

Our Kids - Why are they so stressed?

By Quentin McDermott and Peter Cronau

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2015/11/16/4350533.htm>

Updated November 16, 2015 20:43:00



Our Kids

- VIDEO: [Our Kids - boys on world affairs \(Four Corners\)](#)

Monday 16 November 2015

Childhood and teenage angst is the stuff of legend: songs, films, books, entire careers are built on it. Parents live it, and most kids eventually get over it. Or so it was in the past. Today, one in four Australian kids say they worry about the future constantly. Cyber bullying and depression rates are at disturbing levels. Why, at a time when we're healthier and wealthier than ever as a nation, are our kids feeling so anxious and stressed?

"Doing well in school, getting a good job and providing for a family, if I have one." **Zach, 12**

In this touching episode, Australian kids take us inside their world to talk about their hopes, dreams and fears:

"I'm going to fail every test, apparently." **Teresa, 16**

In frank, funny and sometimes heartbreaking conversations, kids aged from 12 to 19, from many different backgrounds, talk about the pressures they face:

"I felt the need to lose weight, I guess, is because I just thought it was embarrassing to be around my friends when they had good bodies and I just felt like crap about mine." **Ethan, 15**

From bullying to peer pressure, supercharged by social media, to family break ups:

"It wasn't an easy divorce." **Claudia, 16**

In a world that often talks about kids or to them, this is a chance to hear what they say:

"Fathers tell boys to, you know, suck it up ... but it does all add up eventually and you can just crack." **Liam, 15**

"When looking at like, stuff online, I see lots of pressures from other people to do what they're doing, be like them, but then I have to calm myself down and think - wait, I'm unique, I'm myself." **Teresa, 16**

And in some confronting conversations, the program explores the alarming rise of self-harm and attempted suicide by talking to those who have made it to the other side:

"I think that people forget that, you know, they do have the ability to make that change and they don't have to feel so alone in the world." **Alisha, 18**

And in news that may surprise parents of teenage boys, it's possible that those hours spent playing computer games may not be so bad after all:

"It can teach you great skills like problem solving, thinking outside of the box ... There's a whole host of things that can go with gaming when it's done in a way that builds a community." **Mental Health Worker**

'Our Kids', reported by Quentin McDermott and presented by Kerry O'Brien, goes to air on Monday 16th Nov at 8.30pm. It is replayed on Tuesday 17th Nov at 10.00am and Wednesday 18th at midnight. It can also be seen on [ABC News 24](#) on Saturday at 8.00pm, [ABC iview](#) and at abc.net.au/4corners.

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Transcript

16 November 2015 - Our Kids: Why Are They So Stressed?

KERRY O'BRIEN, PRESENTER: Tonight on *Four Corners*, we take you into the lives of Australia's kids and their journey through adolescence and ask: why are they feeling so stressed?

ZACH, 12: I worry about some things like terrorism, racism and, like, poverty around the world and some diseases.

BEN, 13: Uh, I find I used to see a li- lot of, like, ISIS. Like, there used to be a lot of bombings with them and everything. I find that horrible. I find- I just think, "Why do they do that? What did they do to you?"

TERESA, 16: I always look at - compare myself to other people and look at others and think, "Wow, why can't I be like that?"

DYLAN, 14: I notice, like, girls would just think of guys as sex objects. And they just want to be with them because of their masculinity and their body type.

OLIVIA, 12: It really does have to look like you're living this perfect life and everything in your life is perfect and there's- you haven't got a worry. Everything's, like, cute and happy and there's nothing really wrong. When in reality, there is - but you don't want people to know that.

LLIAM, 15: Fathers tell boys to, you know, suck it up. "Just keep moving on, don't worry about it. It's not going to affect you." But it does all add up eventually and you can just crack.

KERRY O'BRIEN: You might think Australian kids have never had it so good. On average, they're probably healthier, wealthier and better educated than better before.

They're also more exposed to the world. In this global village there are very few secrets; very few filters. How, for instance, are children supposed to process an event like the weekend's Paris attacks?

That's just one factor contributing to the anxiety and depression now at very high levels amongst our kids. One in four say they worry about the future all the time.

In this quite special *Four Corners* program we ask a wide range of young Australians from 12 to 19 why they feel so much pressure. Their responses are frank, sometimes funny, often heartbreaking, always illuminating. The reporter is Quentin McDermott.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT, REPORTER: It's a balmy evening at a suburban oval and hundreds of boys and girls are playing football.

(Quentin McDermott walks into boys' change rooms)

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Hi, guys.

BOYS: Hey. Hi.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: I'm Quentin.

(Quentin shakes hands with each in turn)

BEN, 13: I'm Ben.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Ben, nice to meet you.

ZACH, 12: I'm Zach.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Zach, good to meet you.

CAMERON, 12: Hey, Quentin. I'm Cameron.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Yep. Cameron, good to meet you.

SAM, 12: Sam.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Sam, good to meet you, too

So tell me about the game this evening. Who are you playing and how many a side?

SAM: The All-Stars.

ZACH: And we're playing six a side.

SAM: Yeah.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Right. What's your favourite team?

CAMERON: Manchester United, hands down.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Yes?

(Voiceover) Sam, Cameron, Zach and Ben are 12 and 13 years old. They live in an outer metropolitan suburb and go to a local Anglican school.

