

Chaotic kids make compelling TV, but that's a big responsibility for those claiming to have the answers, childcare expert **Penelope Leach** tells Gilly Smith

Practically perfect in every way?

Parenting programmes are a TV phenomenon, but are *Supernanny* and other experts giving us the best possible advice? Childcare authority Penelope Leach thinks not.

Supernanny Jo Frost had 15 years' experience of managing children when she was catapulted to fame by Channel 4. Now her severe, finger-wagging image frowns down on us from billboards not just in this country but also across the US (where Frost's childcare book, *Supernanny*, is a bestseller). But she's far from having a monopoly over small-screen childcare – viewers can take their pick from *Supernanny*; *Little Angels*; *Honey, We're Killing the Kids*; *Brat Camp* and *The House of Tiny Tearaways*, to name a few.

But just what is it about Frost that's made her an international authority figure? And why this slew of childcare programming? It's a question that's well worth asking in the week ITV1 seems to be challenging current orthodoxies with *I Smack and I'm Proud*.

Penelope Leach, whose own child-rearing manual, *Your Baby and Child*, has sold over three million copies in 29 languages since 1977, is not surprised at the success of *Supernanny*. "I think that parenting



GENTLE TOUCH
Penelope Leach has campaigned for years for a sensitive approach

is just one more photogenic subject covered in the enormously successful phenomenon of reality TV. I don't see this as much to do with a child-rearing debate," says Leach.

Television's interest in childcare issues can be a good thing, says Leach, but she's worried about the focus. "What is negative to me is that children are being perceived, and shown, almost entirely as disciplinary problems. That plays into the hands of people whose only interest in children is that they make too much noise on the bus or spoil their nice, peaceful dinner."

The reason we, in turn, are interested in television's take on parenting is that today's parents are constantly pushed for time. "There's

Supernanny is "crassly superficial, repetitive stuff"

Penelope Leach

a huge concern about the business of making modern children fit in with extraordinarily busy lives," explains Leach. "We have them late, we try to do lots of things ourselves first and then we have children and actually we're still just as busy. Anything that people think they can learn to help ▷

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JO
Jo Frost lays down the law with a trademark wag of the finger

