

Polis – Teenage tantrums

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2006/09/13/teenage-tantrums/

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First a grammar lesson:

Let's conjugate the noun 'teenager':

My teenager is very individualistic,

Your teenager is out of control

Their teenager is totally dysfunctional.

But seriously, here we go again. The Media is whipping itself in to another panic about the state of the nation's children.

A letter from leading child experts warning of an explosion in teenage mental illness has sparked a national debate, at least in the media. It's the latest in a series of [reports](#) that claim that the Youth Of Today is bored, miserable and very badly brought up. Various culprits are fingered including computers, schooling and affluence in general. Today the [Guardian itself](#) takes a more measured approach in its leader columns, although in the past columnists like [Madelaine Bunting](#) have led the charge in guilt-ridden hand-wringing about the disastrous state of Children Today. Did she really think that, for example, that emotional problems for adolescents have increased by 70%?

[The Telegraph](#) has also launched a campaign lamenting the loss of childhood, proving that this is not a fear limited to Left or Right.

It makes for great copy or TV and some wonderful clichés. "Children are our future". Well they could hardly be our past and, if you don't mind, I would like to think that I still have a future as well.

I am delighted that we are paying attention to some genuinely interesting and important areas of social life: education, emotional literacy, pleasure and the politics of human development. As someone who has specialised in social affairs journalism I am glad that people rather than just politics are the focus of attention.

But the facts are strangely absent from the debate. Last night on [Newsnight](#) the presenter of Newsround and a Comedy writer talked far more sense than the woman usually cited as Britain's brainiest brain person, Susan Greenfield.

For example, it's often suggested that teenage depression is going through the roof (and no doubt jumping off it, too). And yet the figures seem to be a classic case of finding what you look for, of redefining terms so that unhappiness is described as a disease, and of making wild generalisations. Take this [website](#) which appears to think that the everyday signs of typical adolescence are actually confirmation of clinical depression.

I also think that it's odd that the media turns automatically and reverently to the views of writers like Michael Morpurgo, Philip Pullman and Andrew Motion. Why not consult the pop stars and video game makers who are allegedly poisoning our children's minds to find out what the attraction is and how children really live their sad, depressed lives?

I myself was involved in a major documentary series on the Family (and of course, we meant the Family that is breaking up...) about a decade ago in the wake of the Bulger case. The one original thought I remember having was to dream up the phrase 'emotional autism' to describe the alleged desensitisation of a generation of children. But what interested me in the making of that series was research I did in to the history of social panics about childhood. Every generation reinvents the End Of Childhood. And I'm sure that over-worked journalists who never get to see their own kids help feed the frenzy.

Of course, my complacency may be something to do with the fact that my children are so very well-adjusted, creative and successful. If only I could remember their names..

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