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opening extract from

Toxic Childhood:

How the Modern World is Damaging our Children and what we can do about it

written by

Sue Palmer

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TOXIC CHILDHOOD

How the Modern World is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About it

Sue Palmer



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AUTHOR'S NOTE



This book, like most non-fiction, contains both fact and opinion. Establishing the facts involved many interviews with experts from fields as diverse as child development, physiology, economics and marketing, as well as conversations with parents, children and teachers from around the UK and mainland Europe. My two research assistants and I also waded through thousands of research papers, articles and press reports (only a tiny fraction of which are explicitly cited in the references), and what felt like half a library of books. This research also informed the opinions in *Toxic Childhood* which, along with any mistakes, are all my own. Most of the people I consulted agreed with me, some didn't – but they all helped enormously in assembling the evidence and creating the book.

INTRODUCTION

TOXIC CHILDHOOD SYNDROME



She was standing on the steps of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence – a short, dark-haired girl, slightly overweight, sulkily licking an ice cream. I guessed from her face that she was no more than ten years old, but the angry scowl and scrunched self-consciousness looked more like a teenager, wracked with adolescent angst. Her clothes were too old for her too – a low-slung miniskirt and high-cut top, exposing a plump little midriff. And across her little girl's chest was printed a message to the world: '*I ❤ my attitude problem*'.

In the building behind her were some of Western civilisation's greatest treasures – paintings by Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo – which presumably her parents had dragged her across Europe (maybe across the world) to see. She clearly wasn't remotely interested. I suspect the only thing that small lost soul wanted to do was curl up in front of a widescreen TV and lose herself in something mindless – a cartoon, maybe, or one of the endless American sitcoms on the Disney Channel. Her feelings about life were written all over her: anger, self-obsession, boredom, lack of engagement – the multiple trademarks of the brat.

Poor child. Poor parents. Poor Western civilisation – indeed the whole of the developed world – which now teems with miserable little creatures, male and female, toddlers to pre-teens. In a global culture whose citizens are wealthier, healthier and more privileged than ever before, children grow unhappier every year. From the disgruntled and

discontented to the depressed and dysfunctional, we seem to be raising a generation with nothing to love but its attitude problem.

What's happening to children?

The developed world, especially the most economically successful countries – USA, Japan, Germany and the UK – is suffering an epidemic of misery among its young. In 2004, an English research foundation recorded that behavioural problems in young people have doubled over the last thirty years and emotional problems have increased by 70 per cent. The American Psychological Association now estimates that one in five children and teens suffer from mental health problems, and the World Health Organisation expects that by 2020, neuropsychiatric disorders in children will swell by 50 per cent compared with other health issues, making them one of the five main causes of disability and death.

The knock-on effects of this epidemic are already obvious in statistics on drug and substance abuse among teenagers, along with binge drinking, eating disorders, self-harm and suicide (attempted and successful). Add these to the figures for teenage crime and anti-social behaviour, and there is an awful lot for the parents of a ten-year-old with an attitude problem to worry about. Occasional terrifying incidents – such as the Columbine High School massacre or the eleven-year-old in Japan who murdered her classmate because she didn't like her postings on the Internet – ratchet up the concern.

So what's going wrong? As one who's worked with children for thirty years – the last three of which have been spent researching this issue, and talking to experts on aspects of child-rearing around the world – I've come to the conclusion that there isn't one simple answer. We can't blame the parents, or the teachers, or the junk food manufacturers, or anyone else. This is a complex cultural problem, linked to the incredible speed of human progress. We've created an amazingly exciting global culture but over the last quarter of a century

progress has accelerated so much that our species simply can't keep up. In a nutshell, our culture has evolved faster than our biology.

This clash between our technology-driven culture and our biological heritage is now damaging children's ability to think, learn and behave. And unless we do something about it, the twenty-first-century global village is going to be in trouble. To put it bluntly, the next generation may not be bright or balanced enough to keep the show on the road.

The 'special needs' explosion

What first started me fretting over this issue was the alarming escalation, over my time in education, of what are known as 'developmental disorders'. A number of learning difficulties, which didn't even enter the public consciousness until the late twentieth century, began to affect an alarming number of children.

First and foremost among these syndromes is ADHD ('attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder'), now the most common psychiatric condition affecting children in the USA. Up to 12 per cent of American children suffer from ADHD, which affects their ability to concentrate and control behaviour, and rates are soaring across the developed world.

