

Challenges faced by Children in Hong Kong -- Playright's Response to the Recent "Toxic Childhood" Campaign in the UK

Concerns about the present quality of childhood in the United Kingdom 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. 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", which these experts considered arises in part from modern life and learning experiences that are inappropriate to the realities and subtleties of child development.

As a charitable organisation promoting the value of play in Hong Kong, Playright Children's Play Association ("Playright") is similarly concerned at the growing challenges faced by children in our community. The problems that children in the United Kingdom are encountering sound all too familiar to us in Hong Kong, and the heightened recognition of these issues in the United Kingdom has greatly encouraged and emboldened us to further strengthen our own efforts to move officialdom to take positive action in the interests of Hong Kong children.

We believe that in Hong Kong many of the developmental and other challenges that children face are due to a lack of understanding on the part of both the Government and the public that appropriate and meaningful play is crucial in the daily life of the growing child.

Hong Kong today 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. The children you see around you play on imported playground equipment, but you may not even catch sight of them, so busy are the better off ones 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. Globalization and closer ties to Mainland China mean that more Hong Kong people are now employed there, and this can all too easily divide families. A highly competitive, stressful and labile environment inevitably produces new forms of social deprivation, alienation and distress. Moreover, like the children in the United Kingdom described in Sue Palmer's book, our children are massively exposed to the digital world, as well as experiencing great changes in family life, heavy academic pressure and eating styles that encourage obesity. Children thus run many different risks, and their opportunities for growth through various social activities and play are often sharply reduced.

Such circumstances mean that 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;
- to acknowledge the rising level of concern over the incidence of obesity, mental health problems and anti-social behaviour amongst children and young people;
- to note that lack of opportunity to play is a contributing factor to these problems;
- to express their concern that advanced technology, traffic growth, loss of outdoor space and fears over safety are further restricting play opportunities.

Secondly, we urge the Hong Kong SAR Government, parents, Legislative Council members and all who have a genuine concern for our children to start talking about ways to remedy the situation, in particular looking closely into our children's opportunities to access to the quality play resources and facilities provided, to have adequate provision for safe outdoor play, and to have time for free play and play with their family.

Greatly encouraged by the turn of discussion in the United Kingdom, we are therefore proposing the above initiative. We welcome conversations, contacts, or comments from individuals and organizations offering constructive ideas as how these urgent concerns might best be faced and eventually resolved in Hong Kong.