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# The myth of stressed and depressed schoolkids

If we're not careful, claims that young people can't cope with the 'intense pressure' of exams could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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**A report titled *Community Soundings*, published by Cambridge University's Primary Review Group last week and hailed as 'the first major investigation into British primary schooling since the Plowden report [of 1967]', claims there is a 'deep anxiety' today about children and childhood. Unfortunately, the report remains at the level of feelings - it doesn't tell us anything concrete about the state of modern childhood.**

The report's findings, published on Friday 12 October, generated alarming headlines in the UK media. 'Pressure of tests "means primary school pupils lose their childhood"', reported *The Times*. 'Study reveals stressed-out 7-11 year-olds', said the *Guardian*. 'UK youngsters "stressed and depressed"', said ITN News. The London *Evening Standard* painted a particularly scary picture: 'Family breakdown, exam pressure, celebrity culture and crime... all are robbing children of their innocence, according to a major report released today.'

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In truth, the study did not show that children are 'stressed out' or 'depressed'. It did not investigate family breakdown, the prevalence of crime, or any other objective measure of the quality of modern childhood for that matter. All that *Community Soundings* investigated were the views of 757 subjects in 87 'witness sessions' - commonly known as focus groups - in different parts of England. The participants included community representatives, employers, religious leaders, parents, governors, headteachers, teachers, teaching assistants and children.

Robin Alexander, who oversaw the research of *Community Soundings*, said: 'What struck us was that the overall message everywhere was the same. People are very worried about childhood.' The report stated: 'We were frequently told children are under intense and perhaps excessive pressure from the policy-driven demands of their schools and the commercially-driven values of the wider society; that family life and community are breaking down; that there is a pervasive loss of respect and empathy both within and between generations; that life outside the school gates is increasingly insecure and dangerous.'

It continued: 'Parents felt that they had to keep their children under close supervision in order to secure their safety, yet were unhappy that this was necessary... They were nostalgic for the childhood freedoms they themselves had enjoyed.'

Given that *Community Soundings* was based on witness sessions - that is, on the views and feelings of fairly small focus groups - might the respondents have been influenced by something other than hard facts and evidence about childhood? It's worth noting that the witness sessions took place early in 2007, following

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months of daily warnings about how modern life is damaging kids. Indeed, in the middle of the data-gathering process - February 2007 - UNICEF published its scary-sounding report on child wellbeing. As has been repeated *ad nauseam* across the national press, the UK ranked bottom out of 21 industrialised countries in the UNICEF league table for the wellbeing of children.

Bombarded by a daily diet of headlines about British children being too fat, too inactive, and under threat from criminals, bullies and strangers, and claims that Britain is lagging behind the rest of the developed world in the wellbeing stakes, it is not surprising that a survey of opinion found people expressing concern about kids being stressed and depressed.



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It should be noted that, contrary to all the claims made in the media earlier this year, the UNICEF report did not conclusively reveal that the UK is the worst country in the Western world to grow up in. In fact, it didn't contain many conclusive insights at all. It did bring together lots of interesting material that compared and contrasted children's different experiences in different countries, but the data can be interpreted in various different ways. When it came to more objective measures of the state of childhood - such as health and safety in relation to children - Britain ranked higher than most other Western countries. Britain comes second only to Sweden as the country with the lowest rate of deaths from accidents and injuries amongst young people under 19 years of age.

Yet good news stories about children's lives - such as UNICEF's findings on health and safety - are often subsumed by a titillating focus on the alleged dangers facing our kids. Some aspects of the new *Community Soundings* report could be interpreted positively. For example, it's reassuring and encouraging that 'children were by far the most optimistic of our witnesses', suggesting that young people have a more positive view of their lives than the adults who panic and fret about them. Alas, this sentence was buried in the report - neither the Cambridge Primary Review Group's overview of the report, nor the press release that accompanied it, drew attention to the finding about young people's optimism.

