



FAMILY FIRSTS

Is it too late to *regain control* of our kids?

Lola Borg went to parenting classes and found that some techniques worked on her husband too...

There wasn't one single event that made me realise things had to change in my house. Rather, it was the accumulation of too many little scenarios that felt horribly wrong.

I knew that underneath the surly, moody exteriors, my children – Frankie, 16 and Mary, 12 – were quite nice, but it was getting harder to feel any rush of affection for two lumps who were always hunkered down in front of *The Simpsons* and did nothing to help. They argued constantly and I was exasperated at having to referee. “Will you two stop shouting!” I frequently screeched. And yes, the irony did pass me by.

Added to this was the fact that my husband worked hideously long hours and

just wanted “a nice time” when he got home. I used to joke that when it came to parenting, I was the “Nazi Mum” and he was the “Minister for Fun”. Except, I wasn't joking.

The idea of parenting classes came from a friend, who had turned a pair of whingey toddlers into a vague approximation of Quite Nice Children and said the classes worked for teenagers, too. I put my foot down with my husband and insisted he come with me.

The New Learning Centre promises a “calmer, easier, happier parenting programme”. Admittedly, the husband and I did feel like the clunky “mature students”. But Gillian, the bouncy Assistant Director, was adamant that we hadn't left it too late and offered us three private sessions.

In our first class we learnt the main points of the centre's strategy: one of the primary ones being “reflective listening”, which involves letting the child say what they need to and repeating it back, without making a judgement. Another tool is “descriptive praise” – we were asked to compliment our children at least ten times a day. Come again? For what, exactly? But Gillian insisted, they would not be motivated to please us if we constantly moaned. And it made me realise just how negative I'd been.

Later that day, my son came clattering downstairs, foaming at the mouth. His sister had been in his room and “fiddled with some of his stuff”. But instead of screeching, I stayed calm and did the thing I had never done before – listen, repeating back to him what he'd said. Amazingly, his tantrum fizzled out and he shuffled off back upstairs.

Some things we were asked to do worked better than others. The “descriptive praise” seemed so odd and awkward at first that I almost choked on it. Leaving the children to sort out their own issues when they argued was distressing, especially when I heard them pummelling each other. Sometimes changing my old habits seemed like turning around a juggernaut – just too hard. And the main difficulty was getting harassed and forgetting to do all those things you'd committed to do. It's horribly easy, with a busy life, to let it all slip.

But, for the first time ever, the husband and I were working together. Gradually, we encouraged the children to become more self-reliant, polite, even pleasant. It seems so obvious now that no one is ever going to do anything if you chew their ear off, but I needed a professional to tell me that. One unexpected bonus was using the techniques on my husband – I've found the “descriptive praise” worked like the proverbial charm to get him to unload the dishwasher.

Six months later, we both think the whole family has changed for the better. It takes time to turn a combustible family life around and, on a sliding scale, we are always going to be nearer the Osbournes than the Waltons. But maybe the last word should go to the children. Did they think parenting classes had made a difference? Silence. Then begrudgingly: “You don't moan or shout as much,” was all they could mutter. You know what? That will do.

For more information about parenting classes at The New Learning Centre, call (020) 7794 0321 or visit nlc.info. w&h