Another group of learning difficulties rapidly reaching epidemic proportions is the 'dyslexia cluster'. Statistics suggest that around 10 per cent of children in the USA and the UK suffer from dyslexia (difficulty in reading), and other countries, including Japan, are reporting increasing numbers of cases. Dyslexia's close cousins – dysgraphia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia (difficulties respectively in writing, maths and physical coordination) – are also significantly on the rise.

However, the most recent – and extremely worrying – increase has been in autistic spectrum disorders (ASD), involving children's ability to relate to the world and communicate with others. Autism affects children in many different ways – hence the term 'spectrum'. At one

end are 'high functioning' Asperger's Syndrome children – often academic high achievers but socially inept – and at the other are very severely autistic children, completely cut off by their disability and unable to communicate with the rest of the world. The unifying features of autistic spectrum disorders are difficulties in social functioning and communication, and unusual (often repetitive) behaviours. Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* illustrated them admirably.

In the early 1980s, the incidence of autism in the USA was about 1 in 50,000. By 2004 it had grown to 1 in 166, and the American Academy of Pediatrics reports that diagnoses are increasing by roughly 25 per cent every year. Estimates elsewhere vary from 1 in 100 children in the UK to about 1 in 600 in Japan, but they appear to be on the increase in all countries in the developed world.

It's possible that the huge increase in these 'special educational needs' is the result of increasing knowledge and understanding among doctors and teachers, meaning conditions that went undiagnosed in the past are now routinely recognised. Another possibility is that parents these days prefer to medicalise problems once simply labelled under-achievement. This argument is often put forward by critics of the growth in drug treatment for ADHD – mind-altering drugs such as Ritalin or Dexedrine, prescribed to correct the chemical imbalance in the child's brain.

Both suggestions probably have some truth. But even then the increases are phenomenal. In 2004 the American Academy of Pediatrics recorded on their website that '1 in 6 children are diagnosed with a developmental disorder and/or behavioural problem'. The thought that one in every half-dozen children in the most developed nation on earth is considered educationally and/or socially dysfunctional is extremely alarming. What happens in the USA today has a habit of happening in the rest of the developed world tomorrow. And today's special educational needs turn all too often into tomorrow's mental health problems, antisocial behaviour and crime.

Nature, nurture and behaviour

It's now widely accepted that developmental disorders have a genetic – or, at least, neurological – component. 'Nature' plays a major part, but it's also widely agreed that the way children are brought up inevitably influences their development. The nature-nurture debate about how much an individual's personality is due to one or the other is tediously familiar – indeed it's assumed a similar status during the twentieth century to the medieval debate about how many angels can balance on the head of a pin. But most scientists now take the view that, while genes are indeed significant, upbringing and outside influences make a great deal of difference. Nature and nurture are vibrantly interactive.

When a predisposition is strong – as in the case of those unfortunate infants locked into profound autism – nurture may have little effect. But in most cases the environment in which a child grows up will significantly affect the way any traits – good or bad – develop. In one particularly memorable American research project, two groups of identical genetically vulnerable monkeys were brought up in different circumstances and then given access to alcohol. The monkeys who'd had a tough childhood consoled themselves with drink, while those who'd been carefully cared for and mothered drank less than the average monkey.

So could there be something going on in the successful nations of the world that's making it more likely that genetically vulnerable children develop special educational needs? Might it be that – despite our economic success – childhood today is tougher than it was a few decades ago?

The reason psychologists call ADHD, the dyslexia group and ASD 'developmental disorders' is that, in terms of social behaviour and/or achievement at school, the children concerned don't develop at the 'normal' rate – something holds them back. There's a sort of developmental continuum we expect children to move along during the

first ten or so years of life. At birth, they're all helpless little bundles of egocentricity, but as time goes on we assume they'll move slowly (with occasional understandable regressions) towards more 'grown-up' civilised behaviour. We don't consciously teach this civilised behaviour, except hopefully by example – we just expect it to emerge (or develop) as children mature, in the same way we expect them to walk and talk. Along the way, we also expect them to learn the basic skills covered in primary school – the Three Rs of reading, writing and reckoning.

