

## What's Happening to Our Boys and Girls?

*Maggie Hamilton*

In a few short decades almost every part of our children's' lives have been transformed bringing freedoms previous generations could only dream of. Alongside these dazzling possibilities newer, subtler forces are emerging that threaten the joy, individuality, self esteem and imagination of our young. The thing is no adult has been where today's children are treading, and life is moving at lightning speed. What a twelve-year-old girl or boy experienced when they were seven, is not what a seven-year-old is now facing. That's why it's hard to get a fix on the lives of our children at present.

And when we talk of the issues children currently face, we tend to focus in on teenagers, leaving younger children vulnerable. For example, advertisers are now actively targeting babies from six months. They now know a baby is able to retain brand logos from this age, and that the trademarked characters placed on babies' clothing and in their environment, will translate into ad-on sales from two up. Carefree childhoods are being lost in the rush to turn our children into good little consumers.

So instead of fresh air, spontaneous play, and an endless curiosity about the world around them, their days are now filled with branded junk and related DVDs. Increasingly they're experiencing life through the TV or computer screen. All this comes at the expense of their mental, physical, emotional and spiritual development. Kids need to experience the world *directly* for their brain pathways to grow. This narrowing of essential life experiences, makes it hard for children to value their individuality, to have a rich inner life, an active imagination, a genuine sense of self.

The targeting of our pre-schoolers is influencing the way they're talking and behaving, and what they're aspiring to. It's making them anxious about their bodies, clothes, accessories. Children as young as three are now worried about having the right branded backpack, clothes and hair. This preoccupation with looks is influencing everything from their choice of friends, to what they wear and play with.

The already overwhelming levels of marketing to our kids comes at a time when mental health issues amongst teen and tweens are on the rise. Shrinking childhoods,

less family and community support, and the focus on consumption above all else, is creating a new fragility amongst our young. As a result, children are judging themselves and each other by the only criteria they know – their looks, their popularity, their possessions. These developments have proved a boon for the corporate bottom line. In the US alone kids now spend an estimated \$40 billion a year, and influence a further \$700 billion of adult spending, which equals the GDP of the world's 115 poorest countries.

It's not just the addiction to possessions, which is of concern, but the degraded values and rampant self-interest the relentless marketing to our children encourages. The continual pursuit of material possessions does not serve our boys and girls. As media critic Robert McChesney points out, it 'promotes the sort of world in which you don't think anything matters, unless it serves your material gain. Why be honest? Why have integrity? Why care about other people?' The thousands of expertly crafted messages that bombard our kids daily, encourage them to think that happiness, friendship and security can be bought. Believing the promise, increasing numbers of boys and girls are getting lost in carefully packaged fantasy worlds created by advertisers, focusing almost solely on the next purchase and the next.

Neuroscientist Susan Greenfield warns that contemporary lifestyles and computers may be keeping our young in an infantile state, so that even as they progress through the tween and teen years they're still in need of constant reassurance, instant gratification, and assume the world revolves around them. This growing immaturity amongst our young comes at a time when they have ready access to a world of information, including the worst material imaginable. This immaturity also keeps them vulnerable to multi-million dollar campaigns that continue to target them daily. Susan Greenfield also questions how adult life will be for a generation who have the same packaged childhood experiences, who think the same way, and hold the same values.

Unlike their forebears, today's kids don't rely on parents or teachers to find out about life. In many ways popular culture has become the new parent. It's where kids go for information and entertainment, for comfort and social connection. And no matter where a boy or girl lives on the planet, increasingly they're accessing the same material, forming the same opinions and values. As we contemplate these issues we begin to see why the current generation gap is possibly greater than ever. Boys and girls are acutely aware of this and find it endlessly frustrating that their parents, even

young parents, are still operating from a twentieth century framework. That's why they go to their peers, or to the media and internet for answers. While the information they get may be misleading or inaccurate, it's accessible and immediate – something we as adults generally are not.

Now parental authority is also being eroded by market forces, leaving many parents uncertain of their role, and their kids ever more vulnerable to the sometimes overwhelming consumer influences. This trend is of growing concern to professionals in child and adolescent health, because the only value our children have to corporations is their contribution to the bottom line. As media critic professor Mark Crispin Miller puts it, 'The official advertising worldview is that your parents are creeps, teachers are nerds and idiots, authority figures are laughable, nobody can really understand kids except the corporate sponsor.'

The fragmentation of family and community has also encouraged a rise in the power of the media and new technologies. These new forces offer our children many wonderful opportunities, but they also expose our girls and boys to concepts way beyond their years, making it easy for them to lead significant other lives their parents know nothing about. What was once the domain of adults has become part of the lives of our children, encouraging underage sex, violence and voyeurism, bullying and excessive drinking, and complex social lives.

It's curious that while we're so fearful of strangers, we allow our children almost unlimited access to cyberspace, where they can bully, gamble, take on other identities, view live sex acts, and the worst kinds of violence. With some online communities now in their millions, there are literally vast worlds within worlds on the net. While we wouldn't dream of allowing a young boy or girl to take off on their own overseas, we think nothing of allowing these freedoms on the net, where their access to material is often limited only by their imaginations.

There are now more texts sent and received in a day than there are people on the planet. Every month Google hosts 31 billion searches. With the growth in new technologies, virtual worlds have become extremely alluring. Real life activities and relationships take a poor second place. It's not only exercise and face-to-face interaction our children miss out on, they can so easily lose themselves in these new technologies, suffering sleeplessness and the resulting physical and emotional issues.

