

Save childhood

Wendy Ellyatt, co-founder and director of the Save Childhood Movement, discusses her thoughts on the erosion of childhood in Britain and why we should be worried

There are currently some extremely worrying statistics being published about the decline in child health and wellbeing in the UK. The evidence seems to be coming from all areas that children are unhappy, alienated from the natural world and suffering from a range of increasing physical, mental and emotional problems.

The warning bells started to go off in 2007 when UNICEF published its 2007 Child Well-being Report that put the UK at the bottom of the league table of 20 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. And this was despite the fact that many of the other countries were economically poorer.

Then in 2009 UNICEF and IPSOS followed this up with a further report looking at the commercialisation of children in Sweden, Spain and the UK. The children in all three countries told researchers that their happiness was dependent on spending time with stable families and having plenty of things to do, especially playing outdoors, rather than owning technology or branded clothes. The research showed, however, that parents in the UK were compensating for the time that they spent at work by buying their children technology and clothes.

Consumer culture in the UK contrasted starkly with Sweden and Spain, where family time is prioritised, children and families are under less pressure to own material goods and children have greater access to activities out of the home. A recent parliamentary report also showed that girls as young as five now routinely worry about their weight and appearance while more than half the entire UK population is grappling with mental and physical problems relating to negative body image.

In 2009 the Good Childhood Inquiry reported that children in the

UK were suffering an “epidemic of mental illness”, with significant increases between 1974 and 1999 in the number suffering from conduct, behavioural and emotional problems.

called some of the most tested children in the world. The pressure to achieve is unrelenting and self-worth comes increasingly from comparison with others and external judgement

“Children in the modern world of the UK are currently subject to unprecedented cultural and environmental tensions.”

One in 10 children aged between five and 16 currently have a clinically diagnosed mental health disorder – that’s more than a million children – about 35,000 children in England are being prescribed anti-depressants and the UK has one of the highest rates of self-harm in Europe, at 400 per 100,000 population. The most recent Good Childhood Report showed that at any one time more than half a million children in the UK are unhappy with their lives.

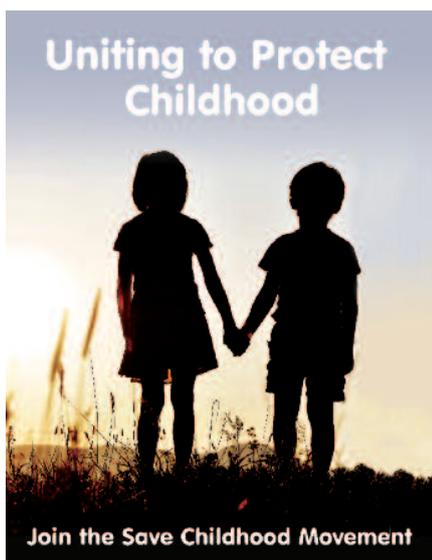
So just what is going on here? What are the external influences that are so profoundly impacting on our children’s health and happiness? And why does the UK stand out as being particularly poor in supporting child wellbeing?

Children in the modern world of the UK are currently subject to unprecedented cultural and environmental tensions. From the downward pressures of the schooling system, to the changing nature of their local streetscapes and the extraordinary advancement of digital technology, their rights and freedoms have been progressively and substantially eroded. We continue to introduce formal schooling at a much younger age than elsewhere in Europe, despite the evidence that shows that this can actually have a negative effect on later achievement, and we now have what have been

rather than any sort of positive internal process.

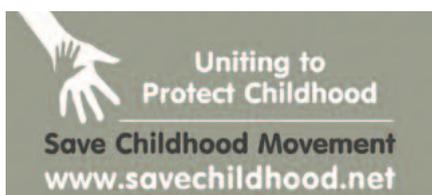
If we look at what matters most to children it is being able to develop according to their natural developmental biology. They are fundamentally designed to be questing natural learners and need only appropriately supportive environments to blossom. Above all they need to feel a sense of relationship and belonging, that they are listened to and matter and that the world is a safe and fascinating place to explore. It is the real world that they need to experience, loving adults that they need to interact with and developmentally appropriate activities that they need to have access to. The most important thing is that they can maintain their positive learning dispositions in ways that have meaning and relevance for them. There is a danger that if they are made to feel in some way lacking, or that they are failing the adults in their worlds, that they will start to fulfil the needs of others rather than their own internal needs and recent target and outcomes based changes in early years policy-making may have unfortunately made this increasingly likely.

Children are also living increasingly sedentary lives with little contact with nature and disturbingly high levels of interaction with screen



technology. They now spend so little time outdoors that they are unfamiliar with some of our commonest wild creatures. According to a 2008 National Trust survey, one in three could not identify a magpie; half could not tell the difference between a bee and a wasp; yet nine out of 10 could recognise a Dalek. In a single generation since the 1970s, children's 'radius of activity' – the area around their home where they are allowed to roam unsupervised – has declined by almost 90%. In 1971, 80% of seven and eight-year-olds walked to school, often alone or with their friends, whereas two decades later fewer than 10% did so – almost all accompanied by their parents. Parents are worried about traffic and 'stranger-danger' and yet statistically the most dangerous place for children to be is in their own homes, particularly with unsupervised access to digital technology.

So we have seen a massive decline in children's natural rights and freedoms and a massive increase in



their levels of social and emotional dysfunction. The Save Childhood Movement was launched in June 2012 in recognition of this situation and to help unite the wide range of people who are increasingly expressing their

own concerns. It has more than 25 eminent advisors, a growing list of supportive organisations and is currently planning a two day London-based summit on the 27th and 28th of April next year with the aim of clarifying the core issues, raising public awareness and starting to identify possible solutions.

The movement has its main website at www.savechildhood.net but there is also a membership network at www.savechildhoodnetwork.ning.com that is free to join together with an

active presence on both Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/savechildhoodmovement>) and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/supportscn>). Members can currently share their own thoughts and concerns, start their own action groups and offer to help as volunteers. It welcomes the feedback and involvement of all pre-school and early years practitioners. ■

Wendy Ellyatt

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Save Childhood Movement

The 2013 Flourish Summit - London 27th & 28th April 2013

Early Childhood and the Science of Wellbeing

The Save Childhood Movement is currently planning its first multidisciplinary summit and is inviting all concerned individuals and organisations to attend.

Summit aims:

- To bring together a multi-disciplinary group of experts to share their own thoughts and findings.
- To clarify the most current research.
- To explore our understanding of the word wellbeing and the environments necessary for children to truly flourish.
- To identify examples of good practice.
- To find ways of moving from awareness to action.

For further info visit www.flourishsummitlondon.co.uk

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