If something *is* happening to interfere with the normal course of children's development – and thus contributing to the huge increase in developmental and behavioural disorders – you'd expect to see it affecting children in general, not just genetically vulnerable ones. And that's exactly what people have been seeing. Over the last couple of decades, I've heard reports from many thousands of teachers around the UK of a steady deterioration in the behaviour and learning potential of children in their classes, not just those diagnosed with a special educational need. Reports from educators in the USA, Japan and other developed countries bear it out. *In general*, children in the world's most successful nations are not as well behaved or as well equipped to learn as they were in the past.

Learning to behave

Of course, all children sometimes act up. When over-tired, over-excited or feverish, any child can regress to the level of a two-year-old on a bad day. But in a civilised society we expect a decline in self-obsession and an increase in grown-up behaviour as the years go by – the proportion of good days to bad gradually increasing, until by the time a child's age is in double figures, his or her behaviour is relatively stable. The fact that children then enter that long dark tunnel known as adolescence is, of course, something of a backward step, but if all's gone well in the preceding years, there's hope they'll come out of the

tunnel unscathed. As St Ignatius Loyola, Miss Jean Brodie and Hillary Clinton have all pointed out, the most important learning happens well before the teenage years. This change from a tantrum-throwing two-year-old to a relatively civilised pre-teen depends on many things, but there are three key principles children must grasp on their journey, principles which have been at the heart of civilisation throughout human history.

The first is the ability to maintain attention even when something doesn't particularly interest them. All children – even very young ones – can focus for long periods on chosen activities (as parents forced to play endless games of peek-a-boo or 'pick up the rattle' know only too well). However, once children begin to socialise with others, they must learn sometimes to focus on other people's choices; and by six or seven, they're expected to focus on what the teacher is teaching them. If you can't attend – or if you're only prepared to attend to the things that interest you – you're going to have trouble at school.

The second is the concept of 'deferred gratification'. Children must grasp that the rewards for actions are not always immediate, and that sometimes people have to knuckle down to dreary, boring, repetitive tasks because they'll pay off later – perhaps in the fairly remote future. An experiment from the 1960s illustrates how important the appreciation and acceptance of deferred gratification can be. Researchers left four-year-old children, one by one, alone in a room with a plate containing a single marshmallow. The children were told that, if they wished, they could eat the marshmallow; but if they waited till the researcher's return, they'd be given a whole plateful of marshmallows. Some children cracked and wolfed down the single treat; others managed to resist temptation and held out for a plateful. Twenty years later researchers hunted down the subjects of this experiment, and discovered that those whose self-restraint had earned them multiple marshmallows had led more successful and happy lives than those who'd been impulsive.

The third principle is that living happily in a group of any size

involves balancing your own needs against the needs of everyone else. This is summed up very succinctly in Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby, the name of a character in Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. Doing as you would be done by, and thus making the wheels of domestic, institutional and social life turn smoothly, requires an awareness of others (the ability to empathise with their point of view) allied with the sort of self-control I've described above. Human beings who do not have these qualities are likely to have a very hard ride through life – and so are the people around them.

Children with profound developmental disorders – conditions that completely impair their quality of life (and, indeed, that of their parents) – don't grasp these principles and their behaviour remains sadly primitive. But 'normal' children progress steadily towards civilised self-control. Then there are the ones in the middle – those who make some progress but not enough, whose education begins to suffer, and who may have real problems 'fitting in'.

The point at which psychologists diagnose a developmental disorder is, of course, moot – indeed, everyone in education knows diagnosis is partially dependent upon a child's background (the apparent incidence of dyslexia, for instance, is much greater in affluent areas than in disadvantaged ones). But the point is that, year on year, fewer children make what used to be called 'normal' progress. Increasingly, children in general have problems focusing their concentration, exercising self-restraint and taking account of other people's needs and interests.

A twenty-first-century report card

Primary teachers are well qualified to assess the behaviour of pre-teen children, since they spend most of the day in their company, and can compare the way classes behave over time. Over the last couple of decades, UK primary teachers' concern about children's deteriorating behaviour – especially in schools in disadvantaged areas – has

mushroomed. We have heard similar reports coming out of America for years, and I now hear them increasingly from teachers on mainland Europe. The general opinion is that, as the proportion of children with diagnosed special needs has increased, so has the proportion that doesn't have a specific diagnosable disorder but are just distractible, impulsive or badly behaved.

