What Daddy did for me — he hired a tutor to teach ‘fun’

Lord Puttnam claims that Britain’s rich kids are among its most deprived. He has a point

**Helen Kirwan-Taylor**

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David Puttnam believes that society should seriously concern itself with the plight of the children of the 0.1 per centGETTY IMAGES

There is a man in Notting Hill who rides around in a clown outfit carrying a large guitar. Intrigued, I stopped him once and asked if he was an actor. “No,” he replied, “I’m a fun tutor.” For £30 an hour this former musician is employed by bankers’ families to come and perform singalong nursery songs to their three-year-olds. “My clients don’t have time to play with their children,” he says.

Of course you roll your eyes. If you’re being tutored to have fun at the age of three, what on earth will you be like at the age of 20? And, sure enough, highly advantaged children are increasingly showing the same symptoms as the most disadvantaged children. Anxiety, depression, self-harm, eating disorders, antisocial behaviour and crime are steadily going up among the wealthiest young people. According to the psychology professor Suniya S Luthar, serious levels of anxiety, depression and somatic symptoms occur twice as often among boys and girls of the affluent compared with national levels. These statistics recently prompted the Labour peer and film producer David Puttnam to suggest that society should seriously concern itself with the plight of the deprived — if spoilt — children of the 0.1 per cent.

To say the children of the top 0.1 per cent are to be pitied is to test any reader’s patience. Puttnam isn’t talking about the offspring of Russian oligarchs, though, but the sort of children whom I have met whose parents are successful lawyers, entrepreneurs and bankers (earning at least £600,000). Before their children have even gasped their first breath, these parents are bribing the registrars of top nursery schools with promises of celebrity appearances (“Take my son or daughter and I can deliver Julia Roberts” — I’m not kidding).

The kids of the 0.1 per cent are painfully smug and insecure

Having reached the zenith of their profession they expect the same for their children (but without actually leaving anything to chance, ie to them). One mother at a London prep school did her son’s homework herself. Even though the school knew full well that the boy’s brilliant architectural models were made in an architect’s workshop they never said a word. Why? They knew the boy was in the running for Westminster Under School and that any scandal would knock him off that list (and they didn’t want the formidable parent getting angry with them).

Many children I know are tutored for years to pass the competitive 8 and 11-plus exams to St Pauls Girls’ School and Colet Court even though the headteacher has firmly advised against this. When the child does crash and burn, an army of psychiatrists and educational experts are brought in to fix them so they can quickly get back in the game. It’s amazing how many badly behaved children of the rich, when expelled from one top school, are quickly accepted at another. One famous mixed boarding school is littered with award-winning new buildings thanks to the generous contribution of such parents. Two of my children’s rich acquaintances have actually broken the law but neither were expelled from their respective schools. I don’t think they even lost much sleep, knowing that their parents would hire the best lawyers.

Rather than seek out a diverse environment to stretch their children’s horizons (and learn some empathy skills, if only to discover that not everyone has Addison Lee on speed-dial), the 0.1 per cent put their children in the most elite environment they can possibly find. These sorts of schools simply reinforce the idea that money is good and more is even better (some 12-year-olds can tell you exactly what a partner at Slaughter and May earns, including bonuses). Many London parents don’t bother looking around: they decide which schools to send their children to based on the wealth or fame of the other parents alone. If the child isn’t cut out for it, they fix it, not by spending time with their children but by bringing expensive tutors on all holidays or even having them move in.

“If you look at the children of the very wealthy and the children of the poor, you see many similarities: neglect, divorce, dysfunction, substance abuse,” says Charles Bonas, the director of Bonas MacFarlane, a top tutoring agency. Hover-parenting is a form of child abuse because underneath it is the idea that a child is a thing that can be moulded to your exact image. When the offspring doesn’t toe the line, the family loses face (which only adds to the poor child’s sense of self-disgust). Oh, the look of shame on the faces of the 0.1 per cent when their son or daughter does not get into Wycombe Abbey or Oxford. They say things like “he’s not that academic” (whatever that means) or they blame one of those disorders that all children of the 0.1 per cent seem to have these days. (Disclaimer: my two sons went to a competitive boarding school but to my credit they complained at the lack of tiger-mothering in this household.)

