

Playtime crucial to survive game of life

Anne Marden

Concerns about the quality of childhood in Britain have recently received wide publicity, following the launching in September by the *Daily Telegraph* of a "Toxic Childhood" campaign.

The campaign centres on a recent book of the same name by Sue Palmer, featured in Education Post of SCMP last week ("Kids taste toxic side of life").

It was given considerable added weight by a letter to the newspaper signed by more than 100 academics, professionals and educationalists. The letter drew attention to the "escalating incidence of childhood depression and children's behavioural and developmental conditions".

Playright Children's Play Association is similarly concerned at the growing challenges children face here. The problems that children in Britain are encountering are all too familiar in Hong Kong.

We believe that many of the developmental and other challenges children face here are due to a lack of understanding on the part of both the government and the public that appropriate and meaningful play is crucial to the growing child.

Hong Kong is a major global trading and financial centre, and its affluence puts it among the world's most prosperous societies. We have better schools, modern apartment blocks, and improved recreational facilities. Playground equipment is imported but you may not catch sight of any children.

The better off are so busy with play groups, interest classes and organized activities, not to mention burying themselves in cyberworld.

These changes in play patterns not only parallel overall social change in Hong Kong, they also reflect specific shifts in the economy and the labour market.

Moreover, our children are affected by the digital world, great changes in family life, heavy academic pressure and eating styles that encourage obesity.

The real needs of children are often undervalued and overlooked. We therefore first call urgently on parents and politicians to:

- support us in upholding the right of all children to a safe, challenging and accessible play environment;
- acknowledge the rising level of concern over the incidence of obesity, mental health problems and anti-social behaviour amongst children and young people;
- note that lack of opportunity to play is a contributing factor to these problems; and
- express their concern that advanced technology, traffic growth, loss of outdoor space and fears over safety are further restricting play opportunities.

We urge the government, parents, Legislative Council members and all who have a concern for our children to consider opportunities to access the quality play resources and facilities provided, have adequate provision for safe outdoor play and have time for free play and play with their family.

Anne Marden is a founding member and honorary president of Playright's Children's Play Association.

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