

Arresting children's premature growing up: *A crucial imperative of our time*



By Richard House

Maya

'The reliance on mind, and the intellectual function at the expense of action and bodily experience, can be a serious pathological factor in early development'.
(Corrigan and Gordon, 1995: 4)

I recently gave a keynote talk to a child development conference at Bishop Grosseteste Lincoln University College, speaking to the theme of 'developmental appropriateness' in child development and learning. On the very morning of the conference, yet another damning report came out about the parlous emotional state of Britain's hapless children – this time from the NCH charity. It was splashed across the front page of several newspapers – with immaculate timing for my talk that very morning.

For many years now, a number of us have been predicting an explosion of child mental-health and behavioural problems if current approaches to early education and learning continue unchanged in the UK; and I take no pleasure whatsoever in pointing out how these dire predications are now coming true in a way, and with a ferocity, that hardly anyone foresaw.

On 20th June the NCH research reported how, as the *Daily Mail* headlined it, 'a million chil-

dren now suffer from mental health problems'. Let me put to bed immediately one misleading, but persistent, challenge to data like this – that is, the view that there hasn't actually been any significant increase in child mental-health problems, but rather, our *sensibility* to such problems is far more developed than it used to be, so we're simply now reporting problems that, in the past, just weren't labelled as such, but *did* nonetheless exist. Now I've always been very suspicious of this argument: there might be *some* limited degree of truth in it, of course; but my own experience and perception, added to the many discussions I've had with people working with children, seem to confirm that the incidence of children's emotional difficulties is indeed discernibly increasing – and, quite possibly, dramatically.

And as the *Daily Mail* reports, this Nuffield-sponsored research 'found evidence that escalating mental health problems were the result of real changes in behaviour, and *not* increased reporting of problematic behaviour'.

There is surely a need for detailed and concerted further research to reinforce this finding –

or else the complacent apologists for 'modernity' and 'technocracy' will continue to sow seeds of doubt about childhood's toxicity with their often pedantic and dubiously motivated scepticism.

The Lincoln conference at which I spoke was by no means populated by the 'usual suspects' from Steiner, Montessori, home, and other progressive educational approaches. Indeed, quite the contrary – for most of the 60-odd participants were, in fact, *mainstream* early-years teachers and practitioners; and I was most encouraged by the very positive response I received for both the ideas about 'toxic childhood', and the positive Steiner alternative which I spoke about. On the evidence of this conference, there is clearly a deep groundswell of concern about the coercive direction in which early-childhood experience is headed under central-government diktat – and I felt that these were practitioners who would be prepared to say 'no' to any government directive that they felt would harm the children in their care. More on this later.



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The theme of children's 'growing up too soon' is one that is threaded through all of the debates about toxic childhood, and I want to say a bit more about it here – not least because I believe it to be the most urgent concern of our times in the so-called 'developed' world. In general terms, the argument is that human development is a complex, holistic process – one that simply can not be mechanistically broken down into controllable, plan-able, measurable 'outcomes'. The arrogance and the unacknowledged anxiety that underpin the 'managerialist' desire to control child-developmental outcomes in this way is arguably the greatest existing danger to and intrusion upon our children's well-being. We can look at this premature 'waking-up' of children in modern culture in a number of ways, but here I want to refer to the work of the great British paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1896-1971). Winnicott was a genius of a man who worked with literally thousands of children and families in his career, and by all accounts had remarkable success as a clinician.

Now the link I want to make between Winnicott's clinical work and children growing up too soon is the following one: Winnicott wrote about what he called the 'mind object', referring to a pathological psychological phenomenon in his patients which he put down to *precocious intellectual development* in very young children (see the reference at end of article). Put simply, some children are exposed to such noxious environments in early life that they have to find some way (or 'psychic mechanism') of defending themselves against the resulting environmental impingements. Faced with a situation, then, in which there is no reliable and consistent attachment figure in their early life, some children respond by developing their own minds (or the 'intellectual function') to rely upon, in a way that is developmentally 'out of kilter', and highly inappropriate, as the intellectual function is then developed out of harmony with the holistic 'psyche-soma' development that Winnicott rightly saw as an indissolubly holistic experience. Remember Rudolf Steiner's model of child development: in the first seven years, he argued, the child is predominantly developing **the physical body** and is learning through movement and imitation; and, Steiner argued, if the feelings or the mind are unduly emphasised in this period for any reason, then the child's development is interfered with, and becomes unbalanced – and this in turn leads to life-long health problems. As we are about to see, this is exactly the kind of

argument developed by Winnicott, based on his many clinical observations from working therapeutically with both children and adults.

