opening extract from

The Spoilt Generation:

Why Restoring Authority will Make Our Children and Society Happier

written by

Aric Sigman

published by

Piatkus Books

One

Little Emperors: Their Rise to the Throne

Children's growing sense of entitlement

Anyone over forty who claims that today's children are more spoilt than their predecessors will most likely be dismissed as being middle-aged and out of touch with the children of today. Historians are ushered in to remind us that, 'This is nothing new . . . you really must read a bit more history, old chap.' We all feel more comfortable when we surrender to intellectual laziness and lean on well-worn refrains such as 'history repeats itself' and 'nothing is new'. The dismissive evidence is brought forward, the best examples being attributed controversially to figures ranging from Aristophanes, Socrates, Plato and Hesiod to Peter the Hermit – all of it a pot pourri of ancient disdain: 'The children now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority, they show disrespect to their elders . . . They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and are tyrants over their teachers.' (Fifth century BC (?)) Sound familiar? Read on . . .

'The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they alone knew everything and

what passes for wisdom with us is foolishness with them. As for girls, they are forward, immodest and unwomanly in speech, behaviour and dress.' And isn't it reassuring to know that the ancient philosophers were just as doom-laden as today's cultural commentators? 'Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households.' And, 'I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words . . . When I was young, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly wise [disrespectful] and impatient of restraint.' (Hesiod, eighth century BC (?))

It would be easy to end this discussion here because, of course, 'history repeats itself' and 'nothing is new', but I believe that our children are now making history and there is a new backdrop to the stage in this repeat performance.

By the way, successive spoilt generations can lead to entropy – the inevitable and steady deterioration of a system or society. Entire empires have crumbled because of spoiling.

The science of spoiling

The first things that come to mind when we think of a spoilt child are too many material goods and a physical appearance of chubby excess borne of laziness and too much choice and access to junk food. Of course, all of this is generally true about our children. They are, in terms of material goods and adipose tissue, richer and fatter than ever before, born during a bull market of often double-income parents with access to credit that their grandparents hadn't even heard of. If this is the case, then the credit crunch and economic recession should soon put paid to this latest historical outbreak of spoiling.

But many of us already know that this is only a small part of the picture. It is still quite possible for a child to be fat and rich, yet unspoilt. But it's even more possible for a child to be all three. And

it can be done remotely and cross borders: the Philippine Institute for Development Studies reported in 2008 that Filipinos working abroad have spawned 'a generation of instant gratification and spoilt children'. Parents usually ply their kids with material luxuries, such as mobile phones, to make up for their absence in the family, then use their children's good academic performance as a measure of the positive effect of their migration. 'But deep inside, here is a person who is trying to look for a sense of self.'[1] Ironically, spoiling is often the result of *deprivation* – in particular, a parental attention deficit – and the materialism is a decoy that has duped us, frequently being used by less involved parents to mask this parental shortfall. It's also far easier to point to physical material goods and hard cash or even plastic as the spoils of spoiling because more abstract concepts, such as parent-to-child eye contact and attention, are harder to get our teeth into.

Unlike with fashionable subjects such as 'self-esteem', there's little empirical study or hard facts to shed light on what we mean by 'spoilt children'. This is partly due to the fact that the term has gone underground, much of what we used to call bad or spoilt behaviour having been sensitively rebranded as 'lacking adequate social skills'. I personally love the ring of this attempt at a definition of spoilt as a mindset: a spoilt child is a child with a sense of entitlement – 'I deserve whatever I want' – a child with less empathy and sympathy, more interested in himself than others.

I also see another dimension that amplifies this sense of entitlement: the increasing expectation of instant gratification. Another way of describing this is a reduction in our children's 'impulse control'. It isn't merely a case of a child wanting something; nowadays, they *expect* to get it, and more quickly than ever before. This could be explained as the result of the click-and-see and click-and-buy culture of screen technology, but this too has been amplified by big shifts in parenting, social values and legislation. Of course, every child is born selfish and the centre of their own universe, and whether that child is the son of Socrates

or Paris Hilton or the daughter of Joe the plumber, we as parents have to shape and socialise the souls, values and actions of our noble savages, who may have no thought for the feelings of others and whose behaviour only serves their own needs and comforts. It is called civilising our children. But there have been unprecedented obstructions to our efforts.

