How community life affects family life:
In a recent article I highlighted the failure of any political party to articulate the needs of families in their party Manifesto. I see it as a symptom of how, at every level of society, we have begun to accept and tolerate a kind of national cynicism about developing a value-based social, cultural, and community life for our children. There is more interest in developing a Green environment than a Value-Based human community.

While the technology we have and the way we live our lives have changed tremendously, we are only dimly aware of how profound these changes have been. The changes in our society have come so incrementally that we have not taken a step back and asked, seriously, what is happening to family and community life.

In recent years I have been meeting with a lot of parents who have been having problems with their teenage children. As a psychologist I had been taught to look at the psychology of the child and family but in recent years I have begun to realise that this approach was not always helpful. I begun to realise that, even if you are a very good parent, your children can have serious problems.

I began to realise that I was not always able to explain a teenager's out-of-controlness or their anger in terms of inadequate parenting. The more I sought to help these struggling families the more I realised that the issues were not all about the parents. Young teenage girls worry, not about their Mom or Dad, but about getting abused in a relationship with a boy, or getting hideously teased, or the terrific fearfulness of rejection by peers, or about hating one's body. I began to realise that to understand mental health one must look at culture and community.

The best description of what I think is happening today is a statement from a colleague of mine who said "I would say I came from a dysfunctional family, but I had a functional community and I turned out okay". However, today, we find that you can have very functional parents but still have teenagers that are experiencing a lot of trouble.

Today parents are no longer raising their kids in a context in which they have a community and neighbours who are backing parents up and trying to teach their children exactly the same things they try to teach them. In bringing up my own children I have been continually amazed at how few parents make phone calls to other parents when sleep-overs are arranged. There seems to be this reluctance to engage for fear of being seen as mistrusting.

If you want to teach your children certain values and ways of living you are working against the media that tells them continually "Don't think. Act on Impulse!", as one ad puts it. Teenagers now are being immersed in MTV, Urban music, mobile phones, Bebo, YouTube, texting, and new patterns of drinking, drug abuse, and sexual behaviour.

You cannot have good mental health if you live in a lousy community. We are all connected. Trying to just sort out your teenager or fix your family is like going first class on the Titanic. It does not work. If you want your children to be happy, you

have got to make other people's children happy and try to create a world in which all children have some support. And the essential thing now is that children are moving among strangers and that means two things. It means they are not getting nurturing from other adults besides their parents, and it also means they aren't getting corrected and taught what to do.

If things were to change for the better we would, for example, have to once again be involved and interested with helping other people's children.

The problem in modern life seems to be cynicism. Cynicism is a cheap, easy emotion that turns its nose up at change and improvement. It is an attitude of "why bother making an effort". But change we must. For our own mental health, for our own moral stimulation, we must try to develop a culture of courage and kindness. At the end of the day, cultural change is really just one person after another doing the right thing.

Families nowadays just let their culture happen to them – they end up overweight, addicted, broke, with a house full of stuff and no time. Parents nowadays need to know how to hold this popular culture at bay and realise how it eats, like a rising flood into the heart of your family.