

The anxiety epidemic: Why are children so unhappy?

By Richard Garner, Education Editor
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Teachers are to take the extraordinary step of calling for an independent Royal Commission to investigate why so many of Britain's children are unhappy.

The unprecedented move by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers follows a welter of evidence highlighting the fragile states of mind of many of the country's seven million primary and secondary school pupils.

A motion to be debated at the ATL's annual conference in Torquay next Tuesday says: "Conference notes with deep concern that many children in our schools appear unhappy and anxious." Over the next two weeks, ATL members will discuss several topics relating to the mental health of primary age children and the pressures they face in modern society. Another motion on the ATL's agenda warns that "social dysfunction and family breakdown are damaging the educational attainment of children and the performance of schools and colleges", while a third speaks of the growing number of pupils being driven to suicide by "academic, social and peer pressure". The recent spate of teenage suicides in Bridgend, South Wales, is symptomatic of the unease felt by today's children, delegates will hear.

Dr Mary Bousted, the ATL general-secretary, said yesterday: "There is rising concern that more and more children are coming to school unable to learn because their lives are so dispirited and they are under stress."

Numerous recent studies have identified a growing malaise among children, particularly in primary schools. In February 2007, the United Nations Children's Fund reported that British pupils were the unhappiest in the western world because of the lack of social cohesion in the UK.

That was followed by the most in-depth study of primary education for 40 years, which claimed that 3.5million younger children were affected by a worrying "loss of childhood".

The inquiry, led by Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University, said primary schools were engulfed by a wave of "anti-social behaviour, materialism and the cult of celebrity".

A separate report blamed this anti-social behaviour on the Government's rigid system of testing and its constant drive to meet targets.

Many pupils felt alienated at school because lessons were boring and their teachers spent too much time "teaching to the tests", the study said. Just before Christmas, the National Association of Head Teachers accused ministers of presiding over the death of fun and play in the primary school curriculum.

The ATL, in its call for a Royal Commission, will blame homework for heaping further pressure on children and making them "unhappy and anxious".

As a first step towards easing the problem, conference delegates will be asked to back the scrapping of compulsory homework for the nation's three-and-a-half million primary pupils, as well as stricter limits on the amount set by secondary schools.

Dr Bousted added: "I think a lot of homework is a waste of time. It puts a huge amount of stress on disadvantaged children. Middle-class children can go home and get help from their parents to do their homework. Disadvantaged children do not necessarily have the extra learning support that the middle-class children have and consequently it doesn't tell you much about the relative abilities of different children."

The motion to be put to the ATL conference next week says: "Children should be able to explore, experiment and enjoy their learning without feeling pressured. Homework has become an increasing pressure placed on children in primary and secondary schools."

The proposed motion also expresses "deep concern" about the situation.

The pressure to set more homework came soon after Labour's election to power in 1997, when the party's first Education Secretary David Blunkett for the first time published Government guidelines on the amount of homework to be set for children between the ages of four and 16.

These recommended 20 minutes a night for four- and five-year-olds, increasing to 30 minutes for six- and seven-year-olds and between 90 minutes and two hours for 16-year-olds studying for their GCSEs.

Dr Boustead argues that teachers feel under more pressure to set homework because of the Government's rigid targets and testing regime – which culminates with league table of the performance of all primary schools, highlighting their results in the national curriculum tests for 11-year-olds. The union's move comes after a series of reports – notably from the Cambridge-based review of primary education (the biggest inquiry into sector for more than 40 years) – warned that today's children are more stressed than their predecessors and bored with lessons constantly focussing on teaching to the tests. As a result, standards have declined, the review has argued.

To combat pupil stress, Dr Anthony Seldon, the headmaster of Wellington College independent school, has introduced lessons in "happiness" for his pupils.

Last night, a spokesman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said: "Homework is not compulsory but we do encourage teachers to set children work to do outside the classroom.

"A good, well-organised homework programme helps children and young people develop the skills and attitudes they will need for successful, independent lifelong learning."

He rejected claims by the union that today's youngsters were "unhappy and anxious", saying: "Research shows that, for most children, 2008 is a great time to be a child.

"Most children are happy, most are achieving to a higher level than ever before, enjoying better health, more opportunities to travel, to engage in sport or cultural activities than was the case for any previous generation."

Unhappy times for children

***Global Report on Child Welfare and Happiness by UNICEF**

Just over a year ago, this report by Unicef, the UN children's agency, revealed the results of a survey which showed that UK schoolchildren were the unhappiest of 21 countries surveyed in the Western world. The report blamed a lack of social cohesion and poor parenting for its findings.

***A Review of Primary Education by Professor Robin Alexander**

Two reports from this Cambridge-based review of primary education – the biggest inquiry into the sector for 40 years – highlighted similar concerns. One revealed a worrying "loss of childhood" among today's youngsters. This, it said, had led to schools being engulfed by a wave of "antisocial behaviour, materialism and the cult of celebrity". The second warned that constant interference by politicians in the primary school timetable with the stress on tests and league tables had put pupils off lessons and damaged their learning.

***An Inquiry into Testing and Assessment by the National Association of Head Teachers**

After taking evidence from a range of academics and writers, it said that ministers had presided over the death of fun and play in the primary school curriculum. It, too, argued children's education had been damaged by putting them off learning through too much repetitive teaching for tests.