

# 'We're natural cheerleaders, but we've had to learn COMMANDO TACTICS'

With eight children between them, Georgia Coleridge and Karen Doherty have experienced every family peak and pitfall possible. And now they've condensed their knowledge in a new book that divides the parenting world into seven distinct types

Report CAROLINE PHILLIPS Photographs CHARLOTTE MURPHY

**I**m sitting at a kitchen table in West London's Notting Hill talking to the two parenting gurus of the moment. Their children – a total of eight between them – are at school, but there are bikes and scooters in the hallway, two fish tanks on a worktop, and the fridge is covered in magnetic letters, like a hundred thousand other family kitchens around the UK. It's the home of Karen Doherty, and this table is where she and Georgia Coleridge have spent the past five years writing their book *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting*.

Karen, 44, and Georgia, 42, became friends through their offspring. 'We met in the communal garden that our houses both backed on to,' explains Karen, who has Californian surfer-girl good looks, matching accent and Juicy Couture tracksuit. 'Our children would run in and out of each other's houses,' adds Georgia, more bohemian in her spotty dress and with the face (in the words of her husband) of a prettier Cherie Blair.

Karen is the partner of Peter Doherty, a financier, and mother of three girls and a boy, aged eight, nine, 11 and 13. Georgia is married to Nicholas Coleridge, writer and managing director of Condé Nast, publisher of glossy magazines such as *Vogue* and *Glamour*. They have three boys and a girl, aged nine, 12, 15 and 16.

Despite being the kind of groomed, confident women who make mothering look easy, both admit to having felt paralysed with fear when they first became parents, and being tested to the limit by their own children's antics. 'My youngest son was the naughtiest in his nursery class,' says Georgia. 'He got up to endless mischief with Karen's son, who was his best friend. And two of

our daughters were also partners in crime – at the age of five they escaped on to the street through the garden fence.'

Karen, who is forthright and witty, has an MPhil in management from Oxford and was a producer and journalist for American television before she became a full-time mother. Georgia, an Oxford graduate in politics, philosophy and economics, is children's book editor of the *Daily Mail*, a reviewer and a spiritual healer. Tiptop academic, journalistic and caring credentials on both sides – but the idea for their book stemmed from their complete lack of confidence at the thought of bringing up children.

'When I had my first baby,' says Karen, 'I was terrified I wouldn't be able to cope. I'd never changed a nappy, and I was worried that I'd make

with each other and didn't do what they were told. Whenever there was any sign of trouble, either I panicked and froze or lost my temper.'

They both attribute their lack of instinctive parenting skills to difficult aspects of their own childhoods. Karen was raised in California by her father James Weinberg, then a Hollywood lawyer, and mother Patricia, then a nurse turned housewife. Her parents divorced 25 years ago. 'My mother hated having her authority challenged,' she explains. 'Her dogmatic approach worked with my younger brother and sister, but I stood up to her, and she didn't like it. To her [she'd been brought up by a Christian fundamentalist father] I was the devil child, the root of all evil in the house. She screamed and shouted and meted out physical punishments

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mistakes and ruin my relationship with her. But then I saw how well a friend of mine dealt with her son when he was rude to his great-grandmother. If I'd behaved that badly as a kid, I'd have been slapped across the face and reminded for months of my insolence,' she says. 'So my friend's sympathetic approach was a revelation. I realised how much I needed to learn, so I started reading lots of parenting books and signed up for classes.'

Georgia remembers feeling a similar sense of panic and bewilderment. 'I had intended to be Julie Andrews up a mountain with a guitar and permanently happy children,' she recalls. 'So it was a terrible shock when mine argued with me, fought

that would be considered child abuse these days – like hitting me so hard with a wooden spoon that it broke. She just didn't know how to deal with me.'

Georgia, the elder of two daughters born to George Metcalfe, then a businessman, now a life coach, and his wife Elizabeth, who did charity work, was raised in Fulham, West London, amid gerbils, dachshunds and her mother's home-made tapestry cushions. 'My mother would be nice... then even nicer... then when being nice didn't get through, she'd lose her temper volcanically,' Georgia recalls. 'My parents divorced when I was eight and I became like...' She pauses. 'Do you remember the boy in *The Snow Queen*? When the queen's mirror ➤

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: NADIA BOBAK



Passing on their  
parenting wisdom:  
Karen, left, and Georgia

YOU 20 APRIL 2008





Practice makes perfect – Georgia and Karen with their children (clockwise from bottom left): Alexander and Freddie Coleridge; Anya, Cian and Natasha Doherty; Sophie and Tommy Coleridge; Alexandra Doherty

◀ breaks, a shard goes into the little boy's heart and he can no longer feel proper emotion. I'd been a sunny child until then but I coped badly with the underlying tensions and sadness, and my mother pretending it was all OK. I was fine at school [she won a scholarship to St Paul's, the top London girls' school] but at home I froze up and wouldn't connect with my mother at all.

