

MGN MIRRORSURE

Why pushy parents should slow down to let our kids thrive

AS A NEW SO-CALLED UNDERPARENTING TREND IS PRAISED BY EXPERTS, MUM SIOBHAN MCNALLY ARGUES THAT WE SHOULD LEAVE THOSE KIDS ALONE.



Some parents are helicopter parents. Helicopters overparent kids, micro-managing their lives in the vain hope a punishing schedule of Mandarin, ballet and violin lessons aged three produces CEOs and high court judges.

And then there's me - submarine mummy. I prefer to dive to depths, underparenting for weeks at a time, surfacing only to shout "go to sleep" at my daughter Jesse, who's nearly four, before tuning back into Corrie.

One day, Jesse will spread her wings, come down with a few bumps, then hopefully fly off - while I catch up on a lifetime's-worth of lie-ins.

How can I make sure she will succeed? Not by entertaining her for hours, doing her homework or driving her between daily engagements, that's for sure.

An Eton housemaster has spoken out at the relentless pressure from pushy parents - turbo-charged dads and "tiger" mothers. By not allowing children to take risks, make mistakes and learn

from them, Mike Grenier, a leading light in the 'slow education' movement, argues we are demotivating them and holding them back.

As a sloth mother, I support his call for enforced idleness. Being bored, daydreaming, staring up at the clouds - this is how children truly learn to use their imagination.

After all, Eton has produced 19 prime ministers, and all of them have certainly been creative - even if it's just with the truth.

Child psychologist Dr Pat Spungin prefers to call underparenting "benign neglect", which is just a nice way of saying ignore them until they try to put the cat in a dress.

An advocate of good-enough parenting, she says: "If only every child could be brought up as a third child, parents would be more relaxed and not always be on their child's case."

So how have we ended up with so many spoilt children, stuck in pushchairs aged four, who interrupt our conversations, refuse to play on their own and won't go to sleep until

well after Wine O'Clock? Fans of tough-love parenting say we need to stop babying kids and make them responsible for themselves.

If they never experience the consequences for their behaviour - such as going hungry until teatime when they don't eat their lunch - they'll never break the cycle of poor behaviour.

Dr Spungin's children learnt the hard way. She says: "One daughter was always late for everything, which was frustrating for my husband as he did the school run on his way to work."

"One day, he got so fed up of waiting he drove off and left her. It took her two hours to get to school!"

If children can't be left to work out how to get down safely from a tree branch, they won't learn to make death-defying decisions as adults.

Assessing risk is as important as learning to read and write. Since we've been wrapping them up in cotton wool, studies show the cognitive ability of children to take risks has declined over the past 60 years, with five-year-olds

Fake praise is damaging - but reward proper effort

How NOT to baby your preschool children

1 Make them walk
The Government says under fives should be active for three hours a day. They can't do that if you're pushing them everywhere.

2 Make them dress themselves
Dr Spungin says the process can be developmental, so if your child can't do his laces, make him put his shoes on but help with laces.



3 Make them do chores
Even little ones can help at home. Tidying up and setting the table makes them feel competent, says Dr Spungin.

4 Don't fill their day with lots of activities
Just a trip to the park can be the highlight of the day, says Dr Johnson. "Hanging out together will be more valuable than all the Mandarin classes put together."

5 Don't teach them to read
Dr Spungin says: "Specialists

feel it's best for a child to learn with their class and experience the breakthrough to literacy together."

6 Don't overpraise them
"Fake praise is damaging. Kids gain confidence from making an effort and then succeeding. Reward that effort with praise," says Dr Johnson.

7 Don't spoon-feed them
As soon as your child can use cutlery, do not help them. If they don't eat their food, clear it away and don't offer anything else.



CLOSE: But Siobhan and Jesse keep their distance

Kristin's diary



LIVING WITH CANCER

Birthday icing on the boobey cake

This week's feel-good factor ☺☺☺☺●

I have mixed feelings about November. It's a bit like Marmite – you either love it or loathe it. The days get shorter, people start sporting an upside-down smile and snotty noses. It's starting to get chilly and Christmas music gets played way WAY before it should. But it also happens to mark the end of October (with Breast Cancer Awareness Month, a stressful time to be running any kind of boob-related organisation, I can tell you). It brings about brilliantly coloured leaves, the scent of crisp, wintry mornings – oh, and MY BIRTHDAY.

However, I am currently one of those said people – i.e. sporting a snotty nose with an unhappy face – which, for



MASTERPIECE: Maren, right, and I mark CoppaFeel's birthday

someone with cancer, is a bit ironic. The whole "not being able to breathe properly along with the bright red nose" thing is just inconvenient, slowing me down like a turtle. And while I'd choose a cold over cancer any day, it's still annoying.

