

INTRODUCTION
MANAGING CHILDHOOD



No matter how calmly you try to referee, parenting will eventually produce bizarre behaviour, and I'm not talking about the kids.

Bill Cosby

In an affluent corner of London, in a primary school built more than a century ago, a very modern parent-teacher evening is in full swing. My wife and I are here for an interview about our seven-year-old son. A few parents sit outside the classroom on plastic chairs, staring at the floor or glancing at their watches. Some pace the corridor, fiddling nervously with mobile phones.

The Year Two workbooks are piled up like small snowdrifts on a table. We flip through them, smiling at eccentric spellings, cooing over sweet drawings, and marvelling at the complexity of the arithmetic. Our son's triumphs and failures are laid bare on the page, and they feel like our own. I celebrate each gold star in his workbook with a silent cheer.

Eventually, Mrs Pendle invites us into the classroom. Our son seems to be thriving, so we have high hopes for the interview. Once we take our seats at a low table, Mrs Pendle delivers her verdict: our son is very good at reading and writing; his maths is solid; his science could be better; he is well behaved and a pleasure to teach.

It is a very good report, yet somehow not quite good enough. ‘She didn’t mention his amazing vocabulary,’ says my wife, as we walk away from the classroom. ‘Or explain why he’s not in the top group in every subject,’ I add. Our tone is jocular – we’re making fun of the pushy parents you read about in the newspapers – but there is an edge to the irony. We partly mean it, too.

After my wife goes home to relieve the babysitter, I head off to visit the art teacher. ‘Your son really stands out,’ she gushes. ‘He always comes up with a different twist on things.’ That’s more like it, I think to myself. One of his works is pinned to the wall of the art room as a model for other pupils. It is a sketch of a scraggy magician done in the style of Quentin Blake, who illustrated the books of Roald Dahl. Underneath the portrait, our son has depicted the old man’s head from different angles. The teacher takes it down to show me. ‘Amazing for a seven-year-old to come up with something that plays with perspective like that on his own,’ she says. ‘He really is a gifted young artist.’

And there it is, that magic word, the six letters that are music to the ears of every parent. *Gifted*. I walk home from the school already mapping out my son’s ascent to the top of the international art world. Will his first exhibition be in London or New York? Does he need an agent? Are we raising the next Picasso? Suddenly, all those visits to the Tate

Gallery, all those Sunday mornings spent dragging the children around the Turners and Titians, have paid off. My son is an artist.

My wife is delighted by the news, not least because the father of a classmate was present when the art teacher delivered her panegyric. After a late supper, I start sifting through parenting magazines and surfing the Internet, hunting for the right course to nurture our son's gift. The ad that catches my eye promises, 'Unlock your child's genius!' My wife wonders if I'm going too far, but her words are no more than background noise to me now.

The next morning, on the walk to school, I float the idea of enrolling in an art course. But my son is having none of it. 'I don't want to go to a class and have a teacher tell me what to do – I just want to draw,' he says, firmly. 'Why do grown-ups have to take over everything?'

The question stops me in my tracks. My son loves to draw. He can spend hours hunched over a piece of paper, inventing alien life forms or sketching Wayne Rooney dribbling a soccer ball. He draws well and it makes him happy. But somehow that is not enough. Part of me wants to harness that happiness, to hone and polish his talent, to turn his art into an achievement.

Of course, I am not the first parent eager to steer my child to the top. It comes with the territory. Two thousand years ago, a schoolteacher named Lucius Orbilius Pupillus identified pushy parents as an occupational hazard in the classrooms of ancient Rome. When the young Mozart helped make prodigies fashionable in the eighteenth century, many Europeans hothoused their own children in the hope of creating a wunderkind. Today, however, the

pressure to make the most of our kids feels all-consuming. We want them to have the best of everything and to be the best at everything. We want them to be artists, academics and athletes, and to glide through life without hardship, pain or failure.

In its more extreme form, this brand of child rearing has different names around the world. Helicopter-parenting – because Mum and Dad are always hovering overhead. Hyperparenting. Scandinavians joke about ‘curling parents’ who frantically sweep the ice in front of their child. ‘Education mothers’ devote every waking second to steering their children through the school system in Japan.

Yet parents are not the only ones curling, pushing and helicoptering. Everybody, from the state to the advertising industry, has designs on childhood. In Britain, a task force of parliamentarians recently warned that too many children dream of growing up to be fairy princesses or soccer stars. Their solution: career advice for five-year-olds.

Wherever you look these days, the message is the same: childhood is too precious to be left to children and children are too precious to be left alone. All this meddling is forging a new kind of childhood. In the past, the Working Child toiled in the fields and, later, in the factories of the Industrial Revolution. The twentieth century saw the rise of the Free-Range Child. Now we have entered the age of the Managed Child.

Before we go any further, let’s be clear about one thing: not all childhoods are created equal. You don’t find many children being project-managed in the refugee camps of Sudan or the shantytowns of Latin America. Even in the developed world, millions of youngsters, especially in

poorer families, are more likely to suffer from underparenting than overparenting. Let's be honest: most helicopter-parents hail from the middle classes. But that does not mean this cultural shift only affects the well-to-do. When it comes to social change, the middle classes often set the tone, and over time their hang-ups and foibles trickle up and down the social ladder – or at the very least they make everyone else feel guilty for failing to keep pace.

