

PERFECTING YOUR PARENTING

Suzie Skipper, mum of 4, ranging from toddler to teenager, puts the latest parenting advice to the test. Illustrations by Charlotte Cleveland.

You did the antenatal classes and learnt about every aspect of giving birth. You probably did baby care classes too and left hospital with your gorgeous new addition. Two years on your sweet, cooing baby has turned into a tricky toddler who dives onto the supermarket floor at a moment's notice, refuses to eat anything green and doesn't do 'sharing'. Maybe you have another baby or two and suddenly getting out of the door is like wading through treacle. Tea time is a war zone. You hear yourself saying the same phrases your mother said to you or, worse, start shouting. Sound familiar?

I truly want to enjoy my children and like all parents get so exasperated by the everyday situations. I am always saying I'll do things 'in a minute' and hardly ever get round to playing that much requested board game. One day I asked my children what I should learn about being a parent. 'Be more fun, stop getting cross and play with us more' were the answers I got. So I decided to check out what was available to help the modern-day parent.

THE CLASS

'Surely all you need is a bit of common sense?' said a friend when I said I was going to parenting classes. I too wondered what would greet me when I attended a Positive Parenting Course run by The Parent Practice. I was pleasantly surprised to find a group of like-minded mums and dads genuinely in search of parenting tips.

Most of us tend to point out what's wrong with our children's behaviour. Actually when we tell them what they're doing wrong they often tune it out. We should reinforce good behaviour with praise. Lots of us encourage our children with phrases such as: 'Well done, darling' or 'Fantastic!' But this type of praise, according to my facilitator, is unspecific and focuses on the end result rather than the effort and attitude shown.

So what should you do? It is far more effective to remember there is always something to praise (I wasn't entirely sold on this but, hey, it was worth a go). I tried it out on my 6-year-old who is not keen on tidying up after making a mess. The playground was a scene of devastation. I tried to look for the positive (not easy). 'You've already started putting some of the puzzles in their box. What a good start! You are being very helpful and cooperative at tidying up,' I said rather awkwardly but with a big (slightly gritted) smile. And lo and behold, she looked at me and said: 'I can do the other puzzle too, Mummy.' Progress!



THE FACE-TO-FACE CONSULTATION

I booked a 45-minute consultation with Elaine Halligan of The Parent Practice. I had already filled in a 4-page questionnaire about my children.

Elaine decided to train in Behaviour Management when her son (now 14) started having difficulties at school. She isn't a psychologist or a psychoanalyst, she's simply a parent trained to give others practical tools in parenting. She immediately discussed the difficulties I have getting one of my daughters out of the door in the morning. Before I knew it I was opening up about my relationship with her and how bad I feel about getting irritated with her.

Elaine's prognosis? Stop issuing instructions and get her to do her own thinking. Praise her when she is helpful with her younger siblings and encourage her to use those skills to get herself ready when asked. She tells me to start a 'golden book' for each child where I capture what they've done well and why.



THE TELEPHONE CONSULTATION

Dr Clare Bailey is a GP, mum of 4 and founder of Parenting Matters. She was also the inspiration behind the BBC show, Little Angels. Clare explains that her coaching courses use a well-researched positive parenting approach based on cognitive behaviour therapy. I had already emailed Clare my main worries and we got started.

Tea time is a concern for me. I look forward to seeing my children after school and crave time talking about the events of the day. But more often than not, everyone is fractious, demanding my attention and big brother enjoys winding his siblings up. Clare says I should encourage the children to sort out their squabbles themselves: not make a big deal unless someone is genuinely hurt.

She suggests I get a small jar to put a marble in each time I see positive behaviour at mealtimes. Once it is full, collectively they can choose a treat. Ideally, it would take no longer than a week to fill. Before we sign off Clare reminds me of my tasks: organise the jar and write a list of what I would like to see more of at mealtimes so the children know what they are aiming for. The jar is an instant hit. Even my teenager starts to contribute more positively. I feel I've learnt a lot and could get quite addicted to our weekly chats.



