

Book Review

A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age: Richard Layard and Judy Dunn: Penguin: ISBN: 978-0-141-03943-5: Price: £9.99

A Good Childhood describes itself a 'landmark report' for the Children's Society. It has been compiled by Richard Layard and Judy Dunn with the help of nine other panel members, thirty-three other adults and forty-two children and young people, all mentioned by name in the acknowledgments. Since the book is only 166 pages this works out at rather less than one page per contributor.

The result is a book of nine chapters, the first asking whether there is a problem and the last offering conclusions and repeating many of the recommendations from earlier chapters. The intermediate chapters deal with the family, friends, life-styles, values, schooling, mental health and inequalities. They provide statistics, mostly in the form of bar-graphs, to demonstrate that children suffer as a result of, for instance, parental discord, poor sex education, poverty, unemployment and discrepancies in wealth. They show how poverty affects exam results, that having no friends makes for unhappiness, and that most violent offences are committed by males between the ages of 12 and 19; the median age for first sexual intercourse is 17 for boys and 16 for girls. On almost all counts Britain and the United States come bottom of the international class.

None of this may be new to supporters of libertarian education, but it is important that it should be repeated until it becomes part of accepted wisdom, and the authors of this book have considerable status. They provide useful ammunition for anyone campaigning for change.

Statistics are useful in this kind of argument, but they but they deal in averages, and there is no account of the suffering of individual children at the bottom of the various scales. There are no case studies, and many of the recommendations are simplistic. To improve schools, for instance, we are advised to '(1) consistently attract more able people into the teaching

profession (2) train them well (3) make sure that every child gets good teaching.'

The report is illustrated by drawings done by children in response to such questions as, 'What do you think all children and young people need for a good life?' These demonstrate the children's sound moral understanding, but unfortunately the authors of the report do not pursue the implications of this.

The final conclusion is that 'the key is an ethic in which we care more for each other. As the psychological evidence shows, this yields a double benefit – other people treat us better and we feel better from helping them.' It is good to read such a statement as the result of extensive research, rather than as merely an expression of opinion.