'She had had a very difficult childhood too,' Georgia adds. 'Her own mother ran off when she was two, and her parents fought a vicious custody battle over her for 16 years. So she'd had poor parenting herself, yet she did her best as a single mother to look after us and hold everything together. But she was suffering, I was suffering and it was all just too painful. When things were at their worst, there was no money because my father's business had folded and my mother was struggling to keep us all afloat. She couldn't physically even kiss us goodnight – she just couldn't touch us because life was too much for her.'

Interestingly, both Georgia and Karen had better relationships with their fathers than their mothers. 'I told my father everything,' says Karen. 'He was the one who helped me sort out boyfriend troubles and took me to buy my first bra. To him I was an angel and he always saw the best in me. He never shouted at me or hit me, and I responded much better to his style of parenting –

very gentle, very thoughtful. When I did misbehave, he'd sort it out sympathetically.'

And Georgia? 'My father was just so cuddly and affectionate, I've always got on with him,' she says. 'I am so grateful that my mother didn't repeat the pattern from her own childhood, and fight him for custody. It was a lifeline seeing him at weekends.' So for both Karen and Georgia, most of their 'mothering' came from their fathers.

'But let's put this in perspective,' says Karen. 'Neither of us had idyllic childhoods, but nor were they terrible. There are plenty of people far worse off.' And despite their troubled experiences, both of them have gone on to have large families of their own. 'My relationship with my mother didn't put me off having children,' says Karen. 'And luckily my temperament is very like my father's. When each baby was born I loved them so passionately I just kept on getting broody. But I knew I'd reached my limit after having four children in five years.'

For Georgia, raised as one of five children from the age of 12 (both her parents remarried so she acquired two half-sisters and a half-brother), large families

seem normal. 'I love the different characters and relationships you get in big families,' she says.

Yet both women felt they couldn't cope with the reality of a sprawling family without additional help. 'I hired a nanny for a time, because I couldn't manage a baby, two toddlers and a five-year-old on my own,' explains Karen, who has no extended family nearby, having moved to the UK 20 years ago when she met her husband and won a place at Oxford.

Georgia adds, 'I had a wonderful lady to help me out. And I was lucky because when Alexander [her oldest child] was born, I went back to the office part time. Then, as I had more babies, I found I could do large chunks of my job in the middle of the night when the children were asleep. But,' she adds, 'I kept thinking, if it's tough for me, how incredibly hard it must be for other people. Like most parents, I've been tired for years and years. That's why I wanted to find solutions that work for everyone.'

Georgia's four children are all now at boarding school. Isn't this surprising in a parenting guru? 'Yes, I'm frightened people will say, "How can she write about parenting when her own children board?"' But the two youngest have only just started, so for 16 years I've had children at home full time,' explains Georgia. 'I mourned each of my children for a year before they went to school. My husband says boarding days were the happiest of his life, so they wanted to go too. It was a hard decision, but a good one. They love boarding and my relationships with them are still very strong. The only thing we've lost,' she continues, 'is the fight over homework. I spend tons of time with them in the holidays, see them most weekends, and speak to them up to three times a day. I'm still very physical with them. Even Alexander, my 16-year-old, will sit on my knee and hug me, although he's taller than me now.'

What, though, makes the duo think they can tell the rest of us how to parent? 'We can't,' responds Georgia. 'And we don't want to. I've thrown lots of bossy, patronising books, the sort that tell you there's only one way to do it, in the dustbin.'

Instead, they collected anecdotes and solutions from all sorts of parents – at the school gates, in grocery queues, at parenting classes, even in sandpits. 'Most of our stories came from mothers,' says Karen, 'but as we both had such great fathers we tried to get lots of input from men too.'

Both of them think their own husbands do a fantastic job. 'Nicholas is a great father,' enthuses Georgia. 'He's very affectionate, cooks them breakfast and stands on the side of a hockey pitch in horizontal ▶

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## Seven ways to successful parenting

Karen and Georgia have identified seven parenting types, each with their own unique approach to family life. If you have children, you will almost certainly identify with one or more of them, but what can you learn from the other parenting styles?

**PAUSE PARENTS** give themselves time to think. They stay calm and quiet and don't overreact in a crisis. If their child is arguing, whingeing or shouting, they realise it doesn't help to get wound up and sucked into the drama. They know that once everyone has simmered down, everything will become clear. Then they can pick up the pieces, solve the problem, and maybe even stop the same scene playing itself out again in the future.

**CHEERLEADER PARENTS** focus on their child's good points and are great at motivating with praise. It's not that they don't care if their child misbehaves; they stay positive because they know it gets results and that bad behaviour tends to shrivel up from lack of attention. Often saying something kind is all it takes.

