

# Book Review

## A GOOD CHILDHOOD

SEARCHING FOR VALUES IN A COMPETITIVE AGE

Richard Layard, Judy Dunn and  
the panel of The Good Childhood Inquiry  
Penguin, London, 2009.

*The Good Childhood Inquiry* was launched in 2006 by the Children's Society. It was labelled as the first independent inquiry into childhood in the UK. According to the Children's Society website, the aims of the Inquiry were to 'renew society's understanding of modern childhood and to inform, improve and inspire all our relationships with children' ([www.childrensociety.org.uk](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk)). The research papers and summaries of submissions on which the book is based can also be found on this website.

The book starts with the question 'Is there a problem?' The contrast is made between the material well-being of many children – 'more possessions, better homes, more holidays away', with more than 90% of children over 11 years of age having a mobile phone – and a perceived 'widespread unease' about children's experiences (2009:1).

Yet some of the information is surprisingly positive. Children aged 11-16 years in one survey were asked which best described how they felt about their lives. Some 87% said 'happy' or 'completely happy'. The authors state that 13% were 'less than happy', but closer examination of the responses appears to indicate that 9% were 'neither happy nor unhappy' and the other 4% 'unhappy or completely unhappy' (2009:8).

The lives of children have altered in other ways, and the book draws attention to two significant changes. Most women now work outside the home; in Britain '70 per cent of mothers of 9-12-month-old babies now do some paid work' (2009:13). Twenty-five years ago that figure was just 25 per cent. The other major change is in family disintegration; in the UK, a third of 16-year-olds live apart from their biological fathers while in the US the proportion has reached a half (2009:14). The 'Think Fathers' campaign in the UK is an interesting response to this (Bartlett 2009).

There are chapters devoted to family, friends, lifestyle, values, schooling, mental health and inequalities. Each chapter starts with quotes from children. There are moving insights into their lives and the lives of others:

Make me have a mum and dad that love me and to start my horrid sad life AGAIN and not have so much sadness in my life.

Well you can't really stop people having children if they want, but they should be able to keep you happy and secure.

To be in a good school with good people because if they grow up around good people then they usually become good people.

Only come to our school if you don't mind not learning in certain subjects as some teachers can't control the class.

Each chapter concludes with recommendations. A final chapter draws these together.

The Children's Society was founded in 1881 as the Church of England Children's Society. That is why the Afterword of the book is written by Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury. He emphasises that the report 'is not a document of theology or even ethics' (2009:175).

The concluding chapter argues that we 'can make a better world for our children' (2009:151). The authors suggest that three words summarise the message: love, respect and, interestingly, evidence. The problems, they argue, will only be solved by gathering evidence to be used to improve their lives:

We need a more positive attitude to children where we welcome them into our society and want to help them (2009:162).

This is an important book with a vital message. I look forward to an Australian version of the Inquiry.

## REFERENCE

Bartlett, D. (2009) 'Fathers' time has arrived', *Community Care*, 12<sup>th</sup> March, p.20.

## REVIEWED BY

**Professor Chris Goddard**

Director

Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia

Monash University, Victoria

Professor Goddard's next book, with Dr Bernadette Saunders, *Physical punishment in childhood: The rights of the child*, is to be published by Wiley/Blackwell.