

## Too young to be so worried



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Pressures to succeed and visions of diminishing options are undermining our children's view of the future and placing the family unit under stress. Is therapy the answer? Peter Weiniger reports.

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Marigold and Seamus are teenagers who attend two of Melbourne's leading private schools. Last month they had a bet on how many students in this year's VCE would suicide.

Just another classroom prank, an act of youthful bravado, or an adolescent bluff? Whether simply a case of adolescent black humor or a case of popular perceptions, inside every joke lies a kernel of truth.

Our children are worried, stressed and cynical. A friend's 10-year-old son came home from school crying that he couldn't keep up with his class and that he'd never get to university and that his life had been ruined.

His mother rang his local primary school to be told by his teacher that the boy had come third, instead of top, as he usually did in a maths test. There was no cause for alarm.

Pressures to succeed, visions of diminishing options, and the reality of structural unemployment are undermining our children's view of the future and whether they have any stake in it at all. Sophie Holmes, a family therapist, puts it succinctly: "The generation (the babyboomers) that grew up with unlimited expectations has managed to impose a rigorous, almost medieval regime on their kids." Nobody, she says, talks any more about personal enrichment.

Her view is supported by Dr Brian Stagoll, a psychiatrist, and Moshe Lang, a psychologist. Both specialise in family therapy. Says Dr Stagoll: "In the 1950s and '60s there was a profound belief in the value of education, not just for academic and professional qualifications, but for its ability to make the world a better place.

"No one believes that any more. These days you study hard because, if you're lucky, you may end up with a job. Neither Marx nor Christ have delivered a better world, and I don't know anyone today who can say that in 10 years time the world is going to be a better place." While parents fretted over the threat of a nuclear holocaust, their children are having to face the dual consequences of economic collapse and environmental devastation.

Educational expectations as typified by the VCE, fuelled by tougher competition for fewer jobs, have turned the education system into a pressure cooker that trickles from year 12 all the way down to as early as year five, says Ms Holmes. "The pressure starts so early because many schools believe that they have to train their students to cope with the

demands they will experience later on." What happens, she says, is that children become specialists in a very narrow field, without really learning very much for their efforts. "They will, for example, know a lot about the Gary David case, but little about the legal system." As children reel under the pressure from an uncertain future and the accelerating pace of change, their parents are also feeling the strain. Parents, too, are insecure and less clear about their role. Consequently, family therapy is enjoying somewhat of a boom.

"Many parents are becoming as stressed as their children," says Ms Holmes. "They project their fears and anxieties, which in turn can radically affect the whole dynamic of the family." She relates a case study in which a family (mother, father and 17-year-old son) succumbed to stress. Originally a happy family that enjoyed a cooperative relationship, consultation and socialising, the strains emerged after the parents attended an information night at their son's school.

What they heard in terms of deadlines, expectations, CATS (Common Assessment Tasks) triggered off anxiety, heightened by their projections of the future. They began to monitor their son's work more closely, to a point where they kept a log book of the time spent at his computer. They also kept track of his phone calls and social engagements. Where once father and son went regularly together to the football, the son was obliged to choose between footy with dad, or a night out with his mates, as leisure time became tighter.

As a result, the relationship between the parents and their son began to disintegrate, with the son becoming increasingly resentful of the intrusions into his life and the restrictions that were being arbitrarily imposed upon him, some of which the son felt were excessive and unnecessary.

On the other hand, the parents felt the son wasn't responding responsibly to the seriousness of the circumstances and lacked a full appreciation of their efforts on his behalf.

"What we have is all the tensions in the family relationship asserting themselves at the cost of the good times they used to enjoy together," Ms Holmes says. "The son becomes resentful, while the parents feel they have no choice but to maintain their hard line.

"Their positions become so entrenched that they end up in my consulting rooms. It's a very common scenario." The strains are even greater among working-class families of ethnic origin, says Mark Furlong, a psychologist with the Bouverie Family Therapy Centre. Here the pressures arise from parents who are working in low-status, repetitive jobs, driven by the desire to finance their children's tertiary education and provide them with the opportunity for a better life than they could ever hope for.

The children are caught in a conflict of loyalties to their parents and their own needs and capabilities, Dr Furlong says.

Diminished social expectations, he says, can lead to a feeling of being disconnected from the system, which results in apathy and anger and finds expression in increased domestic violence, sexual abuse and child neglect.

Dr Stagoll says that more of his time is spent teaching parents the skills involved in parenting. "We help parents who have lost the plot," he says. "Once it was fairly simple. All kids wanted was a tolerant person to talk to because they were rebelling against repressive families and awful schools.

"Now we have to tell parents to be tougher with their children and show them how to assert their authority." Mr Lang, one of the pioneers of family therapy in Victoria, adds that 20 years ago there were more boys than girls coming in for therapy. The reverse is now the case.

"I often wonder whatever happened to juvenile delinquency or the category of 'in moral danger' which meant that a girl was likely to have sex before she turned 16, although she was probably having it with her father since she was 10." Both he and Dr Stagoll say they are now dealing with more cases of child abuse and incest, whereas 15 years ago the big problem with children was hyperactivity. It was once thought that children couldn't be depressed. They were either anti-social, withdrawn, aggressive or too passive. These days, they say childhood depression is all too common.

They acknowledge the contribution of the women's movement, which insisted that violence and sexual abuse were not myths but real, and a central factor in many of the cases that come through their consulting rooms.

Other growth areas are anorexia and bulimia, which Dr Stagoll says affects the best and brightest of our young women. "They are concerned about their appearances at an earlier age and they are receiving conflicting messages telling them to consume and stay thin, which the most successful women push to its logical conclusion.

"These kinds of obsessional neurosis are becoming more common and are noticeable in rising adolescent suicide figures," Dr Stagoll says.

Ms Holmes says many of these concerns will be aired at the Australian and New Zealand Family Therapy Conference, which starts today. "Previous conferences focused on such issues as 'men and intimacy', which have been replaced in priority by 'growing up in a climate of hopelessness'," she says.

"You don't suicide because you don't have a dream, but because you feel a sense of disconnection (from those closest to you as well as institutions such as schools and churches) or non-belonging. So you go out and do something crazy and terrible ... like acts of violence, abuse, humiliation and destruction."

The Australian and New Zealand Family Therapy Conference opens at Ormond College today and runs until 18 July. Inquiries: 347 7096.