

'Too much information destroys childhood innocence'

We can't shelter children from the ugly excesses of the world, but we should make sure they receive certain knowledge at the appropriate age, writes Peter Tait



Parents are hell-bent on stimulating and pushing their children further Photo: ALAMY

By Peter Tait

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"Some parents and educators believe that a child is like a huge container. To insure the child's success, they think it their job to fill it up with as much information as possible, as quickly as possible. This misconception is damaging the brilliance of millions of our youth." JW Wilson, Advanced Learning Institute

We live in an age that is full of information; information that is growing exponentially as the power of the Internet grows.

Wikipedia, Google and similar sites provide information on tap, but without any means of filtering what is actually worth knowing.

Worryingly, we all feel the pressure to do more, to experience more and, in turn, to provide more for our children. And so, more and more parents are hell-bent on stimulating and pushing their children further on the premise that the more young children know, the more they do, and the better their chances of success later in life.

This is not just a desperate fringe group – in a recent poll, over 87 per cent of parents said they believed that the more stimulation a child received, the more successful they would be.

This misplaced ambition – which ignores the prescribed stages of development, which encourages children to jump from concrete concepts to abstract concepts before they are ready – apart from all other considerations, is not only of dubious benefit, but as research now tells us, risks the overstimulation of some areas of children's brains at the expense of others.

The effect, we now know, can be damaging to neural development, which can lead to severe psychological and emotional difficulties later in life.

And yet, from the time of a child's conception, parents are swamped with advice on how to bring up their children, and desperate to 'compete' with other parents, push their children relentlessly in order that they, too, can be 'competitive'.

As a consequence of ignoring readiness, maternal instinct, parental intuition and common-sense – so necessary to build an emotional bond – are swamped by pressures as artificial as they are dangerous.

The dangers of overriding 'readiness' doesn't just rest in the early years. Nor is it a matter of volume, but of timing. In our current world, children are subjected to a veritable surfeit of information which, unfiltered, can destroy their innocence and produce social and emotional problems on a scale that we are only now properly recognising.

We know it for we see it everywhere – the effects of 'too much information', much of which is delivered via an unregulated Internet, on mental health, on self-image, on diet, self-harming and so on.

Yet while we struggle to teach children how to use and filter the Internet, we have other sections of society determined to inform young children about issues of sexuality, of adult problems, of diseases and behaviours at a younger and younger age, without any consideration of the social and emotional effect on the child.

The result is that we have an epidemic of mental illness as children struggle with 'too much information' or 'too much, too soon', with the effect evident in increased depression or, in extremis,

such appalling manifestations of distorted youth as sexual crimes committed by children often against other children and suicide. What is going so terribly wrong?

Part of the problem, and a significant part, is directly related to social media, but not all.

When, last week, there was a report in the national press of an Ofsted inspector questioning 10 year old children about lesbian sex and transsexuality, it raised a number of issues about how we can protect our children from such intrusions into the realm of childhood.

For too long, Ofsted along with other government agencies and an endless queue of educational journalists, academics, do-gooders and social engineers seem to be hell-bent on informing children about issues that they are neither intellectually, physically or emotionally equipped to handle.

To this list there is now a growing number of parents who share their own problems with their own children, asking them to take sides in relationship issues, to be involved, and to know all.

This adherence to some warped political correctness that says all knowledge should be transparent and freely available has led to children being exposed to issues of sexuality, criminality, disease, in fact, all the angst of modern life at an age at which many cannot cope. It is an act that borders on criminal.

Those who feel that exposure to the grim realities of adult life doesn't require age limits, or some form of protection, have clearly never paused to consider the correlation between their understanding of children and the statistics on the mental health of over-anxious, frightened children.

To treat young children as sounding boards in discussions of adult issues, emotional, social, physical or even financial, when all they want is for their parents to provide security and stability, is hugely destabilising and damaging to young lives.

We can see it in the way that families have been demonised and children traumatised in public enquiries when a more responsible and age-appropriate approach was required, by planting ideas, asking leading questions, without ever, it appears, considering the long-term effects on the child.

Of course, children need to know about different stages of physical development and about social, health and emotional dangers that confront them, but at the right time when they are ready and able to handle them.

They need to understand the physical, emotional and neurological changes that will occur to them during adolescence. They need to know about e-safety. They need to know about potential dangers.

But we need to be careful about how much and when.

When I was teaching in a senior school some time ago, I was aware of the PSHE or Life skills programme that we had for our 14 – 15 year olds. The programme consisted of lessons on alcoholism, on drug abuse, examining the effects of smoking by studying diseased lungs, a visit to a morgue, moratoriums on bullying, self-harming, mental illness and so on.

There was not one ray of joy: no talk of family celebrations, festivals, reunions, no talk of well-being or the joy of living; no talk of music, drama and sport or other outlets. Is it any wonder our children have growing incidence of mental illness? Is it any wonder that our teenage suicide rate is where it is?

Perhaps the wheel is turning. The debate about sex education continues, and the attempt to introduce a bill to make sex and relationship education compulsory was met with the contention that sex education as a concept had failed and the problems had got worse.

Inappropriate, ill-timed, education was always going to fail. The issue, however, is not how we protect children by sheltering them from the ugly excesses of the world; simply, how can we convince people of the need to only tell them when they are ready, and need, to know. They deserve that much.

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How we moderate

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