Mood matters: A voice for the stressed-out children

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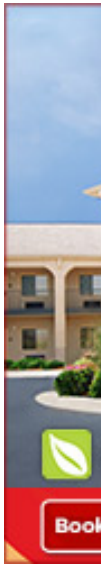
Sir Alfred Aynsley-Green despairs at the 'awfulness' of so many English pupils' lives – and wants to turn anxious youngsters into happy and successful adults. Can he make a difference? Hilary Wilce meets him

Thursday 01 November 2007



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The man who is the voice of England's children works out of an office so bright and cheerful that its smacking new orange, green and purple decor could be a Saturday morning TV studio. But the news unrolling on the television screen in the reception area is bleak. Two tiny boys, aged six and seven, have been killed while pushing their scooters along a motorway in the dark. Then there is the breaking news that the Government has just decided not to abolish spanking.

It is clearly apparent that Sir Alfred Aynsley-Green, the Children's Commissioner for England, is a man in an impossible job. His task is make this country a place where children feel respected, listened to, loved, safe, happy and able to reach their full potential.

But our children are so far from this that the gulf seems unbridgeable. In February UNICEF declared British children the least fortunate in the developed world. It said that they were unhappy, unhealthy, engaging in risky behaviour, had poor relationships with friends and peers, low expectations and no feeling of safety. The Government argued that the report had used old data and that things were better now. But then came last month's interim report from the Primary Review, a major Cambridge-based inquiry into primary schools, declaring that today's children feel anxious, stressed, unsafe and pessimistic; meanwhile, new figures from the Department of

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The commercialism, individualism and social fragmentation of 21st-century England are clearly making the world a perilous and miserable place for children, with three-quarters of them saying that they feel neither respected nor heard. Not surprising, then, to learn that, two years into the job, beyond "the exhilaration and inspiration of meeting so many fantastic children", Sir Al, as he likes to be known, is feeling anger and despair.

"Despair at seeing the awfulness of the lives of so many children, in this, one of the richest countries in the world," he says, "and deep anger that we have so many children under our noses who are very unhappy, and who are not succeeding. Yet, most people are quite oblivious to what's under their noses in terms of the impact of society on children."

The role of Children's Commissioner for England was set up two years ago, under the 2004 Children's Act, in response to growing calls for the improved care and protection of children. Sir Al had experience as an eminent paediatrician and as a senior civil servant: he was Nuffield professor of child health at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children and the Institute of Child Health, University College, London, as well as the national clinical director for children at the Department of Health. To the new post, he brought decades of dealing with sick children and their parents, as well as his Whitehall experience of lobbying, advocacy and alliance-building.

But it is clear that travelling around England, talking to children on inner city estates, in traveller camps, in special schools and in isolated rural villages has given him much pause for thought. Although his

tone is dry and doctorly, his message is savage.

"We are a remarkably child-unfriendly country – so much so that I have come to believe there is something endemic, something built into the English psyche, that makes us this way. Look at today's issue of physical punishment, which is, I think, a barometer of how children are valued. Twenty-odd European countries and New Zealand have introduced legislation about how children should be respected in this area, but not us. We have a low age of criminal responsibility; we have ever-more children subject to ASBOs and punishment and control instruments; and we have one of the highest rates of incarceration of children in the civilised world. Yet, the popular sentiment is not to see children who are vulnerable and who need help, but to see them as a burden to society, needing to be locked away."

There is also, he says, a total failure to realise that children have rights. "As soon as you mention rights, and particularly children's rights, you get a barrage of criticism."

In fact, his own post has been widely criticised by children's charities and lobby groups as being "rights-light" and lacking full independence from government. It has no power of enforcement, and is limited to listening, recommending and seeking to influence. Sir Al, though, stresses that his powers – such as the right to enter any premises where a child is looked after, as long as it is not a private home – have helped bring about important changes in the areas of youth justice and young asylum-seekers.

