

I try out my newly-acquired skills. "Thank you for helping Mummy and putting your coat on by yourself," I venture. My three-year-old eyes me suspiciously – clearly making a mental note to never do that again.

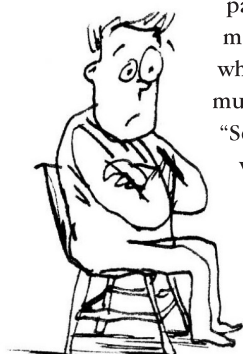
That night, we have a tricky bedtime. The oldest one doesn't want to go to sleep and is making more and more demands. Once I have provided the story, bottle of milk, the light on, the light off – I stomp upstairs ready to give her a good telling off. As I enter the room, Gillian's words ring in my ear – "We never tell children off." Instead I sit down and, forcing a smile, say, "Now you're three, I think it's great the way you go to sleep all on your own. So I'm going to turn off the light, you snuggle down and we'll see you in the morning." I creep downstairs convinced it will never work. The peace and quiet continues – all night.

Descriptive praise takes getting used to. For starters, you have to get over sounding like a complete idiot in front of your friends and family. By Tuesday, I don't feel the week has been dramatically different, but I'm more aware of the negative language I'm using around the children – the pleading, the nagging, the threats. I realise I am, indeed, guilty of the first mistake identified by Mary Spence: somewhere between my daughter's second and third birthdays I turned into my own mother!

WEEK TWO

Gillian opens the door and tells me to join in the cocktail party. "Find three people and tell them one thing that you're pleased about that happened this week." I tell Anna about our bedtime success; she tells me how she praised her nine-year-old daughter for being brave at school. We share our successes with the group. Margaret says that her daughter had a tantrum, but she managed to stay calm throughout. DP, Gillian explains, helps you stay in the moment and not lose your temper. Just as important is to praise the absence of the negative as in, "You're not screaming anymore, that's good."

Gillian talks about providing a United Front (a UF). "Whatever happens, parents must unite along a middle path. This means that whoever's in charge at the time must be backed up," she says. "See yourselves as a smiling wall." Next to me, City trader Bob is doodling; a brick wall with a smiley face on it. At teabreak, Bob con-



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fesses he's finding it difficult to concentrate after a full-on day at the office. "It all seems a bit detached for me. I'm a passionate person, I like my children to be passionate, too."

The other key lesson tonight is about asking questions. "If you want your children to make their bed," says Gillian, "ask them the night before what they have to do in the morning. If children say what they have to do rather than you tell them, they're more likely to do it." It's all about training, Gillian reiterates.

The next day I take the girls to Brighton. They're in good form and there doesn't seem to be much need for all the stuff I learnt the night before. It's only later I realise how many opportunities I missed to praise them. As we drive back, I try to make up for lost time and tell my three-year-old how brave she was for putting her feet in the waves, for patting a dog and for saying hello to a little girl in the playground. By the time I've finished, she's fallen asleep and I realise how much better that would have been delivered at the time.

On Thursday I am invited to a private session with Gillian to discuss my particular concerns. This is all part of the course. I tell her about an incident the previous day when my three-year-old got so cross with her younger sister that she bit her on the bottom. Gillian's suggestion is that I remove her from the situation

and ask her what she should do when she's frustrated. "If you ask a question and then praise them for providing the answer, you can avoid telling them off," she says.

I put this into practice the next night when my daughter climbs onto the dinner table. "Is it a good idea to stand on the table at dinner?" I ask calmly. "No," she says. "What do you do when you eat your dinner?" "You sit down." "That's right. So what are you going to do?" "I'm going to sit down." "That's right. You've got one foot off the table. Now you're sitting down. That's great." "It's like living in a bloody cult," grumbles my partner.

WEEK THREE

Tonight's lesson is about Reflective Listening (RL, naturally) which, Gillian explains, is simply a way of listening to bad feelings. When children get caught up in a bad feeling, there's no point talking rationally to them. "It's tantamount to us suffering from road rage," explains Gillian. RL is a process where you listen, make sympathetic noises, label the feeling ("you're cross") and finally indulge in a little fantasy, where you try imagining what things could be like.

At home, my oldest is having major meltdowns. All her toys are packed away in boxes, ready to move house. She tries to draw a cat on a piece of paper, can't and collapses in tears. "It's frustrating," I say. "You can't draw a cat." I repeat this a few times and she cries harder. Rather than soothing her, my reflective listening seems to act as a constant reminder of her failings. Finally, she turns to me and shouts, "Why do you keep saying that?" An hour later, she's in tears, I'm in tears and my faith in the course has been brought down a peg or two.

This week we also learn about the 'Six Step method' – a guaranteed way for getting your children to do what you want them to. "This is a training method," says Gillian, "so it requires your total attention. You can't be chopping onions and getting children to put on their shoes at the same time." This is all well and good, I want to say, but between descriptively praising, reflectively listening and everything else, when *do* I chop the onions?

We try the Six Step method for getting my toddler dressed in the morning. Although it takes about half an hour, I sit there descriptively praising and we achieve our goal. She goes off to nursery wearing a truly disgusting outfit, chosen and assembled without my help. I grit my teeth and congratulate her. By the end of the week I am feeling positive again. When ►