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Children 'being forced to grow up too soon'

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Children face "excessive" pressure to do well at school and conform to the commercial values of the modern world, a major report into public views found today.

There is widespread concern that family life is "breaking down" and the culture of respect is disappearing, according to Cambridge University's Primary Review.

In the first of a series of research papers, the Primary Review uncovered a national mood of anxiety that children are being forced to grow up too soon.

Primary Review director Robin Alexander said: "For a Government which has invested so much in its drive to raise educational standards, there is a battle for hearts and minds to be won.

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"The unease about the present and pessimism about the future which we uncovered as we travelled round the country and talked to many people both inside and outside education cannot so easily be explained away.

"If things are going so well, why are people so worried?"

The researchers conducted 87 in-depth discussion sessions about primary education and related issues with groups of children, parents, teachers and others across England. In all, 750 people took part.

The report, Community Soundings, identified a series of widely held concerns:

:: Today's 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".

:: Family life and community are "breaking down";

:: Respect is "in decline";

:: Life for young children outside school "is increasingly insecure and, in many areas, dangerous";

:: The pressures of school "Sats" tests for 11-year-olds dominate the last two years of primary education and distort the curriculum.

Children were fearful of the long-term impact of climate change and pollution, as well as the gaps between rich and poor nations.

"The children were no less anxious about those local issues which directly affected their sense of security - traffic, the lack of safe play areas, rubbish, graffiti, gangs of older children, knives, guns," the report said.

"Some were also worried by the gloomy tenor of 'what you hear on the news' or by a



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generalised fear of strangers, burglars and street violence."



Pupils who took part in the study said they found the national curriculum Sats tests "scary" and felt nervous and under pressure to do well.

But they also understood that the tests provide important evidence of how they are progressing.

Professor Alexander said ministers may need to accept that improving school "standards" - through tests and Ofsted judgments - is not the same thing as raising the quality of education.

"The health of a national educational system can't be fully captured by the term 'standards', critically important though standards are," Prof Alexander said.

"Standards may have been too readily equated with quality. It is time to start exploring the difference between them."

Teachers said the report proved it was time to review the school testing system.

Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said: "From the evidence, it is quite obvious that a review of the primary curriculum and national curriculum testing is long overdue."

A spokeswoman for Department for Children, Schools and Families said: "We are committed to improving the lives of children and young people right across the country and we are making substantial progress.

"The vast majority of children go to better schools, enjoy better health, live in better housing and in more affluent households than they did 10 years ago.

"But there are fresh challenges facing Britain, which is why we are currently undertaking a nationwide consultation on the Children's Plan - to listen to young people and their families about what we can do better to help all our children have a happy, healthy and safe childhood, achieve the best education and fulfil their potential.

"The Government does not share the view that children are over-tested. Tests help parents and teachers monitor the progress of children and ensure they get the help they need.

"Less than 0.14% of teaching time for seven to 11-year-olds is spent on national tests. Teachers are well-versed in ensuring children know what to expect and can cope well with tests."

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