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opening extract from

Divas and Dictators

written by

Charlie Taylor

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introduction

They throw tantrums over the smallest thing, they develop astonishing food fads that have their chefs running about in search of the correct ingredients, they demand continuous attention and can't bear it if anyone else gets a look-in, even for a moment. They leave their clothes and possessions discarded around the house and have no respect for other people's time or property. Ideally, they like to be followed around by a fawning entourage who will protect them from the outside world and bow to their every whim and command. They become self-centred and unpredictable, one minute they are charming and funny, the next they are screaming, crying delinquents.

Our children bring enormous happiness to our lives. However, at times, they may show the same impossible, irrational behaviour that we associate with grown-up divas and dictators from the gossip pages of newspapers and flickering black and white images on the History Channel. Parents, however calm and rational, have moments when the business of being a mother or a father

gets too much. As a parent of three under-tens, I know how children have a remarkable, in-built capacity to push our buttons and a knack of doing it when we are at our most tired and stressed. Parents can easily get stuck in a cycle that begins to feed the bad behaviour and make it more likely to be repeated.

This book is for all parents, regardless of how well their children behave, not just for the few who put up with some really challenging behaviour. It is not about getting perfectly behaved children (what a hideous thought!), rather it gives a range of practical strategies that parents can use straight away to make their children's behaviour 'better'. As parents, we inevitably hit some sticky patches with our children. The ideas in *Divas & Dictators* will stop this behaviour developing into longer-lasting, more damaging patterns.

There is a lot of talk these days about the 'work-life balance' as though there is an achievable equilibrium when we achieve a nirvana of perfection as a parent, alongside a satisfying and stimulating career. The reality is that if we can find some sort of reasonable work/life muddle then we will be doing just fine. The strategies in this book will help make for calmer, more positive parents who feel less guilt and can spend more time enjoying the fun bits of bringing up children.

I developed the ideas in *Divas & Dictators* through my long experience of working with children with behavioural difficulties and their parents. I have taught for eighteen years in tough inner-city primary and comprehensive schools and I am currently the headteacher of a

school for children with behavioural difficulties in west London. We take the most challenging and socially deprived children who have been excluded from school and aim to turn their behaviour round and get them back into mainstream education. I run regular training workshops for parents on positive behaviour management. I also do lots of work with individual parents who are having difficulty with their children.

This book contains a range of positive strategies that will give parents a framework to use when dealing with any type of behaviour. First, we look at why children misbehave and how the reactions of parents can feed into the pattern. Then I describe how, by dramatically increasing the amount of praise, parents can improve and embed better behaviour. There are additional sections on the role and effectiveness of rewards and punishments, on improving routines and a description of how to play with your children to get better behaviour. The last section of the book contains suggestions for dealing with specific, common issues that arise in all families, from bedtimes to car journeys to homework.

I hope that you will be able to read the book in full and then refer back to it whenever you need a bit of support, when some tricky behaviour arises.

I am acutely aware of the constant guilt we feel as parents that we are not doing as well as we should be. I hope this book will help you recognise what a good job you are doing. One of the overarching themes of the book is the use of praise and I wish, as parents, we were better at praising ourselves.

These strategies work with children with the most challenging behaviour at my school. They work with my own children. They will work with your children too.

1

the reptile in us

Wild Threats or Bribes

The four-year-old starts screaming and throwing groceries out of the trolley, just as the baby is beginning to need a feed. The mother can feel her stress levels going through the roof and she has just noticed the disapproving stare of the woman behind her in the queue. She has stopped thinking rationally, she just wants to get home. To stop the child bawling the mother either gives a wild threat:

'Right! If you don't stop screaming then you can't watch any videos for the rest of the week.'

Or offers a bribe:

'Come on, darling, if you stop shouting you can choose a packet of sweets.'

When she gets home and calms down she realises that she needs her child to watch a video so she can bath the baby in peace. She also decides that the punishment she thought of in the heat of the moment was a bit too severe. Either she forgets about the threat completely, or she finds a way to get out of it.

