

# Are our children really in crisis, or the victims of parents' anxiety?

A major new report, out tomorrow, reveals that Britain's children are afraid of bullying, stressed by schoolwork and beset by concerns over relationships and abuse. But is 21st-century existence really that awful for our youngsters? Or is childhood being undermined by adult fears and aversion to risk? Amelia Hill, Caroline Davies and Gaby Hinsliff investigate

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**Amelia Hill, Caroline Davies, Gaby Hinsliff**  
The Observer, Sunday 1 February 2009

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Childhood was once seen as an idyllic time. It was, children were told, "the best days of their life", during which the exuberance of youth could be enjoyed unadulterated by responsibilities or cares. It is not hard to think that such days may be gone. Experts warn that young people are suffering from stress and anxiety, parents are too scared to let their children play freely and newspaper headlines paint a picture of Britain in which childhood is fast disappearing.

For children like 13-year-old Eleanor, things feel hopeless. "I'm so worried about the effect of the credit crunch on my family," she said. "I got sent home from school last week because I just started crying and couldn't stop. I feel like I'm having a breakdown."

Last year, ChildLine received calls from 195,485 children desperate for help. Many had specific problems. Others, like 16-year-old Kwame, couldn't identify the source of their misery. "I've been on antidepressants for a year and have considered taking an overdose," he said. "I can't be around people. I either get angry or break down in tears. I just feel like I can't be bothered to go on living."

According to a major new report into the state of childhood in Britain, published tomorrow, Kwame and Eleanor are not alone. The conclusions of the Good Childhood Inquiry, which has tracked the lives of the country's children for more than two years, are that British children are anxious, fearful of bullying, stressed by schoolwork, and wrestling with worries about family relationships, poverty, peer pressure or physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

"Our wealth has not bought us the kind of childhood we want for our children," said Bob Reitemeier, chief executive of the Children's Society, which commissioned the study by an independent panel of 12 experts including Lord Layard, emeritus professor of economics at the London School of Economics, and Sir Al Aynsley-Green, children's commissioner for England. "We simply cannot ignore these shocking findings. This has to be our 'wake-up call'."

The report is expected to reveal that improved economic conditions in Britain appear to be associated with increasing levels of emotional problems in young people. It will say that:

- Depression and anxiety have increased for boys and girls aged 15 to 16 since the mid-1980s, as have what are called "non-aggressive conduct problems" such as lying, stealing and disobedience
- One in five children and young people have mental health problems at some point, and one in 10 have a clinically recognisable mental health disorder

- Up to one in 12 children deliberately hurt themselves on a regular basis - the highest rate in Europe
- Children have lost the freedom to play outside because of their parents' fears.

The inquiry's findings seem to confirm a recent Unicef report of children's wellbeing, which ranked the UK 21st out of 25 major industrialised countries, despite being the fifth most prosperous. It also echoes research by the Primary Review, a three-year study by Cambridge University into primary education in England, which has found evidence that exams and league tables are building pressure inside the classroom, while consumerism, the cult of celebrity and a desire to grow up amplifies the pressures outside.

The state of childhood is one of the recurring topics of our times. That childhood is different seems in little doubt: today's young people live in an era of rapid change that many fear threatens their growth and development.

But on the eve of the inquiry's publication, dissenting voices are beginning to make themselves heard, arguing against the claims that childhood is "toxic", "disappearing" and "degraded". If today's children are anxious, they say, it is in part a result of their parents' panic.

Among the dissenters is Beverley Hughes, the children's minister, who warned that society is too eager to propound a "doom-mongering view of childhood in Britain". She said she knew of no evidence that today's children are more stressed than previous generations.

Instead of striving to remove all risk, upset and friction from childhood, Hughes argued, children need some stresses and challenges in order to grow up resilient enough to cope with setbacks in adult life.

"I think it's positive that we want to strive now in a way that perhaps wasn't the case in previous generations for children to be happy in their childhood here and now - they're not just little adults," she said. "But part of that is to become resilient and have that kind of confidence that children will need to tackle the things that beset them as they get older, and you can't develop that resilience unless you experience one or two knocks. The crucial thing is you have the support to negotiate those and come through stronger," she said. "It's our job as adults to make sure children have the space to do that."

Tim Gill, former director of the UK Children's Play Council and author of *No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society*, agreed. "Over the past 30 years, activities that previous generations of children have enjoyed without a second thought have been relabelled as troubling or dangerous, and the adults who permit them branded as irresponsible," he said. "Childhood is being undermined by adults' increasing aversion to risk and by the intrusion of that fear into every aspect of their lives. The knock-on effect is extremely serious."

