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Childhood appears to be under siege these days. Apart from the usual shocking stories, the murders, the rapes, the school fights, are others, perhaps less striking but equally important. The needs of children appears to be an anachronism. More so if we consider not only the immediate problems they present but think of the long term consequences. Among these are, the effect of cars on children; the introduction of computers and AI learning into secondary school, ultra-processed food and certainly not least, social media.

Streets, even in residential areas, no longer belong to people, far less children. Streets belong to cars. In a tiny tropical island in the Caribbean, you can no longer walk or bicycle. Children are not allowed to go outside. The very space just outside their front door does not belong to them. The need for children to exercise, to explore and to develop self-confidence in exploring their physical and social world, outside of their home, is subordinated to adult's need for mobility.

The Dutch have long recognised the needs of children. Two weeks ago UNICEF declared children in the Netherlands the happiest among all developed nations and Dutch teenagers come tops for both mental and physical health. A culture of outdoor living, including lots of walking and cycling assists in this.

There is a peculiarly Dutch annual event called the Avondvierdaagse or "four-day evening walk" in which thousands of schoolchildren and their families walk routes of five, ten or fifteen kilometres on four consecutive evenings in early summer. It is not a race. It is a social, leisurely stroll designed to get people outside and enjoy their neighbourhoods.

Dutch fans do a similar 2 mile march at every Soccer World Cup, the Oranje Fanwalk, walking to each football stadium where their team plays, behind their iconic, double-decker “Oranjebus”.

We also seem intent on introducing screens into schools at a time when countries like Finland and Norway who did this years ago, are now backing out because the educational results are so poor. The recent finding that writing things in a copybook stimulates the brain in ways that we never imagined and that simple typing on a computer does not, is frankly, scary.

Concerns about ultra-processed food are growing due to how they are designed to drive over-consumption, their impact on health and the risks they pose to children. Ultra-processed food is now linked to brain and mental health disorders, heart and metabolic disease, gut and digestive problems, immune and inflammatory disruption and whole-body health effects.

A world “fed-up” movement has made its appearance (<https://www.fedupmovement.org/>). People are fed-up with the dietary and advertising manipulations of the food industry and are speaking up for a food system that promotes health instead of diet-related diseases.

Because of the work of psychologists like Jon Haidt and Darcia Narvaez and the decision by the Australian government to ban smartphone and access to most social media to children under 16 people, parents, teachers, paediatricians and even politicians, are now waking up to the monstrous experiment we have been carrying out on our children over the last 25 years, i.e. allowing them full access to a smartphone culture dominated by tech companies whose only purpose in life is to addict children and make money without concerning themselves about the consequences. Among them: mental health deterioration (anxiety, depression and suicide); addiction (46% of teens report they are almost constantly on their phones); cyber bullying (among children aged 8 to 16 who report bullying, 8 out of every 10 children experience it through a phone); sleep problems (60% of teenagers report using they phones at night when they were supposed to be sleeping); sexual grooming (the Internet Watch Foundation reports that online images of primary school children being coached to perform sexual acts has soared by 1000%); access to porn (51% of UK children aged 11 to 13 have watched porn acts); harmful content (75% of 15 year olds had been sent a beheading photo; obesity rates have spiralled out of control in parallel with smartphone overuse; and two out of three South Korean children have poor eyesight because of the amount time they spend on smartphones.

The fight to remove children from these harmful effects has began. The following countries have taken decisions to ban or restrict children from using smartphones until at least age 16:

Australia; UK; Italy; Spain; Indonesia; Malaysia; Poland; Sweden and France. Globally more than half of countries have banned smartphones in school.

In T&T several secondary schools are already preventing their pupils from bringing smartphones into the classrooms and the PM has publicly expressed support for such ideas.

Bring back bicycles! Bring back handwriting. Bring back blue food and above all, delay smartphones use!