It is clear that the Government wanted to avoid creating a post that could really shake things up for children. Sir Al's appointment lagged behind similar appointments in Northern Ireland, Wales and

Scotland, and came with fewer powers. He has only a budget of £3m and a staff of 30. Much of his time so far has been spent setting up the organisation and "re-branding" it, with the help of children, into the snappily labelled 11 Million, after the number of children in England. Marketing this new brand – including using extensive consultations with children and young people to help create a child-friendly website and resources – continues to be a major focus of his work. It reflects his aim of wanting to create, by the time his five-year term comes to an end, a "respected, authoritative, competent and careful organisation that can speak for the needs of all children".

But when it comes to targeted interventions, he knows that his limited resources mean that he cannot spread himself all over the place; rather, he must do one or two things well. And there have been successes: he has helped to stop children being placed in adult mental health wards; to shelve the use of housing benefit sanctions to punish antisocial families; to improve the access of young asylum-seekers to benefits; and to obtain additional money for the education of autistic children.

But his central role, he says, is to consult children as widely and thoroughly as he can, so that he can accurately convey their concerns to those in power. "My whole legitimacy is based on what children and young people tell me," he says. He spends time on the road travelling the country, and goes out of his way to reach the most unreachable children, such as travellers' children.

The Commission's annual programme is designed to reflect what children say are their main concerns. This year, half the budget is being spent on issues of health and happiness. Next year, the focus will be bullying, violence and abuse. "Many children are profoundly

concerned about domestic violence in their homes, and about physical punishment. And they are very concerned about school life, and about bullying, and they want it stopped," he says. This month, he is hoping to raise the profile of children with the 11 Million Takeover Day, when children will have the chance to take over from adults in hundreds of organisations.

And although his job is mired in frustration, he is keen to point out just how far the Government has come in its development of child-centred policies, such as Sure Start and Every Child Matters. "I would argue that more has been done in the last seven years than in the whole 30 years before," he says.

The forces ranged against today's children are deeply woven into the fabric of society, he says. "There is the loss of time for children to be children, the incessant commercialisation of childhood by the advertising industry, and the relentless sexualisation of children at very young ages." Then there is the media, "which consistently demonises children, even though 10 times more of them are giving back to society by volunteering than are causing trouble."

Then there is ourselves. If Sir Al could have just one wish, he says, it would not be for better legislation, or for improved services. It would be that parenting be recognised for the crucial thing that it is, and that it be given the time and resources that it needs. And he would also like to ask us all one simple question: do we value children enough?