For boys so young, their worries are surprisingly grown-up.

(To Zach) What are your top three concerns? What- If you said, "Look, these are the three things that are worrying me most in life," what would they be?

ZACH: Um, probably doing well in school, getting a good job and providing for a family, if I have one.

CAMERON: My number one concern would be education, getting a job and all of that. My number two concern would be family and friends. And at this stage, number three would, um, probably be soccer. (Laughs)

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Playing for Manchester United?

CAMERON (laughs): Yeah.

SAM: First one is probably getting a good job. Number two probably is getting enough money to actually support my children when I get older. And number three is probably, um... probably staying close to my family.

CAPTION: One in four kids say they worry about the future all the time.

MAGGIE HAMILTON, SOCIAL RESEARCHER AND AUTHOR: We socialise our boys from being very, very little that it's all up to them. You know, even though we've had the women's movement and women can be brain surgeons or whatever now; things haven't moved a great deal for our boys. And, and they feel the weight of that responsibility very heavily.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: A generation ago, kids like these would have been shielded from the horrors of the wider world. But not anymore.

Now, with the explosion in social media and news online, children's horizons have expanded immeasurably - and sometimes, frighteningly.

CAMERON: Take the refugee incident in Europe: um, I found that, like, quite upsetting to see people having to flee their homes and, like, the parents being split up from their kids. It's pretty heart-wrenching.

ZACH: I worry about some things like terrorism, racism and, like, poverty around the world and some diseases.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Ben, how do you react to the news?

BEN: Uh, I find I used to see a li- lot of, like, ISIS on it. Like, there used to be a lot of bombings with them and everything. I find that horrible. I find- I just think, "Why do they do that? What did they do to you?"

MAGGIE HAMILTON: There's a very clear sense that they feel they're about to be handed a poisoned chalice. And that is, I think, because of the immersive amount of news that we have now, the 24/7 cycle, where they see environmental degradation; you know, we see IS; we see the floods of migrants.

And so they're left in that place of pain and bewilderment and these issues being much larger than they, they can personally deal with.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Maggie Hamilton is a social researcher who specialises in child and adolescent development. In the last few years she has interviewed hundreds of kids and spoken at length to teachers, doctors, parents and researchers.

MAGGIE HAMILTON: I saw some really disturbing things. Um, we're now seeing children as young as seven having to go into counselling for anxiety issues, eating issues, depression.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: One major cause of anxiety and depression in kids is family conflict and parents separating.

BEN: I would like to have a positive and ha- positive and a happy family in the future.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Ben's parents split up when he was four.

BEN: I don't remember much but I remember, like, m-my Dad leaving me. Like, I remember that. I remember that. I remember how my Mum and Dad used to fight.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: How did it affect you emotionally at the time?

BEN: It affected me a, a fair bit once I got to realise that's what happened. It, it affected me for like a half a year. But then I got over it, like, 'cause that's about when I started playing soccer. And that's when I started to get over things. That's how... that's why I get over things: by playing soccer, as I learned to get over, like, my Dad and my Mum leaving.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: And how are you now?

BEN: I'm fine with it. Like, I see my Dad at least once a week and it's good. I've- I haven't seen... I haven't seen them fight in ages. So yeah, it's good.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Olivia is 12. She lives with her mother and younger brother, Will. Their parents are separated and Olivia has just changed schools.

(To Olivia) You weren't very happy at your old school, were you?

OLIVIA, 12: No.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Tell me about that?

OLIVIA: I was bullied. I was teased because I wore glasses. Um, I was... Girls would, like, make me buy them... like, use my money to buy them, like, treats; like, lollies and stuff from the school canteen.

Um, and they'd say: if I didn't they would, like, for example, bite their arm - have a bite mark - and then go tell the teacher that I bit them. So I felt that I really had to go and buy things for them.

CAPTION: One in three 11-17 year-olds were bullied in the past 12 months.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Bullying's been around forever, but it now has an added dimension: social media.

OLIVIA: There was cyber-bullying. Um, like, some girls were being called names over the internet by people who were supposed to be their best friends. Um, and I know, even in, like, year four things were being posted online about other girls. And it was... made people, like, really, like, upset and...

(Footage of Olivia playing with her dog)

OLIVIA: Yeah, I love you too.

MAGGIE HAMILTON: One of the things we're missing in the whole argument around bullying and cyber-bullying is: how we grow, ah, our children up to really be able to navigate what is an incredibly complex world. To me, I think emotional intelligence should be one of the top things on the curriculum we're teaching, because that's the reality of what's needed for tomorrow's world.

(Footage of Olivia and Lilli studying together)

OLIVIA: What do you wanna go on?

LILLI: Hmm...

OLIVIA: Oh, here you go.

LILLI: OK.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Olivia and her friend Lilli are doing well at school, but still feel the pressure of other people's expectations.

OLIVIA: Well, in private schools there's, you know: teachers are always saying, "You have to do well." You know, "Your parents are paying so much money for you to come here!" It's: "You have to, you have to pass this test, you have to get A's, you have to succeed."

And I know lots of people, there is a lot of pressure from esp- particularly the especially bright children: um, they, ah, there's a lot of pressure from their families; that sometimes it's, like, too much for them.

OLIVIA and LILLI: Hmm...

LILLI, 13: Zoella!

OLIVIA: OK.

LILLI: Have you seen her newest video?

