

My soft parenting has made monsters of my children

By [Thea Jourdan](#)

Never had I seen my lovely little girl so enraged. Her pretty little heart-shaped face was flushed deep red. Her body was stiff and she was banging her fists on the table.

And what was the reason for this? There were green bits in her stir-fried noodles. ‘You know I don’t like them and you STILL put them in,’ she shouted, her voice rising to a terrifying crescendo. ‘THEY MAKE ME SICK!’

The green bits were freshly-cut spring onions, which I thought she loved. In the ensuing kerfuffle, as I knelt down to her level, the entire contents of the bowl ended up on the floor, in her lap and all over my freshly-washed hair.



Mini meltdown: Thea's children can fly into a rage over anything from food to toys - and she only has her parenting style to blame (posed by models)

And I’m afraid displays of fury like this are far from rare. For when I heard about the primary school in Leeds which had taken drastic action to try to tackle bad behaviour by introducing lessons in anger management for its pupils, I felt a twinge of recognition, as I see children who lack restraint almost daily — and they’re my own.

What’s more, my husband and I are to blame. Instead of teaching our children discipline and boundaries, we, like many modern middle-class parents, have tried to reason with them instead.

The result? Both of them fly off the handle over the slightest thing.

Yes, five-year-old Imogen (of the aforementioned spring onion incident), Hugo, four, and Oscar, two, are lovely, bright youngsters and I love them more than I can say. But Hugo, like Imogen, can become a little pillar of rage.

Take the other day. He had decided his new pirate sword was the wrong kind. ‘It’s not my favourite!’ he shouted, before holding his breath and turning a scary shade of purple and snapping the sword in half.

‘It’s going in the bin!’ he announced before stomping off. Despite the fact I felt angry — the sword was a gift from Daddy — I decided to let him cool down.

Later, when he returned with a lovely smile on his face wanting a cuddle, I decided to forget his outburst and embraced him, not wanting another tantrum.



Tough love: Thea now realises she needs to enforce more boundaries (posed by models)

I know plenty of other parents whose youngsters behave in the same way. I have seen children at parties throwing punches over the party bags. Or hitting their mums while in shopping queues because they can't have the ice lolly RIGHT NOW!

These are not children from sink estates, either. I have seen raging children in the grandest homes. After all, my own children are privileged. We have two trampolines so they don't have to share, we go on foreign holidays twice a year and they have all the latest toys in their large, airy playroom.

So, what's going on? Worryingly, there's evidence to show that children in the developed world are becoming more stressed, causing a rise in juvenile anger.

Phillip Hodson, a fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, says: ‘Children today can feel helpless in the face of information overload, with a surfeit of exposure to TV, computer games and mobile phones ringing all the time.

‘Pace them! Get them to move off the couch — if only to run up and down stairs a few times.’

My children don’t spend hours playing online, but they don’t get a lot of time to wind down. Imogen started ballet when she was three and now learns swimming, gymnastics and piano. Hugo is about to start football, which we’ll fit around music class. Even Oscar goes to baby yoga and sing-along drop-in.

And I am aware that their father and I might be passing our own stresses on to them. As Mr Hodson says: ‘Children are masters of copying behaviour. If you are a pretty angry person there is every reason to suppose you will raise another one.’

I have never considered myself to be an angry person. But maybe I can be a little high-pitched when a deadline looms and the children want my attention.

**WHO KNEW?
Twenty five per cent of adults
are so afraid
of upsetting their children
they do not discipline them**

And I have to acknowledge, like many middle-class parents, I do not spend enough time with my three children. My husband and I are loving, dedicated parents but we both work to pay the bills.

My husband goes away for work a lot. So we have been unavailable for long periods of time when our children needed us. Instead, they’ve been brought up by a succession of kind but professional childcare experts — nannies and au pairs — who are hardly a substitute for a loving mother and father.

Understandably, children like mine become increasingly resentful. And parents like me become consumed by guilt. In our case, it wasn’t disinterest which led us to this crisis point. We were genuinely misguided. We bought into the notion that children are mini-adults with rational minds, able to understand arguments and make considered decisions.

Now I realise we should have been more firm when they misbehaved. Yes, I might have given them a ‘I’m disappointed’ lecture, but I never made them feel the full force of my disapproval.

Instead, I usually felt sorry for them. What I didn’t see was that the less I reacted, the more they did. They wanted me to notice and give them attention. Now, we desperately want to go back in time and start again. So we have started our own parenting revolution and can only hope it is not too late.

Phillip Hodson points out that the ideal time to tame children is during the terrible twos, when they start to respect boundaries and learn self-control. ‘Oscar is at the ideal age to cope with a change in parenting style, but it will be harder with your other two.’ he says.

‘But, they are both young enough to re-learn more balanced ways of behaving, as long as you continue to combine firmness with love.’

Meanwhile, my husband and I are looking at ways to spend more quality time with the children. From now on, I’m going to use a little tough love and show my three that I’m firmly in control of the zoo. After all, it will be the best present I could ever give them.