

Armido Rubino*

THE PAEDIATRIC DISEASES OF CIVILISATION. THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

“The other side of the coin” concerns: (1) the “new diseases” induced by globalization; (2) the new environmental determinants of child health; and (3) the impact of globalization on child development.

The childhood obesity epidemic with the associated metabolic syndrome is a prototype of diseases that are increasing in frequency consequent to the ongoing changes in cultures, customs and lifestyles. With an estimated 22 million children under 5 years old overweight, an increase in a variety of psychological and physical problems must be expected. Furthermore, many obese children will become obese adults with all the consequent risks this entails. Changes in dietary patterns (the nutrition transition and globalization of diets) and increasingly sedentary lifestyles are the factors most frequently implicated in childhood obesity.

Globalization, defined as “globalization of markets, informatization and generalization of communication, and pervasiveness of the mass media in the global village”, has impacted on the environmental determinants of child and adolescent health. Indeed, this population is particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of globalization.

Access to television and computers, if excessive and not guided/controlled, stimulates and accelerates maturation of cognitive processes; however, it can also jeopardize children’s emotional development so that they become more fragile, insecure and prone to problems. Mass media communication tends to simplify, trivialize, and weaken conceptual aspects thereby favouring a strong emotionality. Knowledge is transmitted and received without or with little memory so that the link between seriousness, coherence and outcome tends to disappear. Unfortunately, the time spent by children watching TV is too long, but more importantly, the solitude in which the child is left in front of the TV is too long, even at an age in which the child doesn’t distinguish between fact and fiction. Thus, at a time when biological resources and intellectual and emotional development are at their peak, many adolescents remain isolated in a

² Prof. Armido Rubino, Department of Pediatrics, University of Naples Federico II, via S. Pansini I-80131 Naples, Italy, rubino@unina.it

vacuum in which families and educational systems carry out their functions poorly or not at all. This situation must be viewed within the more general context of the global village in relation to the increasing presence among adolescents of boredom, inertia, indifference, incommunicability, unwanted pregnancies, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, illegal behaviour, accident-risk behaviour, and mild or severe mental disturbances. These are worldwide problems and concern all European countries to a greater or lesser degree.

There is a need for more research about these problems, and for appropriate social, sanitary and education policies. In particular, we must learn much more about the effects of globalization on the development of the brain and mind of children and adolescents. It is now imperative to find ways of exploiting the opportunities offered by modern information technology using the child's natural aptitude in order to obtain a quality leap in pedagogic systems designed for this age group. Hopefully, awareness of the above aspects will result in a new approach to education for the first years of life up to adolescence.