

A SILENT TRAGEDY written by Dr. Luis Rojas Marcos

There is a silent tragedy that is unfolding today in our homes and concerns our most precious jewels: our children.

Our children are in a devastating emotional state! In the last 15 years, researchers have given us increasingly alarming statistics on a sharp and steady increase in childhood mental illness that is now reaching epidemic proportions:

Statistics do not lie:

- 1 in 5 children have mental health problems
- A 43% increase in diagnosed ADHD
- A 37% increase in adolescent depression has been noted
- There has been a 200% increase in the suicide rate in children aged 10 to 14

What is happening and what are we doing wrong?

Today's children are being over-stimulated and over-gifted with material objects, but they are deprived of the fundamentals of a healthy childhood, such as:

- Emotionally available parents
- Clearly defined limits
- Responsibilities
- Balanced nutrition and adequate sleep
- Movement in general but especially outdoors
- Creative play, social interaction, unstructured game opportunities and boredom spaces

Instead, in recent years, children have been filled with:

- Digitally distracted parents
- Indulgent and permissive parents who let children "rule the world" and whoever sets the rules
- A sense of right, of deserving everything without earning it or being responsible for obtaining it
- Inadequate sleep and unbalanced nutrition
- A sedentary lifestyle
- Endless stimulation, technological nannies, instant gratification and absence of boring moments

What to do?

If we want our children to be happy and healthy individuals, we have to wake up and get back to basics. It is still possible! Many families see immediate improvements after weeks of implementing the following recommendations:

- Set limits and remember that you are the captain of the ship. Your children will feel more confident knowing that you have control of the helm.
- Offer children a balanced lifestyle full of what children NEED, not just what they WANT. Don't be afraid to say "no" to your children if what they want is not what they need.
- Provide nutritious food and limit junk food.
- Spend at least one hour a day outdoors doing activities such as cycling, walking, fishing, bird/insect watching.
- Enjoy a daily family dinner without smartphones or distracting technology, let everyone feel valued.
- Play board games as a family or if children are very small for board games, just let them pretend to play it.
- Involve your children in some homework or household chores according to their age (folding clothes, hanging clothes, unpacking food, setting the table, feeding the dog, etc.)
- Implement a consistent sleep routine to ensure your child gets enough sleep. The schedules will be even more important for school-age children.
- Teach responsibility and independence. Do not overprotect them against all frustration or mistakes. Misunderstanding will help them build resilience and learn to overcome life's challenges.
- Do not carry your children's backpack, do not carry the homework they forgot, do not peel bananas or peel oranges if they can do it on their own (4-5 years). Instead of giving them the fish, teach them to fish.
- Teach them to wait and delay gratification.
- Provide opportunities for "boredom", since boredom is the moment when creativity awakens. Do not feel responsible for always keeping children entertained.
- Do not use technology as a cure for boredom, nor offer it at the first second of inactivity.
- Avoid using technology during meals, in cars, restaurants, shopping centres. Use these moments as opportunities to socialize by training the brains to know how to work when they are in mode: "boredom".
- Help them create a "bottle of boredom" with activity ideas for when they are bored.

Be emotionally available to connect with children and teach them self-regulation and social skills:

- Turn off the phones at night when children have to go to bed to avoid digital distractions.
- Become a regulator or emotional trainer for your children. Teach them to recognize and manage their own frustrations and anger.
- Teach them to greet, to take turns, to share without running out of anything, to say thank you and please, to acknowledge the error and apologize (do not force them), be a model of all those values you instil.
- Connect emotionally - smile, hug, kiss, tickle, read, dance, jump, play or crawl with them.