OLIVIA: I don't know. Maybe. I'm not sure.

LILLI: Yeah, she did this really cool haul and she had this really pretty dress. And I was like, "Oh my god, I need to find that somewhere."

ZOE SUGG (YouTube): Hello, everyone. Today I'm going to be doing my July favourites. June, I had a good reshuffle of my make-up bag, but through July I kind of stuck to the same things. Um, if you watch my second channel you'll notice I have pretty much the same make-up look every day.

OLIVIA: Do you watch her second channel?

LILLI: Yeah. Sometimes her vlogs are so interesting.

OLIVIA (laughs): Yeah, I watch them too.

LILLI: Yeah.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Away from school, peer pressure has never been more intense.

LILLI: Next page.

OLIVIA: Yep, that one.

LILLI: Which one?

OLIVIA (voiceover): There's the pressure to have the newest trends and be trendy and look, you know, just look "Tumblr-ey", which is: like, that's everyone's sort of aim in our generation.

(Looking at clothing web store) That's so cool...

LILLI: OK.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: For a regular girl like Olivia, it's almost impossible to keep up.

OLIVIA: ...so I'm not surprised (laughs).

OLIVIA: At private schools it's... (Laughs) It's almost like a crime to shop at stores like Target or Big W, like stores like that, um, Kmart. Um, yeah, it's like it's... You just don't do it. Um, you know, every now and again they'll get away with wearing something from a store like Target. Um, you know, but you cut off the tags, because no-one can know.

LILLI: It's pretty much, like, the same thing that would happen 40 years ago: "Oh you're not wearing that, so you're not cool." It's just like the same thing, but now it's escalating to a point where when you have social media you can post pictures about where you- what you're wearing. And then people pretty much see your outfit for every single day of the week.

So it, it turns out to be something where people are seeing every single aspect of other people's life.

LILLI (looking at clothing web store): Those are so cute. They look like pumpkins or something.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: The constant struggle to fit in makes Olivia anxious.

(To Olivia) What brands? You know, what-what, what are you expected to have?

OLIVIA: Yeah. Um, everyone will generally have, like, the really expensive Converse, the- like, the leather ones, usually in white. Ah, that's, like, the staple item in ever- like, pretty much every private schoolgirl's wardrobe

(Looking at clothing web store) They glow in the dark!

(Voiceover) Like, bags: they'll have Longchamp bags; um, triangle bikinis; um, Victoria's Secret, like body sprays; EOS lip balms; um, Marc Jacob, like jeans or wat- and, like, watches.

Um people use, like... like expensive - like, say Victoria's Secret or something - like, makeup bags as their pencil cases.

LILLI: They go and think that that's cool. But really it's kind of as if, like: what message are they trying to send? That they're trying to act like an.. like a 21-year-old?

Like a two- somebody who's gone - and they're a young adult - like, literally adult. They're going and buying adult things, trying to act really grow- grown up, when some of these girls are still 11.

MAGGIE HAMILTON: I think one of the, the really tragic things about this is not only the anxiety it's creating; but what I saw was the huge amount of life energy that these kids put into this, in their desperation to belong.

And this is energy that could be going into having a life and having experiences that are going to develop them as a human being.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Just in terms of your general appearance, Olivia: do you worry about that, about what you're going to wear every morning?

OLIVIA: Yes. (Laughs) Um, when I have to pick out an outfit to go somewhere, even if it's just to walk my dog; in- just in case I- I see someone that I, I know, I'll change outfits, like, 10 times. And I'll do my hair 20 times. And I need to... I feel like I do need to have the perfect outfit and have my hair looking, like, really nice.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: And social media doesn't help.

OLIVIA: There's, like, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, YouTube et cetera. There's not really a winner but it is a competition in a way to get- have the most followers on Instagram. And you've got to have the perfect picture.

You do feel, um, like it really does have to be perfect. It really does have to look like you're living this perfect life and everything in your life is perfect and there's- you haven't got a worry. Everything's, like, cute and happy and there's nothing really wrong. When in reality, there is - but you don't want people to know that.

LILLI: And it's just really scary, being, like, a 13-year-old girl and knowing that people are kind of pressured into do this, because: "Oh yeah, the popular girls are doing it, so if I don't do this then people aren't gonna like me."

(Footage of Liam playing 'Call of Duty' and speaking with his friends)

LIAM, 15: Ah, are you going to continue on from you book, write a diary entry? Or are you going to pick up on the um, on the assessment task notification?

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: It's a Monday evening in a middle-class inner city suburb.

VOICE IN GAME: We're taking control.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: In separate locations, linked by the internet, Dylan and Dimitri and Lliam and Lewis are playing 'Call of Duty'.

LLIAM: Ah no! No. Everybody, don't get any more kills! Don't get any more kills.

LEWIS: What's this? What's this?

LLIAM: It's 105.

LEWIS: What does this do?

LLIAM: I think it's some...ah, you just killed everyone on the opposition team.

LEWIS: Ah, nice.

CAPTION: Thirty per cent of 11-17 year-old boys spend three hours or more gaming on school days.

VOICE (off-screen): Ah, you go fast hands, cold-blooded.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: This is how many 15-year-old boys play games now: on the couch and remotely.

DYLAN, 14: How am I still alive?

VOICE IN GAME: We're taking control.

DYLAN: Aaaaah...

