

## Kindness of a stern parental hand

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS at a dinner party the other night when two children, aged 10 and 12, came to the table to join us. It was well past their bedtime, but their parents had brought them along to play with a few of the other youngsters under the clear directive, "Leave mummy and daddy in peace to eat our dinner with the grown-ups."

Little June and Freddie did not leave mummy and daddy in peace. Instead they plonked themselves down and started interrupting the adult conversation. Not only did the parents allow this to continue, ending dialogue which now had to be edited to make it child-safe, but they actually started engaging their children. "Well, what do you think about (XYZ)?"

Throughout the night other offspring, including my own, approached the table. Most were allowed to sit, interject and disrupt. Mine was sent off to play with the stern warning: "This is my time now, please leave the adults to eat." Whereupon I was glared at by other parents for my unkindness.

But I need to pose these questions: since when has it become popular to include precocious 10-year-olds in dinner party conversation, and is it appropriate behaviour? When I was young, we children played together and never dared intrude on our parents' social time. Yes, it is healthy for kids to offer opinions and contribute; but parents seem blissfully unaware of when to allow this to happen.

Meanwhile, we all know adults who are literally controlled by their very young kids. "Johnny doesn't like reading books, so I don't make him," one parent told me the other day.

What, then, is being a parent? Experienced adults know that kids don't like going to bed, doing homework, eating spinach or wearing sunblock. But what's "like" got to do with it? In my day, such opinions were simply met with: "Bad luck." You did what you were told or privileges were revoked.

Now, with healthy teeth and a set of school marks that won me the vocation I wanted, I thank my parents for their stern hand.

Parents who let their children dictate to them, or who fail to establish clear boundaries around their personal space, or who allow endless hours on computer games, all because "it's what little Peaches wants", need to assess the cost. The old adage "Children should be seen and not heard" did profound damage to my generation. But that doesn't justify heading too far in the opposite direction.

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