From this unrefined mindset of entitlement, emotional disregard and weakened impulse control come many of the things that we complain about and that make up the facts and figures detailing society's ills. However, much of the landscape of spoilt behaviour is formed at a terribly subtle level. Nuances in body language, such as a lack of or delay in eye contact, disrespect in voice inflection, a pause in reaction, can all denote a profound change in recognition and respect. At a slightly more visible level, perhaps, is a lack of acknowledgement on the pavement, whereby children don't move aside or make way when an adult walks by. All too often now, it is the mountain that must move for the Little Emperor.

In discussing any sensitive subject nowadays, the intellectual coward always regurgitates the default mantra: the need for 'evidence-based conclusions'. Yet any true scientist realises that beyond the realpolitik of research grants and the 'publish or perish' confines of their intellectual ghetto lies the human condition, which is often difficult to measure and where we have to use good judgement to draw conclusions. There isn't a way in which to 'prove', definitively, that children and young people are more spoilt, but there is plenty of circumstantial evidence if you're set on the need for a so-called 'evidence-based' discussion.

We don't need no education

To start with, most teachers who have been in the job for several decades report that there have been significant changes for the worse in children's sense of entitlement and concern for – or even awareness of – others' feelings and in the behaviour that goes with

this. For example, 'spoilt children' and the serious implications of them for schools and society was, for the first time, the main theme of the general secretary's speech at the Association of School and College Leaders annual conference in 2008. John Dunford saw parents as failing in their duty to instil basic moral values and acceptable conduct in their children, arguing that for too many children school was the only place where they experienced clear moral boundaries. In particular, Dunford said, inconsiderate attitude and bad manners have to be reversed, along with teaching children not to eat solely with their hands but how to use a knife and fork. Dunford concluded that it is, perhaps, a sad indictment on the present age that we accept the need to help parents to play their natural part and to rediscover what being a parent means.

'Teachers Under Pressure', a report published by Cambridge University's Faculty of Education in 2008, identified a growing trend of children at primary school who challenge teachers and throw tantrums in class. There was a general pattern of disobedience at home spilling into classrooms and the report cited 'highly permissive' parenting and misguided discipline policies in schools, resulting in poor pupil behaviour reaching the highest levels. Confrontational children were often found to be imitating their parents who often undermined teachers' authority by failing to support their disciplinary measures. 'Five years ago, primary teachers blamed the behaviour problems on an insufficiently motivating curriculum. Now teachers blame a rapidly changing social scene. By the time they come to school, many of these children have become expert in manipulating adults.' And for those who sleep easily, assuming that this applies only to the lower orders, the lead researcher pointed out, 'It does, to some extent, run across social class . . .'[2]

The difference between the son of Socrates and the child of today is that the old teacher–philosopher was complaining about miscreants who were *five times* the age of today's spoilt generation – teens and young men – while the reports quoted above

refer to children as young as three. Low-level civil disobedience now has a youth market or, in fact, a toddler market. One graphic snapshot of this trend is the significant rise in rapes and sexual assaults actually taking place in London schools during 2008/9 reported by the Metropolitan Police. Their statistics suggest the vast majority of victims were school children under the age of sixteen and as many as one-in-three were under eleven.

This heralds a tipping point. From aristocracy to underclass, our children are now spoilt in ways that go far beyond materialism. We feel we've given them so much in terms of legislation, rights, opportunities and experiences. Indeed, on the surface, society has never done so much for its children. However, far from being protected, their wellbeing enhanced, our children are suffering in ways we could never have expected. And the consequences are measurable: we now have the highest rates of child depression, child-on-child murder, underage pregnancy, obesity, violent and anti-social behaviour and pre-teen alcoholism since records began. According to a study by UNICEF of twenty-one industrialised countries – 'An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries' (2007) – there is no strong relationship between per capita GDP and child well-being. Even before the recession, when their economies were riding high, Britain and the US ranked bottom in most tables for child wellbeing. Britain's children are the unhappiest in the West, and are among the least satisfied with life, being described as a 'picture of neglect'.[3] Furthermore, a recent government-funded review highlighted research spanning twenty-five years and found that the prevalence of many mental health problems has doubled since the 1970s. One in ten children – that's more than a million – now has a clinically recognisable disorder such as depression, anxiety, anorexia or severe anti-social behaviour. And millions more may have 'lower-level' mental health problems that do not warrant a diagnosis, but cause concern and put them at risk of struggling at

school. Interestingly, the report suggests that 'at least one good parent–child relationship' could help to reduce children's risk.[4]

These are the many cracks that have ultimately produced the Broken Britain endlessly discussed by political parties and the media, who themselves have blood on their hands and a smoking pistol in their studies. And the same general trends are emerging in all industrialised countries.

