A crisis in the family

By Jenny McCartney
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Britain's children, we are told, are deeply stressed, badly fed and uncontrollably delinquent. Their parents are overworked and out of their depth. Who should be sitting on the naughty step, asks Jenny McCartney

It appears to be a compulsory condition of modern parenthood that we are permanently in despair about the well-being of our children. A survey emerged last week, however, that illustrates that British adults are not alone in their chronic worrying: an independent inquiry called Primary Review found that very young schoolchildren are also "stressed" and "deeply anxious" about everything from constant testing in schools to global warming and the terrorist threat.

Despite the absence in Britain of either war or famine, those two great scourges of human security, this is not an optimistic era in which to be either a parent or a child. Through a succession of media snapshots, a gloomy picture of the family emerges, in which each member is

navigating his or her troubled way through endless dangers and neuroses.

The small children are permanently glued to the television and barely able to speak in class. The teenagers are drunk and disorderly, the girls flirting with anorexia, self-harm or risky sex and the boys carrying knives. Parents work long, erratic hours, snatch a greasy microwaved snack where they can, and then slump in front of programmes such as Supernanny, in which an emphatic lady named Jo Frost lays down the importance of rules and routine for toddlers. Parenting has replaced sex as the art which most commonly begs the question: "Am I doing it right?" The answer, as supplied by an endless list of grim statistics and a host of quarrelling experts, is invariably no.

Last week another survey found that women who earned more than £30,000 a year were significantly less likely than lower-earning mothers to read stories to their children. A terrifyingly high proportion of British children under five – estimated in surveys at between a third and half – have their own television set in their bedrooms, with which they can presumably channel-hop to whatever unsuitable material they fancy. Dr Aric Sigman, a child psychologist who has been vocal in his alarm at how television is distorting children's responses to the wider world, has said: "Reducing TV viewing must become the new priority in child health."

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There is increasing evidence from America that constant exposure to violent video games, to which many British children appear addicted, can heighten aggressive behaviour. Repeated surveys confirm that British children have startlingly high rates of obesity, alcohol abuse and teenage pregnancy compared with the rest of Western Europe.

Such findings, especially when backed up by anecdotal evidence, should be a cause for serious reflection among British parents. But is the type of

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anxiety that parents are demonstrating over both their children's behaviour, and their own child-rearing abilities, a means of fixing problems or making them worse?

Where once parents absorbed advice over how to treat childish ailments and temper tantrums from grandparents and the extended family, now an army of television and publishing "childcare experts" have emerged to offer trenchant, but often conflicting, instructions. The ongoing furore over Channel 4's Bringing Up Baby – in which three "experts" take charge of three newborns in an adversarial format – is but the most extreme example of a growing industry apparently based on teaching parents how to do parenting properly.

Jo Frost, the star of the Channel 4 Supernanny programmes, is most famous for introducing the concept of the "naughty step" during "time out" for bad behaviour. Much of her approach was sound common sense, but shortly after her programme first aired in Britain an entire nation appeared to have latched on to the quick-fix notion of the naughty step. Now a British company has created a device called the "Time Out Pad", which bleeps loudly and flashes if the misbehaving child moves off the pad before his or her allotted time is up.

This, as many parents will recognise, is a potential disaster: children tend to be entranced by flashing lights and blaring noises: the "Time Out Pad" is almost certain to become an unintended source of fun. None the less, it will go to join the host of other new inventions that promise "parenting solutions" for a price, such as the "baby quiet sounds video monitor", which permits the watchful parent to scrutinise a baby or older child on a CCTV screen from another room.

The insidious message to adults, subtly and persistently conveyed, is that one can somehow – through the assiduous purchase of parenting DVDs, books, and safety and spy gadgets – buy one's way into a happier, more successful home life. Even Dr Tanya Byron, the voice of sanity in the television show The House of ? Tiny Tearaways, has observed with some concern that "it's going too far – parenting has become a well-marketed product and that's why I'm not making any more

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parenting television programmes".