THE BOOK

Dubbed the Trinny and Susannah of parenting, Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge aren't psychologists or parenting experts. They are simply mums with eight children between them who've done lots of research and have a keen interest in parenting. 'We started an informal parenting group and followed a number of courses and read loads of books on the subject,' says Karen. 'We discovered that there are seven different parenting skills. So to make it fun we gave each one a name and a picture.'

Their second book 'Sibling Rivalry' is certainly compelling reading, well set out and easy to read. My children, like most, have their fair share of squabbles. The biggest ones tend to erupt when I've just answered the phone or am negotiating heavy traffic. These petty quarrels quite often end up with me shouting and everyone feeling bad. So what's the best way to stop a fight? Be a 'Laid Back' parent and ask your children to solve it: 'When they come up with the answer they're far more likely to stick to it.' I often get sucked into their arguments and end up making them worse. Try being a 'Pause Parent' by zipping your lip and not getting involved. 'When your children know that bickering won't get your attention, they'll often stop on their own.' But what if you really can't stand it anymore? Easy. Be a 'Commando Parent' and use swift, firm intervention such as saying a single word like 'Noise!' Far more effective than a long explanation.

'Don't let sibling rivalry fester. Take the steam out of the emotional pressure cooker by having quiet chats with each child to calm things down,' suggests Georgia.

THE CD

The Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting Programme has been developed over thirty years by learning and behaviour specialist and author, Noel Janis-Norton. Noel is an inspirational woman. She



FACT BOX

- Elaine Halligan at The Parent Practice
theparentpractice.com
- Dr Clare Bailey at Parenting Matters
parentingmatters.co.uk
- Karen Doherty & Georgia Coleridge 'Sibling Rivalry'
karendgeorgia.com
- Noel Janis-Norton and Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting
calmerparenting.co.uk
- Family life advice service
greatvine.com

RECOMMENDED READING

- How to Calm a Challenging Child by Miriam Chachamu
- Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting by Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge
- How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- Siblings Without Rivalry by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- Could Do Better by Noel Janis-Norton by Cassandra Jardine
- How to be a Better Parent by Sue Palmer
- 21st Century Boys by Sue Palmer
- Raising Happy Children by Jan Parker, Jan Stimpson and Dorothy Rowe



began her career as a teacher in the US when she found she had a gift for getting kids to cooperate.

When Noel's two children went to university she came to London, fostered an English teenager and set up the The New Learning Centre, which offers classes, DVDs, CDs and books.

Before our chat, I listened to one of her new special topic CDs 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Mealtimes'. Mealtimes in my house have become functional: I

cook, serve and run around after them like a surly waitress. My bug bear is not sitting properly at the table and getting down without asking. Noel suggests I do a one-minute 'think through' with each child at a neutral time of day. I should ask a question such as: 'Who decides when you get down from the table? What do good table manners mean in this house? Or why is it so important to say please and thank you?'

Noel suggests I sit at the table with them even though I'm not eating. This way I will be setting a good example and won't feel like an unpaid servant. Next mealtime I give lots of 'descriptive praise', where I notice every tiny thing they have done well. At first it sounds really stilted: 'You're sitting up straight! I notice you're using your fork and not your fingers.' My teenager thinks I've gone mad but seems happier as I'm more relaxed. As the praise starts to slip off my tongue, my younger ones are positively bristling with pride. Towards the end of the meal we have an escape. I follow the advice and praise the ones who are still sitting at the table. Then calmly ask her to sit down and ask properly to leave the table. The penny is slowly dropping.

THE VERDICT

Proactive parenting certainly isn't for wimps. It takes an awful lot of energy but it really does work. Children don't come with a little instruction book and parenting doesn't always come naturally. If you were working as a lawyer or in marketing, you'd keep your skills up to speed by doing courses or attending seminars on the latest topics. So why not do the same with parenting? It has really made me think about my parenting style, how I'd like things to be at home and I've picked up some new tips. You never know I just might play that game of snakes and ladders ... in a minute.