Instead, the overview stressed that the outlook of the participants 'as a whole' was 'pervaded by a sense of deep pessimism about the future', and said that 'children themselves were not immune' to such an outlook. Sadly, it is true that children are not immune to society's rising sense of doom and gloom; for example, a study earlier this year found that many school-age British children have sleepless nights or nightmares about climate catastrophe. Likewise, many of the children's responses to *Community Soundings* come across as simplistic regurgitations of contemporary politics and fads. 'America consumes, Africa wants', was one child's view of the world.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that children unquestioningly internalise the miserabilist culture of contemporary society. Media reports said *Community Soundings* found that children are 'stressed out' about exams. In truth, 'the children were a lot more ambivalent about SATs than any other constituency', the report says. Some of the young respondents did describe SATs as 'scary', and said that sitting exams 'puts them under pressure'. But they could also see the positive side of testing: 'Tests tell teachers, and us, how we are doing.' Nothing in the children's responses suggested they were seriously 'stressed out' about exams. Instead it was the *teachers* who were surveyed for the report who described SATs as 'highly stressful' and claimed that they 'put children and teachers under

intolerable pressure'.

Teachers have made many legitimate criticisms of the National Curriculum since it was first introduced under the Conservative government in the late 1980s. Its net effect has been to undermine teacher autonomy and quash creativity in teaching. So in the witness sessions for *Community Soundings*, teachers complained that the curriculum was 'over-structured and rigid' and 'subverted the goal of learning for its own sake'. Headteachers complained that 'bureaucratic pressure' was supplanting the 'proper task of educating children and providing educational leadership'. Yet teachers' arguments about exams being stressful are entirely unconvincing. I myself have been a primary school teacher, and will readily admit that it can be a challenging job. But I cannot see how teachers can claim to be under pressure more than other public workers - plus they have the bonus of nice long holidays.

Teachers are using the 'children are stressed' line to avoid having the hard argument about the content of the National Curriculum and the focus of their working lives. They should oppose government meddling in the nitty-gritty of what they teach, and stand up for their professional autonomy, rather than hiding behind the children, and effectively saying: 'Things need to change otherwise the poor little mites will become depressed...'

One of the more worrying aspects of *Community Soundings* is what it reveals about teachers' and teaching assistants' views of parents. Apparently, many teaching assistants judged most people's parenting skills to be 'inadequate', and recommended encouraging mums and dads to take 'remedial parenting classes'. Teachers similarly raised concerns about 'low parental aspirations', 'unsettled home backgrounds', 'parents passing the socialisation buck to schools', and 'parents' unwillingness or inability to provide educative experiences for their children'.

Community representatives - including local authority officers, statutory agencies, voluntary agencies, police and magistrates, and local projects of various kinds - 'were also ready to pinpoint poor parenting as a major problem', says *Community Soundings*. 'The familial inadequacies' that the community witnesses deplored are apparently 'a reflection of prevailing values and trends in society as a whole: selfishness, materialism, disregard for the needs and rights of others'.

For me, the main lesson of *Community Soundings*, which is the first in a series of 32 reports that will be published by Cambridge University's Primary Review, is the urgent need to counter today's doom-mongering about children's lives and the state of the family and society.

At the end of *Community Soundings*, the researchers list questions 'arising from this strand of the Primary Review' which they propose to take forward to the next stage of the research. The questions include: 'If, as witnesses tell us, there has been a loss in recent years of social cohesion, community and concern for others, and a growth in selfishness and materialism, how might primary schools both help children to cope with the adverse consequences of these changes and play their part in redressing the balance...? Does the *Every Child Matters* agenda represent the best available way of securing children's wellbeing, identifying children at risk and protecting them from harm...? How might schools strike the best balance between protecting children from the dangers which some of them may confront outside school and overprotecting them...?', and so on.

I have different questions: At a time when government, the media and advocacy groups are constantly panicking about children and their wellbeing, is it any wonder that fear for our kids is widespread in society? Couldn't it be a self-fulfilling prophecy if some children (though by no means all of them) claim to be nervous and stressed? And wouldn't we be better off

if teachers were allowed to get on with teaching, instead of having to behave as social workers too, and if parents were trusted to bring up their kids as they see fit?

Adults should stop projecting their own fear and uncertainty on to children, labelling young people with the 'stressed' and 'depressed' tag, and instead allow children to grow and flourish with a balance of sensible adult guidance and some youthful independence.



**Helene Guldberg** is managing editor of *spiked*. She is speaking at the session [Toxic childhood](#) at the [Battle of Ideas festival](#) in London on 27-28 October.

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