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The Changing Conditions of Childhood

by Christopher Clouder

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The book *Toxic Childhood*, which was published in 2006 by Sue Palmer, made a great impact in that it highlighted an issue of growing concern in the U.K. At about the same time there was an article in *Le Monde* that stated that Britain was now, in football terms, in the post-hooligan phase, having had tragic experiences in this area and having had to learn from mistakes, whereas in some other European countries the phenomenon of hooliganism was just picking up. So occasionally the U.K can serve as warning to other countries about certain negative developments in society. This is certainly true for questions around childhood.

The last few years have been remarkable in terms of the attention given by the British media to the subject of childhood. Until comparatively recently childhood was mentioned only when an emergency situation emerged or when a scandal was exposed. Today it is very different with many articles, research reports and books being published, for example on the theme of the threats to childhood well-being in the U.K. The remainder of this article provides a snapshot of some of the threats to childhood that have received attention in the media in the U.K over the past three to four years.

Lack of play

Professor Michael Shayer, of the Economic and Social Research Institute in the UK, stated in *Learning Intelligence: Cognitive Acceleration Across the Curriculum from 5 to 15 Years*, that research shows that children of 11 to 12 years old are some 2 to 3 years behind academically in comparison with children of the same age of 20 years ago. He speculated about the reasons:

- Is it the lack of play that has caused the changes?
- Is it because children spend substantial amounts of time playing video and computer games?

It is presently known that when children have learnt to move their bodies, for example, through games, sport or dance, this has a consequent positive effect on their academic achievements. Nowadays there are children who do not spend much time in physically active play and live a largely sedentary lifestyle. This is harmful for children on many levels because it will eventually hamper their physical and mental development and health.

Increase in Stress

Research has also found that many children in day care centres suffer from stress. In many day care centres the quality is not sufficiently high. The main parameters for the quality are:

- The level of competencies among the people working there
- The adult /child ratio.

Sue Gerhardt has covered this in her seminal book on this phenomenon entitled '*Why Love Matters, How Affection Shapes A Baby's Brain*.' You cannot replace love by allowing children to play video games or watch television. And she questions the quality of some early childhood settings in not being able to fulfil a young child's emotional needs. Steve Biddulph, the well-known author on parenting, has recently changed his position in this respect and also expresses great concern about adult/ child ratios and inadequate and damaging care facilities. The conclusions that a number of researchers have come to on this issue are as follows:

- It is important to pay people working in childcare sufficiently and the job should also have a good status;
- The people working in childcare should have been well-trained;
- The group size should never exceed 16 and the ratio between children and adults should be 2 adults per 16 children. If the group is larger than this and there are fewer adults, then the child may have difficulties in forming attachments with the adults in question.

Another source of stress is the rigorous testing system of English schools. Warwick Mansell in his book "*Education by Numbers*" (2007) points out the English child encounters a high profile test or exam virtually every year while at school. Children spend a great deal of school time preparing for these and such assessments are never very far from the teachers' thoughts. This creates an overwhelming pressure on all concerned.

Professor Jonathan Bradshaw recently published a report entitled *The Well-being of Children in the U.K* (2007). In this book he explains that today's children are more often than previously unhappy, pressurized and obese. The 2007 *Innocenti Report*, however, was even more critical and the U.K was one the worst of the 21 economically advanced countries which they studied when researching the quality of children's happiness.

Socially Pressurized

The American author Dr. Madeline Levine has published a book ('*The Price Of Privilege, How Parental Pressure And Material Advantage Are Creating A Generation Of Disconnected And Unhappy Kids*') about the damage done to children who have been given a tight extramural schedule for the entire week by their parents (this is also known as hot-housing). When the children are not at school they have to play sport, go to dance lessons or play a musical instrument, for example. These children have no time for themselves and do not have the chance to experience how it is to live without such a schedule. They do not have the opportunity to play, to rest, or to become personally creative outside of a class of some kind or another. These children experience high levels of stress.

Is the World of Technology changing the Brains of Children?

