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Civilizational Threats to Childhood and Adolescence

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INTRODUCTION

The civilizational crisis

Contemporary childhood is developing within a civilizational crisis (environmental, economic, and social) which, according to Bartra (2013), stems from a production and consumption model undermining the two original sources of wealth: the earth and human beings. Within this global order, individuals are reduced to mere workers and consumers, "enslaved by advertising," stripped of the cultural institutions that once served as a "protective layer" against excessive accumulation (Bartra, 2013). This crisis translates into an "erosion of the subject," in which society's greatest wealth—its youth—is squandered by the inability of the system to provide a dignified future, pushing children toward compulsive consumption mechanisms as a means of escape or belonging (Bartra, 2013). In countries such as Mexico, this environment is further exacerbated by economic precarity, due to it 36.3% poverty rate, and high levels of criminality, increasing exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The latter are linked to more non-suicidal self-injury in adolescence (He et al., 2024) and a greater risk of substance abuse in adulthood (León Rojas et al., 2025). In this editorial, we review three civilizational threats to childhood and adolescence: addiction, identity, and violence.

Addiction problems as civilizational threats to childhood biological vulnerability: the "brake" and the "accelerator"

Developmental biology makes the young brain particularly susceptible to addiction. The brain undergoes neurological maturation characterized by a "functional disconnection" between the subcortical regions (the reward system) and the prefrontal cortex (the control center) (Aly et al., 2020). The automobile metaphor is often used: the young brain possesses a fully developed "accelerator pedal" (sensation seeking and reward pursuit), while its "brake pedal" (impulse control) remains immature (Nelson et al., 2022). Substance use and addictive behaviors produce supraphysiological levels of dopamine the immature brain cannot adequately regulate, interfering with myelination and normal development (Thomasius et al., 2022). The early onset of these behaviors, sometimes beginning as early as age 10, creates a three- to five-fold increase in the likelihood of developing a chronic disorder in adulthood (Nelson et al., 2022).

Dual perspective: substance addictions

Substance abuse remains a major risk to global pediatric health. Alcohol and cannabis use disorders are the most common, frequently beginning during puberty (Thomasius et al., 2022). Heavy cannabis use during this developmental stage severely impairs essential

cognitive functions such as memory, learning, attention, and intelligence (Aly et al., 2020). Compounding this issue is the proliferation of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) and synthetic opioid crises involving drugs such as tramadol, which present unique challenges for clinical detection and treatment, especially among vulnerable populations such as street children. These children often use inhalants and inexpensive drugs as survival mechanisms in hostile environments (Aly et al., 2020). The normalization of substance use through mass media and social networks acts as a catalyst, further exacerbating this vulnerability (Nelson et al., 2022).

Dual perspective: behavioral and digital addictions

The boundaries of addiction have expanded into the digital sphere through Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD). The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2026) and the World Health Organization identify it as a condition characterized by loss of control, neglect of personal hygiene, sleep disruption, and failure to meet academic responsibilities. Neuroscientific research has revealed that brain activity patterns in children with video game addiction are remarkably similar to those observed in individuals with substance use disorders (APA, 2026). It is estimated that between 2% and 3% of the global population is affected, with adolescent males representing the highest-risk group (Stevens et al., 2020). This "technological addiction" constitutes a civilizational threat because it isolates children from real-world social interaction, anchoring them to virtual environments specifically designed to maximize engagement time through reward-based algorithms (APA, 2026).

The challenge of prevention

Chemical and behavioral addictions are not isolated events but rather symptoms of a system prioritizing profit over human well-being.

Effective prevention requires a comprehensive approach that not only addresses the clinical needs of children but also mitigates socioeconomic inequalities and strengthens Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCEs). The latter serve as protective factors that promote neurological and emotional resilience (León Rojas et al., 2025). Only through a radical transformation in the way society protects its "greatest wealth" can the trend toward a world inhabited by subjects eroded by consumerism be reversed.

Identity problems as civilizational threats to childhood

Modern technologies and their uses and implications are beginning to impact childhood and adolescent development and self-limited identification in life, a key pillar of a healthy society and civilization. For example, the XV Adecco survey shows that more boys wish to become *Youtubers* rather than doctors when they grow up, and *Streamer* and *TikToker* are showing up in the top desired professions (Redacción El Economista, 2025). Teenagers have more difficulty choosing what degree to study, with some studies reporting that as many as 39% of adolescents are classified as career uncertain (OECD, 2025). Although the causes of these changes may be multifactorial in nature, they reflect how society is changing and how the future is taking shape. The identity of new and future generations, governed by electronic devices, is changing and may be deviating from healthy development.