This shift has caused many problems for schools because distractible, impulsive children are difficult to teach. It's particularly difficult teaching them to read and write, since the various sub skills of literacy take a long time to acquire and – no matter how hard teachers try to jazz it up – involve plenty of dull, repetitive effort. The eventual rewards, however, are well worth having: beside the obvious advantages of being literate in a literate world, psychologists believe the very process of learning to read develops children's powers of thought and understanding. It's a classic example of the importance of deferred gratification.

Another major problem is that, as children's behaviour gets worse, teachers must spend more time and energy on crowd control. At the lowest level, they've noticed a decline in manners and respect for adults, with general 'cheekiness' and backchat making day-to-day classroom management more demanding. More significantly, there are many more incidences of rule breaking, violence and bullying, and all these discipline problems take up teaching time and distract from the business of learning.

Readers blessed with well-behaved offspring, or those who do not mix much with children at all, may think teachers are overstating the case. Janet Street-Porter, a British writer and broadcaster, used to feel that way – until she agreed to spend two weeks teaching eight-year-olds in a primary school. Ms Street-Porter is renowned as a forceful woman, capable of withering hardened BBC executives with a glance. In her new role, however – despite an armoury of guidelines for dealing with problem children – she found herself leaving school at the end of each day 'weeping with frustration that several of the worst

offenders would simply run rings round me. Quite simply, they had no idea of discipline whatsoever'.

These opinions are reflected in teachers' comments across the developed world. Even in Japan, where a formal education system has meant that discipline was not a problem in the past, primary teachers now speak of widespread impulsive behaviour, including bullying (the Japanese word for this, *ijime*, didn't enter the public consciousness till the early eighties, but is now a household word). They also report an apparent lack of guilt among the children concerned – deeply worrying in a society where respect and honour is of supreme importance. What's more, over the last few years, literacy levels – always a source of pride in Japan, where dyslexia was once unknown – have begun to plummet. Why then, in all the most advanced and advantaged countries of the world, should children be growing less able to exercise self-control and more difficult to teach?

The blind men and the elephant

Like most teachers I meet, my first instinct was to lay the blame for deteriorating behaviour on television. To a literacy specialist it seems obvious that children who spend their days slumped in front of TV miss out on other important activities, such as conversation and reading for pleasure. Commentators have been complaining about reduced attention span ever since television became widespread in the 1950s, and over the last twenty years children's viewing has escalated wildly as TV became a round-the-clock global presence, with endless channels aimed specifically at them: Nickelodeon, Disney, Fox Kids, CBBC, Toonami and so on. I began to take a keen interest in the issue and often wrote about it for the educational press.

Then one day, while looking into reports that Ritalin prescriptions in the UK had increased ten-fold in a single decade, I bumped into another researcher, an expert on children's play. She put the apparent increase in attention deficit down to something quite different: the

fact that many parents were too frightened to let their children go outside and run off excess energy. In conversation we discovered that, while her argument and mine were clearly linked – in both cases, TV was implicated – neither of us had hitherto given much consideration to the other's point of view.

Suddenly I noticed how many other experts seemed to be digging away at this issue. They began to turn up everywhere –newspapers, bookshops, the Internet – and each had his or her own speciality. They seemed to be all over the world – from the USA in the west to Japan in the east – worrying away at the same problem, despite differences in cultural traditions. Some put the change in children's behaviour down to diet or lack of exercise; others chose working mothers, marriage breakdown, defects in the education system, excessive consumerism or other effects of technological or social change. The world is full of experts on children's behaviour, and most of them seem completely oblivious of all the others.

The trouble is, expertise nowadays is increasingly specialised: researchers are trapped in their own disciplines, knowing more and more about less and less; social commentators are trapped in their own countries, addressing the minutiae of national concerns. So although there's worldwide concern about changes in children's behaviour patterns, investigation into the issue is proceeding like that of 'The Blind Men and the Elephant'. In the poem, each blind man caught hold of one bit of the animal – the trunk or the leg or the tail – and on the basis of this worked out his theory of what an elephant looked like. At present, each expert latches on to one element of the decline in children's behaviour and ability to learn, and in so doing we fail to grasp it in its entirety. We haven't observed the whole elephant.

The more I read, the more I became convinced that there was not just one cause behind the changes in children's behaviour, but a vast array of causes, all interrelated and deeply ingrained in contemporary culture – a complex and alarming mix. And it was affecting children across the developed world. This is why, three years ago, I stepped off

my personal professional tramlines and began research into childhood in general.

