

lol Education Forum comment

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Compulsory parenting lessons undermine both teachers and parents. Ruth Kelly should think again, argues **Kate Abley**.

Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Education, has recently announced that parents who fail to ensure that their children behave at school will be forced to attend lessons on how to bring up their children. This policy is likely to compound the problem it seeks to address by confusing roles and weakening the authority of both parents and teachers.

My experience as a primary school teacher in inner London for thirteen years tells me that this policy will not work. Whilst most children behave well at home and school, there are significant numbers who are angels at school and tyrants at home, and vice versa. I worked with a great many parents who have asked me if I can do anything to make their child behave as well at home as they do in class. I also shocked a number of parents who were astonished to discover that their child had misbehaved at school.

The simple fact is that children respond to different adults in different ways. Ultimately, it is the teacher who has to take responsibility for establishing good behaviour in their class, irrespective of the background of their charges. In blaming parents, teachers evade their own responsibilities.

At the same time, it is true that a growing number of parents undermine teacher discipline by complaining about the unfair treatment of their children. This is symptomatic of the confusion of roles.

It is now established practice for parents to play a part in teaching their children. The reading book bag, home work from the age of 4 and of course GCSE coursework have combined with the message from school that parents are the teachers' partners in the child's education.

Meanwhile, teachers have had their expertise undermined by successive government campaigns, such as the National Literacy Strategy, which have sought to 'improve' education.

Now, thanks to 'Every Child Matters' teachers are even obliged by law to care for their pupils' happiness, something that was previously understood to be a parents' job.

Consequently, roles and responsibilities have become blurred and the authority of teacher has been compromised. For this reason parents are more likely to challenge teachers.

This see-saw of blame is unhelpful and expresses the uncertainty that exists about how to discipline and socialise children. This social responsibility has become problematised because we are unclear about the sort of society we want. Those of us who were children, teachers or parents during the last 50 years will know that there has been no consensus about how to bring up children for all that time. This is reflected in the conflicting advice given by everyone from Spock to Goleman.

Although the care of babies is still a mire of contradictions, a new consensus does appear to be forming for older children. This is entirely negative and is based on a narrow set of agreements on what children should not do. 40 years on from Dr Spock and the only agreement that has been reached is that children should not be anti-social in their behaviour.

This is reflected in popular books such as 'Toddler Taming' and 'How to be a Better Parent', as well as programmes like 'Little Angels'. It is significant that most of these are explicitly behaviourist in approach and treat children as if they were dogs to be trained. Often the 'experts' will say that the cause of the problem does not matter, it is the actions of the parents and children that should be treated.

Still, I do not fear for the minds of our nation's youth. You can fill your house with star charts and naughty stairs but your child will probably grow up into a perfectly nice person because they will understand that you meant well.

However, enforced parental education classes are different because they will be imposed on the very worst of parents. If a child knows that people with power can make their mother or father go to a class then their trust in their parent's judgment will be undermined. And if a child does not trust their parent it will make no difference which parenting style has been adopted. Whether the child's behaviour improves in the short term or not the relationship between parent and child, which in extreme circumstances might already be very fragile, will be weakened. The chance that the child may then go off the rails for good will be increased.

The imposition of parenting classes is also likely to create a child like dependency in the parent. I have met quite a few parenting-books-and-classes junkies who having lost faith in their own judgment go from one theory to the next in an anxious quest for the perfect parenting style.

Ruth Kelly and the government for which she works are on a similar quest. They will try anything that promotes the idea of not being anti-social. But there is no evidence that enforced parenting classes will work and many good reasons to believe that they will undermine the already fragile authority of parents. A good number of families will have been wrecked before Kelly and New Labour move onto the next big thing.