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The rights and wrongs of parenting programmes

Elizabeth Brooker

Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood at the Institute of Education

Liz Brooker finds that, by divesting toddlers of their tantrums on prime-time TV, the programme-makers are also divesting them of their rights.

Excerpt from *Child of our time*

Young triplets are individually assessed by being presented with tasks and questions by an adult tester.

Voice-over Our children are growing up at different rates ... our highest scoring child is also one of the best behaved ... Now, it's the triplets' turn. Phoebe's not being very helpful. [Phoebe does not co-operate with the tester]. Next up is Alice. Alice is completely uninterested: her behaviour was marked lowest of all our children. Now it's Mabel's turn. She won't play ball either. Their development is slow, and that may be due to lack of discipline.

Dad They just weren't interested.

Voice-over And if the children weren't interested, their parents won't force them to try...

A few weeks ago I was contacted by a researcher for the BBC TV programme, *Child of our time*, and asked to help them devise an experiment that would show the impact of computers on children's creativity. I was busy and did not give much thought to my response, which was perhaps over-hasty: I not only declined the invitation, but informed the researcher that I disliked the programme's use of 'experiments' on children and felt 'very dubious about the ethics of putting children on TV as public infotainment'. Exactly a week later, I received another invitation: to write about TV parenting programmes for *Early Education*. In response to this invitation I have looked more carefully at what is offered to the viewing public as 'child development' and 'parenting education'. Unfortunately it hasn't changed my mind.

Programmes about children's behaviour and parents' roles are only one facet of the pervasive concern with 'problem children' and 'problem parents' which is crystallised in the government's Respect agenda (the *Respect action plan*, 2006, reports that 85% of people in the UK blame the rise in anti-

social behaviour on poor parenting). While the importance of parenting is more widely recognised than ever, the public discourse, like the government's policy, contains mixed messages. On the 'good' side of the policy divide, we are told that parents, as their children's first educators, are our partners and colleagues in the shared project of fostering children's wellbeing and laying the foundations for a future society which is more healthy, more happy, more prosperous and more equal. Parents are the experts on their own children, and professionals must respect them, listen to them and work with them. At the other extreme is the discourse which blames parents for the failures in child-rearing which have brought about our present social malaise. Bad parents, weak parents, inadequate parents are the reason, apparently, why ASBOs seem to be dished out like Smarties. Like the young children featured in *Little angels*, parents can be seen as either 'angels' or 'demons', and the public project – like the TV series – is to turn them from the bad side to the good. The recent spate of programmes in which experts and nanny-figures arrive on the scene to bring badly behaved young children into line exposes parents, rather than their children, to public censure.

As if to underline this message, the BBC has made its wisdom available on the BBC Parenting website. 'Parenting Videos On Demand' is an edited collection of clips from previous programmes, including *Child of our time* and *Little angels*. The former may be perceived as part of the BBC's serious educational output – it regularly calls on eminent professors – while the latter is more popular entertainment, but they present messages and methods which are highly complementary. For one thing, both programmes make their point by employing 'experts' to show us – the non-experts – the 'truth' about child development and good parenting. For another, both tend to present children as small animals who, unless rigorously tamed and managed, will turn round and bite the hands that feed them (sometimes literally). At the same time, both can portray the parents they are 'helping' as similarly simple-minded subjects for conditioning. And both expose ordinary parents and children to the public gaze in ways which appear to disregard their rights, and have potential consequences for their off-screen lives.

The 'truth' about children and childrearing

Both *Child of our time* and *Little angels* call on impressively qualified experts: along with the professors. They employ 'straight-talking psychologist Dr Tanya Byron', 'family-relationship expert Rachel Morris' and other parenting gurus. While these experts adopt a genuinely supportive and sympathetic tone with the families they work with, the professors and the programmes' voice-overs are more ominous, informing us that 'well-behaved children are more likely to be high achievers', and warning of the consequences of allowing children too much liberty. In the case of the triplets, it is claimed, 'these parents don't believe in taking control of their children's lives: they believe childhood is a time for freedom'.