The past is another planet

My first reaction was deep sympathy for contemporary parents. How in the world could they be expected to cope with the astonishing amount of information generated by these legions of experts? And if those same experts haven't worked out what 'the elephant' in the middle of all their research looks like, how are parents supposed to guess what's significant in their findings?

Bringing up children has never been easy, but nowadays it's a minefield. Twenty-first-century parents pick their way gingerly through the sound bites – junk food, sugar highs, couch-potato kids, pester power, battery children, electronic babysitters, technobrats, and so on – but with a distinct shortage of reference points. When my husband and I were bringing up our daughter twenty years ago, the world we lived in was not vastly different from the one in which we'd grown up ourselves. But since then, the pace of change has been phenomenal. In less than two decades, technology has transformed our homes: PCs, laptops, email, the worldwide web; cable, satellite and digital TV, camcorders, DVD; computer games, PlayStations, iPods; mobile phones, text messaging, camphones ... And everything happens much, much faster than it did in the past.

Social changes have been no less startling. Across the developed world, there are now far fewer extended family groups than there were, and more parents bringing up children alone; mothers are much more likely to work and, in a fast-moving, fast-changing workplace, the pressures of work for all parents have increased enormously; marriages are less stable and cohabitation and divorce widespread – even in countries, such as Japan and Spain, where such behaviour was unthinkable twenty years ago. The old certainties have gone, and 'moral relativism' doesn't make for easy parenting.

Technology has meant families across the developed world have more and more in common – an exciting development – but it also means that they have less and less contact with their own cultural past. Back in 1950, L. P. Hartley began his novel *The Go-Between* with the famous words: 'The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.' These days the past isn't just a foreign country, it's another planet.

The Canadian media visionary Marshall McLuhan called this phenomenon 'electric speed'. It began with the growth of global mass media in the middle of the twentieth century, but has accelerated wildly – as evidenced above – since the 1980s. McLuhan predicted that the contraction of time and space within the global village would be a great leap forward for mankind, and in many ways he was right: for adults, it's an amazing period to be alive, and most of the time we manage to keep up with the electric speed of modern life.

But children are not fully developed adults – they still have to move along that developmental continuum, acquiring the habits of civilised behaviour. Focused attention, deferred gratification, self-control, empathy and other important lessons can't be learned at electric speed. Human development happens in 'slow time', and contemporary children need the same time-consuming, old-fashioned nurturing that small, highly intelligent primates have needed through the ages.

The elephant in the house

In the tumult of change, it's not surprising if some parents have lost sight of age-old truths about child-rearing, especially as many of the old reference points – lore from the extended family, cultural and religious traditions – have been swept away. But the problem is compounded because the cultural changes of the last quarter of a century have brought with them a toxic mix of side effects that have made the task of rearing children more difficult than ever before. Parents

haven't had the time (or the clarity of information) to make adjustments for these side effects. As a result, every year children become more distractible, impulsive and self-obsessed – less able to learn, to enjoy life, to thrive socially. So even though it's more difficult than in any previous generation, good parenting is essential. In a complex contemporary culture, children are in greater need of parental wisdom, guidance and support than ever before.

The needs of a small human being are much the same as they ever were. They need physical nurturing (a healthy mind in a healthy body): nourishing food; plenty of exercise and play; adequate sleep. They need emotional and social support, which means time, attention, communication and love from the people closest to them. As they grow older, they must widen their social circle and learn cognitive skills, including the Three Rs. And throughout childhood they need moral guidance, to help them navigate the increasingly complex web of contemporary ethics.

My research suggests that children's development in every one of these areas is threatened by the side effects of technological and cultural changes. A great many – probably a majority – of our children have developed a taste for unhealthy food and a couch-potato lifestyle, and have related problems with sleeping. An unacceptable number also suffer from inadequate early emotional bonding, lack of interaction with their parents and a high level of emotional instability. Instead of stimulating, real-life experiences, contemporary children have TV and computer games at home, and – all too often – a narrow test-and-target-driven curriculum at school. Moral guidance has suffered as societies become increasingly confused, while children are constantly exposed to manipulative advertising and the excesses of celebrity culture.

