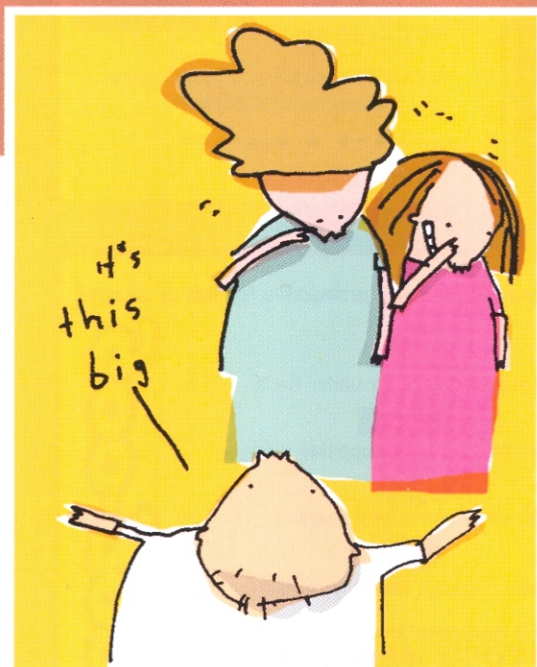


who's afraid of the big bad dad?



When my partner and I became parents, we earnestly agreed that we were going to share the responsibility for doing the telling off. I promised I would never do the “wait till your father gets home” bit – I hadn’t spent years calling myself a feminist for nothing! My other half was also adamant that he didn’t want to be the “big bad Daddy”. Unfortunately, we hadn’t reckoned on the kids giving him the job anyway.

We are, I think, typical Nineties parents. We dutifully do all the classes going – we even did pre-wedding ones, where we smugly agreed that money wouldn’t become an issue for us – after all, we were both professionals and had tons of it. Little did we know how briefly that feeling would last, that having babies is like flushing bank notes down the toilet. Parenting issues were calmly discussed in the clear NCT light of day; our lives were to be a series of easily negotiated, pre-agreed events.

The first time I noticed things weren’t going to plan was when our first child had a tantrum,

“But he’s only two years older and the height difference is, what, three inches?” Doesn’t matter, two years are a lifetime to some children, and three inches is what makes my youngest drown while my oldest can breathe in the swimming pool – pretty important stuff.

Then there’s work. We both work, but Daddy goes on a train, to London with a suit and briefcase, while Mummy is a writer and

When forced to play with Thomas the Tank Engine, she lines them up nicely for tea parties.

Everything I have ever struggled against in my idealistic, pre-baby years has been destroyed: Mummies stay at home and do weak, ineffectual, mummy things, that is an irrefutable law of nature. My own mother spends half her time rock climbing and the other half sailing boats across the North Sea, yet to the children she is Gran, who sits in an armchair knitting.

I do think in the end it is all about willies. Yes, I’ve read Freud, but he makes no sense to the average woman until she has a two-year-old son. Willies are it, and Daddies are it with knobs on (pardon the pun) because they have the biggest ones in the world. Why else would my sons argue with their friends on the school run that “My Daddy has an *enormous* willy”, “Yes, but my Daddy’s willy is GIGANTIC.” Who cares? Their Daddies are also developing enormous beer bellies, but no one’s bothered.

Okay, if I’m really truthful it is also partly

In the end it is all about willies. Willies are it, and Daddies are it with knobs on. Why else would my sons argue with their friends on the school run that “My Daddy has an enormous willy”

countering all my reasonable requests with “No!” and foot-stamping. My temper was rising, my voice getting higher, when Daddy walked in, took one look, and bellowed “Enough!” Instant silence, from both warring factions.

Since that day, the bellow has appeared more frequently than we would have hoped, but it works every time. Try as I might, I can only produce a squeak. I don’t know why the bellow works and the hysterical squeak does not, but maybe it’s a reflection of natural pecking order. Daddy walks into a room where the children are fighting, juts out a male jaw, squares some male shoulders, and they cower.

Mummy walks into a room and nothing happens. It’s simple, as far as the kids are concerned: Daddy is the biggest and that gives him top-dog status.

stays at home. I sit at the computer all day, and of course everyone knows that computers are only for playing games.

“But you don’t really work, Mummy.” “Look,” I retort. “I have got a briefcase and here is my latest article in *Junior*.” He remains unimpressed; if I wrote for the *Beano*, or produced Harry Potter book five, that might count, although it would probably still be dismissed as something else mummies do.

I didn’t really figure what was going on until I had my third child – a girl, after two boys. As soon as she could walk, she started sweeping the carpet with the mini-vacuum she inherited from her brothers. The boys had always thought it was an implement for tormenting the dog. Ignoring their trains and tractors, she wants Barbie, as pink as possible.

my fault on the discipline front – anything for a quiet life, that’s me. My solution to a fight breaking out these days is to disappear into the kitchen, shut the door and pour myself a drink. If the screams get too loud I put on some music, preferably something deafening. Sometimes this is enough to astonish the kids out of their battles; my choice of music is a bit retro: Black Sabbath and Deep Purple usually do the trick. “What on earth is that, Mummy?”

However, even that’s backfired, as my eldest son decided after months of heavy-metal drowning squabbles, that he wanted to learn the drums. Daddy now arrives home to a sozzled wife and the sounds of Led Zeppelin accompanied by an eight-year-old drummer – mayhem until he bellows “TURN THAT NOISE OFF!” and we all leap to obey ■