Death of the inner parent

Even as we chant 'put children first' ever louder, we have actually retreated from parenting. We used to parent far more. Yet in the space of a few decades, the way we parent has changed dramatically. Something we once did unknowingly and intuitively has been elevated to a fine science and become the subject of political fashion, the province of gurus, experts and TV nannies.

As parents, we are older and more time-poor than ever before, and we have the highest proportion of single-parent households in history. Our resourceful children have learnt successfully to manipulate their tired, overworked or separated parents to their own advantage, and are now spoilt in ways that extend beyond possessions and the confines of the family home. So we have to start asking direct questions: why has compulsion been replaced by the politically correct alternatives of persuasion and negotiation as the 'right' approach to shaping our children's behaviour? Is parental guilt behind the trend of parents saying 'No' with a sense of apology in their voice?

Spoilt behaviour is making a growing impression in every area of society, from the classroom and workplace, to the streets, criminal courts and rehab clinics.

Death of the outer parent

The erosion of our parental influence has also been caused by a variety of external measures ostensibly intended to protect our

children, yet often merely disempowering us, their parents, and ultimately achieving the opposite. We need to ask ourselves further direct questions. For example, how and who has undermined the ability of parents, teachers, doctors and the police to help our children to become socially viable adults? And do laws that criminalise those of us who dare to smack our children erode our authority? A parent who holds their daughter by the wrists to prevent her from going out to have underage sex with a married man can be charged with assault. The Data Protection Act frequently prevents parents from discussing important things about their child's mental or physical health with the family GP. And the parental authority of separated fathers has been weakened by the Children Act, the Family Law Act and Child Support Agency at a time when children desperately need authoritative responsible fathers.

The act of parenting does not stop and start at our front door. In a civilised society, it extends into the wider community. At one time, there was an unspoken understanding that neighbours, teachers, policemen, even strangers were, in effect, deputised to deal with our children. However, there has been an almost complete reversal of this dynamic. Teachers are often challenged by parents when children are chastised, and a new study by the General Teaching Council has found that, ultimately, four in ten new teachers are driven out of the profession within two years,[5] while strangers may be either beaten up or arrested by the police for assault if they attempt to control unruly children, even when they are breaking criminal law.

If we are to dignify our living circumstances with the term 'society', we must now recreate a state of joined-up parenting in the fullest sense of the word, as this will make it easier on all of us, especially our children. And we need to begin by restoring authority to the adult figures in our children's world.

Two

Friend or Führer?

The role of authority

Adolf Hitler must bear some of the responsibility for spoiling our children. One of his many untried war crimes was to set in motion an aversion to authority that lingers today. Hitler gave authority a bad name.

Authority has been horribly misconstrued when it comes to dealing with our children. Sixty years after the Führer's demise, many of us who should be figures of authority – parents, teachers, policemen, doctors – have gone to great lengths to obscure obvious signs of hierarchy and control. Some liberal, middle-class parents even encourage their children not to call them Mummy and Daddy, but by their first names instead. And many parents, celebrities – even former members of the Royal Family – now causally refer to their children as their best friends. This loosening-up of overt hierarchy and power relations may seem cosy and kind, but it has helped to undermine our authority. Through a failure to distinguish between authoritarian and authoritative, best friend and superior, our parental roles have become less defined. We've done ourselves out of a job. There is

a growing recognition that the tail is now wagging the dog, and this is not good for either.

As news of Nazi atrocities and genocide emerged from the Western Front in the 1940s, psychologists were desperate to understand and to prevent future generations of children from either idolising a fascist or from becoming one themselves. Halfway across the world, a team of researchers assembled at the University of California, announcing in 1950 that they had identified a personality type: 'the authoritarian personality' or 'TAP' for short. If a person was an authoritarian type, or a fascist in the making, this would be revealed in their psychometric profile on the diagnostic test, 'The F Scale' (F for fascist). With an F-score of between 3 and 4.5, they would be within normal limits and unlikely to be a Führer or Führerin in the making. Above this level, however, they'd be considered to be in possession of a 'pre-fascist' personality, possibly destined for a life of significant bossiness – or, in a worst-case scenario – a career of fascist dictatorship.

