

Mothers in arms

We met when we had eight small children between us. The noise and mess in both households was incredible, and we seemed to lurch from disaster to disaster. One day our youngest boys – best friends and partners in crime – sneaked upstairs and emptied every bottle of shampoo and face cream into the basin and covered the floor with wet loo roll. Another awful day our middle daughters, both aged five, wriggled through a gap in the garden fence and were found at the bus stop by a horrified neighbour.

With four children each, there seemed to be a new drama every day, and after years of chronic sleep deprivation, our brains were so foggy it seemed we could never think of the right thing to do or say. We knew we didn't want to shout, scream or nag at our children. But we didn't know what to do instead, and neither of us felt that plonking our children on the naughty step – *Supernanny*-style – was the solution. We needed help.

So we decided to start a local parenting group. We approached friends suffering the same difficulties we were (which included just about every mother on our street), sent off to America for coursework, and asked our neighbour Ellen to run the classes. She had already brought up six children and survived. At the same time, we read every parenting book we could lay our hands on, and started going to workshops and lectures.

The experts had some really good advice, but the most useful ideas came from our friends. We found their stories so fabulous and life-changing – why hadn't we tried that before? – that we couldn't stop. We began asking questions everywhere; at the school gates, at dinner parties, in the queue at Tesco. We wanted answers to the problems we were facing every day. How did other parents get their children to turn off the PlayStation, tidy up, eat broccoli and leave for school on time?

We gathered so much information that at first we couldn't make use of it. When it

With four children each, Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge decided to ask every mother they knew for their secrets. The result is a no-nonsense guide to running a family – whatever your personality...

PHOTOGRAPH

ANDREW HAYES-WATKINS

came to the crunch, either our minds went blank or we lost our cool (again). So we decided to boil all the advice down so it would make sense to even the most weary, exhausted, overstretched parent.

We realised early on that there isn't one magic formula for everyone. Different strategies suit different parents, and most parents have a natural way of doing things which work for their families. Over time, seven approaches emerged, inspired by people we know. By seeing how they managed, we found it easier to remember what to do in times of crisis. And it worked. As we added these new strategies to our repertoire, we felt happier; our children behaved better. A great way to ditch the guilt is to work out what you're already doing right. Here are the seven parent types. See anyone you recognise?

1 THE PAUSE PARENT DOESN'T OVERREACT IN A CRISIS

When you see her collecting her children from school, this woman looks remarkably

calm. You'd never guess her house is a building site. The kitchen was supposed to be ripped out and replaced while the family were away on holiday for the summer, but the builders went bankrupt halfway through and she came home to a huge mess and no cooker.

Her children are bickering and causing a scene, hitting each other with their school bags. Yes, she's embarrassed about their behaviour. Secretly she feels like throttling them (as well as the builders), but she makes a deliberate decision to stay quiet and not to get involved in the squabble. She knows from experience that in time, once she gets her children home and they've calmed down, she'll be able to sort everything out.

IN A NUTSHELL If you aren't a natural Pause Parent, it can be nearly impossible not to react to provocation. But if you can take a deep breath and stay quiet, there's no chance of blurting out something horrible you'll regret later. It's amazing how many family arguments quieten down on their own, and are much better solved when everyone is calm.

2 THE CHEERLEADER PARENT FOCUSES ON THEIR CHILD'S GOOD POINTS

These parents are incredibly positive. You can always spot them at the nativity play; they've been waiting for hours, video cameras charged, so they can bag the front row. When their child comes in, third sheep from the right, they can't stop smiling, clapping and dabbing their eyes. Afterwards, they congratulate their little darling for every little nuance of his performance and praise him for every bit of it. They seem to have missed the part when he picked his nose all the way through the innkeeper's solo, and couldn't be more proud.

IN A NUTSHELL If you notice the good things your child does and tell him what they are, he's more likely to listen to you. "Well done, you've already cleared up one corner of your bedroom," is much friendlier and will get it tidied faster than, "Why the hell is this room still such a tip?" The more →



KAREN:
"We wondered, how did other parents get their children to eat broccoli, wear seatbelts, tidy up?"

GEORGIA:
"We asked questions everywhere: at the school gates, at dinner parties, in the queue at Tesco"

specific you are, the better. If you say, “I like the way you’ve straightened your desk,” he’s more likely to believe you than if you gush that he is always so helpful.

It’s easy to only give your child attention when he is misbehaving, but keep your eyes out for the one time he’s sitting at the table without tipping his chair, and mention it. Chances are you’ll get a repeat performance.

3 THE TUNED-IN PARENT UNDERSTANDS THE FEELINGS BEHIND THEIR CHILD’S BEHAVIOUR

Tuned-in parents go in with the assumption that there’s a reason behind their child’s behaviour. When their little angel bulldozes another child’s sandcastle, they don’t thwack her with a spade or force her to apologise. They’ll probably take her quietly to the side and find out what happened from both points of view. They might find their child felt aggrieved because the other child snatched her bucket. Once she feels understood, better behaviour and even an apology are more likely to follow.

