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# The State of Modern Childhood – 20 years on

*Sue Palmer and Richard House in conversation*

**Richard House (RH):** Sue, it's hard to believe (for me, anyway!) that it's now a full two decades since we devised, and then launched, our 'open letter' about the parlous state of childhood in modern society.<sup>1</sup> That letter, published in September 2006, literally went viral and global overnight, and pretty much instantly we were doing radio interviews and speaking at conferences on the issues raised in the letter. Our letter clearly 'caught a wave' of emerging cultural disquiet about the multiple, arguably deleterious impacts on children's experience of the relentless march of technological society; and the letter, signed by well over 100 key authorities, managed to capture a seam of deep disquiet that many people from a wide range of perspectives were experiencing at the time.

But I don't want to take the credit for what was *your* inspiration, with your now iconic notion of 'toxic childhood', which your best-selling 2006 book of the same name brought to the world.<sup>2</sup> It was in 2005 that I read a front-page lead article on your research into toxic childhood in the *Times Educational Supplement*; and it resonated with me to such an extent that I just had to contact you immediately! Thankfully, you responded with great enthusiasm and commitment, and just one of the many synergies we co-created in the next decade was this *Telegraph* open letter. I can remember that we took a great deal of time and care getting the wording of the letter right; and the fact that so many eminent signatories responded enthusiastically to it suggests that at that time, we did a pretty good job at capturing the *Zeitgeist*. I can remember our amazement when, several years later, we were approached by an examination board to ask our permission to include the letter text in an A-level examination paper! – such was the cultural impact and reach of the letter.

Perhaps we can begin this retrospective conversation by returning to the open letter text itself. Can I ask you to what extent we 'got it right' with our concerns 20 years ago; and as of today, what issues affecting children's experience did we miss, or fail to foresee, at that time? This can then serve as a jumping-off point for the rest of this conversation.

**Sue Palmer (SP):** Yes, 20 years is a long time to watch the fears voiced in that letter come horribly true: startling increases in developmental conditions (nowadays

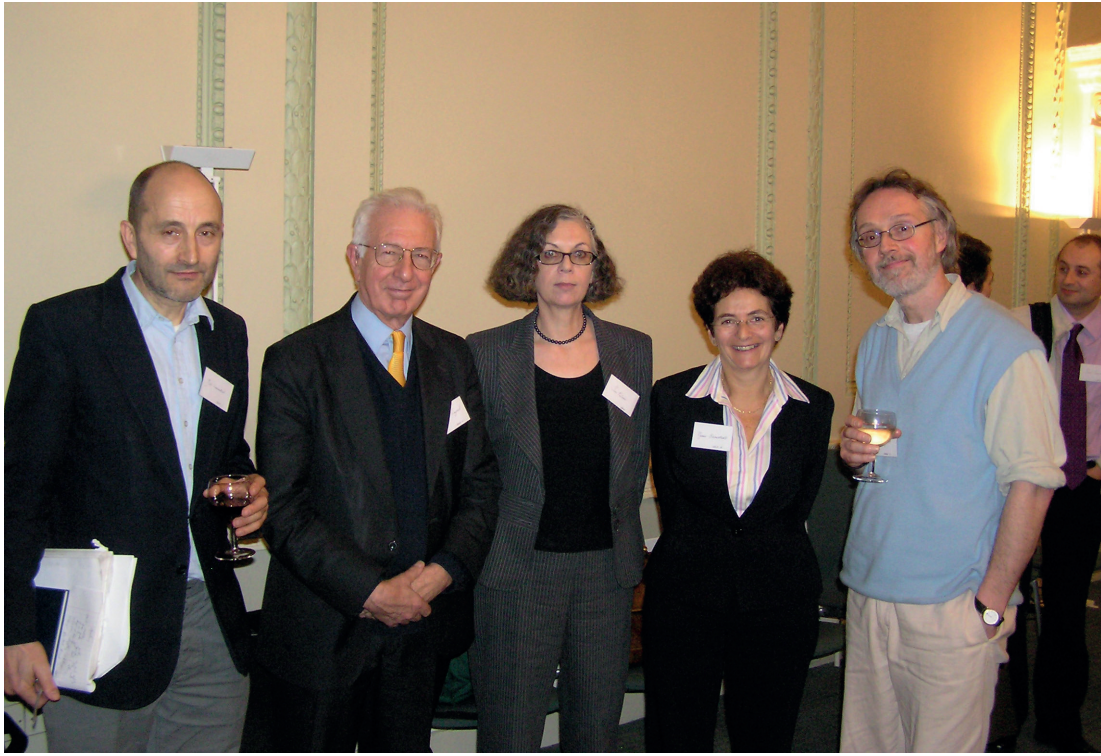
known as 'neurodiversity'); escalating mental health conditions amongst children and young people (and no reliable data, because there are more children requiring help from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) than the system can cope with), and a growing gap between the life chances of children from poor and wealthy backgrounds.

