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## The primary cause for concern

### Our young children are anxious, badly behaved, stressed, depressed and obsessed with the cult of celebrity, according to the first in-depth report into primary schooling for four decades

By Richard Garner, Education Editor

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Primary schools have been engulfed by a wave of "anti-social behaviour, materialism and the cult of celebrity", according to the most in-depth study for 40 years.

The study, the first major investigation into primary schooling since the Plowden report in 1967, paints a grim dystopian picture of a "loss of childhood" among the 3.5 million children in state primary schools.

It also reveals a decline in mutual respect for fellow pupils and teachers and warns of a growing lack of cohesion and family life.

"Today's children, it was generally felt, are being forced to grow up too soon and the prospects for society and the world they will inhabit look increasingly perilous," it states.

The study was conducted by a team of researchers headed by the Cambridge-based academic Professor Robin Alexander, who is also professor of education emeritus at Warwick University. Advisers to the inquiry, which is funded by a leading charity involved in the world of education – the Esme Fairbairn Foundation, include Dame Gillian Pugh, former head of the National Children's Bureau,

Its conclusions echo the findings of a report by Unicef earlier this year which found children in the UK were the unhappiest in the Western world as a result of tensions brought about by the lack of social cohesion in the country.

Those findings were given short shrift by government ministers who claimed they were based on out-of-date statistics. However, sources for the Alexander review stressed that its findings were based on more than 750 interviews conducted with parents, teachers, heads and pupils throughout the past year.

The study said it had found a surprising level of unanimity amongst its witnesses over the bleak world inhabited by pupils attending today's primary schools.

Throughout the country, children interviewed expressed similar fears which plague their everyday lives outside school – traffic, the lack of safe play areas, rubbish, graffiti and gangs of older children. Inside the classroom, the recent proliferation of tests, particularly SATs, were frequently described as "scary" and stressful.

Teachers sounded the alarm over pupils' frequent access at home to internet and games consoles material ranging from the "unsuitable" to the "pernicious", and an obsession with celebrity, learnt through all forms of media.

Witnesses told researchers of their concern that pupils were fed a diet of "wall-to-wall television" outside of school – which had led them to see TV stars and celebrities as their idols.

They also spoke of parents having "little control" over their children's demands for new gadgetry – such as their own TV sets, mobile phones, the internet and games consoles.

They also criticised a rampant consumerism among the very young, a result of many parents succumbing to children's demands for new gadgetry.

Antisocial behaviour was also a major concern for interviewees, who cited "pervasive and threatening levels of aggression among older children", as well as an unacceptable presence of knives, drugs and guns, particularly in urban areas.

The authors of the study said the cumulative evidence had shown "deep anxiety about the condition of childhood today and the society and world in which children are growing up". Anxiety was also expressed, particularly by pupils, about what they termed the "growing crisis of climate change".

The study warned that the pressures of constant testing at school was also exacerbating antisocial behaviour in the classroom with pupils bored by

constant teaching to the test and a narrow and rigid curriculum based on the the three Rs.

"We were increasingly told that children were under intense pressure – and perhaps excessive pressure – from the policy-driven demands of their schools and the commercially driven demands of the wider society," the report says.

Witnesses also claimed the primary school curriculum was "too narrow and rigid" and "the curriculum and children's educational careers are being compromised by the national tests (especially for 11-year-olds)".

The review is the first since the 1967 report by Lady Plowden ushered in a new era of child-centred education. During the 1980s and 1990s, successive Conservative and Labour administrations reined back on its findings to return to a more formal era of education.

The study also reports widespread dissatisfaction with the standards of modern parenting. It complains of parents' low aspirations for children and said many were "passing the buck for their children's socialisation to schools".

Teaching assistants, in particular, were concerned about "what is summed up as the 'loss of childhood', a combination of pressures from school, parents, peers, media and commerce combined with the increase in marital breakdown and family instability".

Measures to combat the problems included an increase in parenting classes. In addition, the report will go on to look at whether children in the UK start formal schooling at too young an age and could benefit through more learning through play up to the age of six – as happens in many other European countries.

Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said: "From the evidence, it is quite obvious that a review of the primary curriculum and national curriculum testing is long overdue."

A spokeswoman for the Department for Children, Families and Schools said: "The vast majority of children go to better schools, enjoy better health, live in better housing and in more affluent households than they did 10 years ago."

She added: "The Government does not share the view that children are over-tested. Tests help parents and teachers monitor the progress of children and ensure they get the help they need."

## **The Parent**

### **Katie Appleyard, 24, Hempland Primary School, York**

I have two boys, aged seven and two, and walk to school with them. I know the seven-year-old would love to walk to school on his own and it's only 10 minutes away but I wouldn't allow that. You never know who's about and you can't take that sort of risk at such a young age. I like to know that he's safe on his way in, and the only way to ensure that is to take him myself. Maybe I'll let him go alone when he's 10 or 11.

Children as young as seven now know so much about gadgets that it is impossible to satisfy all their demands. I allow them for a birthday or Christmas present but the demands come every day. They know what's on the market, they see adverts on telly, and they talk about it with their mates. Rather than make do with what they have, they want more and more. Mobile phones, iPods and PlayStations are all incredibly expensive, and within no time they're out of date.

Parents need to exert control over how much time their children spend with technology. But there is only so much I can do: even with parent-control software, the internet is full of lurking dangers. I do sometimes worry that adults like me are projecting their own fears onto children. It's a constant challenge as a parent to stay positive rather than paranoid.

## **The Pupil**

### **George Bolton, 10, Bonneville School, London**

Children should be allowed to have more fun in schools. Whether or not playtime is safe depends on what time of day it is – me and my friends do worry about playing in the dark, but otherwise generally don't care.

In all schools I think there should be different rules for children of different ages. So if the children are under five they shouldn't be allowed to play certain sports, but older than five they should be allowed to try most things.

The majority of the kids are well behaved in my class. There will always be clowns in every classroom, it's just important to ignore them.

I think we should be taught less ancient history, which seems irrelevant, and more about what's going on in our local community, and how we can contribute.

Children my age love exciting ideas, and like to be taken seriously. But sometimes in school you hear about things that adults should keep to themselves. That's how I feel about climate change. Me and my mates should be thinking about day-to-day things, not saving the world – that's what politicians are for. I do sometimes feel in class like the people teaching me are just teaching me to worry. But I've got years to worry about their problems, so why should I now?

## **The Year 6 Teacher**

### **Michael Dinsmore, 41, Hillbrook School, London**

We are becoming more risk-averse in our attitude to childhood. As a teacher, I do worry about exposing children to even small dangers because I'm very worried about litigation. You become professionally cautious about doing something that involves risks in case it comes back to you, just in case something goes wrong. I'm lucky in that I work at a school which will protect me.

A culture of targets and testing is inhibiting what teachers can do. In Year 6 this makes teaching less enjoyable, as children aren't being stimulated like they could be. The aim of the curriculum now is to ensure kids pass tests in a few key areas, rather than produce rounded pupils by harnessing potential. But I'm dubious about the validity of test results, because all they show is that pupils are trained to answer questions effectively.

Education is increasingly bureaucratic, with interference at various levels. The curriculum itself is too focused on English, maths, and science. This means that what we're required to teach children can end up being dull and restricted, when teachers should be given licence to explore anything and everything. We need to give teachers the flexibility to excite children's minds, rather than train them to be replicas of each other.

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