Toxic Childhood

In a letter to the *London Daily Telegraph*, 110 teachers, psychologists, children's authors and other experts call on the Government to act to prevent the death of childhood. The front page article entitled 'Junk culture is poisoning our children,' summarizes that "A sinister cocktail of junk food, marketing, over-competitive schooling, and electronic entertainment is poisoning childhood" and leading "to more depression among children." The *BBC* and the *Daily Mail* also reported on the letter's contents.

It's signatories include Philip Pullman, the children's author, Jacqueline Wilson, the children's laureate, her predecessor Michael Morpurgo, Baroness Greenfield, the director of the Royal Institution, Dr Penelope Leach, the child care expert, Sir Jonathon Porritt, the environmental campaigner, Prof Tim Brighouse, the Commissioner for London Schools, Sir Richard Bowlby, the President of the Centre for Child Mental Health, as well as members of the Alliance for Childhood, including Christopher Clouder. They blame a failure by politicians and public alike to understand how children develop.

The letter was circulated by Sue Palmer, a former head teacher and author of *Toxic Childhood*, and Dr Richard House, senior lecturer at the Research Centre for Therapeutic Education at Roehampton University. The *Telegraph* quoted Mrs Palmer: "I have been thinking about this for a long time and I just decided something had to be done. "It is like this giant elephant in all our living rooms, the fact that children's development is being drastically affected by the kind of world they are brought up in." She cited research by Prof Michael Shayer at King's College, London, which showed that 11-year-olds measured in cognitive tests were "on average between two and three years behind where they were 15 years ago". "I think that is shocking. We must make a public statement - a child's physical and psychological growth cannot be accelerated. It changes in biological time, not at electrical speed. Childhood is not a race."

As Jacqueline Wilson put it: "We are not valuing childhood. I speak to children at book signings and they ask me how I go through the process of writing and I say, 'Oh you know, it's just like when you play imaginary games and you simply write it all down'. "All I get is blank faces. I don't think children use their imaginations any more."

Mr Morpurgo said: "We have so much anxiety about children, their protection, their care, their education, that this has developed into fear. There is a fear around children, both from schools and politicians, which has led to this target-driven education system. That has put children into an academic straitjacket from a very early age which restricts creativity and the enrichment of childhood." He condemned the "virtual play" represented by electronic games and internet surfing. "That is where children are getting their ideas from and I find it quite 'toxic' and pretty scary for the future."

Below is the letter, dated 12/09/2006.

Sir,

As professionals and academics from a range of backgrounds, we are deeply concerned at the escalating incidence of childhood depression and children's behavioural and developmental conditions. We believe this is largely due to a lack of understanding, on the part of both politicians and the general public, of the realities and subtleties of child development. Since children's brains are still developing, they cannot adjust - as full-grown adults can - to the effects of ever more rapid technological and cultural change. They still need what developing human beings have always needed, including real food (as opposed to processed "junk"), real play (as opposed to sedentary, screen-based entertainment), first-hand experience of the world they live in and regular interaction with the real-life significant adults in their lives.

They also need time. In a fast-moving hyper-competitive culture, today's children are expected to cope with an ever-earlier start to formal schoolwork and an overly academic test-driven primary curriculum. They are pushed by market forces to act and dress like mini-adults and exposed via the electronic media to material which would have been considered unsuitable for children even in the very recent past.

Our society rightly takes great pains to protect children from physical harm, but seems to have lost sight of their emotional and social needs. However, it's now clear that the mental health of an unacceptable number of children is being unnecessarily compromised, and that this is almost certainly a key factor in the rise of substance abuse, violence and self-harm amongst our young people.

This is a complex socio-cultural problem to which there is no simple solution, but a sensible first step would be to encourage parents and policy-makers to start talking about ways of improving children's well-being. We therefore propose as a matter of urgency that public debate be initiated on child-rearing in the 21st century this issue should be central to public policy-making in coming decades.

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