

Tiny Tempers

Unable to cope when her child went into meltdown, **Janey Downshire** decided that a radically different approach to parenting was called for

I wish I had understood something about what was going on inside my baby's head when she was placed, newly born, in my arms, 20 years ago – because it would have saved me years of battling with her. I remember only too well the feelings of despair that this little bundle seemed to know exactly where my reactor button was. And her finger was glued to it. As she got older, when I tried to impose boundaries, the intensity of our confrontations snowballed. I remember my defining moment: she was 13 and as we screamed at each other, I realised I had reached breaking point. Things HAD to change: I felt full of despair, but did I ever seek help? No. I never even thought of it. And what could I do about it anyway?

I had enrolled on a counselling course, studying psychology, and as I sat in a lecture, one day, I had a light-bulb moment. My intellectual focus had become "The Therapeutic Relationship". But the principles were just as poignant to me as a parent. What was ironic was that if I had been creating, let's say, a state-of-the-art building, I would have planned it and I would have acquired a top-of-the-range set of tools. Instead, I had embarked on this journey with something akin to a nail file.

Thankfully, my counselling training shone a light on the path ahead. What I had to do now was transfer all these great theories, sciences and philosophies into a do-able parenting package – for myself.

I had adopted a parenting style of firmness, structure and rules. This was backed by a belief that if I let my baby get away with stuff, I would be making a rod for my own back. How wrong I was. I also learned that as a society fixated by labels, there are even labels for parenting. You might call the *laissez-faire* approach a "Permissive Parent", (let's not argue about it, darling) and then there is the "Authoritarian Parent" (I'm in charge, do as you are told).

I was also keen to know how science comes into all of this? How does it shed light on to a less polarised but more firmly grounded "Authoritative Parent"?

The answers again lay in what I learned on my course about the

brain and how biochemical messengers, which respond to whatever we are experiencing, take information around our bodies and brains.

Life for a baby, a toddler or a teenager is about learning how to cope with and adapt to life's banana skins. Our "primitive" brain (the part of the nervous system dedicated to our survival) is subconsciously programmed to seek comfort. While we are encountering the normal ups and downs of life, we are considered to be "settled". But what happens when we feel rising panic? What happens if the toddler's needs are not met, or the teenager is faced with criticism?

At this point, our primitive brain tips into our "unsettled" cycle where our fear or rage systems hop into the driving seat. Once we are pelting down the bumpy road,

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whether baby or adult, we display a cocktail of behaviours to match either our fear (clinging, hysteria, sulky, tears) or our rage (no tears, tantrum, defiance, aggression).

And this is where the Authoritative Parent comes in. They know that their child's responses to life's banana skins are learned through them (the mother or carer). And when the parent responds calmly to a child's needs, they are, in fact, programming them to learn how to calm themselves down.

So that I could take on the guise of Authoritative Parent, I applied the following. Firstly, it's about being able to be calm. This is succeeded by being able to take my time, wait for calmness to descend. I learned to understand that behaviour is a means of communicating an underlying need, for which the child needs attention.

In the case of the Authoritative Parent, it is about being sensitive when confronted with unacceptable behaviour: I had to learn how to control how I reacted to a tantrum. Previously, by trying to control my child, I was ensuring that we were both emotionally "out of control". How many times had I tipped into the same old pattern of discipline, punish, control? And this takes me back to brain science. If I had had a picture in my mind of my own fear and rage systems being linked to my child's, I would have realised that by "encouraging" her to use her fear and rage systems more, I was not only escalating the feelings of fear and rage, but I was giving this muscle a real exercising. Her hysteria was mine and mine was re-enforcing hers. Gulp!

Next up, was how my responses would have a positive effect on my child's behaviour. Where she learned from me to stamp her foot to get what she wanted, she was going to spend the rest of her life doing the same (and probably have no friends).

If my child, however, experienced kindness and responsiveness, then she will be armed, with the tools to cope with and respond appropriately to the pitfalls to come. 

Further information

Janey Downshire and her partner Naella Grew founded Teenagers Translated, advising parents on how to manage those tricky teen years. For courses on toddlers and teens www.teenagerstranslated.co.uk