Child of our time proves its point by conducting 'tests' on its child subjects, such as 'the interactive test' which involves putting the toddlers in a playroom with some toys which they are forbidden to touch, and then filming them as they gravitate towards the 'banned' objects. Any child's 'lack of

control' is then hailed as an example of the bad behaviour which results from poor parenting, and is linked with the same child's poor performance on developmental tests. The tone of disapproval is unmistakable.

The solution to the bad behaviour depicted in the sensational opening clips of each programme – little toddler animals swearing, fighting, spitting, biting and reducing their parents to tears – is surprisingly simple: behaviourism, or conditioning which rewards good behaviour with treats and bad behaviour with a loss of attention and privileges. And it works; we see that it works, as parents whose lives have formerly been wrecked by their children look back in relief at the changes brought about by their sticker charts and time-out chairs. The question that is not asked is whether this emergency relief – which takes all control of their own behaviour away from the child by *defeating* the child's quest for power and autonomy – is an appropriate long-term solution. Miracle cures make better television than the long and dispiriting slog to help a child towards self-management.

So, for 5-year-old Luke, four stars a day for good behaviour (no cheek, no spitting, no aggression) are rewarded by 'Mum reading a comic with him'. No stars, no comic. Meanwhile, for 3-year-old Ryan, the plan is for Mum to play with him for 10 minutes a day.

These small rewards, along with a profusion of commendations for being a 'good boy', are enough to turn the 'little demons' into 'little angels'. At the same time, by prioritising parental 'control', they ignore the alternative option, in which children learn to understand their own feelings and manage their own behaviour.

Treating parents like children

Like their children, the parents featured in these programmes are up for re-education, though the process is slightly different. The first step is for a technician to video in the family home for a week or two, before the 'expert' is filmed walking up to the front door with the videotapes. The next step, as parents and expert watch the evidence, is for the parents to become tearful and distressed as they identify their own shortcomings and their children's awfulness. At this point they will gratefully accept the expert's offer to work with them to regain control.

The procedure – in all the cases we are shown – is as skilful as it is effective. The expert talks the parents through their interactions with the troubled child in real time on an audio- and video-link, using exactly the same strategies as the parents are directed to use with their children: "Brilliant. I liked the way you said that. Now walk away." Like their children, parents may have to go through an extremely painful transitional period and apply sanctions which they themselves describe as cruel (shutting children in the bathroom for three minutes, ignoring their spoken appeals for five minutes) before the children succumb to their parents' control. But the time-out chair and the withdrawal of attention and affection eventually subdue even the most stubborn child, and both children and parents are 'rewarded' for persisting with the agreed means to the desired end, in which children know their limits.

Public exposure, personal rights

Of the many troubling questions raised by these programmes, three stand out. Many people will wonder, for instance, how the families can have consented to such public exposure for themselves and their children (it is clear that the young children themselves had no opportunity to 'consent'). In the days that follow the broadcast – and in the months of availability on the website – how do parents come to terms with the knowledge that their own neighbours, and their children's teachers and caregivers, have viewed their battles, their vulnerability, their distress and humiliation?

Secondly, what of the risk that the short-term fixes of assertive discipline will turn into long-term patterns for parent–child interaction or will be emulated, in inappropriate ways, by parents viewing the programmes? After a day of viewing the BBC Parenting website I found myself visualising a whole nation of children spending time sitting on the time-out chair, shut in the bathroom or ignored by their parents.

But the most troubling message of all in these programmes is that children's own autonomy and agency is a dangerous thing. Unlike the parenting courses offered at children's centres and family centres, they depict successful parenting as 'winning the struggle for power'. In a climate where early educators are committed to a view of children as powerful agents in their own lives, these messages can leave one feeling very pessimistic indeed.