



Alliance for Childhood UK Day Conference

Detoxing Childhood
3rd October 2006 Early Education Centre Whitechapel London

Sue Palmer author of Toxic Childhood;
Richard Watts from Sustain: Alliance for Better Food and Farming

Attendees came from as far away as Aberdeen and Edinburgh and even the USA! They ranged from Foundation Stage Consultants, to Montessori UK, Pre-school Learning Alliance and the National Association of Day Nurseries. Several Steiner school kindergarten teachers also attended.

Sue Palmer spoke about the value of the Alliance for Childhood website for researching her book – even discovering that this is where the inspiration for the title Toxic Childhood came from having read an article by one of the Alliance founders in the US, Joan Almon.

Sue spoke from her research and about the incredible public, press and government response to the letter sent by her with Dr Richard House (Professor and Steiner Waldorf educator) to the Press and published by the Daily Telegraph, highlighting the toxic state of childhood today - the Toxic Childhood Syndrome, as it is already known.

Her work arises out of a desire to show how brain function is affected by the environment that children grow up in during their early years. The prefrontal cortex is the centre for our capacity to be human – to show empathy etc.

Today's children are showing that language is deteriorating, including listening skills. They have a short attention span which can be traced to the lack of conversation, nursery rhymes and word play at an early age. It seems that less movement leads to more special needs showing. 1 in 10 children have diagnosed depression.

The present trend is to diagnose a condition and then treat it medically. Prescribed drugs are on the increase – a well known example being Ritalin.

Teachers say that all children are becoming more distractible, impulsive and self-centred, causing social problems. All of these are natural in a baby, but needs to change as the child develops:

Distractible	-> attention	-> focussed concentration
Impulsive	-> self control	-> deferred gratification
Self-centred	-> empathy	-> consideration

Children with problems (such as involvement in crime) only live in the present and can't see into the future.

We cannot wait for anything nowadays, everything happens at electric speed, but human development happens in biological time. We need to learn at a normal pace, including literacy, we need to develop carefully and slowly and deeply before we access computer speed.

Children are suffering from unhealthy food, lack of sleep, play, too much media input, isolation, lack of communication and socialisation leading to 'Toxic Childhood Syndrome'.

To 'detox' we need to recognise some important facts, acknowledge why problems are happening and make an attempt to change them.

- . Techno-culture has outstripped out biological nature
- . It's fine for adults, but children need to develop in biological time
- . They need real food, real play, and real interactivity.

We played a memory game - what do we remember of our childhood - 98% talked about being outside. This is quite common. Very few remember toys, just outside play.

Sue spoke about the critical interaction with the baby and mother or key worker, and that the one-to-one relationship is critical in the first year at least. This is not happening in institutionalised care.
See: Attachment theory - 'Why Love Matters' Sue Gerhard.

Competition is also not good for children - childhood is not a race!

We need to police electronics - and marketing! Children are exposed to totally unsuitable programmes - many of which contain bullying.

The most successful parenting is warm but firm - human contact with authority.
Rhythm in a child's day is important. Making TIME for childhood and interacting in every way (singing, eating, being, playing, reading, etc) with the children.

The presentation which Sue gave along with interactive research sections is available from Sue Palmer www.suepalmer.co.uk or email: g.pensri@pensri.co.uk for £10 (Georgina Pensri).

Sue ended with a quote from John Schaar:

*The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating.
The paths are not to be found, but made.
And the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination.*

Everyone works in a specialist area and in isolation. It was only when Sue began to put everything together that Sue saw the enormity of the problem. The Alliance can help by getting experts in children and childhood together to discuss their particular areas of expertise or specialism – to come together for the benefit of the children of today and tomorrow.

RICHARD WATTS FROM SUSTAIN spoke of the Children's Food Campaign.

There is a crisis in children's diets and eating habits, to such an extent that parents may probably outlive their kids. 220,000 children become obese each year.

- 85% don't get enough fibre in their diets
- 98% don't eat enough fresh fruit and vegetables

The NHS spends 4 billion on people with food/bad diet related diseases

Burning off calories from a MacDonald's Happy Meal takes a 9 mile walk.

The campaign is trying to get people to sign up for better food for kids, and no advertising of junk food. They are now targeting:

- food skills as part of the national curriculum
- no junk food advertising
- clear food labelling
- healthy school meals

For every £1 spent on fresh food advertising, £500 is spent on junk food advertising.
Most kids watch TV at 5pm, which is when the advertising is on, and do not watch kids' programmes.

Information can be found on the Sustain website: www.childrensfoodcampaign.co.uk

From comments which followed:

In the wake of the letter to the Telegraph, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke about the commission set up by the Children's Society (www.childrenssociety.org.uk).

You can make submissions to the Commission by going to:

<https://www.thegoodchildhood.com/TGC/haveyoursayCYP.asp>

There is excellent research accessible through Learning through Landscapes, the National School Grounds Charity: www.ltl.org.uk

From notes by Janni Nicol, edited by Marion Briggs