These same children often crash at university when they discover that the rest of the world does not ski three times a year or have unlimited pocket allowance. Again, I blame the parents who buy their children two-bedroom flats in Notting Hill (which they think is clever) when their children’s friends can hardly afford to live in a squalid basement flat in Tottenham.

The children of the 0.1 per cent are at once painfully insecure and painfully smug. They know that if left to their own devices they couldn’t have accomplished a quarter of what their peers did unassisted, but equally they’re rich enough for it not to matter. “There is a tacit assumption, even among those most affected, that education and money procure wellbeing and if children falter they will swiftly get the appropriate services,” says Luthar.

This circle of privilege never ends. The 0.1 per cent don’t even have to look for jobs. Parents call their friends (who run media organisations, galleries, ad agencies and film companies) and it happens. The exceptions are banks and law firms who have banned nepotism, but then you see the other side of the same coin: the children of the rich who got to Oxford then Goldman Sachs but quit two years later complaining of stress and short holidays. “The reality is that they have to compete with children of the middle classes of India and China who aren’t privileged,” says Bonas.

Puttnam laments the almost dismissive way in which the rich treat the arts. The professional classes often treat the applied arts as a hobby to be filed somewhere between vegan baking and tennis. They might own a couple of Damien Hirsts but their attitude towards art is more about acquisition than expression (they’ll go to the opening of an art exhibition but only if it’s the VIP evening). Art is never done at home — it’s way too messy if you live in a white, postmodernist glass and marble house.

Artists have complained to me about how many super-rich children do (expensive) foundation courses instead of gap years. This is entirely so they can apply to uni with another feather in their cap rather than because they have an interest in the arts (it’s a toss-up between that and being a chalet girl). Music falls into the same category. Every middle-class parent I know forces an instrument down their child’s throat because they have read that it helps with subjects such as maths (schools love a child who can sit still long enough to play a solo on the violin). “They’ll hire tutors to supervise their children’s piano so they get a grade eight distinction then, once they get into the desired school, they drop it altogether,” says Bonas.

Advantaged children are increasingly showing the same symptoms as the most disadvantaged children

Taking part in an art activity boosts cognitive levels by 17 per cent. However, it’s more than that: as humans we are meant to work with our hands. “Our brains are programmed to derive a deep sense of satisfaction and pleasure when our physical effort produces something tangible, visible and — this fact is extremely important — meaningful in gaining the resources necessary for survival,” says the psychologist and neuroscientist Kelly Lambert.

Creativity is the antidote to anxiety and stress. We all should be encouraged to create, but to do this one needs the mental space — which children so badly lack. “I have lots of headmasters telling me that children used to knock about and make fantastic things in their free time,” says Bonas. “Now they are either glued to their screens or doing organised activities.”

Parents who raise creative children engage in almost the opposite behaviour as the parents of the 0.1 per cent. The Harvard professor Teresa Amabile found that creative children are raised in households where ethics are put above rules. Creativity-nurturing parents offer certain guidelines but refrain from imposing strict do’s and don’ts (they don’t micro-manage). Their children learn self-reliance but, more importantly, they learn to think independently. They take risks: they learn how to handle failure.

Super-wealthy parents spend a lot of their time discussing how their parents never even saw their personal statements when they applied to Oxford (we all rewrite our children’s). They talk about how they worked 20-hour days as associates in New York before becoming managing directors ten years later and working only 14-hour days. For some unfathomable reason, they think their children should do at least as well as they did without any of these sacrifices.

Some of my richest 0.1 per cent friends have deviated from the norm and made their children take out student loans even if they didn’t need to. They made their children fly at the back on long-haul flights and told them to take the bus if they wanted to visit a friend (some of these children never saw the inside of Nobu until they turned 21, if you can believe it). Many other members of the 0.1 per cent balked at the cruelty of such parenting — but guess whose children are significantly more advantaged now?