

Permissive parenting is not the problem; the problem is putting profits before children

Prime minister Tony Blair recently blamed the culture of permissive parenting that started in the 1960s for anti-social behaviour in the young.

I have some sympathy with the notion that permissive parenting sometimes leads to anti-social behaviour, but Blair's analysis is wide of the mark on two counts. First, the culture of permissive parenting did not start in the 1960s; second, he is wrong to single out parents for criticism. Focusing on the populist target of 'permissive parenting' helps divert attention away from a more sinister cultural problem in western society – that of our cultural hostility to children, which means they grow up in a society that does not value them and where they are either an irritation getting in the way of individualist aspirations or a commodity to be exploited.

The trend toward more permissive parenting in the west began in the years immediately following the second world war, when it was feared that despotic discipline caused nightmare societies like that of Nazi Germany. At this time capitalist economies were expanding rapidly and the middle classes were growing, as more personal wealth became available. Personal expectations for more leisure and fun time grew, laying the basis for a value system of 'fun morality', in which the rights of the individual to self-gratification take precedence over social responsibility – the ideal cultural conditions for market economies to flourish. These two economic/cultural developments caused a shift in western societies' attitudes to parenting from that of curbing youngsters' instinctive exuberance to allowing children freedom of self-expression and providing them with constant entertainment.

Paradoxically, the reaction against permissiveness of the right wing Reagan/Thatcher era only furthered the cult of the individual. By putting free market principles at the centre of our cultural value system, the importance of social responsibility as an organising principle withered further. Social welfare was cut back. This affected children and families more than any other group, and caused a massive increase in global child poverty.

Free market values means promoting never-ending growth in consumerism.

Consumerism has to convince us that we need what we don't have in order to keep us buying. A growth fetish, whereby new markets constantly need developing, has gripped us in the west. Surveys show that, despite being in an age where we own (materially) more than at any time in our past, we feel less and less satisfied with what we have.

The promise of more leisure time for which, in the heady days after the war, we were told to prepare never came. Instead, obsession with competition and growth resulted in more families with both parents (where you were lucky enough still to have both parents) working longer hours. With the increase in the number of divorces and families where both parents work, fathers and mothers are around their children for less of the day, while greater social mobility takes many families away from their extended support. A generation of 'home aloners' is growing up: children who by and large have to raise themselves. As children are forced to withdraw into their own culture the free market exploits this, preying on their boredom and desire for stimulation and indoctrinating them into the ethics of consumerism. In this environment poor children are constantly confronted with their shortcomings by media that tell them they are deficient because they do not have whatever is the latest must-have accessory.

In this unhappy isolation western children respond to the market's push to 'adultify' them (at the same time as the culture of self-gratification 'childifies' adults) by entering into the world of adult entertainments earlier and without adult supervision. What we usually think of as childhood is disappearing with this blurring of boundaries between what is considered adulthood and what is considered childhood.

So, if we want to tackle the causes of anti-social behaviour, first we need to have a culture that values children and provides them with positive attention, nurture, security and a sense of belonging. Second, if Blair is serious about this issue then he needs to stop delivering cheap and easy sound bites targeting poor parents and do more in concrete policy terms to challenge the commercial exploitation of children and our family-unfriendly working ethos. Our children's need for connection with others should be given greater importance than profit margins. ■

outside
the box

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