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 Dating
 Digital Life
 Earth
 Expat
 Family
 Fantasy Games
 Fashion
 Features
 Food & Drink
 Football
 Gardening
 Health
 Horoscopes
 My Telegraph
 Obituaries
 Promotions
 Science
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Pushy parents fuel exam stress for children

By **Graeme Paton, Education Editor**

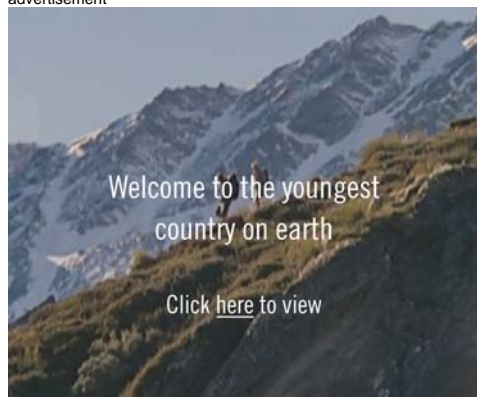
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Middle-class parents are fuelling stress levels among children by drilling them to pass school tests, according to a major study published today.

They admit to being "partly responsible" for the culture of high-stakes exams by paying for private coaching to get children into private school.

Children under 11 even admitted that school tests were vital to get into the best fee-paying schools, said the report.

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The claims are made in a study by Cambridge University which lays bare the "increasingly perilous" state of modern childhood.

The study says Government-imposed exams taken at the age of seven and 11 had caused anxiety among children and distorted the curriculum.

It also claims that outside the schools gates life is "insecure and in many areas dangerous" as concerns grow over family breakdown, a rise in gun and knife crime, materialism and the cult of celebrity.

In areas with a large influx of migrants, parents spoke of their fears over the "rapid change in the character of established communities" and growing community tensions. Some cities are now "physically divided along ethnic lines", says the report.

Academics interviewed 750 children, parents, teachers and governors as part of a major two-year study into the state of primary education in England.

The inquiry included schools in leafy suburbs, rural areas and deprived urban communities. An interim report published today - the first of a series by Cambridge academics - says there was "substantial" agreement on key concerns.

Despite criticism over the influence of national media reports, it says anxiety over the state of childhood was being driven by specific local issues.

"Today's children, it was generally felt, are being forced to grow up too soon, and the prospects for the society and world they will inherit look increasingly perilous," it said.

Robin Alexander, professor of education at Cambridge, who led the study, said it cast doubt on Government claims that children's lives were better than ever.

"If things are going so well, why are people so worried?" he said. Children interviewed were "more ambivalent" about national tests, although many admitted to feeling nervous and anxious. Some in affluent areas told researchers that doing well was important to "get us into private schools".

Parents in one affluent south London suburb "acknowledged they were partly responsible" for stress levels after "paying for regular private coaching to maximise their children's chances" of getting into independent secondary schools.

According to the report, other parents criticised the level of computer use in schools, saying children should learn "traditional as well as electronic communication" as a "vital antidote to children's obsession with mobile phones and texting".

Researchers also highlighted the effect recent influxes of migrants had in many communities. This follows the publication of official Government statistics last month showing that white British children were now a minority in many inner-city primary schools.

The report said primary schools were "committed to multi-culturalism" but the complexity of the ethnic mix in many areas could "no longer be accommodated in the time-honoured fashion merely by telling children about Divali and Eid".

The Department for Children, Schools and Families said its new Children's Plan - which will dictate the future shape of Government policies for young people - would address many of the concerns.

"We are committed to improving the lives of children and young people right across the country and we are making substantial progress," said a spokesman.

"The vast majority of children go to better schools, enjoy better health, live in better housing and in more affluent households than they did ten years ago."

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