The part of this story that's relevant to parenting is the psychologists' belief that harsh and punitive parenting caused children to identify with and idolise authority figures, contributing to a 'pre-fascist' personality. The researchers published the classic book *The Authoritarian Personality* in 1950 which became highly influential, reverberating throughout many areas of thought, including child development and parenting.

No sooner had authority been brought into question as one fascist passed away, than the Cold War produced another demagogue: the 1950s right-wing, authoritarian, anti-Communist bully Joseph McCarthy. An unprecedented witch-hunt for Communist sympathisers or folk who just seemed downright 'un-American' made McCarthyism a byword for fearful conformity and obedience to authority and conservative American ideals. This would provide some of the baby-boom generation – and Bob Dylan – with something to rebel against . . . authority

and the crew-cut that went with it. Many young people grew their hair long and protested against authority of all sorts, just because it was there. They then became parents and politicians.

And the story continues: in 1961, psychologist Stanley Milgram became curious about how a stout, little, testicularly challenged, dark-haired Austrian had managed to convince tall, blond German people that he should lead them to the ultimate supremacy they deserved and to go on and enlist a million people as 'accomplices in the Holocaust . . . were [they] just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?' Milgram wondered.

Unlike his predecessors, who had focused more on identifying those who might become authoritarian demagogues, Milgram wanted to know what a figure of authority could persuade people to do on his behalf purely by virtue of his authority. Through a series of experiments conducted at Yale University, Milgram became the man who literally shocked the world. He exposed our willingness to obey an authority figure who instructs us to perform acts that utterly conflict with our personal conscience, by giving innocent people fatal 450-volt electric shocks. Milgram's subjects believed they were part of an experiment supposedly dealing with the relationship between punishment and learning. The figure of respectable authority (the experimenter) – a stern, impassive biology teacher dressed in a grey technician's coat – instructed participants to deliver an electric shock to a learner by pressing a lever on a machine each time the learner made a mistake on a word-matching task. The intensity of the shock would increase by 15-volt increments with each learner error, starting at 15 volts for the first and peaking at an 'extreme-intensity' final solution at 450 volts for the very final error.

In reality, the shock device was a prop (complete with electric shock sound effects for different voltages) and the learner was an actor who did not actually get shocked, but conjured up authentic screams of agony. As the voltage of the shocks climbed, the

actor started to bang on the wall that separated him from his tormentor. After banging on the wall several times and complaining about his heart condition, his responses would finally stop and it would go silent. Despite the obvious agony of the victim, however, the majority of the subjects (two-thirds) continued to obey to the end, believing they were delivering 450-volt shocks, simply because the experimenter commanded them to. In fact, only one person refused to continue the shocks *before* reaching 300 volts.

This classic experiment on authority has been repeated in different settings and different countries, but our response to authority remains disturbingly high. In fact, in 2009 the American Psychological Association announced the results of a new study: 'Nearly fifty years after one of the most controversial behavioural experiments in history . . . people are still just as willing to administer what they believe are painful electric shocks to others when urged on by an authority figure. Obedience rates [are] essentially unchanged.'[1] The percentage of people prepared to inflict fatal electric shocks remains remarkably constant at 61–66 per cent, regardless of time or place – a finding that should please multiculturalists.

Milgram's home truth about authority and the 'free will' of the people hit a nerve. The *New York Times* was aghast: 'Sixty-five per cent in test blindly obey order to inflict pain.' Later, Milgram was denied tenure at Harvard after becoming an assistant professor there. The truth was too dangerous . . . and politically incorrect.

Milgram's influential 1974 book, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* was accompanied by his influential magazine article, 'The Perils of Obedience', in which he lamented the dire consequences of authority:

> Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' [participants'] strongest moral imperatives against hurting others and, with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of the victims,

> authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.
>
> Ordinary people simply doing their jobs and without any particular hostility on their part can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.[2]

Class-ridden authority

Britain continues to have her own axe to grind with authority: her class system.

