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Tim Lott: The kids are *perfectly* all right

Gun crime, gang violence, exam overload, traffic – these are the things said to be troubling our children. But they are never bored and are having the time of their lives

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If you didn't read last week's Cambridge University report on the state of childhood and education in Britain, allow me to clue you in. Researchers grilled hundreds of parents, teachers, head teachers and pupils. It turns out that primary school children are anxious about strangers, burglars, gang violence, knives, guns, exams, traffic, rubbish, and graffiti. They worry daily about global warming and terrorism, as well as their friendships and their academic performance. School tests freak them out. Oh, and they're also worried about poverty, the lack of safe play areas and family breakdown.

Most of the teachers also felt that administering national tests at seven, 11 and 14 gave kids nightmares. The headmasters deplored children's exposure to bad influences via television, the internet, mobile phones and computer games. Adults in general blamed the media, the pressures of consumerism, immigration and the decline of respect for others. Um, what else? Oh yes, computers meant that children didn't talk any more and the national obsession with celebrity was giving them inappropriate role models. It's a disaster. We're raising a whole generation of terrified, desperate, stressed-out, pint-sized clinical depressives. It's surprising they aren't queuing up to throw themselves in front of the traffic that they are so terrified of, clasping little Ted in their tiny jittering hands.

Is there some mistake, or was this report actually authored by Steve Lowe and Alan McArthur of *Is It Just Me or Is Everything Shit?* book fame. No wonder these kids are miserable with all these paranoid adults about telling them how ghastly everything is. And of course they are miserable, aren't they? After all, that's the one thing that everyone seems to agree on.

Far be it from me to contradict the academics of Cambridge University, but I'm not sure how this fits in with a recent poll in which 92 per cent of people in this country described themselves as either fairly happy or very happy. Only 8 per cent said they were fairly unhappy or very unhappy.

A freak result? No. The overwhelming conclusion of happiness polls taken over the past 50 years suggests much the same thing. Certainly, since the Second World War, people haven't got any happier despite rising levels of prosperity. But it would be somewhat ridiculous if they had. If 92 per cent of people were "very happy" we'd be all living in a DFS advertisement.

No, happiness levels have remained more or less stable, and very high, for a very long time. So this raises the question: is it just the children who are freaking out while the adults continue their fairly or very happy lives, irrespective of the suffering of their infant offspring?

The first common-sense answer to that question is, when did you last see a seven- to 11-year-old who was unhappier than his parents? Given their total lack of responsibility, a mind largely incapable of grasping the facts of death and insecurity, the fact that they have far more wealth and choice than any previous generation, and that by and large they don't get hit any more however badly they behave, that's hardly surprising.

There is a grain of truth in this report, as there is in just about any report about just about anything. It would be surprising if kids weren't somewhat worried about gangs and guns – the "youthing" of violence is a genuinely tragic development. Family breakdown is a grim and common reality. The testing of children at seven and 11 is oppressive and unnecessary. And poverty, now as ever, is debilitating and degrading.

But as a matter of fact, in my experience (four kids, will that do?) worrying is not something children on the whole do much. They might scream their heads off if someone brings them a funghi pizza instead of the margherita they ordered, or have a blue fit if they're asked to do the washing-up. But worrying – it's just not really their thing. They exist in the present most of the time, and most of the time for most of the children, the present is pretty good – until someone nicks their lollipop.

As for worrying daily – daily – about terrorism and global warming, well, I don't know what kind of kids they interviewed on this survey. But on the day of World Trade Center attacks in September 2001, my two primary school kids didn't seem remotely traumatised. In fact, if anything, they thought it was rather exciting. And I would say that was an entirely typical and healthy response. It's part of children's potent array of defences, largely focused on the fact that they are world-class egomaniacs. They really couldn't care less if it doesn't affect them and, more specifically, if it isn't affecting them right now.

Certainly children, like adults, are unhappy some of the time. Who isn't? It's just that the things that concern them are different – not worse – from the things that other generations have had to deal with.

Worried about terrorism and global warming? The external threats – thousands of Russian nuclear weapons pointed at us, IRA bombings – were just as great and immediate, if not more so, in the 1960s and 1970s, but you see few people of those generations wandering around traumatised by the experience. Or, for that matter, try being a child in the previous generation from mine, when we faced imminent domination by a brutal foreign power. Now that's what I call a worry. But we somehow look back at the 1940s as a "golden age" compared with the current stressed-out generation.

Worried about the influence of computers, television, mobile phones? At least the current generation has got them. When I was a kid, what we had to deal with was boredom. Endless, intense episodes of Nothing Happening. Ever. And even if we could find something to do, there wasn't any money to do it.

I'm only 51, but I didn't eat out until I was 18, didn't travel abroad until I was 19. There was nothing on television and I think my parents took me to the cinema twice – on both occasions to see rubbish films, which were the norm in those days. We didn't have sleepovers. We didn't have much in the way of parties. (My primary school-age daughter seems to have one every week.) The food was terrible (sorry, Mum).

Certainly I didn't have to worry very much about being run over by a car (although it might have made a nice relief from the tedium). We had the freedom to walk to school – not such a great boon if it was pissing down with rain, by the way. There was bullying, but not usually with knives, and guns were only a distant rumour. Most of our parents stayed together, even if they were miserable.

On the whole things were a lot more uneventful, for good or ill. Were they better, though? I would say, without having to think about it for more than half a second, absolutely not. Give me Shrek, McDonald's, The Simpsons, porn on the internet and multichannel TV over Swiss Family Robinson, Wimpy, Health and Efficiency and Listen with Mother any time.

I don't think there's really any good evidence to demonstrate that children are any more unhappy than they ever were. So why do we continue to insist that they are? First, if you ask a seven- or eight-year-old kid what he's anxious about, he is not going to tell the impressive, authoritative Cambridge researcher "nuffink". That's not what is expected. That child is going to think of everything he damn well can so that he or she doesn't look, thick, insensitive or unimaginative.

Second, we are a nation of grumblers and always have been. Guilt and self-hatred come more naturally to us than breathing. It's not cool to be happy. In this country it carries a faint whiff of the moron.

The reason reports such as this continue to attract funding and attention is the hope and desire for elimination of unhappiness. Our underlying cultural impulse is that happiness is the ultimate goal and an unalloyed good. But is it?

Of course we all want our children to be happy, just as we want to be happy ourselves. But unhappiness is the grit in the oyster that produces the pearl. Without it we wouldn't know what happiness was. We think we want to eliminate it – but if we did, our lives would be as bland as an episode of The Partridge Family.

Or as the great William James put it: "Life and its negation are beaten up inextricably together. The two are equally essential facts of existence and all natural happiness thus seems infected with a contradiction."

To put it another way, if you want to have sunshine you gotta have rain. And despite what the Cambridge report implies, we've been getting pretty much the same amount of rain now as we did 50 years ago. But somehow the establishment of this banal fact seems to be one that is unlikely to attract much research funding.

Also, "Kids a bit miserable sometimes as per usual" is not going to make much of a headline. But I suspect that's the boring, rather encouraging and enduring reality of life for children both now and as far back as we can remember.

Further browsing: The full report published by the Primary Review, based at Cambridge University's Faculty of Education, is at www.primaryreview.org.uk

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