



know what horrors you have in store for them, they don't mind half as much. There are general tips, too, such as "leading by example" and "being positive", which sound glib, but can prove challenging to put into practice. Being a parent is so often about the details, sometimes it helps to be reminded of the bigger picture. If nothing else, I now realise what a miserable old bat I've become!

Tonight is my seventh class and I find myself looking forward to it. After a two-week break, I feel bit cut adrift and am keen to check in with the others. It's scary how quickly you can become a support-group junkie! In the tea room, I meet Leonard, Ellen's absent husband who confidently speaks about using the reflective listening skills with his five-year-old son. His late appearance now makes me the only partnerless person, bar the nanny. I make mental note to torture my partner for his refusal to join me. I also catch up with Jess and her film-producer husband. They are thrilled as their three-year-old is now getting dressed on her own.

We hold our weekly de-brief. Margaret and family have just arrived back from their mid-term break. After a summer of tantrums, this holiday was a great success. Margaret puts it down to the family meetings they are now having, another way of "preparing for success". The children (aged six and four) feel listened to. She thinks her daughter has also blossomed under regular DP. Ellen confesses that she's taken Gillian's advice and banned TV in the mornings in her house. This is met with real shock from many of the other parents. She explains that she was always pulling her children away from doing something they liked, to do something they didn't. They do allow the children half an hour, but it's rarely turned on.

We move onto the week's lesson: sibling rivalry. "Children will always squabble," says Gillian. "It's about gaining parental attention." There are two things we can do about this. The first is to stop playing the arbitrator and empower them to sort out their own battles. The second is to spend quality time alone with each child every day. "Children find it a drag to have to share their parents with each other. They want to build that relationship with one parent. It's not easy finding the time for such one-on-one time, but it pays dividends. The stronger the relationship, the more they want to please you," explains Gillian.

At home, with one child asleep, I engage my three-year-old in some cooking and housework. Does this count as quality time? We're going to make fish pie, I announce. "Why can't you make food like Granny?" she groans. "What does Granny make?" I ask through gritted teeth. "Bacon, sausages, and little potatoes – these are too big." As I finish peeling the too-big potatoes she skulks around the kitchen. "When do you think you'll want to play with me, Mummy?" she asks. Feeling guilty, I leave the fish pie and we begin a game of hide-and-seek. The next minute there is a cry from upstairs – the younger one has woken up. "What about our game?" wails the three-year-old. "What about my fish pie?" I think.

That afternoon we do something daring and take a late trip to meet a friend at the V&A. I prepare the girls for success by telling them that

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BECAUSE THEY
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we're going to see a photographic exhibition and they need to be quiet. It all goes quite well and I am congratulating myself on such a spontaneous, cultural outing when we get snarled up in a traffic jam. An hour-and-a-half of solid screaming later, we arrive home. The children are starving, I shove the fish pie in front of them, the three-year-old says she's not hungry, her sister starts throwing the peas on the floor. I want to murder them both.

Tuesday, I try to make myself feel a bit better by writing down my parenting successes of the week:

1: I finally get around to spending quality time with my three-year-old while her sister is asleep in the car outside the café. I'm not sure this would win me a good parenting medal from the social services, but we have a lovely half hour eating chocolate brownies.
2: That's it.

I share this with the group later on that night and then hear about their week's ups and downs. Miriam and Bob have followed Ellen's example and banned TV in the mornings. Miriam explains that her

youngest had become addicted to *Bear In The Blue House*. "Anytime he was upset, he'd just point at the TV and shout, 'Bear! Bear!' After a few days, 'Bear' was forgotten about." Without the distraction, her five- and six-year-old fought a lot more at first, but now they've settled down. Miriam can't believe how much smoother the morning routine is.

Gillian suggests we break into groups and brainstorm ways of turning situations around. I explain my desperation over dinner times to Miriam and Judy – the wailing, the trouser-tugging, the refusal to eat. Judy gives me some radical advice: "Don't cook." She doesn't mean don't give them good food, just don't cook it. "Cut up carrots, celery, give them houmous – make meal times simpler." In that moment, I am forced to review all my ideas around being a good mother. I realise that spending hours making meals that don't get eaten isn't helping anyone nutritionally or emotionally. I want to hug her.

That week, I take my three-year-old to the supermarket and buy loads of easily prepared food. I feel defiant – to hell with Nigella, Annabel Karmel and the rest of them, I am no longer cooking meals to be thrown on the floor. The children's picky eating continues all week, but I remain calm. Celery sticks don't have the same emotional investment as lasagne.

Tonight's class is about meeting your own needs. Gillian recommends couples have one night out a week without their children. Otherwise, she says, you're in danger of becoming a CPU (a Child-Rearing Unit, of course!). "It's good for children to see you having a life outside them. You want to show them that being a grown-up is not all about meeting the mortgage and being stressed."

This is a part of the course my partner is happy to join in. We go out for a meal, we enjoy ourselves, but by the time we've paid the babysitter and taxi home, we're down £140. Heaven forbid we become a CPU, but forking out that sort of money every week could quickly turn us