Winnicott describes at length the kinds of pathological symptoms that such patients display in later life – patients whose minds have developed in a precocious way far earlier than their natural time. To illustrate this phenomenon, I'll quote briefly from the excellent book called *The Mind Object* by Corrigan and Gordon. The authors acknowledge that while such patients often have gifted minds and unusual intellectual ability, they display a range of chronic symptoms: 'some are narcissistic, some depressed, some boringly obsessive, while others are wonderfully quick and humorous. None of these patients are on particularly good terms with their instincts or their bodies in general.... Somatically, all... suffer from a variety of serious [medical] conditions... They cannot relax into just being, but must be constantly stimulated and enlivened by something or someone outside themselves. Yet, essentially fearful and negativistic, they do not surrender to any relationship... We have come to view each of these patients as fiercely attached to their mind as an object, an object whose use is overvalued and exploited, whose existence is vigilantly protected, whose loss is constantly dreaded. Striving to disavow reliance on others, they have empowered the mind as the locus of self-holding and self-care...' (p. 3).

Recognise any of these symptoms?... (so-called 'ADHD' immediately comes to mind). Readers who have read my earlier articles in TM will probably already have worked out what I'm about to say. It's simply this: that to the extent that we are living in a culturally ubiquitous and politically sanctioned *waking up* of young children into their intellects and thinking minds in a way that is unbalanced and lacking in a broadly based developmental foundation of 'body-soul-spirit-mind', then it seems likely that the explosion of children's mental-health problems is directly attributable to this premature and unbalanced waking-up of our young children. And if I am anything like right, then the implications are grave indeed: state-imposed and compulsory synthetic phonics at 3 to 4 years of age, and a 'curriculum' for babies and toddlers?... The damage that these policies may be having on a generation of children may well be sufficient to keep an army of psychotherapists and counsellors in work for literally decades to come! (And I really do wish I were exaggerating – but I fear I'm not).

I believe that it is the solemn task of all par-

ents and teachers to simply refuse to implement government diktat about how young children should be educated – as rather like the physician's Hippocratic Oath, it should be every professional's moral calling to refuse to do anything to their children that they deem, based on their informed professional judgement, will harm those children. Judging from the response that I received from the early-years practitioners at the Lincoln conference, I am optimistic that empowered professionals who know the arguments, and who trust their professional and human instincts, will indeed be prepared to take a stand of **principled non-compliance** with policy impositions that they know will harm children. And if that means breaking the law, then so be. It would certainly be fascinating to see an early-years practitioner in court being charged with invoking their professionalism to protect their children from state diktat that they deem to be harmful to children! Will the courts and the judicial system dare to say that pre-school workers must treat their children in a way that those professionals believe will harm them? I feel a very interesting legal 'test case' in the offing!...

What we urgently need, then, is a 'cultural stand' to be taken, through which the benefits that *all* children will derive from the protection of their childhood experience will massively outweigh the benefits that any ephemeral, short-termist interventions might give, whether it be synthetic phonics for 3-4 years olds or cervical cancer vaccines for 12 year old girls (the latter being just the latest 'brain-wave' of the apologists for technocracy).

That there might be some signs of the toxic tide beginning to turn is certainly not a call for complacency or giving up the struggle against the technocratic destruction of childhood. This September, the 'toxic childhood' media story that cascaded all over the world last autumn, has its first anniversary, and another media splash is being planned – this time on play, and how it should be enshrined at the heart of all policy-making related to children. So – watch this particular space – and get ready to call into the phone-ins and write to the newspapers when you see the opportunity to support the growing global movement that seeks to protect childhood and children from modernity's worst toxic excesses.

Reference

Edward G. Corrigan and Pearl-Ellen Gordon (eds), *The Mind Object: Precocity and Pathology of Self-Sufficiency*, Jason Aronson, Northvale, NJ, 1995, 245 pp, ISBN 1- 56821-480-4.

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