it: make them work but allow time for creative play devoid of modern electronic gizmos.

This is what we did and our boys think it was perfect and that this what they want for their children. :-) Our boys tore up parts of our back yard with their toy road equipment, made roads all over the place (and I was so glad when they outgrew this play so I can have nice grass); each one of them constructed a tree house - our three acre place had a minimum of four; and there are a host of other creative things they did which cannot be found in any book. And to say I was pleased with their creativity, is an understatement.

Too many parents today are so paranoid of life and it in turn produces bored children, my opinion. (We had five: one girl and four boys.)

Good post. Thanks for posting it, Corey.

ginnyrose

Re:, on: 2007/7/18 12:06

deceived by material things!!!!

Rev 3:17-18

17 You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

I felt the need to go back and add to this post. My comments were about American and children who have so much material things. I was speaking as though this was an American forum only. In many countries the children do not have the abundance and from what I have read these children are happier which only builds on the subject of why are many children not happy.