

Toxic Childhood by Sue Palmer

How modern life is damaging our children... and what we can do about it

What's happening to children?

- UK: behavioural problems have doubled over the last 30 years and emotional problems increased by 70%
- USA: one in five children and teens now suffer from mental health problems
- In a 2007 UNICEF survey of childhood wellbeing, UK came bottom with USA just above us
- Worldwide: WHO estimates that by 2020 mental instability and depression in children will swell by 50%

The special needs explosion

- One in every six children in the USA now has a 'developmental disorder' affecting their ability to learn
- The rest of the developed world is catching up fast.
- Is something interfering with normal development?

In normal development from birth to teens:

distractibility	→→	attention	focused concentration
impulsivity	→→	self-control	deferred gratification
self-centredness	→→	empathy	consideration

This process of development takes **time**.

The world now moves at 'electric speed'

'Time has ceased, space has vanished' Marshall McLuhan

'Attention deficit is the paradigmatic disorder of our time' Robert Restak, neuro-scientist

Human development happens in 'biological time'.

Children's physical and psychological growth cannot happen at electric speed.

Side effects of technological and social change

unhealthy food	inadequate emotional bonding
couch potato lifestyle	lack of interaction / communication
lack of sleep	emotional instability
lack of play	competitive educational ethos
lack of first hand experience	manipulative marketing strategies
consumer-driven lifestyle	morally relative society

Toxic childhood syndrome

- The side-effects of change swirl together in a toxic mix
- We need to be aware of the whole syndrome
- Different aspects affect different children, depending on genetic makeup.

Toxic childhood syndrome is happening across the developed world, but its effects are particularly bad in the most economically successful countries.

***Toxic Childhood* looks at ten aspects of childhood that need detoxing:**

- 1. Food for thought (diet)**
How 21st century food affects brain function and 21st century eating habits affect behaviour ... and suggestions for weaning children off junk food
- 2. Out to play (exercise/play)**
The parental anxiety that's damaging children's development – what parents can do to rear a 'free range child'
- 3. Time for bed (sleep)**
Why sleep is important for thinking, learning and behaviour, and how to make sure children get enough of it
- 4. It's good to talk (attachment and communication)**
Why lack of communication is dumbing children down and how talk can make children brighter
- 5. We are family (contemporary families)**
How changes in family structures affect children's well-being and suggestions for holding families together
- 6. Who's looking after the children? (childcare)**
The facts about childcare: ensuring children are properly looked after from birth to teens
- 7. Best days of their lives (education)**
Why twenty-first century education fails many children and what parents can do to help children succeed at school
- 8. The word on the street (peer pressure/marketing)**
How the consumer culture damages children's well-being and how to keep your child safe
- 9. The electronic village (TV and media)**
How to protect your child from the many dangers of life in a fast-changing multi-media world
- 10. Manners maketh man (parenting and society)**
The problems of rearing children in a morally-relative society and how to reinstate the 'adult alliance'

Detoxing childhood

- 1.**
 - Our technological culture has now far outstripped our biological nature
 - This is fine for fully developed human beings, but children need to develop in biological time
 - They also need **real** food, **real** play and **real** interaction.

2.

- The movement of women into the workforce has left a gaping hole in the home where mothers used to be
- We have to provide childcare that will nurture children's development as effectively as mothers
- Some TV is fine, but it mustn't become an electronic babysitter.

3.

- The competitive ethos of economically successful countries has given a competitive edge to child-rearing
- For instance, parents attempt to accelerate their child's progress, schools are dominated by tests and targets
- We have to recognise that childhood is not a race.

4.

- The electronic village in which many children grow up is potentially more dangerous than a real-life village
- We have to protect children from predatory marketers and other harmful influences (**see 'Consuming Kids' short film on You Tube**)
- We also have to guard against social isolation resulting from life in a virtual world.

5.

- Research shows clearly that the most successful parenting style is 'authoritative' – 'warm but firm'
- In a culture where old moral certainties have been swept away, many parents lack the confidence to balance warmth with firmness
- They need support to sort out twenty-first century parenting – not least through education about child development.

***Toxic Childhood* by Sue Palmer (Orion Books, £7.99)**

- explains how cultural influences have affected child-rearing practices in each of the ten areas covered
- provides starting points for detoxing childhood in each area
- points to successful child-rearing practices in various parts of the developed world
- lists useful books and websites for parents who want to know more.

If you wish to obtain a CD of this presentation (£10), contact Georgina Pensri: g.pensri@pensri.co.uk

There is a BBC clip of Sue Palmer talking about 'toxic childhood' on You Tube (key in Toxic Childhood).

A 'self-help' book for parents *Detoxing Childhood: what parents need to know to raise bright, balanced children* is also available from Orion, £9.99

Sue's latest book *21st Century Boys*, is now available (Orion, £14.99)

For more information on Sue Palmer's training courses, please contact sue@suepalmer.co.uk