British student

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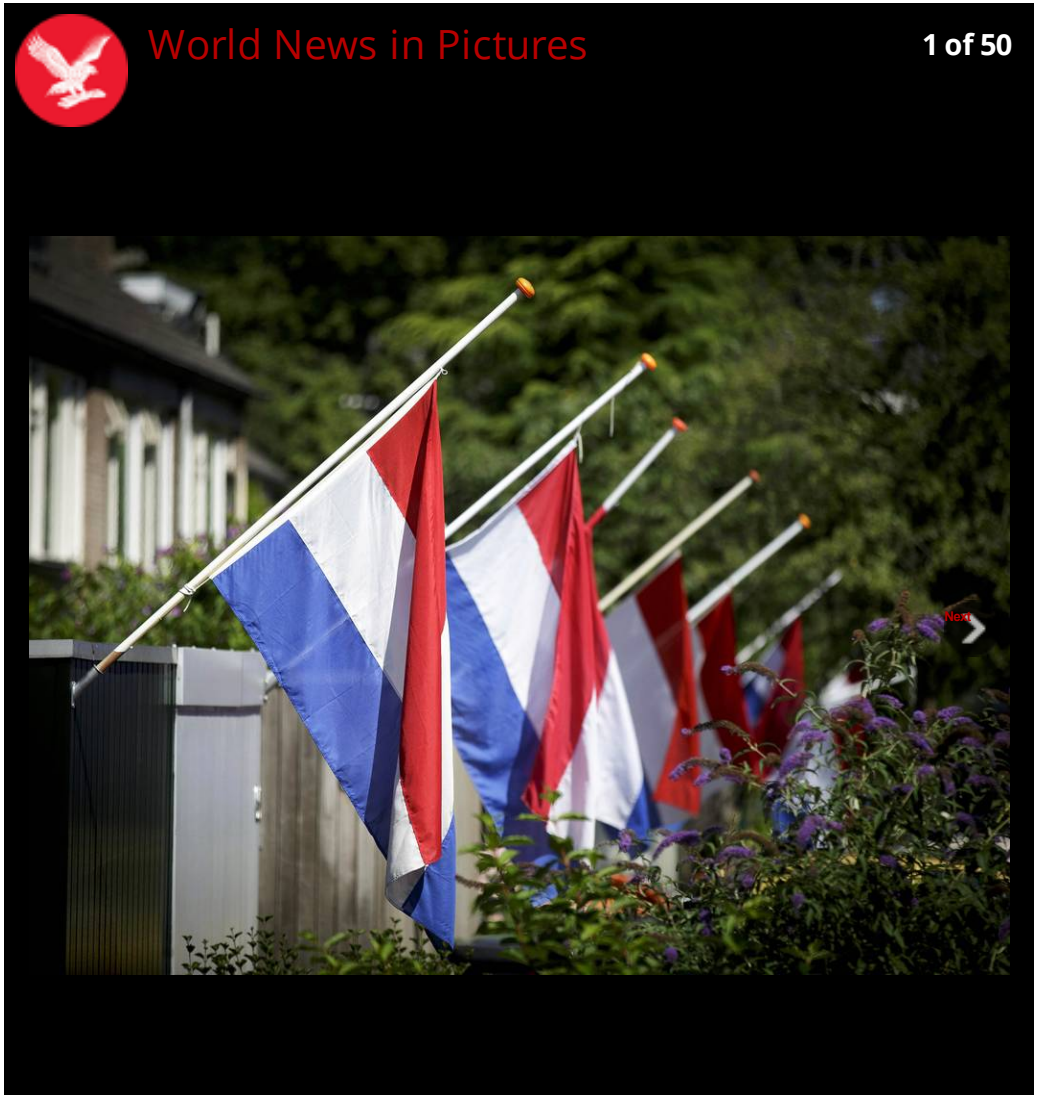

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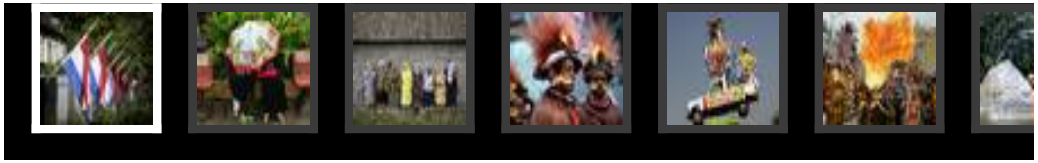

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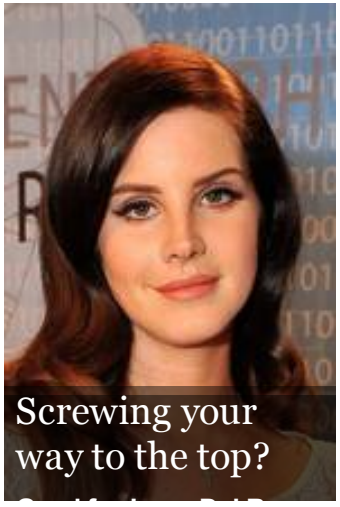

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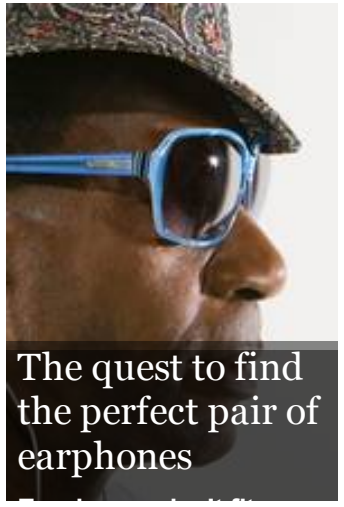

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