'Right, you can watch a video tonight, but if you behave like that in the supermarket again, then you really won't be allowed to watch one next time.'

Or:

'As you've been so good since we got back, you can watch a video this time.'

Children soon learn to distinguish between a serious threat and a bluff and will treat each accordingly. If you listen to other parents (as well as to yourself) you will be amazed by how many empty threats you'll hear.

Bribes, on the other hand, will always work. Your child will quickly learn that a great way to get sweets is to throw a tantrum – the more intense, the more sweets. So starts a pattern that will get harder to break every time it is repeated.

It is easy to be critical of these two responses, but remember the parent is under stress and the adrenaline is flowing. The rational brain has shut down and they can't react logically or reasonably. They are 'in reptile'.

The Reptile Brain: Fight or Flight

When humans are faced with a perceived danger, the body begins to prepare itself to deal with the threat. This is known as the fight or flight reaction. The blood vessels in the arms and legs open up and blood is diverted away from the parts of the brain that deal with rational thought, to the muscles. The body is preparing to fight or run away. There is simply not enough blood to go round, and with

less blood in the brain, the capacity to think clearly is reduced. This means that when humans lose their temper or are distressed they say and do things that they may later come to regret. The thinking part of the brain shuts down and we are left with the primeval part of our brain that is akin in complexity and understanding to that of a reptile. Under stress our brains work with all the judgement and rationality of an alligator.

The problem is that our body responds in the same way to an emotional threat as it does to a physical threat. If you worked on a checkout in a supermarket and you wanted to steal some money, you could short-change the customers with screaming children. They never check their change, and even if they tried they couldn't add it up – reptiles can't do maths.

Imagine trying to read a map ten minutes after you had been in a car crash. You would see the extent to which your rational brain had shut down.

In the following case study, when Maggie gets home and has to deal with a son who is trying to turn bedtime into a game, her body reacts as if she is being physically threatened. Our physical reaction to stress hormones is the same, no matter what has caused them to be released.

Bedtime in Maggie's House

Maggie has come back from a long day at work and she is feeling exhausted. She makes tea for her two children, Tom, five and Laura, two.

The trouble starts when she tells the children to go upstairs for a bath. Tom is in the middle of playing with his toy farm and completely ignores her. This ignoring thing from Tom has just started in the last week or so and Maggie is finding it really irritating. She calls him again and still he takes no notice. She has had enough so she leans over to him and shouts.

'TOM, BATHTIME.'

He gets up slowly and starts to go upstairs at zero miles an hour. Maggie grabs his hand and tries to speed him up; he thinks this is a game. He wriggles free and runs down the stairs again. Maggie goes after him, picks him up and carries him to the bathroom. Maggie gets Laura into the bath, but Tom refuses to get undressed and keeps running away. Maggie tries to jolly him along; she is feeling guilty after carrying him up the stairs.

'Tom, come on, darling, I've run a lovely bath.' He takes no notice and she gets really furious.

'RIGHT, NO BEDTIME STORY,' she shouts.

'I don't want a story tonight,' he says, running off.

'Okay, you're not going to the zoo with Daddy this weekend.'

Tom's face crumples and he starts howling. Maggie manages to get him undressed and into the bath. Laura is helped out and demands her milk. After her bedtime bottle, Maggie reads her a quick story. Meanwhile, Tom has been quietly tipping water on to the bathroom floor. Maggie really loses it.

'GET OUT NOW!' she screams and yanks him out

of the bath. 'Look at Laura, she's ready for bed already, why can't you be more like her? This happens every night, why can't you just do what you're told? Right! From now on we are going to have bathtime half an hour earlier!'

By pinning Tom down, Maggie gets him dry. He finally stops crying and puts his pyjamas on while she puts Laura to bed. Maggie comes back and they have a cuddle.

'I will read you a story tonight because you got dressed all by yourself,' she says.

