



**CHILD'S PLAY**  
Leach praises Tanya Byron for helping parents find their own solutions to childcare problems

◁ mould their children into their busy lifestyles is, I think, irresistible.”

Leach describes *Supernanny* as “crassly superficial, repetitive stuff”, although she has to admit to having some responsibility for its symbolic centrepiece, the ‘naughty step’. It first surfaced decades ago in the form of ‘time out’ – a mechanism to allow overwrought parents and children to separate and calm down – as part of an effort to discourage parents from smacking. “The idea began when we were fighting the physical punishment battle,” says Leach. “It was the more acceptable alternative to the people

who said, ‘If I’m not to smack, what am I to do?’ The trouble with ‘time out’ has always been that while the concept of people (of any age) taking a break from one another rather than hit out or back each other into corners is a good one, ‘time out’ by force is a contradiction in terms.” For under-

fives especially, Leach prefers the idea of ‘time in’: “They don’t need to be isolated from you; they need to be taken in by you. They need to borrow your adult control because they’ve temporarily lost their own.”

While Leach is adamant that psychologists shouldn’t hand out what she calls “quickie media stuff”, she congratulates clinical psychologist Dr Tanya Byron, the presenter of *The House of Tiny Tearaways*, for her “subtle” handling of some of the most important changes in TV’s parenting agenda. “The programme is becoming formulaic now, but certainly, earlier on, Byron seemed to be doing the

best thing that advisers can do, which is helping people think through their own solutions,” says Leach. “She has cleverly campaigned for what she knows is right – no smacking for example – without actually telling people off for doing it, which is partly why I’ve got a lot more time for her.”

Leach would like TV to look more at the child as a child. “We’ve got to stop demonising, pathologising, clinicalising their issues,” she explains. “For instance, ‘tantrums’ are being referred to in these programmes when they’re not tantrums in the real sense at all. They

are childish protests against frustration. A tantrum is a blown fuse where self-regulation has gone out of the window and they are literally out of control,” says Leach. “But what you see on TV is children lying on the floor kicking and screaming and

“What you see on TV is children kicking and screaming... that’s a control issue, not an out-of-control one”

hoping that they get what they want. That’s a control issue, not an out-of-control one.” Leach thinks that the idea of isolating a child and being angry about them losing control is astonishing. “Who is responsible for keeping them in control? Who’s the adult here?” It sounds like TV could do worse than unearthing Leach’s own parenting series from the archives.

Penelope Leach’s new book, *Childcare: What We Know and What We Need to Know*, will be published by AA Knopf next year.

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