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Study reveals stressed out 7-11 year-olds

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Polly Curtis, education editor

Friday October 12, 2007

[The Guardian](#)

Search Education

National tests for seven and 11-year-olds are putting children under stress and feeding into a "pervasive anxiety" about their lives and the world they are growing up in, according to an intimate portrait of primary school life published today.

Primary-aged children worry daily about global warming and terrorism as well as their friendships and passing the next exam, according to a report based on 700 in-depth interviews with children, their teachers and parents, which will feed into the biggest independent review of primary education in 40 years.

The findings echo a report from Unicef which this year placed Britain at the bottom of a league table charting the well-being of children across the developed world. This week a survey by the Howard League for Penal Reform revealed that 95% of 10 to 15-year-olds in the country have experienced crime at least once.

Today's Cambridge University report, Community Soundings, says national tests leave most children stressed and some middle class parents paying for a "parallel" education system employing tutors to get children through their exams even before the age of 11.

Some pupils said the tests were "scary" and made them nervous.

"These findings do build up to a sense that important changes are needed within the primary sector," said Robin Alexander, a fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge, and a former professor of education at Leeds and Warwick, who is heading the Primary Review. Today's research will feed into the review, which reports in a year's time and is expected to have a significant influence on education policy.

He said: "The surprise is that although we made considerable efforts to tap a wide range of opinions inside and outside of schools ... there was a large degree of consensus on what are the big issues."

Many adults questioned for the study voiced concerns over

the influence of the media on children and pressures of consumerism while more suggested that they believed that there is a break down in family life and community.

"The responses reveal a pervasive anxiety about the current educational and social contexts ... and a deeper pessimism about the world in which today's children are growing up," the report says.

Pupils feared the world outside their school gate - those in urban areas were particularly worried about violent crime although parents' biggest fear for their children was traffic accidents.

Researchers found that pupils in schools which tackled the problems they worried about, such as those with eco-clubs and recycling schemes to teach children about environmental problems, were happier.

"Where schools had started engaging children with global and local realities as aspects of their education they were noticeably more upbeat. In several schools children were involved in environmental projects and the sense that 'we can do something about it' seemed to make all the difference," they write.

School staff told the researchers that some parents were not involved enough, while others were too "pushy" and demanding of their children academically. The General Teaching Council for England opposes national tests for seven, 11 and 14-year-olds, the results of which are published in league tables and scrutinised by parents when choosing a school. Wales has scrapped them. Ministers in England are adamant that they will remain.

Prof Alexander said the tests would be addressed in the review: "After what we've heard it would be perverse if we didn't do something on them," he said.

But he added: "Although there is a strong vein of concern that childhood used to be better it's important not to indulge in nostalgia for childhood, it has always been under stress in one way or the other and poverty was much more prevalent in the 1950s. Every generation has its nightmares and problems to contend with."

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