

Wrapped in a cocoon - The Southland Times, 20 March 2009

I know a three-year-old," one woman said, "whose mother had her doing maths, French and tennis", writes The Southland Times in an editorial.

The woman, a working mother interviewed about the impact of her absence throughout the day on her young daughter, suggested stay-at-homes she knew over-compensated for the fact they had given up their jobs.

These women never let their children eat sweets, cakes or tomato sauce, the kids always had allergies, they had to play with educational toys and they were completely over-protected, she said. It gave the children a warped view of life.

Our children are much more protected than previous generations, although the debate continues about the extent to which they are wrapped and cossetted, and who are the worst offenders.

Christoph Baker, assistant secretary-general for the Italian national committee for Unicef in Rome and chief of its Child Friendly Cities programme, joined the debate in New Zealand this week with his message that Kiwi kids are over-protected, live in a virtual world and are less capable of shaping their futures than young people living in war zones.

His message is a statement of the obvious to older people but younger parents will struggle with it.

Ours kids are cushioned, have an easier life. They are generally unaware of how harsh things can be, even in this country.

Dr Baker draws the link with youngsters living in war zones, which is an extreme comparison, but his point is well made.

A child of Gaza, of so many African nations, is finely attuned to everything around them and how this can affect their life. Their awareness of self-protection is necessarily high, particularly that they may have to get through a situation without adult help.

That same urgency to face life is often removed by modern Western parents.

Children are seldom expected to walk long distances, to "go without". Parents going into debt to buy presents and treats skirts the reality of teaching children how to live within an income. There comes a point and many parents may soon have to deal with this situation when children should learn the truth of family budgeting with the words "No, we can't afford it".

At what age should a child know the route to school, start mowing the lawns, cook dinner, pay their own library fines? Sooner than most of them do now.

None of this is to suggest that kids should be thrown out in the cold and made to cope.

After being taught how to keep themselves safe, how to make a reasoned decision and to deal with consequences, they should be challenged to become less reliant on adults. And even words like consequences and challenged have the effect of cushioning reality.

Dr Baker: "We are so caught up with making sure our kids are hyper-protected, we are getting caught in a loop where everything has to be under control ... but a child has to discover on his or her own what the limits are."

It is tempting to fall into the trap highlighted by Kate Figs, author of *Life After Birth*, who warns that the constant stream of advice about what is good and bad for children creates confusion and uncertainty.

"You are constantly looking at what other (parents) are doing and being critical because you feel insecure."

All parents would be better off if they learned to be more philosophical, she says. Previous generations were much better at accepting that life was about compromise.