

New Health Problems of Children and Youth

From University of Bielefeld (Germany)
Research Center for Prevention and Intervention in Childhood and Adolescence

(Translated for the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association by A. Buschatz.)

Compared to the countries of the third world, living standards of children and youth of our first world are mostly favorable. Perilous infectious diseases have nearly been abolished, hunger is conquered, material provisions are mostly abundant and there is ample room for self-development.

In spite of these undeniable accomplishments, a growing number of children and youth are doing badly, according to the research of the Zentrum für Kindheits und Jugendforschung of the University of Bielefeld. The director of the center, Professor Klaus Hurrelmann, says in this respect: “The modern way of living of the highly developed industrial societies with their attractions and temptations, their urbanization and highly complex planning of lives has its price for the mind and health, even for the young and very little citizens. One thing is undeniable: conspicuous behavior and illnesses are on the rise again. In spite of a high standard of living, in spite of a well-maintained educational system and quite good medical and psychological counseling and help, faculties and abilities of more and more children are not sufficient to cope with the social and ecological environment.”

The results of the investigations of the research team in Bielefeld are unequivocal:

About 10% to 15% of children and youth suffer from psychic disorders: hyperactivity, aggressiveness, working deficiencies, reading and writing disorders, emotional instability and depression. Suicides attempted and accomplished are reported in ever-increasing numbers.

New kinds of pathological systems are growing. According to the specialists in Bielefeld, at least 10% of all children and youth are hit by chronic diseases: allergies of all kinds, especially asthma, which has spread to at least 4% of every age group, as well as neurodermatitis [skin inflammations related to the nervous system such as eczema] (1% to 2%) and hay fever are expanding like epidemics. Reasons for it can be found in the area of genetics and environment.

The spectrum of psychosomatic symptoms widens. Digestion and eating disorders are increasing and are encountered in 1% of juveniles. About 15% of children and youth suffer from obesity. In a research project of the Center of Research for Childhood and Adolescence, a high incidence of the headaches, nervousness and unrest, spine and backache, dizziness, stomachache and sleeping problems were found in one-third of every age group. These deficiencies that harm soul and body in the same way result from tensions and conflicts in families, schools and leisure time.

Where do the causes lie? According to Professor Hurrelmann, they do not result solely from genetic characteristics or physical disorders, but also from social and psychic overburdening. Rising illnesses and symptoms are a signal of stress, that is caused by an overstraining of faculties and capabilities to cope with oneself and the environment: “They are, so to say, an expression of the costs of a modern way of life. They express the problems that young people have in coping with their social and ecological surroundings and trying to absorb these surroundings into their own bodies. Finally they are an indicator that children are not experiencing the measure of respect, dignity and free development of their own

personality which healthy development requires. In many areas of daily life their elementary need for respect, attention, security and fulfillment is neglected. Their right to a sound environment is violated.”

The family plays a key role: “An ever-increasing number of parents cannot meet the responsibilities that accompany the presence of children. Relationships between parents are less stable than before. More than a third of marriages end in divorce. [In the U.S. the figure is about 50%.] About the same percentage of children and youth have to cope with the consequences of divorce. The number of children growing up with just one parent is on the rise. The legitimate striving for self-fulfillment of parents is carried out on the backs of their children. They are the ones who have to pay the highest price for the loss in relationships and for divorce, which they did not induce.”

According to Professor Hurrelmann, our society has reacted inadequately to the problems that result from more open and liberal relationships between parents. Parents are completely left alone with the education of children; it is seen as a private matter. Families need more public support if they are not to be pushed aside. That means financial help, adequate housing, streets free for play with centers for children, more flexible working hours, more kindergartens, more grade schools with day care, more full-time schools (than are offered) and more institutions for counseling and help.

According to the researchers of Bielefeld, the difficult situation of families is not the only reason. Social and psychic tensions also arise from school and leisure time. “The demands for performance are too mechanical. The contents of lessons disregard the real interests of children. Our schools still see themselves merely as institutions to pass knowledge. They do not have anything in common with social learning and the development of the personality. Parents place good grades and decent test scores first. They put their children under considerable pressure if a drop in performance is noticed. All this is breeding substantial tension which is the background of these new stress-related illnesses which are growing so strongly today.”

The “natural” environment today does not help the sound development of children and youth. The common areas, residences and streets are far from adequate for children, according to the scientists in Bielefeld. Because of their dangers they constitute the most frequent cause of death in this age group. They do not meet the real needs and interest of the young ones. “Pollution of the air, water, ground and food, as well as high noise levels, contribute to many physical and psychic disorders and illnesses of children and youth.”

These studies conclude that the reasons for this continuous decline in health can be found in an overburdening of the capacities for development in this age group: “We already draw little children completely into the rhythm of daily life, not caring if they have the psychic strength to deal with the problems of relationships, performance pressures and fear for the future. We expose them to an environment that objectively harms their physical development. So it can be of no surprise that the physical and psychic immune system which normally protects young children, more and more often fails them. The development of vital strength necessary to cope with daily life is not only hampered in the social and mental field, but also in the physical, because more and more children are overburdened. One day it makes them sick.”

The appropriate answer to this challenge, says Professor Hurrelmann, cannot only consist in a further extension of medical and social services. “The important thing is to shift in all political realms towards an environment that is more friendly to children and families. The illness of our children is a sign of the ill-making conditions of daily life in our society.”