I heard Alan Milburn (a former labour government minister) on the radio a while ago saying that one in eight young people are now defined as NEETs (meaning 'Not in Education, Employment or Training'), and 45 per cent of 24 year-old NEETs have never had a job so are therefore likely to be on benefits for their whole lives. Those are the neediest of the children we were writing about in 2006, whose entire lives have been blighted. And it's obvious that, quite apart from the appalling consequences for those individuals, the increasing burden that will fall on the benefits system as years go by is clearly unsustainable.

Our *Telegraph* letter was signed by scores of the people I interviewed for my book *Toxic Childhood*, and many others – all experts in aspects of child development, and all deeply concerned about the state of childhood in the early years of the twenty-first century. You'd think policy-makers would have listened to such expertise, yet at the time all the political parties reacted with contempt, claiming that children's lives were healthier and richer than they'd ever been.

As for what we missed in the letter, I'm amazed we failed to mention that the best time to start putting things right would be the early years of children's lives, when their brains and bodies are developing more rapidly than at any other time. But I suppose we were expecting a 'national debate' to establish that. If only there had been one....

**RH:** You say that 'at the time all the political parties reacted with contempt, claiming that children's lives were healthier and richer than they'd ever been'. That's probably about right in practice, but I remember that we did organise an extraordinary one-day conference at Roehampton University in December 2006 (where I was lecturing at the time), to which we invited all the open letter signatories (most of them came), and at which we managed to get representatives of the then three main political parties to attend and speak: namely, Naomi



*The one-day seminar on childhood, Roehampton University, London, December 2006:  
From the left: Professor Del Loewenthal, Professor Richard Layard, Sue Palmer,  
Naomi Eisenstadt and Dr Richard House (Dr Sami Timimi in the background)*

Eisenstadt (a top civil servant and the first director of the Blair government's Sure Start programme) representing the then Labour government; Tim Loughton MP representing the Conservative opposition (who went on to become Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families from 2010 to 2012); and Annette Brooke MP for the Liberal Democrats, who I remember being very supportive of our work and campaigning, and who became Dame Annette Brooke sitting in the House of Lords, until she passed in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, Baron Professor Richard Layard also came to the conference reception (see photograph). Layard was very prominent at the time with his 'Depression Report' of the same year which led to the establishment of the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme in England, and his 2006 book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*,<sup>4</sup> with which he definitely had the ear of the Blair government, and which book was a key player in establishing the new field of 'well-being science'.

So while there was certainly some push-back from the academic world at what some commentators viewed as our unevidenced alarmism about childhood, I also remember all of these prominent, aforementioned political representatives being very supportive of the public debate about childhood that we were attempting to spawn – with the partial exception, perhaps, of Naomi Eisenstadt, who I remember essentially 'going through the motions' of defending the previous Blair government's record, and trying to reassure us that all was in hand. If only...

But perhaps this highlights the important, even crucial distinction between – on the one hand – individuals and their human perceptions and personally held viewpoints, and on the other, the bureaucratic system in which they are embedded – and by which, perhaps, they are disempowered. I'd like to hear your perspective on, and experience of, this disjunction – i.e. the gulf between the personal, no doubt sincerely held views of individual actors, and the sheer intractability of the entrenched bureaucratic-political system in which they work, and which they try – often in vain – to affect.

**SP:** You're right – there were individuals in all the political parties who were supportive of our 'childhood campaigning', but they were no match for the juggernaut of bureaucracy that is twenty-first century politics. At the start of this century, for instance, we had plenty of support from Liberal-Democrats because their manifesto actually included raising the school starting age and introducing more developmentally appropriate care/education for the under-sevens. But the minute they tasted political power (in the Conservative/Lib-Dem coalition government of 2010), they dropped it like a stone.

In the preceding year, a book was published explaining why this happens. Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*<sup>5</sup> makes an excellent case for the gradual usurpation of human understanding by mechanistic, reductionist, unempathetic 'left-brain thinking', encouraged by cultural forces. I went

to interview Dr McGilchrist about it because – very obviously – children’s brains at birth are unaffected by culture; so by ensuring a healthy childhood (particularly in the early years), we could support more balanced early development. Sadly, he said he had no personal expertise in early brain development so was unable to comment!

By this time I was becoming totally obsessed by the way our society treats young children. In the early 2000s, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) had begun publishing comparative tables on children’s performance in literacy and numeracy in different countries of the world. The UK and USA were very miffed at not coming top of the charts. Remarkably, the world’s highest-scoring country in literacy was Finland, and the *Times Educational Supplement* had sent me there to find out why.

