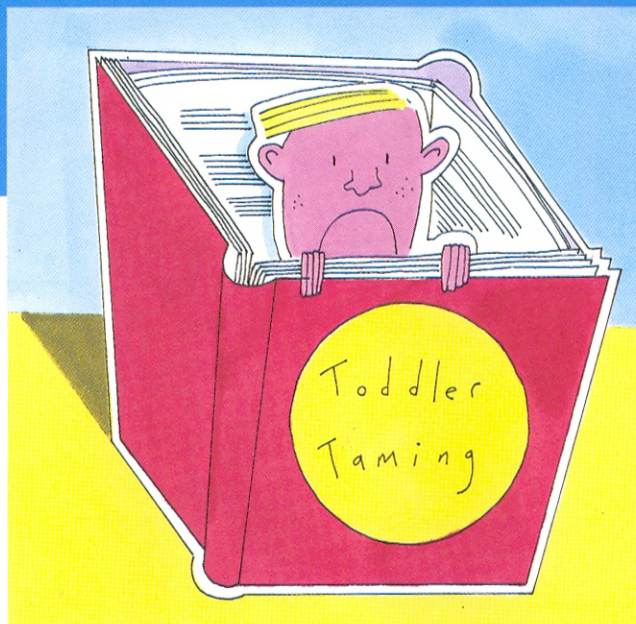


parenting by the book



I do like consulting an expert. First sign of a crisis, I pick up a book. I am that apocryphal mother who, if she dropped her baby, would pick him up with one arm and reach for Dr Spock with the other. My only problem is that my children don't seem to have read the same books as me.

Take the child that won't eat healthily. Having convinced myself that my chubby children were about to keel over from starvation when they refused to eat their greens three days in a row, I consulted famous childcare expert, Miriam Stoppard. Involve your children in food preparation, she advised. This way they're more likely to eat it. Cookery expert Annabel Karmel had some creative suggestions, so I set to with gusto.

It took me three days and two dishwasher loads to clear up the resulting chaos. I only survived because I was fortified by a week's supply of Fairy Toadstools (tomatoes precariously balanced on hard-boiled eggs, arranged on a bed of cress) and Potato Hedgehogs (don't ask), which everyone else had refused to eat.

think it's great! Mummy's being ineffectual, we can ignore her completely.

Dr Leach reckons you should hug your child when he has a tantrum; he may feel scared from being out of control. I tried this and needed osteopathy afterwards. Scared? My toddler thought it was great fun wrestling a prone Mummy. I suppose the diversion factor stopped the tantrum, but it did nothing for my back.

Christopher Green's famous book *Toddler Taming* made me feel a bit better when I read that he believes diversions are better for heading off tantrums. At last I have found something that works for me, only I'm not sure if

in front of the television, completely oblivious to my hardship. I've modelled eating greens till I'm fed up with them too, but no-one is rushing to copy that. Oh yes, there is one behaviour they have decided to emulate – my “oh sh*t” emergency phrase.

Star charts – now there's another method favoured by the childcare gurus. If your child earns so many stars, he will earn a reward. Good capitalist stuff. One thing's for certain, my children won't be ripped off in the big wide world. “Tidy your room,” I suggest. “How many stars will I get?” There then follows some rapid mental calculations. “No, it's not worth it,” comes the reply. “I want five stars at least.” At this rate we'll all be bankrupt. Which guru was it that said children don't need expensive toys – they are just as happy with old toilet rolls and empty boxes? They've obviously never met my kids.

Be assertive, Steve Biddulph says. I asserted and asserted that it was bath time, and my children assertively ignored me. Finally, I lost my cool completely, picked up the oldest and

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“But Mummy, green fings is poisonous.” Creating our edible garden was definitely fun, but who said anything about consuming the end product? I could see their point. When they come back from playgroup with a painting, do they hear you say, “Lovely darling, now why don't you eat it?”

Oh yes, the advice in books always sounds so reasonable, doesn't it? What we fail to remember is that children are not reasonable, and common sense won't materialise until your child is at least twenty-five.

Take the advice in Penelope Leach's books. Children will be nice if their parents are calm and reasonable, seeing the world through child-centred eyes. I've tried being calm and reasonable with my children, and boy do they

I use it the way Green intended. I can easily be diverted to a different aisle in the supermarket when my toddler throws a tantrum. “Yes, shocking,” I agree with the shopping brigade. “Imagine leaving your child on his own making a noise like that. I wonder where his mother is?” I can't linger too long moralising with them in case they notice I don't have a trolley myself and put two and two together.

I've also read that it helps if you ‘model good behaviour’. This theory is that children will do what you do, not what you say, if you model what you want them to do. To this end, I spent hours on the Naughty Chair in the Time Out corner (and it's extremely uncomfortable, believe me). But when I emerged to see where they'd all got to, they were lounging

nearest offender and dropped him into the bath, fully clothed. I then gave myself some “Time Out” – a quick glass of something splashed over tinkly ice in the kitchen. When I crept back upstairs to see what had happened, all three children had gone to bed, tucked themselves in and read each other a story. Incredible! None of the manuals mention this as a strategy though, so I must admit I am beginning to wonder if I've bought the right books.

At least I'm not alone in my obsession. The shelves in my local shop are overflowing with self-help books. I've decided the answer is to write my own book – my creation is going to be called “Kicking the habit; how to stop needing self-help books.” I reckon it will outsell them all... ■