

## 'Life doesn't always revolve around them': Why I don't feel guilty about 'abrupt' parenting

As the NSPCC states parents who are curt with their children may be guilty of 'mild neglect', one mother writes in defence of a short reply

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"Mama ... she's being rude to me," squeals my seven-year-old son.

I pause, inverted ice cream cone in hand. I've just dunked it in grey icing and rolled it in black sprinkles and am about to add it as a turret to a painstakingly constructed sponge-cake model of Hogwarts.

"Define rude," I snap, "Are you dead? Are you dying? Is your arm only connected to your body by a thread? No? Then I don't need to know about it."

According to NSPCC guidance which came to light this week, [this abruptness could make me guilty of "mild neglect"](#). On the other hand, in the charity's Graded Care Profile 2 (which is licensed to local authorities to help them assess parents on a scale of 1-5 in various categories) the fact that I wasn't holding a "low key celebration" (we're talking potion-making, dragon egg hunting, terrestrial Quidditch and me, dressed as Minerva McGonagall, teaching the children to shout "Serpensortia" while my husband throws a stuffed snake from an upstairs window) might help me boost my score to something more acceptable. But hang on, my currently very messy house would bring my number right back down again. And on it goes...

"Our guidelines are aimed at protecting families; not at targeting parents," an NSPCC spokesperson declares, acknowledging that parenting is "an undeniably difficult job". But it doesn't take much to bring on the "parent guilt" and reading about the guidance made many of us momentarily hang our heads in shame.

But are we actually doing children damage when we dismiss them? According to family therapist Dr Shadi Shahnavaz, head of the child and family service at The Soke, the answer is yes – but only if we don't later repair our actions.

“As parents we will not always be available to our children and will, at times, dismiss them,” she acknowledges. “Our children will be hurt by this and will feel rejected, unimportant, unseen and unheard – all of which are damaging to their sense of self and their self-confidence.” The important thing, however, is that we apologise for the dismissal and repair any upset caused, she says. “As parents, we should say: ‘I’m sorry I wasn’t able to listen to you before; I am here now and I am all ears.’ This apology will repair the damage and hurt caused and the child will feel important to their parents again.”

I’ve been a mother for more than 15 years now and frequently question whether I’m doing any of it right – yet every day, I am greeted by three happy, healthy, irreverent, independent youngsters. They banter with each other, ask me how I am, put their bowls in the dishwasher and set off for schools where, by all accounts, they are doing pretty well. On the weekends, they train for football and play matches where – let’s be honest – they don’t always do so well. That’s fine. Despite “delight” and “spontaneous praise” being additional indicators of parenting quality in the NSPCC checklist, our family does commiseration, not celebration. We do “hey – at least you showed up”. We do not do “you were amazing”. Because sometimes they’re not.

And sometimes we parents aren’t, either. I frequently have days when any maternal excellence flags; when I’m bogged down with work, concerns about my ageing parents, hangovers or about how I’m going to work, do the shopping, walk the dog AND be here for the fridge repairman. I get short. I get snappy. I gesture vaguely in the direction of the fruit bowl when they’re peckish.



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But is this an abdication of engagement or just a decent life lesson? Because surely young people need to learn that the world does not revolve around them – and that if the people who love them more than life itself occasionally de-prioritise you, then they can be pretty certain that the world at large is going to do so as well. [We're parents and children, yes – but we're also all human](#), and I think that it's our duty as parents to teach our children humanity and humility, even while loving them to the nth degree.

Playing and talking with children is undoubtedly important – but “if you can show your child love and affection, even when you’re busy, that should be enough,” says parent consultant Kirsty Keltey. “It’s important to tell them what you are doing and how long you expect to be, rather than just saying ‘shush’ or ‘not now.’ A better response might be: ‘I’m sorry, I’m on a call, but I should be finished in about 15 minutes. I’ll be with you straight afterwards.’”

She notes, however, that you need to be able to “read the room”: sometimes your children really do need your time and attention, “adult” commitments notwithstanding.

“It depends on what conversation you’re shutting down,” she says. “Listening to your child is hard, because we are all busy people – but it’s important. I’ve been guilty myself of saying ‘in a minute...’ – but you need to revisit those conversations, because if you don’t listen to the small things when they’re little, they may not tell you the big things when they’re older.”

In other words, be abrupt if you can’t help it, but remember that there’s always a bigger picture with parenting.

Keltey agrees. “It’s about balance,” she says. “There are going to be days when you’re less engaged, but it’s important that you explain to your children why this is the case. They can’t ever expect to have everything they want all time; that’s not how life is. It’s about having consistent boundaries – but also showing them empathy, so that they will also learn how to show empathy towards others.”

As it turned out, the “rude” sister was soon happily rough and tumbling with her brother again, and the party – and cake – is remembered by my son as “one of his best ever”. He tells me that, during our frequent, lengthy and rambling conversations. Because not only do I usually give him my full attention, but I guess parents like praise too.