One of the key tools marketers use to attract our children is the deliberate and calculated use of sexual content. The fallout from the countless edgy sexual images seen in ads, on TV screens, posters and billboards, in MTV clips, movies, video games and sitcoms, on clothing and accessories, and on internet is real and impacting our young. Daily this hyper-sexualised imagery and sexual expression lowers their inhibitions, discourages empathy towards others, and reshapes their sexual aspirations and expression often in risky, violent or unhelpful ways.

This climate is harmful to girls on many levels, and needs attention. Rarely do we consider the impact growing up in a hyper-sexualised world has on young boys trying to come to terms with their emerging sexuality. We need to be more aware of what it's like for young boys to be surrounded by aggressive, over sexualized images, messages and lyrics. This is not something we talk about, yet this is a very real concern of the many parents I meet. Little or no mention is given in raunch culture to real choices, intimacy and kindness, let alone the many nuances of desire. Instead the highly sexualized landscape our kids inhabit constantly suggests they should be ready and willing to have sex at all times if they want to belong.

The continual marketing of 'perfect' bodies to showcase new products to our kids is also biting. Now body issues are impacting the lives of increasingly younger girls, some of whom are only just at school. In one study of girls aged 5 to 8, over a quarter of five-year-old-girls wished they were thinner. This figure rose to 71 per cent for girls aged seven. Most of these young girls believed they had to be slim to be popular. Just under half wanted to be thinner than they were, and were prepared to diet if they put on weight. The issue of weight has now permeated almost every area of a girl's life. And with the increasing marketing of products to boys in the last two or three years, especially of fashion and toiletry items, is now impacting their body image as well. A day at the beach is no longer just about having fun in the sun, it's about having to look amazing. To reach their desired weight girls, and now boys, are resorting to crazy exercise regimes, crash diets, laxatives and anything else that will help get the weight off. And with magazines filled with diets, and tips and tricks as to how to get this summer's perfect look, who can blame them?

The drinking scene is also of concern. Not only are girls drinking earlier and more than their mothers and grandmothers, they're drinking to harmful levels, and more so than boys. Binge drinking has become the in thing. When you talk with medical staff,

a far darker picture emerges. They're concerned about the numbers of intoxicated girls admitted to emergency units. Girls, some as young as twelve, are so drunk they can't maintain their own airway. These girls are very vulnerable to rape. Many have been out all night, and often their parents aren't even aware they weren't at home. Whereas previous generations tended to drink wine and beer, thanks to breezers and their very effective marketing campaigns, teen boys and girls are getting the taste for spirits. Heavy drinking at the weekend is increasingly the norm, leading to an increase in fights, accidents and worse.

Perhaps one of our biggest challenges, however, is how to deal with our children's growing access to porn. Scratch the surface and you see just how many children and teens are viewing this material. It's crucial parents realise a child doesn't have to be at home to download porn. They can do so on their mobile, on a bus or train at a less than vigilant internet café, or at a friend's place. This isn't just an activity high school kids are into. Increasingly primary school children are accessing porn, and boys are now watching this material together. Porn gives them a new language, a new way of relating, which does no-one any favours. Perhaps this issue is best summed up by British philosopher and academic Roger Scruton, 'This, it seems to me, is the real risk attached to pornography. Those who become addicted to this risk-free form of sex run a risk of another and greater kind. They risk the loss of love, in a world where only love brings happiness.'

The capacity for kids to lead secret lives is perhaps greater now than at any other time. Now it's not only adults who are behaving as predators on and offline. With the new technologies, and increased access to adult content, we now have kids grooming others for sex. And as teens have their own secret language, can assume hidden identities and enjoy covert friendships, increasingly parents are being marginalised. That's why, it's vital they get up to speed with the furtive aspects of teen life. They also need to be aware of where their children retreat to for solace when they're feeling sad or lonely, and the likely consequences of this new level of isolation many boys and girls are experiencing.

Some of this material is shocking, but this is the toxic atmosphere many of our boys and girls encounter daily. It's vital we don't shrink from what lies before us, but take note, then act. Not all girls and boys are into risky behaviours, but as they're growing up in a performance culture, most are aware in great and graphic detail of what their peers are up to, which only serves to further normalise harmful behaviour. In many

ways our children are struggling. Yet against these many challenges are wonderful opportunities for them to learn strength and resilience, to connect to their families and communities in new and empowering ways. When we understand what they're up against, we can help bring about the much-needed change, and better support and nurture our children in meaningful ways, so their lives can be richer and fuller than our own, and so they can find solutions to issues we can but dream of.

**Solutions:**

- ✓ Get up to speed with the issues your children are facing and keep up to speed
- ✓ Create a discussion environment in the home where children feel able to raise issues
- ✓ Help children to see when they're being marketed to
- ✓ Make sure you eat as a family when you can at the kitchen table to chat, laugh, cry, celebrate
- ✓ Create one-on-one time – small pockets of time – little family rituals – taking the dog a walk, collecting bread from the local bakery etc
- ✓ Ensure your children have friendships across the generations, not just their peers
- ✓ Take off into nature for a picnic or camping to de-stress and celebrate times together
- ✓ Time with you is far more precious than the stuff you buy your kids
- ✓ Be aware of how your own values 'rub off' on your kids
- ✓ Be open to their world
- ✓ Praise them for making good choices
- ✓ Make your home an interesting welcoming place for their friends
- ✓ Don't be afraid to do things differently – your kids need 'different' to become fully rounded people

Writer and researcher Maggie Hamilton is a regular media commentator, contributor to magazines, and keen observer of social trends. Her landmark books include *What's Happening to Our Girls?* and *What's Happening to Our Boys?* and most recently *Secret Girls' Business*, a fun, funky empowering book for teenage girls. [www.maggiemhamilton.org](http://www.maggiemhamilton.org) and [contact@maggiemhamilton.org](mailto:contact@maggiemhamilton.org)