



Should we let the kids out?

Amid growing concern about today's youngsters, the spotlight has fallen on the minefield that is modern parenting

What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets, inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?"

Such lamentations over "kids these days" could have been taken from any number of books written this year. Yet they are the exasperated words of the philosopher Plato, uttered in frustration at the youth of the fourth-century BC.

The concerns about children may be timeless, but modern parenting is a changed beast, a minefield involving expert manuals, divorce, the internet, long working hours, fear of predators and guilt.

Parents themselves have changed. They are older (the average age of a first-time mother is 31, compared with 22 just 25



years ago) and it is more likely both are working outside the home. They are more likely to be single parents. Each year, it is estimated 50,000 children in Australia will experience the divorce of their parents.

The proliferation of news media means modern parents constantly hear horrifying stories of harm that can befall their children.

Too scared to leave them unattended, they ferry them between school and after-school activities, or keep them close by in the house.

At the same time, they are under pressure to bring up children the "right way", as the traditionally instinctual act of raising children has morphed into the "art of parenting", says Aric Sigman, author of the explosive book *The Spoilt Generation*.

They are faced with whether to be a tiger mum or butterfly mum, helicopter parents (hovering over their children), permissive or authoritative, free-range or attachment. Confused, time-poor and guilt-ridden, parents have been drawn into a "compensation culture", reluctant to say no and enforce rules.

"Armed with a blanket belief that what children need is approval, (parents) have gone on an approval spree, sanctioning — or at least overlooking — many aspects of their children's

behaviour that should be met with disapproval," Dr Sigman, a British psychologist, said.

"While at first children may enjoy getting away with things, they will eventually feel their parents don't care enough about them to do the hard work of parenting.

"On the surface, society has never done so much for its children. However, far from being protected and their wellbeing enhanced, our children are suffering in ways we could never have expected."

Social researcher Mark McCrindle agrees Generation Z, whose oldest members are in their mid to late teens, are "the most planned, most mollycoddled and most materially endowed generation to date". However, he also argues they face unprecedented issues in their regimented young lives. They have little freedom, living largely indoors because of parental fear and the prioritisation of homework, coaching and extracurricular activities.

"These children of an information-saturated and increasingly competitive world have not enjoyed the leisurely and lengthy childhood of previous generations," he said in his book, *The ABC of XYZ*.

"With parents facing



increasing life complexity, adult worries have filtered down to children. Home affordability, getting a job, being successful and needing to make money are all on the list of things teenagers today worry about."

The statistics make sobering reading. In a submission to a recent inquiry into the mental health of young people, the WA Primary Principals Association noted "an increase in the numbers of students experiencing problems with stress, anxiety, aggression, alienation, and resilience . . . incidence of poverty, social isolation, family breakdown, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, insecure attachment and substance abuse are increasing . . . there is an increase in bullying and other behavioural issues in schools".

That inquiry, by WA's first

Commissioner for Children and Young People,

Michelle Scott, found mental disorders affect one in six children aged four to 17. Even young children can suffer; more than 11 per cent of children aged two and 20 per cent of five-year-olds have clinically significant behavioural problems. Medicare data for last financial year revealed GPs dispensed 7182

mental health treatments for WA children aged 14 and under.

Anecdotally, teachers report more children who cannot concentrate long enough to follow simple instructions, who refuse to persevere with tasks and lack social and language skills. They are seeing more students unable

to sit still, who reject adult authority, refuse to take turns and lose their temper easily. Some parents do their children's homework or side with them against teachers who try to discipline them.

The principals' association president, Stephen Breen, said children who were never allowed to fail or solve their own problems did not develop the resilience to cope with challenges, even those as small as a hard question on an exam.

"Parents are extremely protective, which is understandable, but they are probably doing worse harm than they would by allowing children to make mistakes," he said.

"More and more kids come to school who can't tie their own shoelaces, who can't ride a bike, who are driven to school when they live a block away. They don't learn how because a parent is doing it for them."

Many WA schools have introduced programs to promote resilience, including the KidsMatter Primary program. Among other things, it helps students recognise and manage emotions, form and maintain relationships and handle difficult situations. Organisers said there had been an overwhelming response from schools.

Mr Breen recalled a telling moment when a kindergarten teacher, awarded for her work, said her secret was to convince parents to talk to their child for 10 minutes every day.

"We have a lot of parents who don't do that," he said. "It's about the basics: talking to your children, having conversations, playing with them, letting them make mistakes, saying no, putting boundaries up."

Dr Sigman said parents and teachers who set realistically high expectations, criticise when

warranted and are intolerant of egotistical behaviour "are doing children and the rest of us a great favour".

Overly positive parenting allowed children to develop a "distorted, socially unviable sense of themselves", he said.

But Warren Cann, chief executive of the Parenting Research Centre, said advocating a particular brand of parenting ignored differences in temperaments.

Robust children, termed "dandelions" by researchers, are resilient and adaptable, able to thrive in most environments, whereas "orchids" are more anxious and sensitive to criticism and changes in routines, requiring a more consistent positive environment.

Those disapproving of modern parents often failed to consider how the world had changed.

"People will say, 'when I was a kid, I walked to school'. For many parents, the roads are now much busier with traffic and more dangerous," Mr Cann said.

"Often, both parents work and they need to fit the school run in with getting there on time."

Stephen Zubrick, from the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, said despite the changed circumstances, it was vital to ensure children were not isolated.