It turned out that Finland didn’t begin formal schooling till children were seven years-old; before that, they were cared for in relationship-centred, play-based ‘day-care’, supervised by pedagogues trained in child development. And not only was Finland doing well in academic comparisons, in a 2007 UNICEF survey it had also come near the top in terms of childhood well-being, in which the USA and UK languished near the very bottom. I wanted to know why!

Thanks largely to our ‘OPEN EYE’ campaign<sup>6</sup> and your ‘Early Childhood Action’ campaign,<sup>7</sup> I spent several years meeting experts in early child development. As someone whose entire academic and professional life had been in primary education (as a teacher, head teacher, literacy specialist and, eventually, a consultant to the UK government) I was amazed at what I learned. I kept saying, ‘Why did nobody tell me?’

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has therefore been the focus of all my campaigning work ever since. These last dozen years convinced me of the urgent necessity for significant cultural change in the way our country cares for little children. We can’t go on hopelessly trying to stem the tide of mental health problems, special needs, NEETs, social media scandals and so on. As the wonderful Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it, ‘There comes a time when we have to stop pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.’

However, the last dozen years have also taught me how difficult this change will be in the face of what you call ‘an entrenched bureaucratic-political system’. Our politicians – like all our national opinion-makers – are products of an educational system weighted in favour of academic ‘cleverness’, at the expense of human wisdom.

**RH:** Your latter statement links directly to the aforementioned work of Iain McGilchrist, of course, with mainstream schooling and education being woefully ‘left-brain’ in nature (using McGilchrist’s

nomenclature) – information processing, analytical thinking etc., –and therefore chronically unbalanced from more creative, emotionally connected approaches; and then with that entrenched bias becoming a viciously circular, self-fulfilling process whereby policy-makers and politicians educated in a system shot through with that chronic bias will simply *reproduce* that very same bias in their decision- and policy-making. And all the while, of course, they’ll (sincerely) assume that they’re doing the very best for children! – as they tacitly assume their own (unbalanced) worldview to be normal and healthy.

So, what on earth does a campaigner do in such circumstances? One clear option is to engage fully with ‘the system’ as is, and attempt to deploy reason and evidence in order to educate the system’s ‘functionaries’ into a more holistic view that transcends their ‘left-brain’ biases – thus hopefully enabling them to make more informed and intelligent policy-making decisions. I’m wondering to what extent such a strategy can work at all? I imagine that this is something you must have been attempting in your own work in Scotland this past 12 years or so, so you must have a good sense of whether such an approach is remotely viable. Have you had any successes? – and are there any you can speak about here? And what have been your chief learnings in the process of your engagement with the system in the way you have done? From first-hand experience, I know you to be a brilliant, peerless campaigner and if you, of all people, haven’t been able to find ways to make effective inroads into ‘the system’ and inject more balanced policy-making sanity into it, then I can’t think of anyone who conceivably could.

**SP:** Actually, we’ve recently had a wonderful example of a campaigner deploying reason and evidence to enable more informed and intelligent policy-making decisions. Jonathan Haidt has had remarkable success as a result of his book, *The Anxious Generation*,<sup>8</sup> which points out the damage done by the change from a play-based to a phone-based childhood. He followed it up with an excellent online campaign and has ever since travelled the world explaining his concerns.

As a result, several countries have now banned social media for the under-16s, and it’s under consideration in many others, including the UK. Many US states have banned the use of mobile phones in school and that too is taking off (several Scottish secondary schools are now phone-free). I’m now a lifelong fan of Jonathan Haidt, and pray that this outbreak of good sense will continue to grow. My only reservation is that in order to collect the evidence, Haidt had to wait until an entire generation of children had been damaged.

My own campaigning since 2015 was also based on a book, published that year: *Upstart: The Case for Raising the School Starting Age and Providing What*

*the Under-sevens Really Need* (Floris Books).<sup>9</sup> With a group of colleagues, I used it to organise the ‘Upstart Scotland’ campaign for a relationship-centred, play-based kindergarten stage for three to seven year-olds, based on the Nordic model.<sup>10</sup> The colleagues concerned came from education, public health, social justice, children’s rights, environmental sustainability, neuroscience and developmental psychology, as well as early years – and a very eminent lot they are, too! We have bushels of evidence that this change of ethos in early childhood education and care (ECEC) could help tackle the growing problems of ‘additional support needs’ (Scotland’s version of ‘special needs’, which currently stands at around 44 per cent of school children), the child and adolescent mental health explosion, and the ever-widening ‘poverty-related attainment gap.

Indeed, the ‘attainment gap’ begins at birth as a developmental gap between children from rich and poor homes. By the time children are five, there’s a gap of about 18 months in spoken language and problem-solving skills. The best way to close it (and give all children time and support to develop social skills, self-regulation, resilience and many other skills and capacities) is *high-quality ECEC*. However, as in England, once Scottish children turn five they are the property of the government’s Education Directorate, which is run by people who haven’t the foggiest idea about child development. Ten years ago, the Education gurus were busy persuading the Scottish government to introduce tests of literacy and numeracy for five year-olds (Scottish National Standardised Assessments – SNSAs). So no sooner had Upstart launched, than it was at war with the policy-makers.

