



Toxic Childhood: Is the world damaging our children?

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Nicholas Tucker discusses Sue Palmer's book on modern childhood.

In modern society childhood has become an ideal as well as an actuality. So while we go on hoping for the best for our young, there is always the almost inevitable realisation that in the real world what is available to children continues to fall short of what we truly desire for them. The latest critic to focus on this dilemma is Sue Palmer in her energetic but dispiriting book **Toxic Childhood**. Nicholas Tucker assesses her argument. <!--break-->

Cassandra with just one message of doom still could not manage to make others take her seriously. Sue Palmer, with dark warnings on page after page of **Toxic Childhood**, doubly risks being overlooked because she is so indefatigably pessimistic about everything that is happening to British children today. She is sometimes right, but there are other moments when she turns into a modern version of those sixteenth-century Puritan preachers, forever railing against anyone who dared admit that they or even their children were sometimes quite enjoying life, whatever the odds.

And while much of Palmer's book is well researched and worth reading, there are times when she is over-speculative. Does anyone else think that television's Bart Simpson might be a real force for setting a bad example to modern eight-year-olds? Is it true that today's playgrounds are boring because they all suffer from 'health-and-safety paranoia'? Is it a fact that 'practically all juvenile socialising goes on under the eagle eye of adults'? My own equally speculative observations on all these matters are that Palmer is exaggerating in her efforts to get her wake-up message through. Playgrounds where I have spent much grandfatherly time recently seem much more varied than those I remember. Socialising goes on all over the place, often well away from my own eyes, eagle or otherwise. As for Bart Simpson, he is actually an incredibly smart child with an amazing vocabulary. If his work-shy habits at school are seen as undesirable, what could one say about Richmal Crompton's great schoolboy character William?

No brighter side?

Palmer's heart is in the right place. Her anxieties about the way that modern children are being led away from biological imperatives such as the need for an adequate diet and enough sleep at night are wholly understandable. But she would be more persuasive if she could occasionally look on the brighter side as well. Small children today go to schools where they are welcomed and well looked after. At home they are hit less and loved more. These are positive gains. When there is bullying, staff are now expected to be concerned about it. But for Palmer such bullying that does exist today may be partly due to over-supervision, which helps to create both bullies and victims. So what are the schools expected to do then? Still risk 'over-supervising', whatever that means, or return to the *laissez-faire* policies of yore?

Childhood lasts an inordinately long time. Experience of it at first hand can be joyful and fulfilling while also labour-intensive, time-consuming, often tedious and increasingly expensive. Those parents coping with these problems in the past without feeling much obvious affection for their young sometimes managed to opt out of any organised form of child rearing at all, leaving their children to grow up as best they could. Parents today do not have this option, unless they want to risk trouble with the law. But out of all these competing claims on time, money and personal space, some

British children still manage to have a good enough childhood. Others demonstrably do not, and to the extent that government can help out here, Palmer is right to argue for far more vigorous state intervention. There is for example a clear case now for further protecting children from undesirable commercial pressures. But ultimately the state of childhood cannot be separated from what is also happening to adults at the same time. Improving life for everyone has always been the best way to help children. An awareness of the bigger picture where modern society is concerned would have made this a better all-round study.

Palmer envisions a possible scenario soon when there might be some sort of 'tipping point' after which we may have lost a whole generation of children to bad physical, social and mental health. If she was describing the slums of Latin America she may indeed have a point. But warning against an imminent catastrophic breakdown for all British children, not just the neglected few, desperately sad though their stories often are, is to over-egg her argument. Which is a pity, for there is much in these pages that should still concern us all.

Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It by Sue Palmer is published by Orion Books (0 75287 359 8, £12.99 pbk).

[image:Nick Tucker.JPG:left]

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