Any one of the vast array of cultural side effects I discovered would be enough to trigger developmental delay in a genetically vulnerable child; the whole toxic brew could trigger it even in the most genetically robust of individuals. This is the 'elephant' standing

full square in the living room of every family home in the developed world.

Toxic childhood syndrome

There's no point in standing around wringing our hands about this problem, or indeed in looking for someone to blame. No one intended it – the culture changed so rapidly that we're only just beginning to notice the extent of the collateral damage. Hand wringing and blaming are just a waste of precious time.

So I'm not suggesting we turn the clock back on our cultural revolution – and most of us wouldn't want to. Personally I *love* new technology and would hate to go back to an earlier age. Indeed, without email and the worldwide web, this book couldn't have been written. I love the buzz of twenty-four-hour living, the improvements in women's status, the comfort and convenience of our contemporary lifestyle, the excitement of change. But, in order to maintain the new global culture, we must acknowledge what it's doing to our children and work out how to detoxify their lives.

Toxic Childhood assembles evidence from a wide range of disciplines – from psychology and neuroscience to economics and marketing. The research involved took several years' work (by myself and two hard-working research assistants), hundreds of discussions with children, parents and teachers around the world, and – most importantly – interviews with scores of scientists and other experts, who gave generously of their time and expertise to explain the effects of 'toxic childhood syndrome' in their particular disciplines.

The more I found out, the clearer it became that trying to tackle any one of these elements independently of the others was a waste of time – they all swirl together in a toxic mix. So just improving a child's diet, for instance, isn't enough – all sorts of other things impinge on it: TV and marketing messages, exercise and sleeping habits, childcare arrangements, parenting style. Anyway, just as we can't know a child's

genetic blueprint, so we can't guess which elements of contemporary culture might be particularly poisonous for each individual. Toxic childhood is a syndrome, and we have to tackle the *whole* thing, not just odd symptoms. The good news is that doing so isn't particularly difficult, shouldn't cost much (except in time and attention) and parents who are already detoxing their children's lives find it extremely rewarding and enjoyable.

Detoxing childhood

After each chapter, there are a few guidelines for 'detoxing childhood', taking age-old wisdom and adapting it to fit contemporary culture. However, I'm not a parenting expert and *Toxic Childhood* is not a child-rearing manual – one of the problems I recognised in my research was that the growth in 'parenting experts' has contributed to the syndrome – parents feel de-skilled and unable to trust to their instincts. Besides, in some countries, cultural traditions or enlightened social provision already point the way towards aspects of detoxification. Some of these are included as recommendations in the book. I hope parents will assess the evidence offered and interpret all the suggestions as seems most appropriate to their own children's needs, within their own culture and circumstances. I also point to other sources of information, books and websites that I've found particularly helpful in understanding the issues confronting twenty-first-century parents. The strength of the global village means that, as further recommendations arise, they too can be disseminated at electric speed.

But tackling toxic childhood syndrome is not simply about what individual parents can do – it's also an important social project, one that affects everyone in the developed world. Children are our most significant investment for the future, and the toxic cocktail described here is already undermining the social, emotional and intellectual development of an unacceptable number. Even if your own offspring

have escaped unscathed, the world they're growing up in is full of others who've been less fortunate. As more children become distractible, impulsive and lacking in empathy, antisocial behaviour and violent crime will increase. If toxic childhood syndrome is not stemmed, it will pose an increasing threat to social cohesion.

We could, of course, try to solve the problem by doling out drugs, as already happens in the case of the growing number of children diagnosed with ADHD. I would be the last to deny that some families desperately need the relief that comes from a timely dose of Ritalin – living with a severely ADHD child can be utter hell. But as prescriptions soar (between 2000 and 2002, 68 per cent more mind-altering drugs were prescribed to children in the UK alone), we must ask ourselves whether pathologising childhood in this way is an acceptable option.

Apart from anything else, drugging a growing proportion of the nation's youth is an expensive option, and we don't know where it might lead. The rock stars Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love, both on Ritalin as children, became confirmed drug addicts. After Cobain's suicide, Love ruminated, 'When you're a kid and you get this drug that makes you feel that feeling, where else are you going to turn when you're an adult? It was euphoric when you were a child – isn't that memory going to stick with you?'

