

Carrot or stick?

If 'manners maketh man', how do you instill them? **Max Davidson** looks at the problems facing both parents and schools when it comes to disciplining children

Is it really only 25 years since corporal punishment was banned in British schools? It feels like much longer. The cane-wielding headmaster, terrorising his charges, has become like a stereotype from a Victorian novel, a figure lost in the mists of time.

Many such veteran headmasters are actually still alive, living in blameless retirement in Torquay or Eastbourne. But if an MP stood up in the House of Commons and demanded their restoration to their former eminence, he would be greeted with jeers of derision. Corporal punishment in schools is history. There is no going back. On that everyone – or, rather, more or less everyone – is agreed.

There is much less consensus – in fact, a total absence of consensus – on the question of how best to maintain discipline in the

new, gentler, environment of the 21st century. It is legally still admissible for British parents to smack their children, but only in moderation and only at the expense of feeling guilty for weeks afterwards. Many parents – if not yet a majority, approaching a majority – simply cannot countenance hitting a child, whatever the circumstances.

I recently witnessed an extraordinary vignette in a shopping centre in Oxford. It was like a parable of modern parenthood in its increasing complexity. A boy of about six was playing up, pulling faces, bumping into other shoppers. His mother was at the end of her tether, which finally snapped. She did not lay a finger on the child. She just loomed over him, purple with fury, and screamed, at the top of her voice: "Dominic, you are a waste of SPACE!"

The boy looked crushed, on the brink of tears. He will remember that scream all his life. He may be haunted by feelings of inadequacy, low self-worth. If his own mother thinks he is a waste of space....

Would it have been less traumatising to give the boy an admonitory slap? I don't have an answer to that question, but it does need to be asked.

Parenting is much too elusive a skill to be approached in a dogmatic, one-size-fits-all way. Different children need handling differently. There is a lot of clumsy trial and error involved. There always has been. But many of today's parents also need a road map. In a climate of super-vigilance by the state, where the protection of children from abuse is paramount, they don't feel totally confident trusting their own instincts.

The good news for stressed-out parents is that they are not alone. Unless they live in the Outer Hebrides, they will have friends and neighbours with not dissimilar problems. And there is no shortage of good self-help books, from *Divas and Door Slammers* by Charlie Taylor, who has taught at a special school for children with behavioural difficulties, to *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting* by Georgia Coleridge and Karen Doherty, who have eight children between them and have certainly done the hard yards, from nappy-changing to breaking up food fights.

Their recipe for good parenting is flexible enough to accommodate everyone from the 'cheerleader' parent to the 'commando' – who both sound a bit scary, in the nicest possible way. But parenting, alas, cannot be codified or reduced to a simple formula. There must be seven hundred secrets to doing it well, never mind seven.

The teenage years can be absolutely bloody – although help is at hand. The website www.mydaughter.co.uk is a good resource for parents whose little princesses turn into screaming prima donnas when they hit puberty. If you get really desperate, you can attend parenting courses laid on by Teenagers Translated (www.teenagertranslated.co.uk). But in a way, the very existence of such courses is indicative of the scale of the problem. All parents try their best, as a matter of course. But millions are left feeling helpless in the face of mounting indiscipline in the home.

If parents have trouble dealing with out-of-control children, teachers are in the same boat. In theory, they are professionals, with years of experience to draw on. They are the experts, the way the police are the experts when it comes to riot control. A strong teacher can control an unruly class by force of personality alone. There is no need to wield the big stick. It is when the unruly class is in the hands of a less strong teacher,

with very few disciplinary sanctions at their disposal, that the problems start.

Many nursery or pre-prep schools favour the naughty step or equivalent. The medicine works, up to a point. But is humiliating children the same as disciplining them? You can bet that, 30 years from now, there will be adults who harbour bitter memories of being made to sit on the naughty step, just as their parents harboured bitter memories of being caned. There is no safe, pain-free way to instil discipline and good order.

There are hugely divergent attitudes to discipline in the independent sector, with different schools doing their own thing. Parents expect schools to take a hard line on drugs, for example, but in more and more schools, instant expulsion is no longer the automatic sanction if pupils are caught using them.

For good or ill, there is a widespread recognition that offenders are entitled to a second chance. But when that second chance doesn't work, or detentions and gatings are treated as a joke, where does one turn to next?

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"Discipline at my children's prep school is practically non-existent," says one mother of four, who spends her life playing peace-maker in the war zone known as the family kitchen. "One of the teachers told me that the rule-of-thumb at the school was that children should receive 90 per cent praise to 10 per cent criticism. How does that work?"

Answer: it doesn't work. In fact, it's plain potty, a recipe for disaster: spoiled, self-centred children growing up to be spoiled, self-centred adults, the sort who sulk if they don't get their own way and take offence on the slightest provocation.

I am not arguing for a reversion to the bad old days, when the recipe was more like 10 per cent praise to 90 per cent criticism, and regimenting children was seen as more important than boosting their self-confidence. My daughter, who attended quite a strict school, once came home in floods of tears because, despite getting every single answer in a maths test correct, she had only been awarded 9 out of 10 – the teacher that thought giving her 10 out of 10 would make her big-headed.

But, like many parents, I would like to see a better balance struck between the stick and the carrot. Even now that the stick is only a metaphorical stick, and the carrot is organic and from Waitrose, cooked the way the little darling wants, the same basic principle applies. Love and encouragement, although intrinsic to good parenting, are not enough. If you want your children to grow up into the sort of adults who will enjoy the respect of their peers, you need to set clear boundaries and stick to them. In a word, you need to be able to say no. 