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Dylan, ah, are you allowed to play this game?

DYLAN: Um, no, I'm not. Um, my Mum is quite protective on what games I play and, um, she doesn't like the idea of killing people or violence for entertainment. Um, so that's the big reason why I'm not allowed to play those games.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: How do you feel about it?

DYLAN: Um, I'm quite annoyed because, um, I can't spend that time with my friends online, um, as I'm not playing those games.

(Footage of Lliam and Lewis conversing as they play)

LLIAM: Wow, that's so dodgy.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT (voiceover): Gaming cuts into study time and leaves some boys sleep-deprived and anxious.

LLIAM: I got my, um, marks back today for my test.

LEWIS, 15: Geography?

LLIAM: No, for, um... um, PE.

LEWIS: Oh, yeah.

LLIAM: I did really badly.

LEWIS: I still haven't got that back yet.

LLIAM: Yeah, I probably should be studying more for that than be playing on this at the moment

I have no time for homework.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT (voiceover): The experts say that gaming's not all bad.

JANE BURNS, ASSOC. PROF., CEO, YOUNG AND WELLS COOPERATIVE RESEARCH CENTRE: Gaming in and of itself can be a very socially engaging activity. It can teach you great skills like problem solving, thinking outside of the box, um, social connectedness. So there's a whole host of things that can go with gaming when it's done in a way that builds a community.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Jane Burns has researched the use of gaming in supporting anxious boys.

JANE BURNS: Gaming could actually be one way in which you could encourage young men to support each other, seek help, talk about their issues and problems and work together to solve them.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: The impulse not to talk about personal issues is ingrained in many boys from an early age.

(To Liam) Do you feel there's this pressure on, on boys to, you know, "man up" and not, not be emotional?

LIAM: Yeah. It's been passed down through the generations. Fathers tell boys to, you know, suck it up. "Just keep moving on, don't worry about it. It's not going to affect you." But it does all add up eventually and you can just crack.

DIMITRI, 15: For boys, I think they think it's more masculine not to.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: And, it turns out, boys are as worried about body image as girls.

(To Dylan) How do girls regard boys?

DYLAN: Well, um, I notice, like, girls would just think of guys as sex objects. And they just want to be with them because of their masculinity and their body type. And that's, like, they don't feel any real love for them; they just want them 'cause of their body.

LEWIS: Masculinity plays- plays a big, pretty big role.

LIAM: Muscles.

LEWIS: Muscles, yeah, and all that.

LIAM: Muscles are a big thing...

LEWIS: Fitness.

LIAM: ... with girls. Fitness and muscles. If you have a good body - you have a lot of muscles on you - you're, you're marked as good looking. And, um, that's always at our age a big factor when girls are looking at boys.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: If you have a girlfriend - or if you don't have a girlfriend - are there big pressures on you?

LIAM: Yeah, there is. You've got a lot that you have to do to keep up the relationship: talking. You have to keep talking, um, meeting up outside. And having a girlfriend: again, it seems it's like it adds to your social status.

DIMITRI: Fitting in with the world around me and having a good social status, having a girlfriend, a wife in the future; (laughs) something like that. That'd be pretty good.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: What does "fitting in" mean? I'm interested in this.

DIMITRI: To me: I don't want to be excluded from everybody and do different things. I do want to be close to people who do similar things to me, so I can fit into their, like, social group, their sports and all that.

I just feel like... that fitting in... would probably make my life... I don't know, more enjoyable, I guess.

(Footage of dance students stretching talking in dance school studio)

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: In a sprawling outer-metropolitan suburb, away from the bright lights, these 16- and 17-year-olds are chasing their dreams.

GABRIELLE, 16: Yeah, I've been dancing since I was two years old and I've never stopped. And I've loved every single minute of it.

CLAUDIA, 16: When I dance, I feel like... I feel like I can fly. Like, it's amazing.

(Dance students rehearse. Music: "Just Dance" by Lady Gaga featuring Colby O'Donis)

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Training here takes 10 or 15 hours a week. And juggling the demands of home, school and dance can be stressful.

For these kids, dance isn't just a passion: it's a much-needed pressure-valve.

(To Claudia) Does it take you out of the rest of your life?

CLAUDIA: Yeah. It gives me a break from situations at home, situations at school.

TERESA, 16: And I forget about school altogether, 'cause that's always stressful.

EMILY, 17: Yeah, It's just a place where I can be free and happy with all my friends. We're like a big family: um, we support each other. We encourage each other through everything. And it allows me to relieve stress from any family or school pressures that I have. And I can just be myself.

BRENDAN, 16: It releases the pressure a lot and that's why I come - and also because I love it. (Laughs)

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Gabrielle, Brendan, Teresa, Claudia and Emily all dream of a life onstage. But outside the studio, they're brought down to earth by mountains of homework and looming exams.

(Footage of Teresa studying in her bedroom)

TERESA'S MOTHER: So how's it going?

TERESA: It's alright.

TERESA'S MOTHER: Are you going to get this done by tomorrow?

TERESA: Well, it's due by tomorrow.

TERESA'S MOTHER: So how long is it going to take?

TERESA: I don't know. I think about an hour. I'll be done.

TERESA'S MOTHER: Mm-hm. But what about - after you've done maths, what else have you got?

TERESA: I've got PDH and then dance, but I can't do that because have to film them. And then religion, which I haven't started - and I should probably start.

