

The problem with our children

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The Telegraph [reports in a morning newsletter](#) today that:

One million children to be claiming disability benefits next year

They add, and I make no apology for quoting a free newsletter at length:

A new crisis is emerging that Westminster cannot afford to ignore – and it centres on a quiet but dramatic shift in the number of parents receiving disability benefits for their children.

Fresh forecasts suggest more than one million youngsters will soon be receiving support, driven largely by a surge in claims linked to behavioural and mental health conditions. The pace of the increase has repeatedly caught officials off guard, forcing them to revise projections upwards and raising deeper questions about what is happening.

The trend does not exist in isolation. Schools are reporting a sharp rise in poor behaviour among the youngest pupils, with five and six-year-olds driving increases in repeat suspensions. At the same time, diagnoses linked to autism, ADHD and other behavioural disorders are becoming more common, with worrying growth among very young children.

Privately, concern has been growing across both major parties. Some of Rishi Sunak's advisers had floated reform ideas, but they were seen as too politically contentious ahead of the 2024 election. Taking support away from children is hardly a vote-winner.

Alarm is also rising within Labour's ranks, although the issue remains sensitive, with current reviews focused on working-age adults.

But this is a problem that cannot be sidestepped. It is not just a story about welfare spending. It points to mounting pressure across families, classrooms and public services, with long-term consequences for the economy that are only beginning to come into focus.

The mail's author, Szu Ping Chan, the paper's economics editor, continued:

I will be writing more about these issues in the coming months. Please get in touch if you have thoughts and ideas.

She continued:

When growing numbers of children are struggling to cope, and the state is stepping in at ever greater scale, it suggests something deeper is going wrong.

I accept her point. Something deeper is wrong if this many children are having behavioural problems in our society.

The first thing to say is that the children are not at fault. Nor, I suspect, is it their parents in many cases. The problem is systemic, not individual. The problem comes down to neoliberalism, the alienation it has created within society, and the consequent sense of despair, part of which is transmitted to children and impacts their behaviour.

Let me be a little more specific. The problem that we are facing is that neoliberalism is denying everyone in our society their agency, and younger people, most especially, feel this. They also happen to be parents. They are told they must conform, be consumers, productive agents and compliant. They are repeatedly told what to think, what to do and what to buy. Then the government is surprised that they cannot show initiative at work or competence as parents, when our economic environment and the education system that it depends upon have tried to remove from them all their capacity to think, to accept responsibility, or to identify appropriate courses of action. That is what the removal of agency, on which neoliberalism relies to fulfil its meaningless goal of ever greater consumption, is dependent upon. At the same time, it produces mind-numbing products to fulfil this goal.

What are those mind-numbing products? Start with ultra-processed food, which is intended to, and does, change our physical behaviour, wants and desires in ways that are deeply detrimental to our mental and physical health.

Move on from there to endless electronic entertainment. It started with multiple television channels, all filled with utter drivel most of the time, and went on to social media, most of which is designed to promote false representations of life as it is really lived, a sense of despair with a person's own situation, and a sense of alienation from the world around us.

Then move to our physical environment. We are meant to live and be outside. That is what we were adapted to, and we have not lived long enough as a race to remove this requirement for our physical well-being. And yet work, entertainment, travel and almost every other aspect of life force us to be inside, to live under artificial light, to be immobile, and to be alienated from the world outside. When we do go outside, we are

terrified of the sun and the cold, and yet we need natural light and both heat and cold to regulate our bodies. We are denied both. The cocoon that has been created is a recipe for physical and mental disaster, and we are seeing the consequences.

Add to this something else, and that is the culture of outsourcing. The message from the government, the media, and everyone else is that whatever we might seek to do, someone in the market can do it better. Parents now believe that, too. A television channel or a phone might provide their child with better entertainment than they can. It might also talk to them, tell them what colours are, help them to understand numbers and communicate, and yet it cannot. That requires interaction, and electronic media cannot provide that, but parents have absorbed the message that this is a task beyond their ability and that others can do it better than them, which is precisely why they have outsourced it. That is what neoliberalism demanded, and that is what has gone wrong, and the consequences are a disaster.

I could keep going, but my key points are threefold.

The first is that no one should be surprised by this. If you set up an economic and education system in the way we have, this is the inevitable consequence.

Second, I do not blame either the parents involved or the children. Both feel profoundly alienated by the world around them because it is alien, it is unnatural and it does not meet their needs. If they are rebelling against it, that is an entirely rational response.

Third, no solution within the Telegraph's standard repertoire of responses, which is bound to blame parents and to demand reductions in state spending, can in any way address the issues that we are facing. Only a politics for people that is based upon care can do that, and the Telegraph is nowhere near that space at present. As a result, the problems will continue.

And a final thought, autism and ADHD have always been with us. You either have them, or you do not; that has always been true. The Telegraph is wrong to think otherwise. The issue is that those with these conditions are now the canaries in the mine, highlighting the true scale of the crisis we face. They are not the problem. They are signalling that we are living in a world that is truly alien to the people within it because it now refuses to adapt to their needs, but requires that people adapt to the needs of the market, and that is the whole crisis that we are facing.