So, it is a really good job the countdown to my birthday week (my twin Maren and I know how to milk it – it's only fair since we have had to share our birthday since 1985!) has officially begun.

But it was another special birthday last week too – CoppaFeel! turned three. Three years ago, we were granted charity status to spread a whole load of boob love. And what a good day that was.

In fact, it was the very same day I had my mastectomy to remove the boob that had thrown my life into chaos.

And although I was groggy from the anaesthetic, when my sister told me the good news, I just didn't care.

I knew from that moment that I was about to dedicate my life to telling people to check their boobs. We have achieved so much over three years and although there is still much to do, it feels good to look back and reflect and celebrate our successes. And eat cake.

A CoppaFeel! birthday isn't a proper birthday without a boob-shaped cake (thanks to Two Little Cats Bakery for creating a true masterpiece!)

And talking of cake, we are launching CoppaFeel! Cake O'Clock this month too. Tuesday November 20 is about to become the ultimate day for elevenses by munching cake and checking your boobs.

We need you to make cakes, sell cakes, eat cake and get talking with colleagues, friends, daughters, mums and grandmothers about boobies.

Up to the challenge? Yes, you are! Head to coppafeel.org/cakeoclock for the lowdown. Birthdays, cake and boobs. Who am I kidding? I LOVE November!



Kristin Hallenga is founder of breast cancer charity CoppaFeel!
To find out more go to WWW.COPPAFEEL.ORG



CHILL: Take the relaxed approach



PLAY: Jesse keeps herself amused

in 2010 displaying the same levels as three-year-olds in 1950.

Eyebrows were raised at a mums' coffee morning when some of the parents found out I was putting my preschool daughter on her rural school's bus on her own, rather than hand delivering her into class.

When Jesse asked to use the bus, it never occurred to me to refuse on the basis of age. It's safe, convenient and I'm proud of her independent spirit. Although she does lose her bag or coat unless it's glued to her.

Equally demotivating for children is the current parenting fashion for praising them endlessly. At a

children's party with Jesse recently, some parents started doing the clear-plate clap just because a kid had stuffed his face with nuggets and chips. Praise for eating junk food is pointless – save it for when he gets accepted into university.

Child psychologist Dr Rachel Johnson from expert advice service Greatvine.com says: "Fake praise can be damaging. Children don't need continual praise – but make sure proper effort is rewarded."

This half term, rather than organising playdates and trips to museums, parents should be giving kids the space to play on their own

and use their imagination. Not all children are good at this, but Dr Johnson says you can teach a child to play independently (see below).

Or you could do what my mother-in-law did to get away from her four kids – lock yourself in the loo with a book.

Some would say that given half a chance, a kid who's been left to his own devices would just stick the telly on. But allowing them to veg out in front of the TV can be fine too.

Dr Johnson says: "Good quality television is beneficial. CBeebies, for

example, is educational and there are no adverts. Plus you can sit and chat about what's on."

One of my pet hates is seeing big kids squished into pushchairs, feet dragging along the ground. Not only are they being deprived of exercise just when their growing bones need it, but being stuck in a buggy cuts them off from the rest of the world.

"With the rising levels of obesity, it's a good idea to get kids walking as soon as possible. Ideally, a child who's three, nearly four, should not be in a pram," advises Dr Spungin.

Underparenting isn't a charter on how to be a lazy mum – it's about knowing when to back off and let them brush their own teeth, buy their own toy or fight their own battles.

So give yourself and the kids a break from each other. Trust yourself to make the right decisions, and don't beat yourself up about it when they inevitably turn out to be wrong.

As Dr Spungin says: "If you start with the premise that a parent's place is in the wrong, you can ask your kids to 'take me as I am'. After all, what other relationship are we expected to perform perfectly in?"

How to teach your child to play on their own

If your child has difficulty playing on their own for even five minutes, Dr Rachel Johnson advises helping them by:

- 1 Giving them an activity to fill this time.
- 2 Make it very clear to your child that you're leaving them to play alone

- 3 without you for five minutes. Before the five minutes is up, don't wait for your children to come and find you – make sure you go and check on them.
- 4 Encourage and praise their play.
- 5 Repeat this until they finally succeed.

How to let teenagers grow up

- 1 Don't nag them to do homework "Teenagers are old enough to be responsible for their own work," says Dr Johnson. "Leave the teaching to the teachers, but always attend prize-givings and parents' evenings."
- 2 Make them spend their own money "Pocket money should be a mixture of earned, given and saved," says Dr Spungin. "Children should also put their



- allowance towards expensive purchases or school trips."
- 3 Don't use cash rewards for good reports "Working hard should be incentive enough," says Dr Spungin.
- 4 Give them housework Teenagers should help with most chores, including changing beds, washing and cooking.