TERESA'S MOTHER: Teresa!

(Teresa sighs)

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: How are you going at maths?

TERESA: I'm good. Yeah, I'm in the top class. But Mum doubts me (laughs) and thinks I'm horrible at it. So I'm going to fail every test, apparently, to her.

(Footage of Brendan and his mother at kitchen table)

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Brendan's Mum is a high school principal.

BRENDAN'S MOTHER: Let's just go over what you've missed this week, um, so that we can just get a plan of what we've gotta do.

BRENDAN: Yep.

BRENDAN'S MOTHER: So what about English? Where are you up to?

BRENDAN: Just watched the movie off my- well, we're halfway through the movie.

BRENDAN'S MOTHER: OK. So maybe what about - Seeing you're missing Monday because of the ensembles, what about if you plan tonight that you watch that?

BRENDAN: Yep.

BRENDAN'S MOTHER: OK. So, watch.

(Brendan sighs)

BRENDAN'S MOTHER: OK. And art?

BRENDAN: I'm doing art at the moment. I've just got a lot of notes: lots of notes. Um... just off practise, study...

BRENDAN'S MOTHER: OK.

BRENDAN: ...to do.

BRENDAN'S MOTHER: OK. Well, do you want to stick those in? And I'll start with just doing some highlights on that. And then we can go over this together.

BRENDAN: Yep.

BRENDAN'S MOTHER: Yeah?

BRENDAN: Mm-hm.

(Sighs) A lot to catch up.

BRENDAN'S MOTHER (laughs): Yeah.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT (to Brendan): Now, you seem to me to be happy and confident - and that's fantastic. Do you ever get anxious, though, about how much you've got on your plate?

BRENDAN: Yes. Um, it's all happy on the outside. Sometimes, um, on the inside it's very hard.

There's so many dances you have to remember. And then at the same time you've got all your schoolwork, with all your teachers nagging you. And just started year 12, so, um, it's gonna be very hard in the long term. Um, but in... hopefully it will get done. But yes, it is very stressing.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Emily and her family live out on the rural fringe of the city. While her passion is dance, her Dad, who owns a scissor-lift business, has other ideas.

(Footage of Emily doing homework. Her mother is in the kitchen, preparing dinner)

EMILY'S FATHER: You going to marinate it or...?

EMILY'S MOTHER: Yep. Got my little helper down here.

EMILY'S FATHER: What's your, you got your plans after HSC? What are you gonna do after that?

EMILY: Just get a job, get some money. You know.

EMILY'S FATHER: M-hm. Oh, that'd be nice.

EMILY: Doing dance. Dancing, obviously: number one priority. Um... yeah, that's about it.

EMILY'S FATHER: OK. And if dancing doesn't eventuate and make a career out of it, um, it's, ah, come and work for Dad, eh?

EMILY: Ah!

EMILY'S FATHER: Eh?

EMILY: Is it? Is it really?

EMILY'S FATHER: I have got buckets and buckets of filing to be done.

EMILY: Hmm...

EMILY'S FATHER: So, all with your name on it. (Laughs)

EMILY: Dream come true!

EMILY'S MOTHER: Aren't you lucky? (Laughs)

(Footage of students exercising at dance studio)

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Although these dancers enjoy the fun and friendship, the competition can feed their insecurities.

(To Teresa) Are there any other particular stresses or anxieties in your life?

TERESA: I think social anxieties. I always look at - compare myself to other people and look at others and think, "Wow, why can't I be like that?"

When looking at, like, stuff online, I see lots of pressures from other people to do what they're doing, be like them. But then I have to calm myself down and think: "Wait. I'm unique. I'm myself."

Sometimes I feel, when I compare myself to others, that I don't look great. And I'm getting too big in areas around my body or something, and certain features aren't right. And it's... it's really horrible but - yeah, that's what I think.

DANCE TEACHER: Up! Up!

GABRIELLE: One of my friends that actually went to my school: she ended up with anorexia, which is absolutely horrible. And we were all there for her and everything like that, but she had to end up leaving my school because of that.

(Footage of Gabrielle and her mother preparing dinner)

GABRIELLE'S MOTHER: What are we having tonight, Gabrielle?

GABRIELLE: Mexican!

GABRIELLE'S MOTHER: OK.

GABRIELLE: It's Mexican Wednesday. Come on.

GABRIELLE'S MOTHER: It's Wednesday. Tell me what you want.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: As well as being pressured to look perfect, some girls are pressured by boys who learn about sex through pornography.

GABRIELLE: I thought I could get away with it 'cause I tried to wash it, (laughs) like, really well but...

GABRIELLE'S MOTHER: Yeah.

GABRIELLE: ...it didn't work.

(To Quentin) So I know there's some boys that do think that, like, oh girls are just like, kind of like sex toys, which is horrible. And they then go to parties and treat girls like that. And that's where, um, you kind of have to be careful in a way: like, girls especially. But that's horrible.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: While all these kids have normal day-to-day anxieties, one dancer - Claudia - has really struggled.

CLAUDIA: My parents got divorced this year - and it wasn't an easy divorce, either. And I've got a little sister. She's 13 years old. And when my parents divorced, I felt like I had to step up. I stepped up to be, like... like a second mum to my sister. So: very strong for her.

