

Sue Palmer, *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It* (Orion, 2006)

Reviewed by Julie E. Heldt

With the explosion in behavioral difficulties, learning disabilities, and mental and physical health problems in children today, many concerned adults are beginning to ask whether the predominant culture of the modern world is responsible for this damage. Sue Palmer, a British writer, broadcaster, and education consultant, presents her research on how the “toxic cocktail” of contemporary society is impacting our children.

Collecting evidence from a variety of disciplines, from neuroscience and psychology to economics and marketing, and conducting interviews with scientists, parents, children, and teachers, Palmer shares with her readers the evidence of how persistent exposure to a “toxic” environment is affecting the emotional, social, and cognitive growth of our children. The key factors include an increased consumption of junk food, changes in the nature of play (fewer “free-range children” roaming the neighborhood), inadequate sleep, instability at home, poor childcare arrangements, lack of healthy adult interactions, unavailability of good role models, changes in educational standards driven by bureaucracy and politics, exposure to aggressive marketing, the omnipresence of electronic media, and the transfer of authority from parents to paid professionals.

Although her argument is somewhat underdeveloped, Palmer identifies a few underlying causes of all this. The bond between the parent and child formed in the first eighteen months of life creates the opportunity for the “dance of communication” which lies at the heart of child development. It is in the prolonged gaze between the parent and child that the parent responds to the most innate and fundamentally human questions the child silently expresses. When this “dance” occurs, neural networks open up in the child’s brain, enabling more fluent communication. But this process demands the presence of a parent or steady care-giver, which no amount of money or quality programming can replace.

Another major cause is the shift in the understanding of the nature of marriage, from covenant to contract and beyond. Palmer describes the general understanding of contemporary marriage as “a contract which ends when either party has a better option.” Quoting from her research, she continues, “marriage was once a sacrament, then a legal contract and is now merely an arrangement” (p. 148). She also bravely links the change in woman’s assumed role from helpmate and homemaker to independent earner with decreased dependency in marriage. Easier access to divorce may suit adults who prefer democratic relationships, but the impact on children can be traumatic.

Lastly, she briefly offers a critique of modern economics as another key ingredient in the toxic elixir. Noting that if our culture is to have a future it needs “family-friendly economies, not economy-friendly families” (p. 155), she discusses the dangers to children posed by the reverence of the developed world for money, material wealth, and the marketing and advertising industry which treats young people strictly as potential consumers.

Palmer offers an insightful, honest, and thorough argument about how the daily conditions of modern life are hurting our children. While her analysis of the sources of the toxins could use more development, her arguments are well supported by research. One of the work’s greatest strengths is

its insistence on the possibility of healing the damage. At the end of each chapter, she proactively offers concrete suggestions for detoxifying childhood. Holding politicians, doctors, educators, caregivers, and, above all, parents accountable, Palmer leaves her reader with a warning: “in a world where all adults – women as well as men – expect to have opportunities for self-realization and economic independence, the issue of childcare raises political, economic, social and emotional problems. To solve them, all adults – men as well as women – have to wise up to what looking after children involves” (p. 187).

Julie E. Heldt completed a Master of Theological Studies Degree at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C. She currently lives in Houston.