

Standing up to Supernanny

As her new book is launched in Birmingham on 16 September, Jennie Bristow explains to *Early Times* why she decided to write 'Standing Up to Supernanny'

Before I had children, my work as a journalist often led me to object to the way that politicians seem to have an unhealthy interest in lecturing people about how they conduct their personal lives – what they eat, how much they drink, whether they take enough exercise, and so on. It seemed to me that individuals are quite capable of making these decisions for themselves, and that politicians should be looking at the bigger picture, addressing and trying to solve some of the big social problems of today.

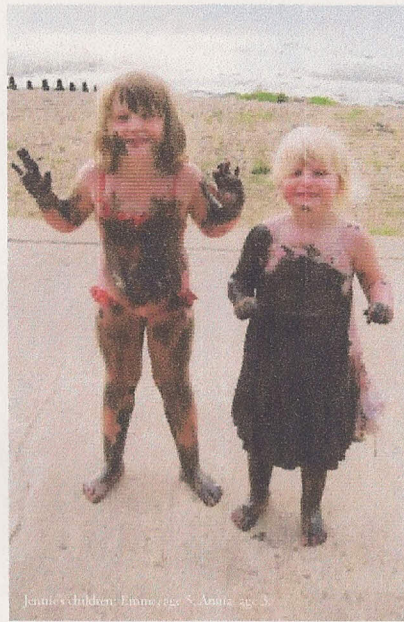
Then I got pregnant – and I realised that, until that point, I'd had it relatively free and easy. Pregnant women are confronted with a bewildering list of things they should not do 'just in case' it might harm the baby – from drinking wine to using hair dye. As well as being instructed about how to behave, they are also given a clear script to follow about how they should be feeling. They should be making birth plans and 'nesting' in their homes, responsibly collecting exactly the right range of baby equipment, and emotionally preparing themselves and their partners for the momentous impact of having a baby in their lives.

Time and again, pregnant women are reminded that having a baby is a very grown-up thing to do, and not always an easy thing to do – so they should try very hard to do it right, and look to experts for advice whenever they feel that they might be doing it wrong.

Having now had two babies, I know full well that it is a grown-up thing to do, and that it does have a big impact on your life. But what strikes me about the whole experience is the way that parents are treated, not like adults who are capable of making responsible choices, but as children themselves, in need of endless instruction about what they should be doing and feeling in relation to their child.

“ Many parents resent constantly being told what to do and how to do it ”

From breastfeeding to sleep training to the question of how to wean and what to wean on, new mothers find themselves buffeted on all sides by advice from people calling themselves experts, and thoroughly disoriented when the advice conflicts, or the techniques don't work. And then you find yourself looking up from the textbook and wondering,



Jennie's children: Emma, age 5, and Archie, age 3

Standing Up To Supernanny by Jennie Bristow is published by Imprint Academic and will be launched in Birmingham at Aston University on 16 September 2009. Price £8.95.

what does any of this have to do with the reality of bringing up children, or the actual relationship between me and my child?

Many parents resent constantly being told what to do and how to do it by faceless experts with whom they have no relationship in real life. As children become older, and as parents have a second, third, or fourth child, they acknowledge that much of the 'expert advice' on offer is unrealistic, or simply wrong. They also start to question the divisiveness of today's parenting culture, which sets parents against each other by attaching far too much importance to the question of whether you feed your child organic food or allow them to watch television.

But at the same time, parents continue to seek such advice. We watch programmes like *Supernanny*, read childcare manuals, magazines and websites, and defer to the authority of those who issue leaflets about the kind of food your child should have in his or her lunchbox. My reason for writing *Standing Up To Supernanny* was simply to ask: why? Why do we feel so unsure of ourselves about how we are raising our children, and so nervous about telling meddling experts to shut up and go away?

I think that somehow, we parents have accepted the idea that every little thing we do in relation to our children has a lasting (and probably harmful) impact.

Children are not machines that can be optimised, and parenting is not a skill but a relationship – an intense, emotional relationship that needs to withstand the ups and downs of everyday life. To protect that relationship from those who seek to politicise it or turn it into some kind of a 'job', it seems to me that we need have a bit more faith in ourselves, our families, and our friends – and rather less faith in anybody calling themselves a 'parenting expert'.

Jennie edits the website www.parentswithatitle.com

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