And it got to the point where it was real- really, bad and she was going through, like, a depress... like, she was depressed for quite a while. And none of my parents knew: only I knew.

CAPTION: Nearly one in five 16-17 year-old girls are suffering from depression.

SAMANTHA, CLAUDIA'S SISTER, 13: I was not motivated for anything. I couldn't get up. I didn't want to do anything. Like, even when I had my outdoor activities: like, it would be a struggle to go to them because I couldn't find the motivation to go. But yeah, I got through that so...

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Who helped you get through it?

SAMANTHA: Oh, definitely my sister: 100 per cent. She's always there for me, through thick and thin and I'll always be there for her and she will for me. I know that for sure. Yeah.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: It all took its toll on Claudia as well.

CLAUDIA: I put on, um, a lot of weight. I was not so much motivated as what I usually are. Um, school: my half-yearly exams didn't go too well. Um, and yeah, just everything went downhill.

But as soon as I hit term three, I really realised that I've got to focus on myself as well, because I'm starting year 12. And I've only got one year left 'til I go into the future. So I cracked down on what I eat. I've, um, cracked down on my fitness, I really stepped up at school, handed my assessments in.

Um, yeah, I've really, like, I'm ha- quite happy with myself at the moment.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: On Australia's eastern seaboard, in a small coastal town, live these four 15-year-old school-mates.

It's an area of high unemployment and broken dreams - and their teachers are pushing them hard to succeed.

Elaura and Emma feel the pressure to do well at school.

ELAURA, 15: Being in, like, a top class: it puts, like, pressure on you to do, like, good. And all the teachers put, like, pressure on you.

EMMA, 15: I'm in the top as class as well, so I feel pressure to, like, do really well and stuff. And I get a lot of pressure off Mum as well, 'cause she always wants me to do really good.

And there's, like, this really smart kid in my class (laughs) and I always: like, I can never be as smart as him and it's really frustrating, but yeah.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Does that get you down?

EMMA: Yeah, it does. And lately I've been getting even worse. And it's really sad, yeah.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Tarquin feels the pressure just to keep up.

TARQUIN, 15: I'm not in the, the smartest class out of all of them. So, like, assignments and just trying to do work in class: I kind of feel a bit, like, pressured because I really don't know much about what they're talking about to me. So I get a bit nervous and anxious about: what if they, like, get angry at me 'cause I haven't done it? But then I don't want to say to them, "I actually don't know how to do it." So I get scared and try to just sit there and be quiet.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Ethan constantly worries about his weight.

ETHAN: It's hard having, like, such good-looking friends who've got, like, the best bodies. (Laughs) And, like... just swimming with, like, going to the pool with them and swimming and then they're all getting, like, shirtless photos and bikini photos and it's just so awkward: like, I'll just sneak around the back to get my shirt back on and, like, get back into the photos. But, um, I've... I'm doing stuff about it: like, I've lost seven kilos, so...

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Tell me why you felt the need to lose seven kilos?

ETHAN: Um, I felt the need to lose weight, I guess: is because I just thought it was embarrassing to be around my friends when they were so s- like, they had good bodies and I just felt like crap about mine.

And seeing other peop- like, people sharing photos on, like, Facebook and stuff: it's like all anyone wants. And then it's, like, people with abs and, like, the jawlines and stuff. And I dunno: it just made me feel like no-one would - like, I'd grow old and just be (laughs) lonely.

But, um, I think at the moment I'm alright about how I am because of, like again, my friends' support.

CAPTION: Kids from sole-parent, low-income families are more likely to be anxious.

(Footage of Tarquin riding scooter at skate park)

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: It isn't just school and body image worrying these kids. Scratch beneath the surface and far darker fears and anxieties emerge.

Tarquin, when he was little, was traumatised by family conflict in his home.

TARQUIN: I didn't really feel, like, safe there, as most kids would. I would just always get anxious about if I've done something wrong: like, what would happen. So I'd just go to the skate park or just go away if- by myself for ages and just would try to, like, forget about everything and just be happy. Just move on.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Like many children experiencing family breakdown, Tarquin blamed himself.

TARQUIN: I just never wanted to be there. Like, it was just a really scary time. Like, it was just: everything I'd do, I just was scared that it was wrong. And even if it wasn't my fault, I would still get the blame. And I was just, like, so n-nervous. And then I'd get, like, depressed about: why have I wrecked everything? And then I'd go down on myself, thinking it's all my fault, when it wasn't. It was actually theirs.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Tarquin's girlfriend Elaura has been his rock.

TARQUIN: It's just: every time, like I'm sad, like, she'll just be there to talk to me and, like, try and get me through stuff so I wouldn't, like, always just think that I should just leave and, like, not come back, you know. Like, she'd just make me think that I actually deserve to live here and... yeah.

ELAURA: Um, I feel like it's really hard watching people that you, like, you care about go through things like that. And, um, I have a few friends that are, like, sort of in the same situation. And, like, um, so I don't know. I just try and be there for them and always offer, like, for them to come over whenever they need to and, like... yeah. So I just... try and, like, help.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Among Elaura's age group, self-harm has become commonplace.

(To Elaura) How many girls are out there around Australia, harming themselves in this way?

ELAURA: I think there's, like, a lot more than people expect. Like... like, I've seen, ah, heaps of girls, like, and I've just been here for, like, two years, I think. And, like - and that's only the ones that were actually - you actually see and you actually know about.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Elaura and Emma have found a huge number of websites devoted to self-harm.