Adults, said Gill, no longer ask themselves whether children can cope before stepping in and taking control.

He is not alone in thinking that it is parents, rather than children, who are frightened. "There is an urgent need to counter today's hysteria about the awfulness of children's lives," said Helene Guldberg, a former primary school teacher, developmental psychologist and author of *Reclaiming Childhood*, published last week. "We need to recognise that 'modern living' is not the problem: whether it be affluence, new technologies, greater mobility or academic pressures, none of these is a problem in and of itself. The problem lies with adult society, and the extent to which the culture of fear that dominates today's society is holding children back. Adults should stop projecting their fears and uncertainties on to children."

According to Wes Cuell, the NSPCC's director of services for children and young people, "child-panic" is not a new phenomenon but it has reached an "excruciating pitch which

ignores the fact that today's children are not the first to face the challenges of youth.

"We need to be careful that we don't over-egg the idea that we have a nation of unhappy, stressed children," said Cuell. "Children today might be anxious about their Sats but I was worried about my 11-plus. Children today might be anxious about being in a one-parent family but I was in class with children who were upset because, although their parents were together, they argued all the time. People say kids are swamped by technology and frantic about the number of friends they have on Facebook but I don't see children cracking under the strain. That's simply the world they're growing up in. Children are remarkably resilient and they adapt to things. We're in danger of talking ourselves into a situation of mass hysteria where we believe everything is terrible and getting worse."

Two months ago, a 15-year-old boy was stabbed in a school playground in Ealing, west London. One moment, he was talking to a boy from another school, the next, he was rolling on the floor with a punctured lung, being kicked and spat on. The police arrived quickly, the victim was airlifted to hospital, his attacker arrested and the school closed for the rest of the day.

The first that Anna, the mother of a 12-year-old boy at the school, knew of it was when her son, Sam, rang to ask if he could pick up his tennis racket from home. "I asked him why he wanted his racket when he was at school," she said. "He cheerfully told me he was off to play tennis with his friends because 'some boy had been stabbed'. None of them were remotely upset about it," she added, in amazement.

Sam confirms his mother's telling of the story. He wasn't worried, he said, because "if you looked at it in context, it happening didn't increase the chance of the same thing happening to me or my friends. The boy who was stabbed was involved in all sorts of bad things, and the families of the boys were involved in some sort of row too," he explained. "The boy who had the knife was arrested by the police and the one who was hurt is recovering, so basically, it won't happen to me and those involved have been dealt with. So why worry? Chill: it's all OK!"

An unprovoked attack in a school playground in broad daylight, one child in hospital and another in police custody. The event was reported breathlessly the next day in the local press and would have been swiftly logged in government, school and police records. "It stoked the fire of parental nerves in the area and, in adding to the number of similar incidents across the country, would have played its part in heightening parental concerns nationally," said Anna. "But there's no doubt that, here, it was the adults who were more upset than the kids."

It is the type of story that leads some to question claims that children are increasingly stressed and unhappy and unable to cope with what is happening around them. Others point to academic research to counter the claims.

Sue Bailey, head of the faculty of child and adolescent psychiatry at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, disputes the recent claim by the British Medical Association that one in 10 children under 16 has a clinically diagnosed mental health disorder. Bailey is adamant that there is very little evidence that child depression has risen since 1999. She is supported by professor David Healy, a consultant psychiatrist at Cardiff University College of Medicine, who believes the number of children with severe mental health problems is closer to one in 100.

"The higher figure can be explained by doctors stretching the label of depression to cover an ever wider range of unhappiness," said Healy, who also believes the psychiatric profession has been "seduced" by the drug industry.

Paul Ennals, chief executive of the National Children's Bureau, said: "Yes, children are more stressed in some areas than previously, but there never was a golden era of childhood. All the evidence shows that things that used to be harder for children are getting better: health, schooling. Other areas are clearly getting worse, such as the pressures from schools and parents to achieve."

"Our expectations have simply changed: we have greater educational standards now, tighter behavioural boundaries. Those raised expectations are picked up by our children."

A recent survey by Edge, an education foundation, seemed to bear out Ennals's supposition. The charity found that 48% of parents admit to being more anxious than their children about exam results, with one in 10 reporting sleepless nights.

One child growing up in this pressured world is 12-year-old Lucia Coppola, from Brighton. Desperate to take advantage of all the opportunities around her, she is heaping out-of-school netball, football and drama on top of her already crammed school curriculum.

She feels under pressure to look good, wear the right clothes, get good grades and succeed at sport. She also wants to be an actress, so is attending drama group three times a week, including weekends. She said: "Whenever I see children starring in movies, like Dakota Blue Richards in *The Golden Compass*, I get stressed and think 'Oh My God I've got to go and do something about it now'. So I think I put myself under quite a lot of stress. I always want to do the best I can and when I don't, that is when I get really stressed."