Professor Susan Greenfield of York University has published '*The Private Life Of The Brain*', in which she explains that our technical world is changing the brains of children. Their brains are less able:

- To recount stories
- To use words, as they are more focused on pictures;
- Children are less able to control their impulses and emotions.

Jane Healy in '*Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think, and What We Can Do About It*' explains that with the modern lifestyle children lose their imagination and originality. Many boys, in particular, get fully involved in computer and video games and live partly in a virtual world. The U.S Association of Paediatricians now recommends that children under two years old should not watch television. For children from two to six years old the watching of television should be severely limited. A draft document of the Australian government's guidelines for parents and carers states that screen time "*may reduce the amount of time they (children) have for active play, social contact with others and chances for language development which could affect the development of a full range of eye movement and... reduce the length of time they can stay focussed.*"

A Chemical Environment

Although the effect of lead and mercury on children's brains is accepted and has brought about legislative action, recent research indicates that many other chemicals have a similarly negative impact to lead on the brains of children. It has been calculated that 202 industrial chemicals have a capacity to damage the brain, with the developing brain being much more susceptible to these chemicals. These industrial substances are not regulated with children in mind. In the U.S.A one in six children have a developmental disability usually involving the nervous system. The EU is beginning to take action and the latest investigation from the Danish Environment Protection Agency into gender-bending chemicals claims there are dangerous levels of hormone-disrupting chemicals in everyday products like rubber clogs, soft toys and sun creams. Furthermore a foetus around 8 to 12 weeks can be demasculinised by exposure to certain chemicals prevalent in common products.

Depression and Manipulation

According to Julia Margo and Mike Dixon in '*Freedom's Orphans, Raising Youth In A Changing World*' the number of children with depression is rising. Their findings are startling. There is evidence that mental health problems and psychic disorders are increasing in young people. It is calculated that one in ten girls has self-harmed. Antisocial behaviour and teenage pregnancy rates are high in the U.K compared to other European countries. Child obesity is increasing. Young people in Britain drink more alcohol and from an earlier age than in most of Europe.

In what has been termed the "commercialisation of childhood" it has become visible how the business world is increasingly using children to expand their sales. Researchers have discovered that children can already recognise brands at the age of two and that brand loyalty can already be attained with children as young as four years old. Children are not only targeted by companies trying to sell toys, computer games and other goods to children, but also by companies trying to influence parents through their children. For example, car manufacturers try to expand sales by aiming their advertisements at children, because they have discovered that children greatly influence their parents' purchasing decisions.

"Media-isation"

Another area in which children are manipulated is through the media. Influenced by the illusory world presented to them in magazines, television and film many girls become prematurely sexually aware earlier and earlier, but their social and emotional development lags behind.

Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, recently launched an attack on what he describes as *"corruption and premature sexualisation of children by a consumer society."* Increasingly children grow up in a culture of peers, which alienates them vis-à-vis adults, with concepts of cool and uncool manipulated by the media. However, when they have become adults themselves they tend to have difficulties in assuming the responsibilities that go with adulthood due to a lack of positive adults models. Family rituals and expectations, such as having set meals, are in demise causing children to feel less secure and expecting gratification whenever they wish.

In June 2009 an article appeared in the journal of the American Medical Association which described the stress factors experienced by children and highlighted the phenomena of "toxic stress". This is engendered by extreme poverty, recurrent abuse, chronic neglect, maternal depression, parental drug dependence and family violence *"These adversities establish biological memories that weaken physiological systems and make individuals vulnerable to problems that can lie dormant for years."* The UK experience supports this view.

The references in this short overview are not there to create a false romanticism about the past conditions or just a doom-laden scenario of childhood today, but rather to serve as a wake up call about modern tendencies in the so-called affluent world. There are, of course, a majority of children who experience their childhood in a fruitful and positive way. But an increasing number do not, and every child has the right to a quality of childhood that enables him/her to fulfil his/her full potential. Finding effective ways of dealing with the negative phenomena as a parent or educator is a shared and complex social task.

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