A much more sensible solution would be for medical, educational and political establishments to address the underlying causes of these changes in children's behaviour, and support parents in doing the best for their children. Governments across the world already recognise that investment in the next generation's physical, mental and emotional health is a worthwhile cause, but they often base their responses on research that doesn't take into account all the effects of cultural change – research from that other planet known as the past. Awareness of, and attention to, toxic childhood syndrome is essential if their investment is to succeed.

Big business needs to listen too. Large corporations have been

slow to recognise that, when short-term profit undermines society's long-term prospects, it's not just the punters they're screwing, it's themselves. However, there are hopeful signs that, with sufficient public outrage and threats of litigation, they can be persuaded to change direction. It's even possible they'll recognise that there's money to be made in creating and marketing products that develop a healthy rather than unhealthy lifestyle for children. In helping big business along this road, parental pressure is an extremely powerful force.

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In the end, though, the main responsibility for rearing children lies, as it always has, with parents. They have to wise up, stop being paralysed by a combination of rapid change, uncertainty and guilt, and concentrate on providing a secure, healthy environment in which their children can grow. The suggestions in this book are not rocket science, but if we care about the future of our global village, they're more important than rocket science. In defending the culture we've created, we have to recognise that the barbarians are not only at the gate, they're in the womb.

Mind the gap

'Something really awful will happen soon.'

I was eating lunch with a group of primary head teachers in a deprived area of the UK, listening to their chat about the children in their schools. They all nodded gloomily at their colleague's prophecy.

'It's inevitable,' someone answered. 'Things are getting so bad. What's tragic is that we have to wait for a terrible disaster before the rest of the country notices.'

I realised, as I pushed my salad around the plate, that they were predicting some shocking, headline-grabbing act of violence from the infants in their care. Murder, mayhem or destruction. By children under ten.

Young children in many rundown, inner-city areas of the UK are becoming increasingly feral. Visiting such places, I find them more terrifying every year. Many of the children don't have children's faces – they're pinched and angry, with dead eyes. For them, violence is a fact of daily life. Their parents – deprived, uneducated, often scarcely more than children themselves – are often junkies, alcoholics, involved in crime. Toxic childhood syndrome flourishes in such circumstances, and it's feeding this feral generation.

Any parents who've gone to the trouble of picking up this book are probably already taking steps to detoxify their children. In the last few years, as concern about children's health and behaviour has grown, there's been plenty of media coverage and advice. The problem exists across all social groups, but educated families are already getting to grips with it. Even the parents of children with genetic developmental conditions are sometimes able to discover and make specific lifestyle adjustments that help to normalise their child's behaviour, often at considerable cost to themselves in terms of time and effort. But uneducated parents – especially those in areas of great deprivation – are either too ill-informed or lack the personal competence to make any adjustments, despite the fact that the toxic effects on their children are greater than anywhere else. That's why, at the end of each chapter, I've added a PS entitled 'Mind the gap'.

This topic could, of course, be a book in its own right. For brevity's sake therefore, the postscripts are often personal, anecdotal and impressionistic. If you want to know more, you can either Google or go and see for yourself. But it's a subject we should all engage with. In the world's most successful countries the gap between the haves and have-nots widens every year. Politicians call it 'social mobility' – the extent to which a nation's citizens are able to move up and out of an impoverished childhood. While some countries, such as Sweden and the Netherlands, have slightly increased social mobility in recent years, in others – notably the USA and UK – the gap grows ever wider.

What's more, in most economically successful countries the birth rate among have-nots is soaring, while among educated classes it's falling. Demographic experts in developed nations are concerned about this widening gap, for two main reasons. First, it diminishes the home-grown educated workforce; second, if a growing section of the population has no stake in society (especially if the younger generation sees no way out of poverty) their disaffection could eventually threaten social stability.

There are moral and philosophical problems in considering how to detoxify other people's children, which is why those head teachers have to wait for 'something awful' to happen before action is taken. Liberal thinkers consider it politically incorrect to interfere in the lives of the poor; laissez-faire libertarians prefer to wait until deprived children are adults, then lock up the troublemakers, even though overcrowding in the prisons of developed nations is reaching crisis point. But there's a limit to how long we can ignore it. As the world continues to move at electric speed and the toxic influences on the children of the poor increase, there's every chance of serious civil unrest within a generation. If for no other reason than enlightened self-interest, it seems to me we have to notice this widening gap and take measures to close it. Just detoxing our own children's lives isn't enough.