The idea of a kindergarten stage has now twice been debated in the Scottish Parliament, with cogent arguments in favour by members of all political parties in Scotland and very little opposition; and Scottish early-years experts have produced some excellent developmentally appropriate guidance for the birth to seven age range (*Realising the Ambition*, 2021). Nevertheless, despite a parliamentary vote to scrap the SNSA for five year-olds, and its own party conference voting in favour of a kindergarten stage, the Scottish National Party (SNP) government has continued its devotion to early literacy and numeracy teaching and testing. *Realising the Ambition* is therefore very poorly applied once children start school, because they have to concentrate on reading, writing and arithmetic (the so-called ‘three ‘Rs’).

Over recent years, two major Scottish think-tanks have come out in favour of a kindergarten stage, the Scottish Greens and Scottish Lib-Dems both have it in their manifestos, and all major educational journalists are on side. But the SNP government had by this time spent £23 million on the SNSA, and was busy investing more, so they shut their ears to their own party activists.

You can therefore see why I believe good timing

is essential in terms of political campaigning. Back in 2015 we had no way of knowing that the government was about to commit to an academic testing regime. Once that happened, Upstart became ‘the enemy’, and our chances of success were effectively stymied.

**RH:** I certainly share your enthusiasm for Haidt’s book<sup>11</sup> and consider it a landmark study that will empower parents to become proactive in combatting the technological invasion of their children’s lives.

I’m inclined to tear out my diminishing head of hair when I hear the mainstream educational discourse about ‘additional needs’, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (or SEND) and so on – and my disquiet is for a number of reasons. Firstly, and not least because your work on the ‘toxic cocktail’ of modern-life influences is hardly ever even mentioned in those media or political conversations! Never are concerns raised about the oppression of the audit-culture (testing) obsessed schooling system itself, which many commentators have been railing against for decades. (The strong support for home schooling that I now advocate is majorly related to this latter issue.)<sup>12</sup>

There is also the issue of over-diagnosis and the over-medicalisation of children. Whilst based on my own research I am convinced that a significant causal relationship exists between the inexorable rise of learning, developmental and behavioural problems in our children and the increasing childhood vaccination schedule.

When the UK government’s new policy initiative on SEND was all over the media recently, not once, in any of the endless hand-wringing discussions that I listened to, was there any serious discussion of *why*, precisely, there has been such an explosion of additional needs and learning difficulties in our children’s lives. I’m convinced – as I was back in 2006 – that your notion of a coalescing ‘cocktail’ of ‘toxic’ influences throws much light on to this phenomenon. (about which there is barely a *mention* in the mainstream media).

As you say, the key issue becomes that of ‘high-quality ECEC’ (Early Childhood education and care). But the problem is that there exists no widely accepted consensus on this pivotal issue – as we ourselves discovered when we vigorously campaigned against England’s Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) with our formidable OpenEYE campaign between 2007 and 2011. Today, is there any more openness to the kinds of arguments you and I would deploy in defining what, precisely, ‘high-quality ECEC’ consists in? Or is it just as difficult today as it was 15 years ago to persuade the education policy-makers that early quasi-formal literacy and numeracy learning is emphatically *not* the way to go in early learning? It certainly doesn’t sound too hopeful that Scotland’s Education Directorate ‘is run by people who haven’t the foggiest idea about child development’; and that ‘the Scottish National Party

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(SNP) government has continued its devotion to early literacy and numeracy teaching and testing'. How *you* must feel, having been banging your head against this intransigent brick wall now for several decades.

Finally, regarding good timing being essential in terms of political campaigning, would you say that it's simply a matter of luck and serendipity? – or is there some way of using one's nous and perception to spot where opportunities might reside? This is surely a question that a consummate campaigner like yourself must have reflected upon very deeply.

**SP:** I agree wholeheartedly with your first three reasons for the increases in 'additional needs', SEND, etc. but I'm not convinced about the final one. As for high-quality ECEC, I don't think that's possible without significant structural change in the education system. That's why the organisation Upstart campaigns for a separate kindergarten stage, with a different ethos from 'school'.

Every attempt to improve ECEC in the UK countries has been stymied by our insanely early school starting age.<sup>13</sup> In the early 2000s, English early years (EY) specialists designed a play-based Foundation Stage for nursery and reception classes ('reception' being the stage, around 5 years old, when English children become school children). I was working for the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) at the time, and heard tales that these EY people were objecting to four- and five-year-olds being subjected to a Literacy Hour every morning. They argued that it was developmentally inappropriate to expect such young children to practise handwriting and phonics, and suggested more emphasis on stories, songs, rhyme and mark-making of various kinds. A couple of NLS bigwigs were sent to help them rearrange their perceptions, and I happened to be in the NLS head office when they returned. 'How did it go?', someone asked. 'Oh, they saw sense in the end', one of the bigwigs replied. 'But there were blood and feathers on the floor.' Neither of the bigwigs had any expertise in early years, but they were special favourites of the then New Labour government.