So perhaps the question should be not "why are British children so unhappy with their lives?" but "why are adults so unhappy about Britain's children?"

Robin Alexander, director of the Primary Review, blames grown-ups. It is "adults who, via the media and advertising, daily ram celebrity down children's throats; it's adult commercial values which create the junk food which contributes to obesity, and the alcohol ocean which fuels teenage binge drinking; it's adults who vote into power governments whose policies exacerbate rather than reduce inequality; it's adults who take nations into wars in which children are among the most prominent and tragic victims," he said. "On this basis, adults may well feel not just anxiety about the society and world in which today's children are growing up, but also a degree of guilt about the social and environmental legacy which today's children have no choice but to inherit."

Guldberg believes that the bleak depiction of childhood is not just flawed and inaccurate but potentially damaging to children and adults. "It could be a self-fulfilling prophecy should children become depressed, anxious, isolated and stressed," she said. "The constant panicking about children's wellbeing by government, the media and advocacy groups doesn't do children any good. Nor is it good for parents. It is likely to make them fret even more about their children and increase the insecurities and hang-ups about their abilities as parents."

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## **Sean, 12**

**Sean Freegard goes to a comprehensive in Ealing. He is the eldest of three with siblings aged nine and six.**

"When I moved to high school last year, I was so worried that I had to have a counsellor. Looking back, I don't know why I was so worried but I was crying, I couldn't sleep and used to hide at home to try to get out of going school, and then I used to hide when I got there. I think I was just afraid because there were so many big boys walking around and I had no friends at the beginning. Now nothing much worries me. I have a really happy childhood. I think the adults are much more worried than I am, or my friends are. They worry we're going to get mugged. But they don't understand that we're able to see dangers and avoid them before things get nasty.

"My mum and dad didn't even let me walk home until I was in Year 6 [aged 10 to 11]. They insisted it was too dangerous. Eventually, though, they talked to the local policeman about what time things might genuinely get dangerous, and then let me walk home as long as I was back before the time the policeman said. Sometimes I feel my parents are really overprotective and edgy but then, they watch the news and know

what's going on, and I don't know as much.

"I'm really excited about my future. I have big plans to be the new Peter Jones [the entrepreneur who appears on the BBC's Dragons' Den]. But my parents say it's really hard and tell me about the difficult exams, which I'm not looking forward to."

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## Amelia, 7

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**Amelia Tanner goes to school near Worcester. She is the oldest of four sisters.**

"I worry about two people at my school who are mean to me. They change the rules of games when I try to play and then shout at me. I write them letters when I'm at home, in a notebook I keep by my bed. When I've written the letter, I tear it up and then I feel better.

"I also worry about my daddy, because when he gets angry he breathes funny. I worry he might have to go to hospital and stay for weeks and weeks. He hasn't been to hospital before. I also worry that my hamster might be eaten by my cat or scratched through the bars of his cage by the cat's claws. I worry about my homework when I can't do it, and sometimes I worry that I won't be able to get a job when I'm older because I can't do what the teacher wants me to do. I worry about getting into fights when I'm older too, and screaming and running away.

"I would say I'm a happy girl. I think the world is a friendly place and that most people are really nice. I don't talk to adult strangers because they might not like children, or have a dog who bites, but I'm not scared of them. A stranger is just someone who other people don't know.

"I'm happiest at the weekend, when I can cuddle up to my parents, and read books and talk to them. That makes me really, really happy."

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## Childhood in numbers

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- 20% of children and young people in the UK have mental health problems at some point, and one in 10 has a clinically recognisable mental health disorder.
- Up to one in 12 British children deliberately hurt themselves on a regular basis - the highest rate in Europe.
- Between 1972 and 2004, the proportion of children in the UK living in single-parent families more than tripled to 24%.
- A study of children's wellbeing in 25 European countries ranked the UK in 21st place. The UK scored badly for relationships with parents and peers, child health, relative poverty, deprivation and risky behaviour, including cigarette smoking, drunkenness, and cannabis use, teenage pregnancy, unsafe sexual intercourse and on children's evaluation of their happiness and health.
- Between 1 April 2007 and 31 March 2008, ChildLine counselled 176,185 children who were first-time callers. 23% of children counselled were aged 5-11. 54% were aged 12-15. 23% were aged 16-18.
- Of those counselled, bullying (18%) was the most common concern, followed by family relationships (13%) physical abuse (10%) and sexual abuse (8%).

**Sources:** Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Mental Health Foundation, Summerfield and Gill, Unicef