

Advice on raising happier kids

Victoria Prooday believes she has a plan to help Canadian kids be happier and live more fulfilling lives. Prooday is a Registered Occupational Therapist, educator, motivational speaker and blogger who received her Masters of Science degree from University of Toronto in 2006. Prooday believes that Canadian families are collapsing under the weight being placed on them by a multitude of societal pressures, and that only with parents playing a more active role in both how the family operates and how children are socialized can these harmful trends be reversed.

Prooday shared that “over the last 15 years researchers have provided increasingly disturbing statistics on a sharp and steady increase in childhood mental illnesses and those numbers are now reaching epidemic proportions.”

According to Prooday “statistics don’t lie” and the numbers she presents are disheartening:

1. 1 in 5 children struggles with mental health issues
2. There has been a 43% increase in ADHD since 2005
3. There has been a 37% increase in teenage depression since 2005
4. There has been a 200% increase in suicide rates from children between 10 and 14 years of age since 2005

Prooday believes that through work both in her practice and for organizations like the Toronto District School Board she knows where society has stumbled in servicing its children. Prooday supposes the following:

- Children today are over-stimulated
- Children today are given too many material possessions

Prooday theorizes children have been deprived of the key foundation blocks to a healthy childhood and these include:

- Emotionally available parents
- Clearly defined limits on behaviour
- Responsibilities that give their lives order and meaning

- Balanced nutrition
- Adequate sleep
- Activity in general but especially outdoors
- Access to creative games, social interaction, casual play opportunities and opportunities for alone time that spur creativity

Prooday believes that in place of these key building blocks to a healthy childhood society has substituted:

- Digitally distracted parents
- Forgiving and forgetting parents who let the children “rule the roost” and set rules
- Children who believe they deserve everything without earning anything
- Poor nutrition
- Inadequate sleep
- A sedentary lifestyle
- Endless stimulation, techno-nannies, instant gratification and no down time

Prooday suggests that “if we want our children to be healthy and happy individuals we need to wake up and get back to basics as soon as possible.” She says many families see immediate improvements after 4-6 weeks of implementing the following recommendations:

- Set boundaries for your children and remember you are the parent. Your children will feel safer knowing what the rules are
- Giving your children a balanced lifestyle filled with what they need, not just what they want. Don’t be afraid to say “No” to your children when what they want is not what they need
- Limit “junk food”
- Spend at least an hour a day outdoors doing activities like cycling, hiking, fishing or walking
- Enjoy a daily family dinner without phones or any other form of technology
- Play table games as a family
- Assign your children age appropriate chores such as folding clothes, cleaning up their room, unpacking groceries, setting the table or caring for pets
- Implement a consistent sleep routine for your children

- Do not protect your children too much from experiencing frustration or error. Being wrong will help them develop resilience and help them overcome challenges in life
- Don't load your children's backpacks, carry their backpacks, or peel bananas/ oranges if they can do it for themselves
- Teach them to wait with patience and good humour
- Offer opportunities for boredom because boredom is often when creativity takes over. Don't feel responsible for keeping kids entertained
- Do not use technology as a babysitter or cure for boredom
- Avoid the use of technology during meals, in cars, restaurants and shopping centres. Use these moments as opportunities to socialize and train their brains to cope effectively with boredom
- Have them create a "boredom jar" filled with ideas that will help them fill their downtime
- Be emotionally available to connect with your children and take that opportunity to teach them self-regulation and social skills
- Turn off children's electronics at night to avoid digital distraction
- Assist your children in recognizing and dealing with frustration and anger
- Model socially appropriate behaviour for your children: say hello to them, say please and thank you, admit when mistakes are made and don't be afraid to be seen apologizing by them. Be the model for these important values
- Connect emotionally with your children: smile, kiss, hug, read, dance, jump, play or simply find time for them

Prooday believes that with these simple but important changes in the family dynamic, children will not only be happier but less stressed in general. With less stress there should be less mental illness, less inappropriate behaviour and less use of prescription medication to patch over the hurt and confusion that many children feel today. The ideas are hardly earth shaking, but they are certainly worth a try. After all, our children are worth it.