Also in the early 2000s, the new Welsh Assembly decided to drop the Key Stage 1 tests of literacy, numeracy and science (which English children sit at the age of eight) and introduced a Nordic-style Foundation Phase, from birth to seven. There was a very brave Education Minister called Jane Davidson who convinced them to ignore the English policy.

By 2004, research for my *Toxic Childhood* book had opened my eyes to the significance of child development and I was regularly asked over to Wales to give advice about the best ways to enthuse four and five year-olds about reading and writing. By this time I was working with an early years colleague called Ros Bayley on a book called *Foundations of Literacy*,<sup>14</sup> so I had lots of ideas for child-friendly literacy activities. I genuinely

thought Wales would become the UK's Finland, with children who scored highly in both literacy and well-being.

Jane Davidson's immediate successor kept the impetus going but, tragically, when she too moved on, a chap called Leighton Andrews became Education Minister. He was a dedicated follower of Blair's policies and in no time at all he had re-introduced the Key Stage 1 SAT (assessments, tests, for children aged 6-7). Within just a couple of years, most Welsh primary schools had gone back to the usual UK reception routine of phonics [a form of teaching how to read that critics claim is inflexible and stifles creativity in learning to read] and handwriting practice. As long as the building that children are in is called a 'school', ignorant politicians, education gurus, media people (and, therefore, most parents) will expect them to simply carry on with the 'three Rs' in the time-honoured way.

The problems of an early start on formal learning hadn't started to show at this time because until the closing decades of the twentieth century children were still playing outside at the end of the school day, at weekends and in the holidays. It was only when 'real play' began to die out that the developmental problems intensified.

And yes, it does feel like I've spent the last ten years banging my head against a brick wall. And while it's cheering that Jonathan Haidt's campaign is likely to reduce mobile phone use among children, unless we also re-introduce 'play-based childhood' it probably won't help stem the problems with additional needs, and SEND, and mental health.

However, on a cheerier note, I've met some amazing people on the campaigning trail. I went to a Festival of Early Learning, organised at the Edinburgh University's School of Education by two Upstart stalwarts, and it was wonderful. There were outdoor specialists showing how to organise outdoor kindergartens (we've got over 50 of these in Scotland now, and the number is growing all the time), teachers from primary schools that have introduced play-based practice till children are six years old (and are being allowed to do it by their local authorities), displays of Froebelian (play-based) nursery practice, artists and musicians and a puppeteer who work with nursery children, and lots of people who'd come to learn. I do feel privileged to mingle with so many excellent folk.

**RH:** I've written a lot about play over the years and you are one of the greatest advocates of free imaginative play and its fundamental importance in child development – which, incidentally, was also a key insight of educationalist Rudolf Steiner over a century ago, and which is a core element of the Steiner Waldorf schooling approach.

It's so useful to have the chronology you've set out 'for the historical record'. Sebastian Suggate's impressive

empirical research, in which he shows convincingly that any ‘head start’ benefit stemming from a significantly earlier start to quasi-formal literacy learning more than ‘washes out’ (his term) by the age of 10 or 11, has perhaps sadly not had anything like the influence on early literacy policy-making that we’d like it to have had – and that we expected it to have.

It’s also perhaps highly relevant that in the perception of many in the Steiner Waldorf schooling movement, towards the end of the second decade of this century (i.e. c. 2015–2020), there was a concerted, arguably calculated assault on England’s Steiner schools by England’s schools inspectorate, OFSTED – which at least some supporters of Waldorf education attempted to challenge in England’s courts.

A telling anecdote of my own comes via a former university colleague, who told me that when Liz Truss [the former prime minister, albeit briefly] was Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Department for Education and responsible for early education, at a meeting to discuss and finalise the government’s new early-years policy document, Truss ostentatiously crossed out with a red pen every mention of the word ‘play’ in the policy document! This surely speaks volumes about just what we’re up against.

As for high-quality ECEC that you don’t think is possible without significant structural change in the education system, I couldn’t agree more. I’d also like to look briefly at the broader agendas that we’re up against which are fundamentally ‘anti-children’. I’ve become very interested in what are referred to as ‘globalist’ agendas in relation to children’s education and schooling. On this view, the modern schooling system has now largely abandoned the goal of fostering intellectual independence, critical thinking and cultural preservation, and has instead been colonised by a relentless ‘Audit Culture’ [tests, tick boxes] that systematically transforms public schooling into what is a globalist ‘indoctrination apparatus’ designed to mould compliant, ideologically homogenised subjects who serve the interests of transnational elites. This might sound to some like conspiracy theory, but it’s very well-documented, as revealed by educators and investigative researchers.

