



you take the time to apply the techniques, they do seem to work. My parental guilt, however, has gone into overdrive. Now whenever I lose my temper, all I can hear is Gillian's voice saying, "We're not keen on shouting/nagging/begging here," or the worst of all, "Your children only react the way they do because that's what they've been allowed to get away with." Roll on the next seven sessions.

#### WEEK FOUR

Everyone is a lot more relaxed with each other. We go round in a circle sharing our week's successes. Margaret and Dan report that home life has run much smoother thanks to their newly implemented 'family meetings'. Margaret says, "We realised we were telling the children off because we didn't know what else to do. They love the meetings because we listen to them and praise them for coming up with good ideas."

Film producer Jess has also had a breakthrough with the reflective listening skills. Heavily pregnant, she is finding her three-year-old's refusal to walk anywhere difficult. On Gillian's advice she tried sympathising with her daughter's wish to be carried and, when that didn't work, turning her desire into a fantasy. "I bet you wish I was great big horse and you could climb up and ride me." Her daughter stopped whining immediately. You have to wonder what a passer-by might have thought, but if it works, why not?

This week, Gillian is talking about Rules and Routines or, if, like me, you're uncomfortable with those words, "ways of doing stuff". Rules, she says, are the way we convey our values to our children. "We say you need a rule when you're not happy with a situation," says Gillian. "If you get the children involved in setting those rules they'll be far more effective. Children come up with horrendous consequences," she says, "they say things like, 'no TV for a month', which means you get to play the good guy and say, 'I think a month is too long, what about two days?'"

We spend the week settling into the new house. The girls are sharing a bedroom which is both a success and disaster in equal measure. Bedtime now works a treat, as they like going to sleep together, but both end up in our bed by the morning, which means no-one is getting enough sleep.

I wake up on Tuesday morning exhausted and with a feeling of dread. A whole week has passed and I haven't implemented any of the skills I learnt last week. To be fair, I'm having a

problem with this 'rules' thing. The whole idea of punishment and rewards seems so archaic, so undemocratic, so uncool!

#### WEEK FIVE

I skulk into class hoping that no-one will ask me anything. Luckily, tonight we're focusing on our problems rather than our successes. These I have to offer in abundance. Gillian splits us into groups to brainstorm and I explain our morning clothes crisis to Jess and Bob. My three-year-old claims she has nothing to wear – if I offer her a skirt, she wants trousers. If I give her trousers, they're the wrong ones. If I suggest she chooses her clothes herself, she dissolves into tears. Bob adopts the role of psychologist – maybe she's trying to compete for attention with her younger sister; what if you offered her special time with Mummy if she gets herself dressed quickly?

The following morning I give this a whirl. "If you get dressed all by yourself this morning, we'd have time to read a story before nursery." Five minutes later, my daughter emerges fully dressed and with *The Mousehole Cat* under one arm. I descriptively praise her eclectic taste and we cuddle up on the sofa to race through the longest book ever written for the under-fives. We're still late for nursery but everyone's a lot happier.

Later that week, I take the girls to the park. I carry the little one out first and come back to find a wailing three-year-old. "I wanted to be first, I wanted to be first," she cries. Trying to remain calm, I reflect how difficult this must be as I put her in the car and go back to gather our remaining things – swearing blue murder under my breath. The difficulty I have with this reflective listening is that half the time I never feel genuine empathy for my toddler's unreasonable dramatics. "Yes, it must be frustrating to be three and have your life dictated to you but it ain't that easy being 36 either," I feel like screaming!

#### WEEK SIX

I miss the class this week so Gillian sends me notes. There's a whole section on being positive. Very timely. "If we manage to stay calm and positive even when we don't like our children's behaviour, we are demonstrating

the qualities that we want our children to develop: self-control, maturity, being considerate and thinking constructively about solutions rather than simply complaining."

I spend the day being positive and am amazed at how difficult this is. I pick up the girls from nursery and head to the park. I only have enough money to park for one hour so, preparing for success, I ask the girls to choose between sandpit and café. Thankfully, the three-year-old chooses cake over wet sand. Amazingly, we make it back to the car within time and without too much of a fuss.

I've been trying to wash my hair for three days and with an evening out looming I decide to do so with the children around. From previous experience, I know it's always the moment that you slide into the lavender-scented water that your older child decides to push her younger sister down the stairs. Continuing with my positive homework, I suggest that they get in with me. The girls love this idea and we spend the next half an hour washing everyone's hair. I'm amazed at how a simple shift in attitude can change a day. Sadly, a night of broken sleep and a hangover contributes to a less positive approach the following day.

Generally, though, I've been staying much calmer. The course has made me realise how much we inherit from our parents without even knowing it. My mother was an actress – spilling your drink was a 'disaster', forgetting your homework a 'nightmare'. There were many good things about living with someone with a highly developed sense of drama but a calm household we were not. Keeping up the descriptive praise has helped, as it's impossible to find the good in your child's behaviour and lose your temper at the same time.

I talk to my mother on the phone. Her unrelenting negativity makes me more determined to try and be positive with the children. Of course, the first thing I do when I come off the phone is have a rant about Grandma. I catch my three-year-old looking at me and realise I have broken my new rule within minutes of making it. It might be difficult to change the behaviour of a three-year-old but nowhere near as difficult as changing the behaviour of a 36-year-old! I have a lot more to learn ■

Follow Francesca's final weeks in Junior next month. The New Learning Centre, tel: 020 7794 0321. Parentline Plus (24 hour helpline), tel: 0800 800 2222. Parent Network Scotland, tel: 0131 561 4162.