The growing erosion of authority is, partly, a long-awaited reaction to the Victorian era of which Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) said: 'The time for levity, insincerity, and idle babble and play-acting, in all kinds, is gone by; it is a serious, grave time.' The social constraints of Victorianism were followed by the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), passed during the early weeks of the First World War, giving the government wide-ranging powers, such as censorship (and you weren't allowed to fly a kite, light a bonfire or feed wild animals bread, for that matter). DORA ushered in a variety of authoritarian social-control mechanisms. And, later, the Second World War was accompanied by propaganda posters proclaiming, 'Be Like Dad, Keep Mum' or '[keep your mouth shut] You Never Know Who's Listening!' and rationing books. My mother-in-law tells me how excited she was finally to gossip and see a banana again in 1950.

Authority continued to prevail, and children did as they were told '. . . because I said so'. Many of my British friends of a certain age tell me: 'It's all right for you with your beach-boy

upbringing, but you really have no idea what it was like over here until recently: the conformity, the emotional repression. You were a citizen, we were Her Majesty's subjects; and while you had doughnuts, we had duties; you had a life, we had a *station* in life.' Coming from a culture in which self-adoring loudmouths and show-offs are commonplace, this social and emotional history is still a revelation to me.

British public school reinforced an obedience to authority through the cane, birch or, for the more fortunate, the slipper. And there was the character-building backdrop of cold showers and the humbling lavvy cubicles with no doors. In some schools, each pupil had to note down and sign confirmation of their morning bowel movement, as they were expected to regularise their bodily functions to conform with the expectations of their housemaster. But many parents and those in positions of authority and influence today have mixed feelings about that long walk to Headmaster's office, not to mention the fagging system. It's not surprising they've been left with a jaded view of authority, and, for some, an inclination to be trussed up and disciplined.

In the recent push for a more 'classless' society, authority has understandably become a casualty. The British feel enigmatically ambivalent towards their class system. Like a well-worn security blanket, it is familiar and has defined everything from their historical influence in the world to their divinely sour comedy. Yet at the same time, they feel the blanket needs to be replaced or torn apart: the class system is unfair, in some way unnatural and certainly wrong.

Various forms of privilege, hierarchy and disparity, including inequality in social status, power, opportunity or money, are the obvious targets in striving for a classless society. Disparity is a reminder of unjust privilege, and so its erosion has been seen as a sensible aim . . . up to a point.

Hierarchies of standards in areas of culture and education are tainted with notions of elitism. Excellence, it is feared, excludes.

So the solution is to diminish the hierarchy by lowering such standards and dumbing down. A hierarchy of spoken English, where to be well spoken is considered better than not being well spoken, is resolved through the growing use of Estuary English by many middle-class people – and BBC presenters. A hierarchy of morality, where certain behaviours are deemed explicitly better than others, is softened through moral relativism.

And, of course, hierarchies and disparities in authority have been an obvious bugbear to the architects of the classless society. As soon as you open a dictionary or thesaurus, it becomes clear that the whole concept of authority is in need of a public relations firm. The synonyms for authority run from bad to worse (command, control, domination, force, might, power, sovereignty, supremacy, sway), while the definition of authority – 'the power to command, control or judge others' – doesn't have much of a New Age ring to it either. And its close relative authoritarian, defined as 'considering obedience to authority more important than personal freedom', rings alarm bells.

After all, if you're in favour of a classless society, authority is in rather an uncomfortable position because it smacks of something you submit to and submission sounds similar to subjugation, which could lead to a servant/master relationship, and before you know it, one's upstairs and the other one's downstairs. A populist mindset of 'people shouldn't feel more important and lord it over other people . . . we should be a more equal society' may seem fine, when you're talking about civil rights. But Britain's class revision has also taken some of the hierarchy out of parenting and made it more of a consensual affair among equals.

The authority channel

Our authority-shy misadventure has been further exacerbated by our complicity in elevating youth culture to the highest altar. Age

now confers little seniority and the natural democratic hierarchy that has served societies and generations has suddenly been inversed. This is the most striking difference between our culture and that of the remote places I visit. I remember seeing a documentary several years ago in which the presenter was the first white man in living memory to visit the Adi people in the Arunachal Pradesh region of India. He interviewed an Adi elder who also acted as the tribal medicine woman. Two sentences in particular stood out for me. When asked about her, presumably, high matriarchal status, the woman pointed out forlornly: 'The young people go to the other villages and see television. Now they don't respect me any more.'

