

PUSHY PARENTS

Aggressively and ruthlessly ambitious for their children or just parents who want the best for their children and want them to be the best they can? Where does supportiveness end and pushiness begin for parents?

KIRSTY YOUNG, a broadcaster who is making a four-part TV documentary series titled *The British Family* for BBC, recently lashed out at “pushy parents” who try to shape children into “baby Einsteins” by forcing them into extra maths and language lessons beyond the school day. The *Desert Island Discs* presenter says that many parents are “pre-occupied with children as an extension of their own success”.

Such a viewpoint might well resonate with Judy Murray, mother of Andy Murray, recently defeated in the 2010 Australian Open Tennis Final in Melbourne. Murray’s route to the elevated status of world number two player has been achieved on the back of a dedication to his sport from a very early age.

“Pushy parents exist in every sport but there is a fine line between pushing too much and not enough,” she says. She cites a number of successful parent-player relationships in the competitive world of women’s tennis – Maria Sharapova, Martina Hingis and Monica Seles among them – but is critical of parents who live out their dreams and fulfil their own needs through their children.

Parental obsession with the sporting success of a child is not

uncommon but is rarely taken to the extremes of Christophe Fauvau, a retired French army colonel who received a prison sentence after he had admitted “spiking” the water bottle of one of his children’s tennis rivals – an act that resulted in the death of the child’s opponent, who fell asleep at the wheel of his car when driving home after the match.

This win-at-all-costs mentality is the name of the game, according to *Country Life Magazine*. In a survey of 24 state and independent schools in 2005, researchers reported the concerns of teachers, in both state and independent schools, that annual sports days were often ruined by “overbearing parents” who shout at children and put too much pressure on them to succeed.

Gordon Smith, Scottish Football Association chief, is convinced that too many children are lost to sport as they grow older because they don’t respond to the pressure of touchline coaching by parents who think that they are helping their children to improve.

As Britain prepares for the 2012 Olympics and the Glasgow Commonwealth Games, sports clubs across the country are



adopting a semi-satirical Biblical-style list of instructions – the 10 commandments – created by a renowned American swimming coach.

The commandments warn pushy parents in a light-hearted way not to get carried away and impose their own ambitions on their children. “Bear in mind that there are 250,000 registered swimmers in Great Britain and another 150,000 receiving lessons,” says swimming coach, Greg Lasenby. “Your child’s odds of becoming an Olympian are approximately 0.04%.”

Carol Midgley, a feature writer and columnist for *The Times*, says that if parents decide to “hothouse” their children, they should not be surprised if the children react adversely. “You can’t treat children like laboratory rats and expect them not to bite you.”

HELICOPTER PARENTS

American psychologist Madeline Levine identifies in her book, *The Price of Privilege*, a growing breed of “helicopter parents”, so called because they hover busily over every aspect of their kids lives, absorbing their every achievement as their own. She says this behaviour can become a living hell for their children.

Rachel Thompson, an Open University professor and co-director of the *Making of Modern Motherhood* report, says that grandmothers often see their grown-up (middle class) children as competitive obsessives who approach parenthood in exactly the same way as their careers – with targets, checklists and ruthless ambition. She is critical of the modern pressure and compulsion on parents to be constantly busy and sociable, taking their child to every class available and being up-to-date on endless independent

research into everything from developmental goals to nutrition. Kirsty Young sees this obsession as a modern disease.

BABY GENIUSES

A hot topic for debate in the UK during the past few years has been the issue of reading readiness for young children. Lilian Katz, professor of education at the University of Illinois in the US, says that pushing reception class pupils, children as young as four and five, too hard and too early could put them off reading for life – particularly boys.

Katz was addressing an international conference on early learning at the University of Oxford. Her views strike a chord with researchers at Otago University in New Zealand who contest the view that children should read from the age of

five. Sebastian Suggate, who led the research, says: “late starters at reading are still learning through play, language and interactions with adults. Consequently, their long-term learning is not disadvantaged because these activities prepare the soil well for later development of reading”.

In Scandinavian countries, the formal teaching of reading begins much later, usually when children are 6 or 7 years old, yet the standards attained by children in many European countries – Finland, in particular, where they start school at seven – are often higher than in the UK by the time pupils reach the age of 11.

Sue Palmer, author and former headteacher, says the research evidence from a number of international studies in the development of early reading programmes would suggest that parents in the



UK seem to be obsessed with doing everything at an increasingly early age. “The way things are going, we will have to start phonics lessons in maternity units if we’re not careful,” she says.

So do children start school at too young an age in the UK? Is childhood freedom being curtailed too early in life for children?

William Glasser, distinguished American psychologist, says that “education is the process in which we discover that learning adds quality to our lives, learning must be experienced”. For Glasser,

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JUDITH WOODS, DAILY TELEGRAPH

there are only two places in the world where time takes precedence over the job to be done: school and prison.

The origin of such an early start to full-time education, introduced in 1870, had little to do with education but was intended to reduce the malign influence of feckless Victorian parents. Schooling was more about protecting children and social conditioning. It was also an attempt to appease employers who needed a ready supply of juvenile workers. An early start to schooling would also mean an early school-leaving age.

Is it unsurprising that so many employers today seek well-educated students and that parents encourage their children to work hard and achieve excellent results in their studies as a route to fulfilment and success as well as meeting the needs of the labour market?

Judith Woods, responding to Kirsty Young’s comments about pushy parents, makes a robust defence of those parents who do their utmost to give their children the best possible start in life. “In such a competitive world,” she writes in the Daily Telegraph, “there’s nothing remotely monstrous about wanting your child to fulfil his or her potential – within reasonable limits.” She quotes Benjamin Spock’s 1946 book, *Baby and Child Care*, in which he observed that the child supplies the power but the parents have to do the steering.

One dictionary definition of the word pushy is “offensively assertive or forceful; aggressively or ruthlessly ambitious”. Although there may well be some parents to whom these epithets and descriptions may apply and who attempt to use the Mozart effect on an embryo the size of a comma or breed a sporting legend from a lumpen child who would rather be indoors on the Playstation, there is a danger of demonising the kind of impassioned parental support, dedication and loving encouragement that spurs children on to succeed in those areas that they enjoy. Top athletes like Andy Murray generally think their achievements outweigh the loss of a normal childhood. One could argue that parental encouragement is an essential antidote to a lack of drive, effort or ambition in life.

Being a pushy parent may not be the worst sin of parenting. It is important for parents to play an active part in their children’s overall development. Numerous

research studies and reports indicate that parents have a very influential role to play in developing their children’s attitude to and appetite for learning. It’s not so much a matter of when but how you embark on the journey. The early bird learner may not always catch the learning bug or become the bookworm.

Joan Freeman, author of *How to raise a Bright Child*, caricatures pushy parents – teaching aids on the wall, no television set, a list of verbs on the fridge and a computer that is only used for learning programs. Pushy parents or merely parents trying to stimulate their children’s interest in learning? Perhaps parents should ask themselves whether they really do need to purchase the definitive guide to having the most brainy child in the world or the hot-off-the-shelves *Quantum Physics for Toddlers*.

It is worth noting, perhaps, that Albert Einstein was no Einstein as a student. Before publishing the work that made his name synonymous with genius, he worked in the Swiss patent office because he couldn’t get a teaching post at any reputable university, so poor was his academic record.

As US President Harry Truman once observed, “I have found that the best way to give advice to children is to find out what they want and then advise them to do it.”