**TUNED-IN PARENTS** understand the feelings behind their child's behaviour and try to work out why he is behaving as he is. When their

child is behaving badly or being defiant, they assume there's a good reason for it, even if they don't know exactly what it is. So before telling him off, they listen. They are brilliant at breaking deadlocks by helping their child deal with difficult feelings.

**PHYSICAL PARENTS** realise that there don't always have to be deep psychological reasons for bad behaviour; sometimes children get ratty because they are exhausted, cooped up for too long in front of the television or juddering with sugar. They know that if their child feels well she will usually behave well – that she will be far less grumpy if she isn't full of junk food, has a run round the park and gets a good night's sleep. They also know a hug can work miracles.

**SORTED PARENTS** stay one step ahead of their child. Getting themselves and their children organised removes a whole layer of stress. If children know in

advance when the television is going to be switched off or who is going to get the window seat in the car, they are far less likely to argue about it. Being a sorted parent is about seizing the upper hand and refusing to be a victim of fluctuating circumstances.

**COMMANDO PARENTS** have no-nonsense authority and are good at being in charge. They get things done without shouting, nagging or being bossy and everyone knows where they stand with them. 'The juice is spilt, we need a cloth' works much better than 'You're so naughty – clean up that mess now!'

**LAID-BACK PARENTS** manage to chill out and encourage their child to do things himself, rather than controlling every aspect of his life. They trust their children's judgment and encourage them to develop their independence. Asking a child for solutions gets his brain working and helps him to feel more confident.

how to be more authoritative, more of a Commando type, and it has helped a lot.'

'I'm naturally a Pause Parent,' says Karen.


'When my children started fighting, my mind went blank and often I didn't know the best thing to do or say. But I found that saying nothing is a lot better than shouting, and once everyone has calmed down, it's easier to sort things out. I also take after my father as a Tuned-In and Cheerleader Parent. But I could become more Sorted. It's a miracle when my children all end up at school with the correct kit on the right day.'

Writing the book has also helped them to resolve childhood issues and their relationships with their own mothers. Georgia had lunch earlier this month with both her parents, in a restaurant in Westminster. 'By some fluke, Mrs Thatcher was upstairs,' says Georgia, 'so everyone was up there gawping and we had the ground floor to ourselves. We spoke about things that we'd avoided for 35 years and had to keep wiping away the tears. My relationship with my mother had been like a raw egg – neither of us had dared tap too hard on the shell in case we found all sorts of raw, runny, scary emotion inside. Now for the first time we were able to tap the egg and talk directly.'

Karen and her mother have also had a reconciliation. 'I refused to talk to her for years in my teens,' she says. 'There was such a wall between us. But we've been able to get beyond that now. She says she regrets all the years we lost. Touchingly, she also says I'm the best parent she's ever seen and she's now using our techniques with her grandchildren.'

Their relationship improved when Karen's children were born. 'My mother came and helped me, as her mother had helped her. It was the first thing she'd done for me in decades, and I saw a calm, more compassionate side of her.'

There will be no stopping the born-again parents now. They've been doing public speaking engagements, have just launched a parenting website, (KarenAndGeorgia.com) intend to run parenting classes and are bringing out a book on siblings next year. 'The connection with our mothers wasn't what we'd have wanted and we've both tried hard to give our children what we missed,' concludes Karen. 'It's taken a hell of a long time to figure it out and make it simple so it works. Now we just want to help

others too.' And they will. 

*Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting by Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge will be published tomorrow by Bantam, price £12.99. To order a copy with free p&p, call the YOU Bookshop on 0845 606 4204 or go to you-bookshop.co.uk*

rain. He took Alexander and Freddie to Egypt, on his own, when they were five and six. I'm not sure what was more exciting for them – seeing the pyramids, or being allowed Coca-Cola!

'I couldn't have had so many children if Pete wasn't such a good father,' agrees Karen. 'When they were babies he did endless night shifts, and as they got older he'd take them swimming and cycling. Now he's always around in the evenings to help with homework, and at the weekends he's on pancake duty.'

Karen and Georgia's book distils their findings into seven parenting types and a collection of simple, accessible, easily remembered emotional tools for dealing with everything from getting your child to clean his teeth or turn off the television to picky eaters and bullying. The idea is that you don't

have to be one sort of parent all the time – you can adapt different approaches to deal with different situations. It's about finding a style that feels comfortable for you, and works with your children. If your child is persistently naughty, picky about his food or being bullied, for example, you will need to try more than one approach. 'The more options you've got, the easier it is,' says Karen, 'but we're not here to tell you which type of parent to be.'

And which type are they? 'I'm good on the friendly stuff,' says Georgia. 'Like my father I'm a naturally Tuned-In and Cheerleader Parent [see box, above]. But I've had to learn

*The more parenting options you've got, the easier it is'*