There is an obvious parallel with the diet industry, in which obese people try and fail to treat their condition by buying more and more diet books, cellulite-toning gadgets and special low-fat foods. As the diet industry expands, so do waistlines: in fact what its adherents really need to do, in every sense, is to consume less.

With the constant emphasis on "expert training" for babies and young children to behave in an orderly manner, they are being treated like potentially problematic pets: possessions to be flaunted, heavily monitored and physically restricted. The emphasis, in middle-class homes particularly, is upon keeping children safe from real or imagined threats and packing their days with parentally approved activities.

Sara, a London mother of four whose eldest boy is now 16, says: "When you have four you can't micro-manage everything. But elsewhere it seems that the middle ground, between neglectful and over-interfering, is often being lost. I know of quite a few parents who regularly do their children's entire school projects for them, for example, and some who won't let their children go to a friend's house in case they're not properly supervised."

The most miserable example of adult control, she said, came from a former nanny who went to work in New York: "The family there lived in a beautiful house packed with antiques, but the nanny and the child were only allowed in one room. The child was banned from watching TV, but they were both being recorded on CCTV the entire time: the nanny said it felt like a prison cell."

The result is a risk-averse childhood in which Mum and Dad might not have any time to spend with you one-to-one, but they're always breathing down your neck. An open letter from 300 leading figures in child development, teaching and literature last September highlighted concern that the loss of "real play – socially interactive, first hand, and loosely supervised" is a serious matter.

Frank Furedi, professor of sociology at the University of Kent and author

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of Paranoid Parenting, argues that we are losing sight of children as autonomous beings: "Every social problem is redefined as a parenting problem. There's this notion that whatever parents do has an absolutely decisive influence on children: if a child does well at school it's not because he or she's a bright child, but because of the parent; or if a child gets into trouble on the streets, it's the parents' fault.

"The result of this 'parental determinism', as I call it, is that parents have become extremely anxious about their performance, and children are paying the price."

Yet many parents – and a wider society that venerates long working hours and material consumption – seem reluctant to examine or adjust their own behaviour. The evidence persistently suggests that children appreciate basic time and attention from their parents above all else, often doing fairly mundane things as a family. Their needs remain relatively uncomplicated, of the kind that an older generation would have easily understood: a routine for meals and bed-time; help with reading and schoolwork; affection and games; an abundance of exercise and a limit set on television viewing and computer gaming. Frequently, when children are asked to cite their best days, it will be those simply spent messing around in the park or playing football.

Parents are naturally preoccupied by fear of factors over which they have little control: of drug-pushers lurking at the school gates; of the influence of anorexic, junkie celebrities and electronic media. In the past, parents mainly concentrated on the pressing need to protect their children from disease, starvation and early death. In more secure times, the battleground has become psychological.

It is salutary, perhaps, to remember that our grandparents' generation – faced with mass aerial bombings and the real threat of Nazi invasion – nonetheless generally managed to imbue its children with a resilient and self-sufficient spirit. In a far safer era, there are signs that young children today are absorbing the dull weight of pernicious parental anxiety, which is already blighting their lives.

One of the wisest things that modern parents could do for their children is to take some "time out" themselves from the burgeoning parenting industry and its contradictory dictates, and cease to regard their offspring as a complicated difficulty to be managed with a professional tick-list. Then, with a little less compulsive checking of their parenting prowess, they might actually find themselves able to enjoy it.

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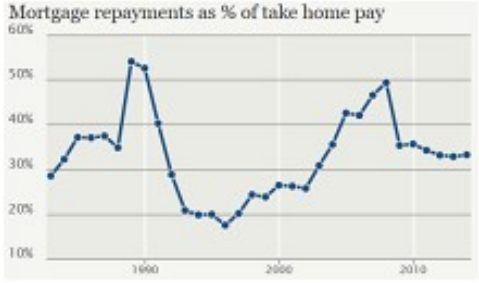

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