

My children have turned into monsters: And, says SHONA SIBARY, it's all her fault for trying to be a nice liberal parent

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Shortly after Florence, our eldest daughter, was born, my husband Keith and I were invited for dinner with friends.

We took our five-day-old baby with us, snuggled up in a new pink blanket in her recently purchased carrier.

Everything felt so shiny and new, so exciting. Here we were, on the biggest adventure of our lives. And weren't we coping well!

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Our friends, who were a little older than us and the parents of 14-year-old teenage twins, seemed exhausted, far more so than us. I remember the mother looking wistfully at Flo and saying: ‘Enjoy her now because, trust me, one day, it won’t be so easy.’

At the time, I nodded and smiled, smug in the knowledge that I had my parenting strategy all mapped out and confident that nothing would ever wipe the shine off motherhood for me.

Roll on nearly 16 years and that little bundle of joy is now a 5ft 9in tall force to be reckoned with. Gone are the sweet smiles and endless cuddles she once offered me, replaced by verbal abuse and emotional blackmail.

Last week, for example, Flo told me I was a b*****, that nobody in the house liked me, and that she could, if she chose, make my life a whole lot more miserable than I was making hers.

Later, long after she’d slammed the front door and flounced off to go goodness knows where, I lay on my bed feeling frazzled and tearful. It wasn’t so much the rudeness and rebellion that was flooring me — aren’t all teenagers vile on occasion? It was the realisation that I had lost control of my children, and that it was all my own fault.

I say this because it’s not just Flo who is whipping up a storm at the moment. The oldest three of our four kids are all running rings around us on a daily basis. The only amenable one is Dolly, who is only four, and for now watching from the sidelines, probably taking notes about how she should behave — or misbehave — later.

How has our life come to this? Until recent weeks I thought I was doing an OK job, that Keith and I were ‘good’ parents. We took a modern, non-authoritarian approach, convinced it would create happy, well-behaved children.

But it seems we were kidding ourselves. Looking at Flo, who turns 16 this year, Annie, 13, and Monty, 12, it’s clear we got things very wrong indeed. So wrong, in fact, that there are days when it feels a lot like we’ve reached the foot of the north face of the Eiger, only to discover the safety harnesses have been left at home.

It seems we are not alone in this. A recent study revealed that more than half of parents find their children’s teenage years the hardest of all. No surprises there.

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Stupid me. Flo, in fact, went AWOL with her 14-year-old boyfriend, a fact we only discovered when his father (clearly more on top of things than us) called to ask us if we knew where they were. We didn't.

After two hours of attempting to get my wayward daughter to answer her mobile she finally picked up, yet refused to divulge her location or, indeed, come home. No apology for lying, no apparent concern for the worry she had caused. Once she had deigned to give us her location we organised for a trusted family friend to pick her up and have her to stay for the rest of the weekend, under close supervision.

I should, perhaps, have felt comforted by the fact that Annie, my other daughter, was safely at her friend's house eating a Chinese takeaway and watching a movie as promised.

Not so. In fact, Annie had persuaded the mother of her friend that Keith and I were at home and had given permission for the girls to come to our house for a sleepover.

They then coerced a local 18-year-old boy to buy them vodka from the corner shop. This bottle was brought back to our empty house and consumed by the two girls in the living room. They drank it, despite the fact they are only 13, and then staggered out into the garden and on to the trampoline, which Annie promptly fell off, breaking her shoulder bone.

We drove home at 1am, waited for her to sober up and then took her to hospital.

And don't think my weekend from hell stopped there. We had our 12-year-old, Monty, with us — what possible trouble could he get into? Unbeknown to us, the week before he had persuaded some boarders at his school to buy Shisha pens online (they're a kind of electronic cigarette that come with various coloured nicotine free vapours and are all the rage for teenagers at the moment).

Monty, having got his hands on some of these Shisha pens, stuck one in Dolly's mouth and took a video of our innocent four-year-old girl smoking: before posting the video online. Back at school the next week, a teacher saw him showing his friends the video on his phone in class and took it promptly to the headmaster's office. The headmaster then called me to warn he was considering phoning social services.

I'd like to say that all this was a one-off in the Sibary family — a few days of madness where we took our eye off the ball and our children, sensing a chink in our armour, went in for the kill.

But the truth is that they are not only pushing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour all the time, but clearing them with the ease of Olympian hurdlers. Worse still, they're getting away with it.

I'm not going to blame the kids' behaviour on hormones, social media or even the dire reality TV shows like TOWIE which they love so much. The real problem is that, before we even had them, Keith and I made a vow to each other that we wouldn't bring our children up in a culture of fear.

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Instead, they would be raised in a liberal, mutually respectful household where things would be explained to them, not enforced with a rod of iron.

What were we thinking? And the legacy of this liberal approach was all too clear as I took my horribly hungover 13-year-old to A&E with a broken shoulder bone.

Like many others of our generation, Keith and I were brought up in much stricter households. Indeed, my parents were practically Draconian in their approach to child-rearing and I was absolutely terrified — not just of being on the receiving end of their wrath if I did something wrong, but also of losing their respect, of making them disappointed in me.

My children, it seems, have no time for such concerns. They're too busy lying to us, being rude, and negotiating the toss on every single thing we ask them to do.

Just the other day, I did an extensive room search and found a packet of tobacco hidden behind a canvas on the wall in Annie's bedroom. A search of Monty's revealed yet more Shisha pens. Flo had a bottle of beer — stolen from the downstairs fridge — empty, under her bed.

There is little point pondering how things have got so out of control because the answer is obvious.

While the bad behaviour may have suddenly crept up on us, it is years of woolly, liberal parenting that has been the ticking timebomb.

We may have got away with it while they were younger, but there's no denying that our approach to our children has turned them into precocious, free-thinking individuals who treat us like their peers and have no concept that 'no' really does mean 'no.'

From this day forth my children will do what they're told, because I have told them to. Whether they like it or not.

Things, clearly, must change. After yet another bust-up the other evening, when Flo slammed her 200-year-old bedroom door so hard it actually split right in two, I told my husband we needed a new parenting approach. Why, I asked him, does she feel it is acceptable to behave in this way? Why isn't she more scared of us?

It's a question bleated by mothers and fathers up and down the country. If only we had all followed the example of our own parents. Children, as my dad used to say, should be seen and not heard.

Why has it taken me all this time to suddenly agree with him? Now I realise what a blessing my strict upbringing was. And I'm sure there are many other modern parents who took the same softly, softly approach with their families who feel the same.

You might argue it's already too late for my children to change their ways. Because we have never properly stood up to them and have lost the ability to show them who is boss, things will go from bad to worse.

Trust me — it keeps me awake at night, too. Which is why, after 15 years of parenting the modern way, I am going back to basics. No more negotiation, no more explaining.

When they were little and I asked them to do something, if they said 'why?' I felt it was wrong to say: 'Because I told you to.' I thought that a good parent always had to spell out the reason in terms their young charges understood.

I know now that is utter rubbish. From this day forth my children will do what they're told, because I have told them to. Whether they like it or not.