(Footage of Elaura and Emma reading website)

ELAURA: "Top 10 ways to self-harm": burning of skin; hair pulling-out. Do people actually do all this stuff?

EMMA: All our friends do.

ELAURA: Cutting. I'm always seeing her with the cuts on.

(Excerpt from video, 'Hidden Face')

Two years ago, Elaura was so appalled by what was going on around her, that she made a film about it.

Elaura was 13 years old when she acted the part of a girl who harms herself.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Is that the pressure, you think, that young girls feel: that they're not beautiful enough, that their body isn't beautiful enough; they don't look good enough? And is that what drives them to harm themselves?

ELAURA: I feel, like, with social media especially, like, you have to look a certain way or be a type of person. And I feel like a lot of girls are really unhappy with themselves and just everything. And so it leads to that.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Elaura and Emma showed their film to an audience of 100 people at a community event.

ELAURA: While the movie was playing, they were just like dead silent the whole way through until it ended. And a few ladies, like, came up to me and they were crying and, like, 'cause their daughter had been through it.

CAPTION: Around 135,000 young Australians deliberately harmed themselves in the past year.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Anxieties unresolved in childhood can lead to a spiral of self-destructive behaviour.

Ellie and Alisha survived their adolescent years - but only just.

ALISHA, 18: I didn't know what it was like to be a cool Australian girl. And I felt very pressured to be something I wasn't. And it just... it was bizarre to sort of like look around me and, like, feel like I was just so im- imperfect compared to everyone. And everyone else seemed to have their lives so together. And I just felt like I was just sort of a mess of a person.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: At 14, Alisha developed an eating disorder.

ALISHA: And it was so much easier to just not eat. I felt so much better about myself. I felt like I was perfect. I was doing something good for myself. And it was very easy to, you know, skip meals 'cause Mum and Dad never expected this of me.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Did social media play a part in this?

ALISHA: Incredibly. On, you know, Tumblr there's people romanticising eating disorders and self-harm like they're completely normal things that teenagers are going through. And the thing is: they are, but social media talks about them in the wrong way.

They were like - well, they're called, sort of like, "pro-ana" sites. And it's where people sort of like promote anorexia. And literally people write lists on how to be anorexic: like, steps to being anorexic. And I would follow it like the Bible.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: In year nine, at different schools, both girls started cutting themselves.

(To Alisha) How long were you self-harming for?

ALISHA: Like... (sighs) like, three years. Yeah: from, like, beginning of year nine up until end of year 11, maybe.

MAGGIE HAMILTON: Self-harm is very much on the rise. In fact, a number of years ago so much so, it was dubbed "the new anorexia". It has become so common, um, out there that the kids themselves don't see it as dysfunctional. So if you say to them, you know, "20 years ago people didn't do this," they look at you as if you've got two heads.

ELLIE, 19: I noticed, I think it was probably in year eight, that I started being really unhappy: like, I didn't really enjoy anything. Um, and when I was 14, um, I started self-harming just to cope with it all.

And then, once I started doing it, it just became addictive. And the one thing that I would turn to, um, whenever I was sad and I just couldn't cope with the way I was feeling.

ALISHA: It definitely gave me a rush: like, it gave me a feeling of almost being like invincible: like, "Wow, look at this. Like, look what I can do to myself. Like, I'm still alive." Like, it was just like a sudden flood of emotions. And yeah, it was definitely what kept me going.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: What would you do the following morning, when you had to go to school?

ALISHA: It was... it was really crazy, 'cause, like, I'd do it at night and it was just like I was completely: it was all I wanted to do. And I'd wake up the next morning and, like, look at myself and there'd be, you know, like, blood on my pyjamas and blood on my sheets.

And I'd look at myself and be like: "What have I done?" Like, "Why on earth did I think this was a good idea?" Like, I was embarrassed. I'd cover it up. I'd wear bandages to school because obviously I didn't want anyone to know.

JANE BURNS: Anecdotally we are certainly seeing more young people presenting with self-harming behaviours. And we certainly know from the large-scale epidemiological studies that have been done around the world that if you're experiencing depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol problems, eating disorders and you're self-harming, you're at greater risk for suicide.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Alisha and Ellie met in the same psych ward after attempting suicide. Both girls came to realise how taking their lives would have devastated their families.

ALISHA: I guess the only thing that sort of kept me here was my brother and just the idea of: that I didn't want to leave him alone in the world. Like, that was just such a selfish thing to do. And sort of like, you know, the repercussions it would have on my family.

ELLIE: The main issue for me was that it's not fair on my family, um, and I knew how much it would just ruin my parents and my brothers.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Only now is Alisha coming to terms with the anxiety she felt about her place in the world.

ALISHA: You know, you turn on the news and there's just all this horrible stuff happening. And you go on Facebook and there are stories of, like, suicide and car crashes. And, you know, everywhere you look there seems to be so much despair.

And I think there's a lot of pressure put on our generation. But I think there's sort of, like, there's pressure put on us that we need to sort of, you know, we need to fix the world.

And like, I know personally for me: I'd sit and I'd watch the news and I'd look at these starving children and I'd look at, like, the state of the economy. I'd look at the mess that the world was in. I'd sort of feel like I had to change all of this and I felt so alone in doing that.

