



Children have celebrity rammed down their throats, says professor

- Adult commercial world blamed for unhappiness
- Grown-ups' guilt 'fuels fears for lost innocence'

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Adults are to blame for a decline in children's happiness because they control a commercial world which "rams celebrity down children's throats", according to the head of an inquiry into primary education.

There is widespread anxiety among adults about a perceived loss of innocence among children, but most children have a more optimistic outlook on their lives, Cambridge university professor of education Robin Alexander told a conference yesterday. Fears about the condition of childhood were being fuelled by adults' own sense of guilt about the social and environmental legacy - as well as the commercial pressures - they had created for their children, he said.

Alexander was making his first public comments on the preliminary findings of the Primary Review, the biggest review of primary education in 40 years, which he is leading. The review's initial research has documented increasing anxiety about the state of childhood, the commercialisation of young people's lives and how the government's policy of testing and targets for schools is contributing to stress and a "scholarisation" of childhood. But it also suggests that fears among teachers and parents far outweigh those of children.

Alexander said people should not be nostalgic for a 1950s idea of childhood and called for less "alarmist talk" about children's lives, which he blamed on the "projection onto children of adult fears and anxieties, not least about the kind of society and world which adults have created". Instead adults should look at their own influence on children's lives, he told the Childhood, Wellbeing and Primary Education conference, hosted by the General Teaching Council.

"It's 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; and I guess - though I've not seen any analysis along these lines - that the carbon footprint of adults is far greater than that of children," 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."

A Unicef review of childhood last year placed British children at the bottom of a league table of child wellbeing, and the Good Childhood Inquiry by the Children's Society last month highlighted mounting concern about the commercialisation of childhood. The Primary Review is due to report early next year. It will set out a critique of school structures, the curriculum, teaching and children's wider lives, and include recommendations for reform.