To give just a few examples: there’s the deliberate suppression of critical thinking in favour of standardised, outcomes-based learning; the over-sexualisation of young children with imposed gender ideology; increasingly centralised control via global institutions like the United Nations (UNESCO) and the World Economic Forum (WEF) influencing, and even dictating, curricula – with centralised control via the UN and the WEF’s ‘Global Education’ framework and the UN’s ‘World Core Curriculum’ authored by . Muller;<sup>15</sup> and the compromising and displacement of academic rigour with collectivism [‘follow the herd’] and dependency on state narratives. Anti-globalist



writers and authorities have written at convincing and disconcerting length about this multi-faceted globalist putsch to take over Western education systems.<sup>16</sup>

Take the Pearson Corporation, for example. This multinational publishing and education conglomerate has played a key role in the technocratic globalisation of the Western schooling system, aligning with globalist agendas by standardising curricula and eroding local educational autonomy. Through standardised testing, digital learning platforms and partnerships with governments, for example, Pearson has become a key architect of a kind of ‘global education reset’, advancing centralised control over the dissemination of knowledge. At worst, Pearson can be argued to exemplify a kind of ‘corporate fascism’ in the education system where indoctrination and profit-seeking merge in order to serve an emerging globalist technocracy. Its systems does not train children for liberty and freedom of thought.

I feel particularly strongly about the grossly developmentally inappropriate sexualisation of young children – with globalist institutions openly advocating following the World Health Organisation’s ‘International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education’: viz. ages 0-4, teach ‘masturbation’ and ‘exploration of bodies’; ages 6-9, introducing ‘sexual intercourse’ and ‘online pornography’; and ages 9-12, encouraging ‘first sexual experiences’. In the culture wars, there is also a drive to eliminate biological sex distinctions, teaching children that gender is ‘fluid’ and ‘non-binary’.

In this globalist context, I think that the recent Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) assault on England’s Steiner Waldorf schools, referred to earlier, makes total sense; heaven forbid that schools should produce children who are genuinely free creative thinkers! It’s also within this context that my commitment to home education has soared. If I had young children today, I wouldn’t let them anywhere near state education, and would go to virtually any lengths to make sure they were home-educated.

I wonder whether these are issues that have attracted your interest or concern in any way.

**SP:** Well, it would have been very difficult to miss them. They're part of the reason I've spent much of the last 20 years trying to identify how countries like Finland and The Netherlands have managed to avoid some of the ill-effects of modernism/neoliberalism on young children (thus ensuring higher levels of well-being for everyone), and why countries like the UK and USA are so dismally caught up in the 'globalist agenda'.

Have you by any chance come across *Against the Machine: The Unmaking of Humanity*, by Paul Kingsnorth (Particular Books, 2025)? [See a review of this book in the book review section of this issue of *New View* –Ed.] The author is a former 'eco-warrior' who left the cause when he spotted that it was being colonised by capitalists. His book doesn't particularly home in on education (although he is himself a passionate home educator), but it does deal with similar concerns to those you voice above. He also gets a glowing endorsement on the back cover from Iain McGilchrist, about whom we've already spoken.

What gives me hope is that there are obviously still lots of us who are able to exercise common sense. Indeed, in recent months there seems to have been an outbreak of common sense with regard to the sexualisation of children (i.e. the growing enthusiasm for putting age limitations on access to social media).

I have a great deal of time for common sense (which I now define as 'sensed experience held in common') because it's what most human beings have operated on over the millennia. Indeed, until very recently only a tiny proportion of the population were educated or interested enough to involve themselves in politics, philosophy, economics or art. Ordinary folk used to acquire the skills needed to keep them alive by watching members of the older generation, copying them and practising until they too were competent. In terms of abstract thought, they internalised ideas through sharing stories, singing songs, watching plays or looking at pictures.

Common sense has therefore always been around in abundance, and greatly valued by the majority of the populace. For instance, in the past, everyone knew that 'It takes a village to raise a child', and that the key ingredients of successful childcare, especially in the early years, are love and play (with a side-helping of stories and songs).

However, it was women who did the actual 'caring' – not just of children, but of the old and the sick – as part of their work on the domestic front. That meant that female common sense was slightly different from the male version. Girls learned their domestic skills and childcare through watching and copying knowledgeable older women and listening to the wisdom of their grannies. (Once, when I was giving a talk on 'Toxic Childhood', a chap in the audience put up his hand and asked, 'So are you telling me that "modern neuroscience" has caught up with what my granny used to say?')