They have an extra story, because Maggie is starting to feel really guilty about getting so angry. She puts him to bed and he promises to be good at bedtime the next day. Maggie goes downstairs and pours a glass of wine, and finally begins to relax after her day's work and the battle at bedtime.

Tom's bedroom door opens and she hears him padding down the stairs.

'Mum, I'm really hungry …'

Any of that sound familiar?

Maggie came into the house feeling tense after her day at work. When she asked Tom to stop playing he ignored her twice, this tipped her over the edge and she began to lose her temper. She shouted at Tom, compared him unfavourably to his sister and made threats that she didn't follow through. Though she got her children to bed in the end, it was a traumatic experience all round and the chances are something similar will happen the next night.

Afterwards, Maggie felt guilty about what had happened, especially as she knew much of her anger was derived from tiredness due to her long day at work.

Maggie became angry and her body dumped a load of adrenaline into her bloodstream. This hormone produced the primeval reaction in her that helped to protect her ancestors from sabre-toothed tigers.

While Maggie's brain was short of blood she lost control of what she was saying and doing. As she started to calm down at the end of bedtime, the blood began to flow back to her brain and she was able to think more clearly. The guilt she felt meant she read Tom a bedtime story, even though she had told him she wouldn't. She also knew she wouldn't follow through with the threat to ban the zoo trip, either. The message this sent Tom was: *When I make a threat, don't take me seriously.*

It is also important to remember that children, as well as parents, go into reptile mode. Remember when someone shouted at you as a child, how you got frightened or angry? Those feelings cause the reptile effect in children, and like adults they can say and do things that they don't mean. Their capacity for rational thought and problem solving goes, and like their parents, they are unable to think straight.

Maggie decided that from now on she was going to start bathtime half an hour earlier. Not a bad idea in theory, but in reptile mode she has forgotten that they are out to tea for the next two days. They won't be back in time for the early bath and so the new plan will have to wait. Maggie has also forgotten that during the next week she has a couple of late

meetings at work. The new regime hasn't been thought through and so it founders. This is hardly surprising, as it is impossible for anyone to start making plans when they are angry. Parents become hugely concerned about bad behaviour when it is happening, but they don't think about it when everything is running smoothly.

Unfortunately, it is while in reptile mode that we usually try and change our children's behaviour. We react by threatening dire punishments, shouting or, worse still, smacking. In addition, we often suddenly decide that there is going to be a new regime.

Right!

Whenever you find yourself starting a sentence like this, you can be fairly sure you are entering the realm of the reptile. It is supposed to sound strong and decisive, but what it usually means is, 'I've started to lose it.'

How Can I Stay Out of Reptile Mode?

Soldiers spend hours taking apart their guns and then putting them back together again. The process becomes second nature and they become so proficient that they can do it blindfolded.

Army training takes into account the flight or fight reaction and the loss of the rational brain under stress. When a gun jams on the battlefield the soldier can automatically strip the weapon down and correct the fault because he has rehearsed the procedure so many times. If he had to stop

and think how to unjam a gun while the bullets were whizzing past his ear he would not be able to do it.

Under stress, humans don't function properly. Soldiers get round this by preparing in advance. I'm not saying there is a direct comparison between looking after children and going into battle, although some parents might think so. The point is this: if parents have a clearly thought out, well-rehearsed plan ready, when the trouble comes they will stay calm, stay positive and keep the reptile at bay.

The Reptile in Us: A Summary

1. When humans get angry, stressed or frightened, a physical reaction means their thinking brain stops working.
2. Parents in reptile mode make wild threats that they won't follow through or use bribes that encourage the bad behaviour to happen again.
3. If parents go into reptile, their children probably will too and things will start to get worse.
4. When parents come out of reptile, they often feel guilty and end up over-compensating. This teaches children not to take them seriously when they get angry.
5. The best way to avoid going into reptile mode is to make plans and be prepared for the trouble when it comes.