Look around and it's clear that children are already the target of more adult anxiety and intervention than at any time in history. A pregnant friend in New York e-mails to say that she spends one hour every evening pumping WombSong Serenades into her bump in the hope of stimulating her unborn infant's brain. On the other side of the world, ambitious parents are enrolling their children in an 'Early MBA' programme in Shanghai. Every Sunday morning, the pupils learn the value of team-building, problem-solving and assertiveness. Some are barely out of nappies.

Many children now keep the kind of schedule that would make a CEO queasy. Infants are shuttled from baby yoga to baby aerobics to baby sign language lessons. In Corte Madera, California, Gail Penner bought a Palm Pilot for her son John's birthday to help him keep track of his extracurricular activities – piano, baseball, Spanish, basketball, soccer, tennis, swimming and karate. 'He's so busy he needs to learn how to manage his time,' she says. John is ten.

Even when children do have spare time, we are often too afraid to let them out of our sight. The average distance from home British kids are permitted to wander by themselves has fallen nearly 90 per cent since the 1970s. My son,

like more than two-thirds of his peers, has never walked to the park alone.

Technology helps us keep tabs on children like never before. GPS devices embedded in their jackets and school bags turn them into little red blips on our computer screens at home and at work. Mobile phones increasingly double as tracking devices: if a child drifts out of the designated 'safe zone', Mum and Dad get an instant text message. Day-care centres and nurseries are installing webcams so parents can view real-time footage of their toddlers from anywhere in the world. Even summer camp is no longer a refuge from the prying eyes of the twenty-first-century parent, with photos and video clips relayed from remote lakes and forests to inboxes back home or uploaded to the Web. 'People used to be happy leaving their kids with us for a week or two without hearing any news apart from maybe a postcard or the odd phone call,' says one veteran camp counsellor in Colorado. 'Now, we get parents freaking out if their kid doesn't appear on the website every day. Or if he does appear and isn't smiling.'

This is the first generation to star in its own version of *The Truman Show*. It starts with the print-out from the ultrasound scan and moves on to eavesdropping on the womb with prenatal heart listeners. Actor Tom Cruise was so desperate to monitor his unborn daughter that he bought his own sonogram machine, despite warnings from doctors that his amateur spying could harm the foetus. After birth, every moment is then captured in digital and Dolby. Like paparazzi, modern parents are always lurking, finger on the shutter release or the record button, waiting for that perfect shot – or seeking to engineer it. I catch myself barking

orders from the director's chair: 'Just make that face one more time for the camera.' Or: 'Everybody stop playing for a second and look at me with a big smile.'

The micromanaging no longer stops at the end of school. Many Britons now plan every detail of their children's 'gap year' before university. Parents in China take on average a week off work to settle their offspring into college, with many moving into makeshift accommodation on campus. North American universities are assigning full-time staff to field the deluge of calls and e-mails from mums and dads who want to help pick courses, taste-test cafeteria food, proofread essays and even screen Junior's roommates. The umbilical cord even remains intact after graduation. To recruit college students, blue-chip companies such as Merrill Lynch have started sending out 'parent packs' or holding open house days when Mum and Dad can vet their offices. 'Our candidates and our interns look more and more to their parents when they're making career decisions,' says Dan Black, director of campus recruiting in the Americas for Ernst & Young. Employers even find parents tagging along to their children's job interviews. One candidate recently turned up at a leading consultancy firm in New York with her mother in tow. 'Mom asked all about the salary, promotion prospects and vacation package,' says one of the interviewers. 'It was like she just couldn't hold back.'

These days, nothing is too good for our children. I am amazed by how much stuff my own kids have. How did it happen? We are not a shopaholic family, yet their rooms are submerged in a river of toys – and that's just the ones we haven't carted off to the charity shop. What will happen when they discover information technology? Will they end

up like Julio Duarte Cruz, who, like teenagers all over the world, rushes home from school to spend time with his gadgets. 'My bedroom is my own virtual world,' he tells me via e-mail from Seville, Spain. 'And my parents like it because they know exactly where I am.'

By any yardstick, we are raising the most wired, pampered and monitored generation in history – and is that really such a bad thing? After thousands of years of trial and error, perhaps we have finally stumbled on the magic recipe for child rearing. Maybe all that micromanaging pays off in the end. Maybe we are bringing up the brightest, healthiest, happiest children the world has ever seen.

Reports of the death of childhood have certainly been exaggerated. There are many advantages to growing up in the developed world in the early twenty-first century: you are less likely to suffer malnutrition, neglect, violence or death than at any point in history. You are surrounded by material comforts that were unthinkable even a generation ago. Legions of academics, politicians and companies are striving to find new ways to nurture, feed, clothe, school and entertain you. Your rights are enshrined in international law. You are the centre of your parents' universe.

Yet childhood today seems a far cry from the 'nest of gladness' imagined by Lewis Carroll. And parenthood is no walk in the park, either. In many ways, the modern approach to children is backfiring.

Let's start with health. Cooped up like battery hens, with little exercise and a high-calorie diet, children are growing dangerously fat. In the United States, manufacturers are