

Our little emperors: does worrying do more harm than good?

A backlash has begun against the all-must-have-prizes culture that has produced children used to getting their own way



Margaret Driscoll

As the mother of two young daughters, Ruth Appleton is used to doling out praise for almost everything they do. Even she was taken aback, however, when her younger daughter, Rachel, now 5, arrived home from nursery clutching a certificate for “sitting nicely on the carpet”.

“It made me wonder what she was doing the rest of the time,” said Appleton, from Porthcawl, Wales. “I thought it was a bit over the top rewarding her for something so routine. But it’s part of a whole culture of stickers and smiley faces and ‘celebration assemblies’.”

Anyone with children at primary school will instantly get the picture: no child’s existence is complete without “circle time”, or “show and tell” sessions at which they are encouraged to parade their achievements and examine their feelings. The received wisdom on child-rearing says nothing should be allowed to damage a child’s sense of self-worth: just last week the Football Association (FA) decided to ban teams including children under eight from publishing their results, for fear of putting the kids under too much pressure if they lost a match.

As parents, we are encouraged to nurture our children’s sense of “self”, but are we unwittingly doing them more harm than good?

Our child-centred society means we fret over what our kids eat, what they wear, their friends, their exam grades and their safety. A US academic has coined the term kindergarchy – a new (affluent) world order in which children rule.

“Children have gone from background to foreground in domestic life with more attention centred on them, their upbringing [and] their small accomplishments,” wrote Joseph Epstein, a recently retired lecturer at Northwestern University, in *The Weekly Standard*, a US magazine.

“On visits to the homes of friends with small children, one finds their toys strewn everywhere, their drawings on the refrigerator, television sets turned on to their shows. Parents seem little more than indentured servants.”

Epstein’s recollections of his own childhood evoke an utterly different world. Parents didn’t feel the need to micro-manage their children’s lives. He doesn’t remember his parents reading to him, or turning up to watch him compete at athletics. They left it to him to decide which foreign language to study at secondary school and weren’t much bothered that he was a mediocre student.

Now, he says, it’s a wonder more teachers aren’t driven out of the profession by parents bombarding them with e-mails, phone calls and requests for meetings. “Students told me what they ‘felt’ about a novel,” he recalled. “I tried, ever so gently, to tell them no one cared what they felt. In essay courses, many of these same students turned in papers upon which I wished to – but did not – write, ‘Too much love in the home’.”

In Britain, too, there has been a seismic shift in parenting. “At the weekends, the kids are saying to us, ‘What are we doing today?’ – in other words, ‘You are going to entertain us, aren’t you?’ ” said Appleton, who works part-time for Netmums, an online network for mothers.

It is becoming a worldwide trend. A recent production of *Snow White* at a primary school in Japan featured 25 Snow Whites, no dwarfs and no wicked witch, as parents objected to one child being picked out for the title role. In Sweden a boy was prevented from handing out invitations to his birthday party at school because he was “discriminating” against the two classmates he did not invite.

A straw poll in Netmums’ virtual coffee house produced distinctly mixed feelings about the phenomenon. “The cushioning effect of awarding stickers and praise for inconsequential trivia masks what children really need and are looking for – guidance, consistency, self-reliance and love,” said one mother, Liz.

Another, Jeanette, was concerned that her daughter’s teachers would not correct spelling mistakes, “because she was spelling the words how you said them”, nor correct her writing when she drew letters back to front.

“The reality is, she does need to be corrected,” said Jeanette. “Children have to learn. I’m not saying it has to be negative, but there has to be a balance. When our kids go into the workplace, they are in for a shock.”

That would appear to be true. Earlier this year the Association of Graduate Recruiters said the generation born since 1982 – the so-called generation Y – were “unrealistic, self-centred, fickle and greedy”.

They used the example of a new recruit to a transport company who rang his mother to complain: “I have got to go to London tomorrow and they haven’t even given me a map.”

The employer threw up her hands in anger, according to Carl Gilleard, AGR’s chief executive: “Here was someone working for a transport company, who had spent three years at university, who was aggrieved because he hadn’t been given a detailed map.”

On a more sinister level, the child-centred approach also seems to have contributed to a decline in standards of behaviour in schools, with children ever more conscious of their “rights” and teachers afraid to chastise unruly children for fear of being attacked or accused of assault.

Last week Boris Johnson, the London mayor, highlighted the problem of indiscipline in schools as a factor in street violence. “Too many kids in London are growing up without boundaries, without discipline and without the family structures they need,” he said. “We should bring back discipline and the idea of punishment.”

In Merseyside an academic is bucking the trend of navel-gazing in schools. Peter Clough, head of psychology at the University of Hull, is working with children at All Saints Catholic high school in Knowsley, attempting to teach them to be “mentally tough”.

“Positive psychology says, ‘Count your blessings.’ My kind of psychology says, ‘Life can be hard and you have to learn to deal with it’,” he explained.

According to Clough, mentally tough pupils do better in exams and are less likely to see themselves as victims of bullying. If they fail at something, they try again. Using a diagnostic test devised by AQR, a business consultancy, Clough has been assessing his group’s attitudes to challenges, looking at such factors as whether they consider themselves optimists or pessimists and whether they think they can stay cool in stressful situations. Those with the lowest scores are learning visualisation, relaxation and anxiety-control techniques to help them toughen up.

“I’m encouraging kids not to run away from stress but face up to it,” said Clough. “If you’ve got a maths exam, just do it.”

We have to decide what we want our children to be – tough go-getters or touchy-feely carers. Or is it even about them?

Frank Furedi, professor of sociology at Kent University, believes our child-centredness is really adult-centredness. “It’s a way of reassuring ourselves that our children are going to be insulated from pain and adversity,” he said. “We tell children they are wonderful now for tying their shoelaces or getting 50% in an exam. But really it’s our way of flattering ourselves that we’re far more sensitive to children than people were in the past.”

The trouble is, Furedi says, that it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. “You’re subtly giving kids the message that they can’t cope with life,” he said. “I have a son of 12 and when he and his friends were just nine I remember being shocked at them using therapeutic language, talking about being stressed out and depressed.”

While researching *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*, its co-author Dennis Hayes, visiting professor of education at Oxford Brookes University, discovered a leaflet telling students that if they studied sociology they might come across poor people and get depressed and if they studied nursing they might come across sick people and get distressed – so the university offered counselling.

“It was telling students they could not cope before they started,” he said. “The focus on feelings has become ridiculous. One friend told me his daughter was crying at home one night and when he asked why she said, ‘It’s my turn to put my worries in the worry box tomorrow and I haven’t got any!’” Perhaps we underestimate the resilience of children. One coach of an undereights football team was in favour of publishing results, saying they just enjoyed playing, whatever the score. “They didn’t care that they lost,” he said of one game. It was only 21-0, after all.

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