And I think that people forget that, you know, they do have the ability to make that change and they don't have to feel so alone in the world.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Most kids do survive their anxieties and most go on to live a full and happy life. But it can be a daunting journey.

There are no easy answers, but maybe listening more closely to what our kids are trying to tell us would be a good place to start.

JANE BURNS: Their voice is just as important as a scientist. Their voice is just as important as a CEO, because they have solutions that they know are going to resonate with other young people.

QUENTIN MCDERMOTT: Is there any advice you would give to parents in particular?

GABRIELLE: Yeah. Just ask them how their day was. It's not even that hard or that difficult: just honestly ask them: "How was school? How are you feeling? How are your friends? Um, is there anything that's stressing you out? Um, what can we do to solve this.?"

ELAURA: I have a mother who I can talk to anything about. And no matter what it is, even if I've done something wrong or something, I can always talk to her because I know that she's, like, there and she cares. And no matter what, we'll get through it. And I feel like a lot of the kids don't have that with their parents.

ZACH: Always be by their side to help them when they need you.

SAM: Let them - not do what they want, but don't wrap them up in cotton wool.

CAMERON: Yeah, not wrapping them up - as much as it is important to wrap 'em up in love.

KERRY O'BRIEN: There's another message in this for all those kids caught in the intensity and loneliness of a problem they feel they can't share: you're not alone. And these issues can be managed.

Next week on Four Corners: our final program for the year. We look at the making of Australia's youngest ever terrorist and the men who are influencing the next generation of home-grown jihadists.

Until then, good night.

END

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Backgrounder

SUPPORT FOR KIDS

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467 - Crisis counselling to people at risk of suicide, 24 hours per day 7 days a week across Australia. www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au/

Headspace | 1800 650 890 - Young people, aged 12-25 years, can talk to someone on the phone, online or in person to get health advice, support and information. headspace.org.au/

Kids Help Line | 1800 551 800 - National 24 hour free telephone counselling service for people under the age of 18. www.kidshelpline.com.au/

Lifeline | 13 11 14 - 24hr Telephone Crisis Support. www.lifeline.org.au/

Youth Beyond Blue | 1300 22 4636 - Advice, support and information about depression and anxiety for young people. www.youthbeyondblue.com/

The BRAVE Program - An interactive, online program for the prevention and treatment of childhood and adolescent anxiety. brave4you.psy.uq.edu.au/

The Butterfly Foundation | 1800 33 4673 - Butterfly provides support for Australians who suffer from eating disorders and negative body image issues. Call Monday-Friday 8am to 9pm AEST. thebutterflyfoundation.org.au/

ED Hope Support Line and Web Counselling Service | 1800 33 4673 - This national support line provides free, confidential support for anyone experiencing eating disorders. www.nedc.com.au/

Mens Line Australia | 1300 78 99 78 - National 24 hour telephone counselling service for all Australian men. www.mensline.org.au/

ReachOut.com - Australia's leading online youth mental health service. au.reachout.com/

Smiling Mind - Smiling Mind is modern meditation for young people. smilingmind.com.au/

What is Anxiety? | Headspace - What is anxiety and what are panic attacks? Get info and support at: headspace.org.au/get-info/anxiety

Types of Anxiety | Beyond Blue - Read all about the different types of anxiety. www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety/types-of-anxiety

SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

Anxiety disorders in teenagers | Raising Children Network - It's important to seek professional help if you see any of the warning signs of anxiety disorders in your child. raisingchildren.net.au/articles/anxiety_disorders_teenagers.html

KidsMatter - An Australian mental health and wellbeing initiative set in primary schools and early childhood education and care services. www.kidsmatter.edu.au/

Talking to Teens Interactive | Raising Children Network - Talking to Teens shows some tricky parent and teen situations and explores how different approaches to communicating with teenagers can get different results. raisingchildren.net.au/talking_to_teens/talking_to_teens_landing.html

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What is stressing our kids? Young Australians in their own words | ABC News | 16 Nov 2015 - www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-16/young-australians-in-their-own-words/6937784

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Wellbeing survey reveals nearly half of teens stressed by social media | News.com.au | 8 Nov 2015 - www.news.com.au/technology/online/wellbeing-survey-reveals-nearly-half-of-teens-stressed-by-social-media/story-fnjwmwrh-1227600514412

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'Instafamous' teen revealing 'ugly truth' behind social media will positively impact women, expert says | ABC News | 3 Nov 2015 - www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-03/instagram-personality-essena-o'neill-reveals-social-media-truth/6908270

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AUDIO Children and their emotions | Radio National | 19 Jul 2015 - www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/allinthemind/children-and-their-emotions/6616428

Teens talk suicide, mental health and pressures of growing up in social media age | ABC News | 24 Jun 2015 - www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-24/canberra-school-starts-the-conversation-of-suicide-mental-health/6568554

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REVIEW Are child and adolescent mental health problems increasing in the 21st century? A systematic review | Aust N Z J Psychiatry | Jul 2014 - anp.sagepub.com/content/48/7/606

SURVEY Stress and Wellbeing: how Australians are coping with life | 2015 - Report from the Australian Psychological Society. www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/PW15-SR.pdf [pdf]

REPORT The Mental health of children and adolescents | Dept of Health | Aug 2015 - Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing. www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-pubs-m-child2

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First posted November 16, 2015 12:57:00