



Broomwood Hall Lower School pupils

EXTRA TIME

Helping children to thrive is an essential part of parenting, says *Annabel Heseltine*

That you are only as unhappy as your unhappiest child is a wonderful truism when said child is bouncing happily through life, but hell, when they are failing and miserable. With the numbers of children suffering from mental health issues increasing from one in nine in 2017 to one in six in 2021 according to an NHS digital survey, many parents will be asking themselves when and how they can help.

'Parents know their children better than anyone,' says psychotherapist Alicia Drummond, author of *Why Every Child Needs a Parrot*. 'You know when they are not thriving; when there is a change in behaviour; a lethargy and lack of interest. Maybe they stop doing the things they have always enjoyed or don't want to play with their friends, or are very reactive, explosively angry or sad. Any signs of self-harming must not be ignored.'

However, there is a chasm between the parent who is reluctant to step in and the parent who steps in too much; neither of which is good for the child. 'You don't want to be trigger-happy but often parents don't act quickly enough. I advise parents to weigh up the situation and it's always helpful to chat to the schools,' says Drummond, founder of TeenTips which has 180 schools from Devon to Glasgow with 90,000 children and parents signed up to its Wellbeing Hub offering specialist advice.

'Being a loving and protective parent is linked to positive child outcomes throughout development but controlling their every move should come with a warning label,' says Adele Monsef, a registered



Smiley toddler at Queen's College Highgrove Nursery

psychologist at The Child and Adolescent Development Centre in London who worries about the parents who micro-manage or 'helicopter' their children. 'When parental involvement is not developmentally appropriate and intrusive, it can be problematic for a child's adjustment and wellbeing.'

Helicoptering can include parents fighting their children's battles or over-schooling them to ensure they win loads of competitions. 'Managing their children's friendship circles undermines them, taking away their ability to feel competent in life so that they develop poor coping and problem-solving skills, have a poor sense of self, doubt themselves and their capabilities, be nervous about making decisions, less open to new ideas and develop a strong fear of failure,' adds Monsef.

'Parents don't want their children to grow up too quickly but they need independence to help them develop into resilient and competent adults ready to take on life's challenges,' she says. 'Helicoptering parents might be trying to protect their children from pain, but they are also quite possibly reacting to pressure from other parents, overcompensating for what they missed when growing up or over-worrying.'

'The most important thing parents can do is to have an understanding of their child's emotional needs,' says Drummond. 'How parents should react to an unhappy toddler is very different to an adolescent teenager struggling with friendships.'

'Children who feel safe with their parents will feel secure going out into the world,' she says, breaking the developmental process down into five stages from tiny babies creating safe bonds and a secure emotional attachment to parents, through the messy creative phase, to learning to be inquisitive, asking questions and taking initiative. Between seven and 11, children want to be industrious and feel successful. Adolescence is when children should be encouraged to be independent, while knowing that there are firm and secure boundaries in place. 'The trick,' says Drummond 'is to lay down the first coin securely. If you don't, then the other pennies might slide off later.'

Drummond, a mother of two young adults, is quick to reassure parents. 'We are good enough and that's all you have to be as a parent. It is not helpful to beat ourselves up. That makes it all about us and is not what they need.' Adding that mental health issues are not just caused by bad parenting; it is nature as much as nurture, the environment, the school or their own genetics. She also offers some hope for parents who know they have made mistakes at one point or another; either because of their own inter-generational 'stuff' or because life got in the way.

'It can be repaired,' she says. 'Nothing is static, nothing is stuck. Therapy can find the developmental gaps and our brain changes according to our



Off for a ride at Abberley Hall School

environment and our experiences. An amazing teacher can help the child who hasn't learnt to trust by creating a safe space at school.' Drummond loves Montessori for its focus on messy creativity. 'Cognitive development can rewire throughout life.'

She recommends schools as a good place to start looking for help. 'There isn't much they haven't seen. They can direct parents in the direction of organisations and charities. Your GP is an option but CAHMS (the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) are overwhelmed.'

And for the child who is resistant to talking therapies, she reminds parents to think laterally and question why they are resistant. For the child with an obsessive-compulsive disorder the idea of giving up the behaviour might be terrifying. 'I had a 13-year-old girl who found talking really hard but she loved horses, so I found her an equine therapist. There are music and art therapies, too.'

So in a neat 360 degrees, we come back to the parent. Ill-educated as they might be in the skills of parenting, they have two important strings in their bow; instinct and will. They know their child better than anyone and they love and want the best for them. They can learn the third. The voice. Learning how to speak to your child is all. When things are going wrong any good parent should start with a gentle conversation. 'You don't seem happy, I am wondering why?'

'Ask. Don't tell.' is the mantra: otherwise you are always on their case. Talk to them like they are your best friend,' advises Drummond. 'We don't tell our best friend to pull themselves together or offer advice unless asked for.' Don't rush in and fix things, the most powerful thing is to sit there and listen.

'Be gentle,' says Drummond, who doesn't believe in attention seeking. 'If children are looking for attention there is something wrong.' And finally use humour. It can work when all else fails.

Monsef describes a moment she witnessed in a park when a mother helped her son manage a difficult situation. The boy was upset and angry that he hadn't scored a goal. His mother looked at him and in a calm voice said, 'When you took your first ever step, you fell over. I am so happy that you decided to get up and try again!' The boy looked at his mother and laughed. ■

ADVICE

Teen Tips

Their wellbeing hub offers 24 hour support for parents, staff and pupils. £7.99 for parents. £5 for schools. Each independent school can 'gift' to a maintained school. www.teentips.co.uk

Happy Confident Company

Kids journals, educational games and courses for happier, more confident children and teenagers. www.happyconfident.com

Calm and Headspace apps

www.calm.com
www.headspace.com

Maudsley Charity

UCL/Kings research created an animated series for parents to help children and for adolescents to learn tools to help themselves www.maudsleycharity.org/familiesunderpressure