Identities may have benefits if they operate as a transitory structure, but they can also have a negative impact as they can prevent growth or compensate for its lack (Money, 2023). From this perspective, identities may pose a threat to human development and society if we do not understand or use them in a way that encourages the incorporation of complexities into human life. Certain terms have been popularized in mental health narratives, such as neurodiversity, rejection sensitive dysphoria, attachment styles, extremely sensitive persons, and multiple intelligences. Although these terms have varying degrees of scientific and clinical validity, the problem lies in the tendency of social media to be riddled with misinformation (Starvaggi et al., 2024), which may produce a looping effect (Chevalier, 2024) and a misinterpretation of scientific findings. This new flow of information and communication in society can spawn peculiar phenomena, such as Functional Tic-like Behaviors (Martindale & Mink, 2022), referring to the explosive onset of tic-like behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the accumulated evidence of the negative impacts of social media (Teague et al., 2026), organizations are beginning to recommend prohibiting social media use below the age of 16 (Plataforma Control Z, 2026) and some countries like New Zealand are even undertaking nationwide legal action (Corlett, 2025). Measures like the ones mentioned must be carefully thought through, as they may interfere with the rights of children (United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1989), including those concerning the digital environment (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021).

Some identities would appear to be harmful for both the individual and society. The incel phenomenon (Aiolfi et al., 2024) has achieved a concerning status in western society because of it links to aggression and violence, facilitated by online communities and the teenage population. One could argue that another example involves national/ethnic identities. In the case of the genocide in Gaza, an estimated 22,800 violent deaths of children under 18 have occurred since 2023 (Spagat et al., 2026) largely mediated and justified by supremacist beliefs.

One of the potential identity threats to civilization is the unregulated, inappropriate use of generative artificial intelligence. Although it may help with certain tasks, it appears that its use can cause detrimental effects, such as diminishing cognitive abilities (Barcaui, 2025; Kosmyna et al., 2025) and outputs being 'homogeneously' creative (Wenger & Kenett, 2026). It can substantially hinder identity development by reducing cognitive effort and perhaps minimizing critical thinking. These topics require interdisciplinary research, detailed discussion, and regulation given their potential counter-civilizational impact on society.

Violence problems as civilizational threats to childhood

Violence has been seen as a threat to civilization for over a hundred years. Russell (1916) explained how war and violence can destroy decades of development in a matter of days. Some authors have posited that a non-violent culture is a *sine qua non* for civilization. The concept of violence could therefore be extended to poverty conditions, such as ill health, lack of food, lack of education, lack of adequate housing, inadequate living conditions and ACEs (Allinson, 2023), present worldwide but particularly so in low- and middle-income countries such as Mexico. All these forms of environmental violence in the macro system influence the environment of micro systems, in the city, the neighborhood, and the family itself.

The violence received and perpetrated by children and adolescents may be linked to several external factors such as exposure to violence in the home, school, neighborhood, video games, and other entertainment activities as well as alcohol- and drug-use and low self-esteem (Daane, 2003). Some other internal factors have also been directly associated with persistent behavioral problems, the most important of which is limited prosocial emotions (LPE). LPE is now a specifier for behavioral and oppositional defiant disorder, comprising what was previously called "callous unemotional traits" (Scheepers et al., 2011). It was proposed in 2013 as a specifier of conduct disorder (CD) by the American Psychiatry Association in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (APA, 2013). This was because some authors considered it part of the symptomatology of psychopathy and the most severe manifestation of antisocial behavior (Frick & Ellis, 1999). To meet the criteria for this disorder, the individual must present with two or more of the following characteristics over 12 months and in multiple relationships or settings. These include lack of remorse or guilt (LRG), callous lack of empathy (CLE), absence of concern about performance (UAP), and shallow or deficient affect (SDA). CLE and SDA have been described as core and UAP and SDA as ancillary characteristics in children and adolescents with LPE (de la Peña et al., 2022a).

Preventing violence through a practical individual approach

Give that external risk factors for violence may be difficult or in some cases impossible to change in a mental health intervention, identifying LPE early in school-age children with disruptive behavioral problems may constitute one of the most important strategies for an individual preventive intervention for reducing adolescents' misbehavior and violent behavior. In this scenario, LPE constitutes an open window for early recognition, with the potential to change negative outcomes in adolescence and adulthood (de la Peña et al, 2022b).

In short, addiction problems, identity threats, and violence are emerging as potential civilizational threats to childhood and adolescence. Mental health professionals must be aware of these situations and able to recognize them and intervene to enhance the development of children and adolescents.

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