If you can be bothered to examine many of the mainstream soaps, sitcoms and dramas you'll soon find that when middle-aged and older people appear on television, they often seem to have 'earned' their place only because they can emulate the behaviours of younger people. Increasingly, I see older people on screen trying to ape the young: it's never hip, but always promises to be simply undignified. And the same is happening with our political leaders: the former US secretary of state and army general Colin Powell recently performed a hip-hop dance routine alongside well-known rap artists, complete with embarrassing hand movements.

Connecting with young people does not mean imitating them and relinquishing your stature and seniority in the process. But one big obstacle to retaining our standing is a generation of parents who are determined not to appear uncool, sharing similar tastes in pop music with their children, whom they treat as their best 'mates'. The latest example I've seen in my town is the promotion in shop windows and kindergarten hallways of 'Baby Boogie – fun and funky afternoon clubbing for parents and children up to seven' held at a cocktail bar and 'featuring the very best soul & disco . . .'

So, in addition to seeking the approval of children, parents

and figures of authority are increasingly befriending them – hardly a good basis for establishing respect and authority.

As I finished writing the last paragraph, my wife handed me an article by the editor of *Vogue*, entitled, 'Help! I'm a Slave to My Son'. It describes: 'a pathetic tendency to bathe in pleasure if I managed to elicit filial approval for any activity other than the handing out of cash . . . I notice, to my horror, that it is me who is desperately trying to conjure up teenage praise. I glow with inner pleasure if he likes some recherché tune I've downloaded on to my iPod . . . If we were sensible, we would all . . . allow ourselves to be viewed as "sad" oldies.'[3]

When older people appear in mainstream programmes, they are parodied as figures of fun. And the power relationship between older and younger people in both drama and factual programming forms another highly insidious part of television's new devotional position towards youth culture. In contemporary drama, older characters are spoken to as equals and, at times, subordinates by the more knowing younger characters. And when children's characters speak, it has been the fashion for them to hold court while parents take note or even obey the child's edicts. This affects the way young people treat older people in real life. Is it, therefore, surprising that older, or even middle-aged, people today are generally not appreciated as experienced elders or possessors of wisdom?

In many countries, the birth rate is falling and society is greying, yet the silver-haired sage is obsolescent on the screen. Instead, we are encouraged to revere the ideas and importance of the young as never before. The growing lack of respect for older people, reinforced and driven by the media, has eroded the social value of more than half of the population. Furthermore, it has weakened a long-established foundation of a civilised society. The effects on family and classroom discipline, and law and order are becoming clearer by the month. With youth culture, everyone is equal, so the older person has

to earn respect. In other cultures I've visited, he is afforded respect naturally.

Our veneration of youth culture is also betraying and damaging our children. Young people crave and need figures of authority, if only as a frame of reference to rebel against. This is a necessary part of their development. But when their elders end up trying to emulate them, it's actually unsettling and confusing for them and the rest of society. After all, someone has to be older and unfunky on television and in real life to enable the young to feel . . . well, young. And in a world that changes more quickly in every other aspect, older people serve as a form of continuity and quiet reassurance. Given the detrimental effects of high rates of divorce and our increasingly mobile society, this is particularly so for children. To deprive the young of these things is selfish and short-sighted.

When I was in China, I was told they would be celebrating the Year of the Old Person, something I couldn't imagine ever happening in Britain. Historically, Chinese society has placed their elderly on a pedestal. Respect for older people was an integral part of Confucian doctrine, especially for the family patriarch.

And I have found the same invisible hierarchy appearing in completely different cultures I've visited, such as in Iran, South Korea and in the villages of Mali and Burkina Faso. Travelling on a tiny motorcycle, covered with red clay dust from the paths, to somewhere west of Bobo-Dioulasso and south of Ougadougou, I passed a scene like something out of *National Geographic* and another era: a casual, yet neat, line of women walking for miles with enormous containers and sacks on their heads, often with no hands needed to balance their burdens. In this line, the older women (perhaps in their late twenties or early thirties) exuded a subtle, yet obvious, seniority over their juniors – an unspoken pecking order. When I arrived at my destination, a small village of mud-and-thatch hut-cum-cabins, I was led to the chief, who took pity on me in the searing heat and asked someone to give me