It wasn't until the late nineteenth century that literacy became universally available through the state school system. Sadly, however, by the mid-twentieth century, boys and girls were all being indoctrinated into the world-view that high-status jobs demand university degrees, while care, practical skills and common sense are markers of low intelligence and low status.

In terms of healthy child-rearing, the final nail in the coffin came in that mid-twentieth century period when three great global movements collided:

The development of digital technology, meaning increasingly rapid acceleration of the pace of change; Politicians' acceptance of consumer capitalism as the driving force of life on the planet, meaning everything on earth had to be 'monetised' (from now on, 'love' equalled 'stuff', and 'play' was 'something you buy in the shops'); The movement of women out of the home and into the workforce, meaning that care is now largely outsourced (with current levels of pay for childcare workers showing how worthless society thinks they are).

It's therefore easy to feel as if humanity has reached a watershed.

Nevertheless, I do still have enormous faith in the power of the human spirit. We're still primed by evolution to exercise common sense as long as we get the opportunity to develop it. And all the inspirational people in the field of early childhood said that formal education shouldn't start before age seven. (St Ignatius Loyola kept the Catholic church on track for centuries with the maxim, 'Give me a child till he is seven years old and I will show you the man'; and nowadays, the marketing gurus recognise the huge importance of catching children young for their brands).

If we can get it as right as possible in the early stages, the academic elitists won't find it anywhere near as easy to indoctrinate children. I'll therefore carry on campaigning for a kindergarten stage for the under-sevens run by people who actually love children and provide plenty of outdoor, active, social play (preferably in green places), as well as lots of stories and song. That way, I reckon as many kids as possible will have a fighting chance of developing a well balanced thinking.

**RH:** I also very much agree that 'if we can get it as right as possible in the early stages, the academic elitists won't find it anywhere near as easy to indoctrinate children'. I wish we could go on (and on), Sue, but alas, length constraints are intervening. One final question for you. What achievement are you most proud of in relation to your campaigning work for children; and is there anything you would like to have achieved but haven't managed as yet? And thanks for this conversation; and for all you've done, and continue to do, for children.

**SP:** And thank you so much for all your help, advice, inspiration and support throughout the last 20 years.

I think the two achievements I was most proud of in relation to campaigning work was (with you) rallying ‘the great and the good’ to sign two letters: the 2006 press letter you’ve appended to this article (see endnote 1), and the tenth anniversary letter we sent to the *Guardian* in 2016,<sup>17</sup> with many of the eminent 2006 signatories, plus a few extra ones, including Dr Rowan Williams, ex-Archbishop of Canterbury. Collecting all those signatures showed me how many influential grown-ups really care about little children, and that has helped keep me going on the campaign trail.

As for your other question (about what I’ve so far failed to do, but would dearly like to achieve), I suppose the answer is obvious: I’d like to see a relationship-centred, play-based kindergarten stage (as often as possible outdoors and in green places) established in my beloved home country of Scotland.

*Sue Palmer, a former primary head teacher, is the author of many books on literacy and child development, has participated in several campaigns about modern childhood, including the ongoing Upstart Scotland campaign (www.upstart.scot).*

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## Endnotes

1. Here is the text of the September 2006 *Daily Telegraph* open letter: ‘Modern life leads to more depression among children’ – *Daily Telegraph*, 12 September 2006.

(available online at <http://tinyurl.com/5ebskdev>)

Sir – As professionals and academics from a range of backgrounds, we are deeply concerned at the escalating incidence of childhood depression and children’s behavioural and developmental conditions. We believe this is largely due to a lack of understanding, on the part of both politicians and the general public, of the realities and subtleties of child development.

Since children’s brains are still developing, they cannot adjust – as full-grown adults can – to the effects of ever more rapid technological and cultural change. They still need what developing human beings have always needed, including real food (as opposed to processed “junk”), real play (as opposed to sedentary, screen-based entertainment), first-hand experience of the world they live in and regular interaction with the real-life significant adults in their lives.

They also need time. In a fast-moving hyper-competitive culture, today’s children are expected to



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cope with an ever-earlier start to formal schoolwork and an overly academic test-driven primary curriculum. They are pushed by market forces to act and dress like mini-adults and exposed via the electronic media to material which would have been considered unsuitable for children even in the very recent past.

Our society rightly takes great pains to protect children from physical harm, but seems to have lost sight of their emotional and social needs. However, it’s now clear that the mental health of an unacceptable number of children is being unnecessarily compromised, and that this is almost certainly a key factor in the rise of substance abuse, violence and self-harm amongst our young people.