"We are seeing a greater rise in children who spend more time on their own or in very small groups," Professor Zubrick said. "Children need face-to-face time with other kids. That is how they learn to negotiate their way through life. They need practice being with people and that can't happen sitting in front of a TV or alone in a room."

Murdoch University's John Gardiner, who spent 13 years as



chief clinical psychologist at Princess Margaret Hospital, said many children now spent their free time moving from organised sport to tuition to hobbies. Shrinking backyards meant days of playing cricket or other games with the neighbourhood children, without adults intervening, were also diminishing.

“Those times in the backyard, when someone won’t give up the cricket bat, are such valuable experiences,” Mr Gardiner said. “Those are social skills kids need — co-operation, sharing, turn-taking — but they aren’t being developed in those structured environments.”

Our technology-filled world led many modern parents to feel they had lost control, particularly of what was coming into the house, Mr McCrindle said. In the past, someone had to call the house to reach their children. Now mobiles and laptops can relay messages without parents’ knowledge.

Despite guidelines recommending no more than 120 minutes per day of screen entertainment, boys aged between nine and 16 watched an average of 248 minutes and girls 198 minutes. It is estimated children under the age of 10 spend less than 10 per cent of their free time outdoors.

Oxford University neuroscientist Susan Greenfield fears that growing up saturated in technology could rewire Generation Z’s brains into those of perpetual small children, “attracted by buzzing noises and bright lights, who have a small attention span and who live for the moment”.

And there are physical consequences, too. In report last year titled *Nothing But Fear Itself*, Professor Zubrick and researchers from the University of WA noted the aerobic fitness of Australia’s children had declined 4 per cent every decade since the 1970s.

The decline was concurrent with a rise in childhood obesity and ailments such as asthma,

allergies and some mental health problems, all claimed to be partly caused by children spending less time being active and outdoors.

Studies found more than 70 per cent of parents thought “stranger danger” was a barrier and 52 per cent of children themselves worried about strangers.

The report also noted a loss of “adult solidarity” — a person’s feeling that others would protect their child.

Dr Lisa Wood, deputy director of the University of WA’s Centre for the Built Environment and co-author of the report, said parents over-estimated the dangers.

“Your child is more likely to be in a car accident while you’re driving them to school than be abducted by a stranger,” she said. “Yet, parents refer to predators and paedophiles as though it was a common thing. It’s in the media and I’ve had five emails this year (from my children’s school) about a suspicious person in the northern suburbs.

“The school sees it as duty of care but . . . this guy could be miles away and before the days of email, I wouldn’t have known . . . No one sends me an email to say 40,000 children walked to school today and nothing happened.”

Children who didn’t get the chance to take some risks were ultimately worse off, she said. Children reported modern playgrounds were boring and preferred climbing over rocks and playing in sandpits but parents were often too afraid to let them.

“Look at the ads for sanitised wipes,” she said. “There’s a whole industry built around making sure your kid doesn’t even get any germs on their hands from the monkey bars. As a parent, you think you’re doing the right thing by not letting them get hurt or scratched but then they don’t have the physical motor skills or the street smarts to know how to respond when someone is mean to them in the playground.”

There is no winding the clock back to the 1950s, but there are ways to combat some of the issues, Dr Wood said.

“It’s not a matter of just going back to the ‘good old days’, where mum stayed at home and the kids roamed the streets,” she said. “Things have changed. It’s tricky to let the reins go a little — I find it tricky — but it’s about finding ways to do it. You can make them take a mobile phone if they go to the park. You can make them go out in a group. You can take them down there and sit on a bench 400m away.”

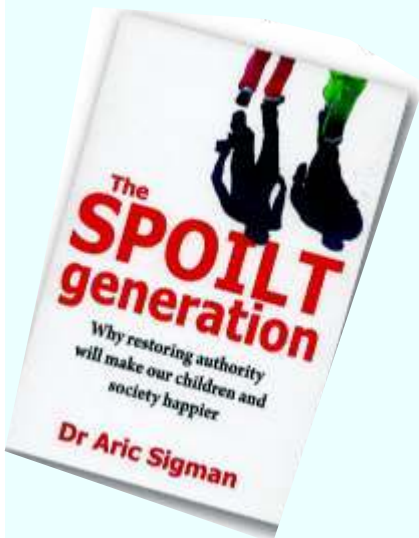
Mr Gardiner said parents were coming to grips with the fact children needed free play, even if they were not willing to let them roam completely unsupervised.

“Parents will meet at the park and let the kids have some space,” he said. “They will leave the kids to resolve things rather than intervening. Most parents want to give kids opportunities to grow, rather than doing things for them, but the difference is it takes a conscious effort now. These are skills we haven’t had to think about in the past because the kids have been down the street and we haven’t been around to intervene.”

Dr Sigman said the old-fashioned family dinner was “probably our greatest opportunity to socialise our children”, with lessons such as serving others first, waiting until others finish, deferred gratification and respect for others.

Mr Cann said parents should be viewed as powerful agents for positive change, not soft targets for criticism.

“Parents are simplistically blamed for all the problems children experience even though, if you look at mental health or social problems, it is never one factor,” he said. “Parents still exert the greatest influence over their children, so are best placed to make a difference.”



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Stephen Breen



Fear of attack: Letting children ride home alone is a big worry for many parents. Picture: Bill Hatto