

# What are we doing to our children?



## *Can the education system learn some lessons from Existential Psychotherapy?*

*By:* Ben Thornhill

Psychologically speaking, school, as we know it, does far more harm than good. It is a place where young children, naturally curious and not yet world-weary go to become confused, depressed teenagers with a wide-range of psychological problems ranging from anorexia and social anxiety to depression and self-harm.

With such antiquated methods of educating children in settings that would suck the life out of the most enthusiastic child, it is a wonder that anybody escapes the gauntlet of school without becoming deeply scarred

as a human being. Life is a difficult, mysterious and complicated thing and yet we go on "educating" and suffer at the hands of our children - admittedly with the best intentions - paying absolutely no mind to fundamental cornerstones of happiness such as self-knowledge and self-acceptance, physical and mental wellbeing and purpose.

We inadvertently smother children for years. Often both school and parents so well-meaning fill up every hour of a child's day with "enriching" activities, only to perversely end up suffocating them, making them world-weary before they have even been allowed to enter it with the freedom of an adult.

Even in areas where there aren't as many well-meaning parents to help enforce excessive amounts of homework children are made to follow a curricula stripped of all meaning and substance by government bureaucrats who believe it is possible to turn education into a science and who see standardisation as the way to ensure progress in society. Why aren't we trying to create thinking individuals who have opinions and who are engaged by big ideas through discussion? Where are philosophy, politics and psychology on these curricula? How are children supposed to even attempt to understand themselves and the world without these subjects?

Children are herded through schools like chickens on a conveyor belt: shoved into a confined space, not knowing why they're there, surrounded by others equally confused about what is going on and not knowing what's going to happen in the end. One of the most shocking statistics recent research in the UK has shown that prison inmates spend more time outside than many teenagers. Yes, people who have had their freedom denied them by their government. How have the best of intentions gone so horribly wrong that we are collectively culpable for producing a generation of confused, depressed young people? Why does education as we know it have to be such an ordeal?

Now, I am going to highlight more problems and ask more questions than give answer se but I believe that we at least need to be asking the questions in order to come to better answers in the future. But I feel, as an educator and student of psychotherapy that a much closer link between education and mental health needs to be made. Surely, the goal of our education systems across the globe should be to produce young people who can embrace their creativity, think for themselves and have some semblance of physical and mental wellbeing. Maybe I am asking too much of an already over-worked, highly pressurised profession, but I am certain that the current trends in education are a huge cause for distress in children and teachers.

Education systems across the globe pay no mind to children as complex individuals with several layers of being. Often educated as one homogenous block, individual needs are left at the school gates. In existential psychotherapy it is common to look at 4 layers of one's being during the healing process: the physical, the social, the psychological and the spiritual.

As mentioned above, with children spending their days bundled into a classroom, seated for hours with 30 other confused and frustrated teenagers, having little time outside and not enough exercise built into the daily timetable - not to mention the shocking quality of food provided by many schools and many parents contributing to poor nourishment and unhealthy habits - the physical world of our children is neglected in favour of academic activities that turn them into passive receivers and not energetic doers.

Their social world is a minefield where they are thrown together with other children from all sorts of different backgrounds; thrown into a sort of cruel melting pot, where conformity is demanded and individuality shunned. It acts as a period where one's journey of self-discovery is almost on hold for years because it is much safer to fit in than to stick your head above the parapet. The result of which is angst. Even if you

don't end up on the receiving end of systematic bullying, you are still more than likely to come away with psychological scars and behaviour patterns that may take years to overcome.

One's social and psychological worlds are inextricably linked. The harder you find the social world, the more damage to your personal psychological world. This concept the dialectical relationship between our inner and outer worlds is a common theme in the Existential approach. And so when your outer world is in conflict and even hostile towards your inner being, your self-esteem can be greatly wounded. As a result, self-esteem issues are absolutely rife across the younger generation. Schools are where young people feel the pressure of popular culture most acutely: anti-intellectual; body-image crazy; looks-obsessed; extraordinarily egotistical. By being so academically biased, so focused on standardisation and grading, are we also culpable for allowing a degradation in moral social standards?

The fact that such a culture has infiltrated schools is the total neglect of the spiritual dimension. And I think that this is one of the issues underpinning many other problems in schools and modern society: we need a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives, otherwise there is a huge hole that can not be filled by sex, looking good, winning at stuff, getting good grades, anything that schools or social culture seems to value..

People need, to some extent, to understand and accept themselves; know what they value; find out what it is that THEY think is a valuable use of a life. Tragically, when I ask most children what is the purpose of your being in school, the answer is: "To get good grades, so I can get a good job." This is what we have boiled education down to. And what happens to those who don't get good grades? Are they prohibited from getting a good job? What do we mean by a "good" job? One that pays well? Or one that we feel is worthwhile according to our own values? How do we find a job that we feel is worthwhile when we don't allot any time for

reflection and self-discovery?

One of the key aspects of an existential approach is the Sartrean idea of acknowledging One's ultimate freedom to choose. And with that finding a great sense of motivation that comes with a carefully made choice that is in line with one's values. From that motivation also comes a desperate sense of responsibility to see it through ultimately leading to the development of a more resilient character. So why do we insist on stripping children of their freedom of choice? Why are we constantly trying to coerce them into doing things whilst at the same time not allowing them to fail? What do they learn from this?

It is simple psychology to know that when you try to shame and coerce people into doing something that you want them to do, they are far more likely to do the opposite. So why do we have a system that boils down to: if you don't work hard, you are a naughty person and you won't get a good job? How many children have suddenly changed their ways as a result of a teacher telling them that?

When there is no freedom in education and children think that in order to be educated, all they need to do is turn up and remember what the teacher says, how are they expected to develop into healthy, well-rounded beings? They are released into society with, if they're lucky, some qualifications, but no experience. Why can't education be more about experience? So much of what I have learned in life that has turned me into a much happier and fulfilled person has been through experience. My experience of sitting in classrooms for nearly two decades took me away from myself. It deadened my enthusiasm and turned me into a cynical and troubled young adult. I don't believe I am in the minority.

I think we need to radically overhaul our idea of what an education is because, at present, we are seeing another generation passing through a system that doesn't adequately care for their needs. We have some

exciting and inspiring developments in some schools in some parts of the world who are starting to put the wellbeing of children first: mindfulness and Philosophy for Children are starting to creep into the timetables, but not nearly enough. Forest school and unschooling are also interesting approaches worth researching if you are a parent concerned about the physical and psychological impact that school is having on your children.

But this is just the beginning. We have to get away from the idea of 30+ children in a classroom with one teacher. We have to trust in freedom. We cannot continue to actively damage the potential in young people by restricting that freedom to think and create. We need to allow young people and teachers the space to explore their own interests and passions and create a culture of enthusiastic enquiry, not an on going battle to fill the heads of young people with adequate amounts of information to obtain a grade. We need to make mental health and wellbeing a central part of our daily care for children. We need to provide them with a enough space and support in order for them to gain an understanding of themselves, the world, how they want to live in it and what contribution they want to make to a society that needs as much creativity and inspiration as it can get as we face the daunting challenges of the future.

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