This is a complex socio-cultural problem to which there is no simple solution, but a sensible first step would be to encourage parents and policy-makers to start talking about ways of improving children’s well-being. We therefore propose as a matter of urgency that public debate be initiated on child-rearing in the 21st century this issue should be central to public policy-making in coming decades. (*Signed by 110 authorities on childhood*)

2. *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World Is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It*, Orion, London, 2006; 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition published in 2015.
3. Annette wrote the foreword to the 2011 book *Too Much, Too Soon? Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood* (Hawthorn Press, Stroud, ed. Richard House), in which book many ‘kindred spirits’ on the issues addressed in this article attempted to articulate the problems of early-childhood experience in the modern world.
4. Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2006; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 2011.
5. Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary:*

- The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, Yale University Press, London/New Haven, Conn., 2009; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2012; 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2019.
6. See [openeyecampaign.wordpress.com](http://openeyecampaign.wordpress.com).
  7. See [www.earlychildhoodaction.com](http://www.earlychildhoodaction.com).
  8. Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Allen Lane / Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 2024; see [www.anxiousgeneration.com](http://www.anxiousgeneration.com); [jonathanhaidt.com/anxious-generation](http://jonathanhaidt.com/anxious-generation). See also Max Fisher, *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World*, Quercus, London, 2022.
  9. Sue Palmer, *Upstart: The Case for Raising the School Starting Age and Providing what the Under-sevens Really Need*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 2016; see [upstart.scot](http://upstart.scot).
  10. See, for example, Charlotte Ringsmose and Grethe Kragh-Müller (eds), *Nordic Social Pedagogical Approach to Early Years*, Springer, New York, 2017.
  11. See *New View* magazine, 112 (Summer), 2024, pp. 15–20 (copy available on request).
  12. See, for example, Anna Dusseau and Richard House, ‘The Long Interview: Schooling, home education and childhood under Covid’, *AHP Magazine for Self & Society*, 7 (Summer), 2021, 13 pp (available from RH on request).
  13. See, for example, Sue Palmer, ‘Opinion: Fours years bad. Six years good. Seven years optimal’, *Literacy Today*, December 2009, pp. 7–8; and Richard House, ‘What age should children start school?’, *The Mother* magazine, 60 (Sept/Oct), 2013, pp. 32–4.
  14. See Sue Palmer, *Foundations of Literacy: A Balanced Approach to Language, Listening and Literacy Skills in the Early Years*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, Featherstone, 2014.
  15. See Robert Muller, *World Core Curriculum Manual* (Overview), Robert Muller School, Arlington, Texas, 1986; see [tinyurl.com/yj89x6rx](http://tinyurl.com/yj89x6rx) (accessed 3 March 2026). Muller’s curriculum is a linchpin of globalist education, advancing technocratic control under the guise of ‘unity’. Its implementation – via UNESCO, SEL and EdTech – reveals a long-term strategy to erase national identity and produce compliant, ‘digitised’ citizens.
  16. See two review articles on Alex Newman’s work by Richard House: Review article: ‘Indoctrination or education? – schooling amidst the “culture wars”’, *New View* magazine, 111 (Easter), 2024, pp. 73–6; and Review article: ‘Welcome to the literacy wars’, *New View* magazine, 115 (Easter), 2025, pp. 90–4 (both articles available from RH on request).
  17. Letter: ‘Screen-based lifestyle harms children’s health’, the *Guardian*, 26 December 2016, available at <http://tinyurl.com/5yxfuzay> (accessed 5 March 2026). Here is its text:
- A decade ago our first multiple-signatory ‘toxic childhood’ press letter described how children’s health and wellbeing were being undermined by the decline of outdoor play, increasingly screen-based lifestyles, a hyper-competitive schooling system and the unremitting commercialisation of childhood.
- Despite widespread public concern, subsequent policymaking has been half-hearted, short-termist and disjointedly ineffective. The above factors continue to affect children adversely, with ‘school and cool’ displacing active, self-directed play at an ever-earlier age. Physical health problems like obesity continue to escalate, and mental health problems among children and young people are approaching crisis levels. As well as the intense distress caused to families, there are obviously longer-term social and economic consequences for society as a whole.
- Many parents worry about the effect of screen-based technology on their children. If children are to develop the self-regulation and emotional resilience required to thrive in modern technological culture, they need unhurried engagement with caring adults and plenty of self-directed outdoor play, especially during their early years (0-7). We therefore urge the government to take immediate action, including:
- The development of a coherent, well-funded approach to care and education from pre- birth to age seven, including a kindergarten stage for three- to seven-year-olds emphasising social and emotional development and outdoor play.
- National guidelines on screen-based technology for children up to the age of 12, produced by recognised authorities in child health and development.
- We also recommend the appointment of a cabinet-level minister for children, remaining in post for a full parliament, whose department audits all government policies for their impact on children’s health and wellbeing; or as an absolute minimum, the setting up of a non-party-political standing conference on children’s health and wellbeing, meeting and reporting regularly to parliament.
- Without concerted action, our children’s physical and mental health will continue to deteriorate, with long-term results for UK society that are frankly unthinkable.
- (*Sue Palmer, Dr Richard House and 37 others*)

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