When their children fight, Tuned-in Parents listen quietly to each child’s side of the story. Once their child has aired her grievances, she’ll let go of them more easily. **IN A NUTSHELL** Listen to your child when she has a problem. There’s no point telling her to cheer up or stop making a fuss, because it won’t work. If she says, “I hate homework,” be sympathetic and agree that homework can be a pain. You aren’t letting her off the hook, only acknowledging that you understand how she feels. This will save hassle in the long run – once she feels you’ve heard her, she’ll probably pick up her pencil and get on with it. As well as solving short-term problems, tuning in can help you connect with your child and she will have the security of knowing you understand her.

4 THE PHYSICAL PARENT KNOWS THAT WHEN THEIR CHILD FEELS WELL, HE USUALLY BEHAVES WELL

These parents don’t go in for much of the psychological mind-bending stuff. They know that children are a lot like Labradors and need lots of good food, fresh air and affection. They give their child organic muesli for breakfast instead of Coco Pops, and put wholemeal bread and fruit in his lunchbox. They try to walk or cycle to school with him, and after so much exercise he is happy to go to bed on time.

IN A NUTSHELL If your child is lazing around or strung out on too much sugar, you might want to make changes, but you won’t

be winning any popularity contests. It takes courage to limit screen time or to swap Krispy Kremes for courgettes.

But when it comes to his health and your sanity, it’s worth having a go. Chuck all the junk out of the kitchen cupboard, walk to school (even if it’s only part-way), and go to the park at the weekend. With luck he’ll be so exhausted from all the activity, he’ll have no trouble going to sleep. If you do nothing else, just spend time with him or give him lots of hugs and kisses; it’s one of the best ways to show him how much you love him.

5 THE SORTED PARENT THINKS AHEAD AND STAYS ONE STEP AHEAD OF THEIR CHILD

Sorted Parents are easy to spot. They’re the ones who arrive at school in the morning, make-up on, hair done and ten minutes early. Their children have all the right kit and bits; uniforms are neatly ironed and name-taped, homework is finished, permission slips are signed and music practice is done. These parents are a real wind-up for the rest of us who straggle along, not remembering the things we’ve forgotten until it’s too late. Most irritating of all is their children never misbehave in public, because they tell their children ahead of time exactly how they’re expected to behave.

IN A NUTSHELL Sorted Parents stay ahead of the game by being organised and training their children up. If you find you’re constantly fire-fighting and never getting ahead, getting organised might seem impossible. But if you can get to grips with your worst trouble spots, it will save time and hassle in the long run. Who on earth wants to pack up all the school bags the night before and put them neatly by the front door? But it has to be said, if it’s done, you don’t have to run around the house at dawn like a maniac looking for everything. And if you show your child ahead of time how to do it, she might surprise you by helping.

6 THE COMMANDO PARENT HAS NATURAL AUTHORITY AND GETS THINGS DONE WITHOUT SHOUTING OR NAGGING

You can often hear Commando Parents before you see them. They’ve got big voices and big hair – they seem to have big everything, though they may only be of average height. When they walk into a room, you immediately know they’re in charge. Though some Commandos bark orders at their children, others have a more subtle natural authority. All they need to do

is make a polite suggestion and their children leap into action and don’t waste time arguing.

IN A NUTSHELL How these parents get things done is remarkable. If you ever plead, nag and then lose your temper, instead try giving clear instructions in a way that won’t get your child’s back up. For example: by giving options: “Blue trousers or green trousers?” you can bypass the entire argument about whether it’s time to get dressed; by giving information: “There’s a towel on the floor,” you don’t have to order him directly to pick it up. And by expressing your feelings: “I’m embarrassed when you talk like that,” you can give him the chance to do the right thing without being told off.

If their children still don’t cooperate, it’s no more Mr Nice Guy – Commando Parents move straight to consequences. They don’t bottle out when it’s time to enforce them, so their children know they mean business.

7 THE LAID-BACK PARENT ENCOURAGES THEIR CHILD TO DO THINGS FOR HERSELF

Laid-Back Parents are delighted to see their children doing things for themselves and don’t try to control every aspect of their lives. They didn’t mind their daughter’s mismatched clothes and lumpy ponytail in kindergarten, and they’re proud when their son starts taking the bus to school on his own. When they plan holidays they canvass the whole family for good ideas, and if there’s an argument, they ask everyone to help come up with a solution. The result – their children are confident to do far more for themselves than most.

IN A NUTSHELL Laid-Back Parents don’t feel the need to prove they’re Superparents. They don’t want to control their children’s lives, and know it’s often best if they don’t. They don’t feel they need to be everything to everyone all the time. Plenty of perfectly wonderful parents realise they can’t do it all themselves, so they get friends, neighbours, family or hire someone to spread the load.

If your child is having trouble at school, try asking her for ideas instead of jumping in and sorting everything out. She’ll be more confident if she knows she can solve problems for herself and that you respect her judgement. If you step back just a bit you’ll be amazed at how competent she can be without you hovering over her and doing everything. ■

Seven Secrets Of Successful Parenting by Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge (*Bantam Press, £12.99*) is out now. For more information, visit karenandgeorgia.com