

Horizon:

“Taming the Problem Child”

UK TV documentary : 2001 : dir. : BBC 50 min
 prod: Nikki Stockley : scr: : dir.ph.:

Series editor: Bettina Lerner

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Sergei (12) learns not to be “a problem”
 Source: Radio Times

Radio Times review:

“American neuro-psychologist Dr Ron Federici has devised a controversial treatment plan for children with severe aggressive behavioural disorders. The programme follows Hayley and Sergei as they undertake the tough regime. But does it work?”

“Whether or not you are a parent, this is a documentary that carries a whacking emotional punch. It will shock, distress and challenge you, leaving your heart in pieces for the plight of children and parents alike¹. Thousands of children have severe behavioural disorders that result in aggression and violence against their families and peers. Love and understanding haven’t worked, and the parents are at their wits’ ends².

It’s a complex question and one to which conventional psychology has yet to come up

with a single solution. One man believes he has found an answer. Trouble is, it involves an inflexible programme of behaviour that goes against the deepest instincts of a parent.

Psychologist Dr Ron Federici, who has worked among the orphanages of Eastern Europe and fostered seven children, had based his radical and controversial plan on his experiences. He believes that dysfunctional children have been deprived of the natural bonding between parent and child, leaving them unable to understand or give love. His answer is to strip the child of its identity and instil it with a rigid routine of obedience to the parents.

Through evidence from a camera mounted in their homes, interviews with the parents and sessions with Dr Federici, we follow the progress of five-year old, slightly autistic Hayley from Sussex and 12-year old Sergei, a Russian orphan adopted by an American family. It is not an easy journey for parent, child or viewer.

To say Dr Federici’s programme of “total adherence” is controversial would be an understatement, so it is through the opinions of conventional psychologists that the audience’s fears and doubts are expressed. Yet, despite the fact that there have been no control trials to prove or disprove Dr Federici’s theories, desperate parents are still flocking to him for help.”

Still caption:

¹ Yes, I’m already wanting to throw up..

² It doesn’t sound too long a journey.

"Twelve-year old Sergei takes part in Dr Federici's radical plan to treat extreme cases of conduct disordered children [sic] in **"Horizon"**."

Accompanying article – "Avoiding the Parent Trap" – by Dr Mark Potter:

"Sergei and Hayley are two children prone to violent outbursts that have left doctors flummoxed and their parents desperate. This week their two families will be the subject of **"Horizon: Taming the Problem Child"** (Thursday BBC2) as they follow a controversial American treatment programme in the hope that it will help them deal with their children's behavioural problems. The programme, which is the brainchild of American neuro-psychologist Dr Ron Federici, is based on a combination of deprivation (no toys or TV and little contact with the outside world), close supervision (they must remain within 1m/3ft of a parent 24 hours a day for six weeks), strict punishment for unacceptable behaviour, and reward for obedience. It's not for the faint-hearted - he guarantees neither child nor parent will enjoy the process, but that it will result in improvement.



Progeny of the "me" generation?

Source: Radio Times

Federici's radical programme is far too extreme for many, but **"Taming the Problem**

Child" provides a useful insight into the complexities and mechanics of child/parent relationships. Severe behavioural problems are comparatively rare, but "minor" problems such as temper tantrums, sleeping difficulties and fussy eating are incredibly common, and can cause a disproportionate amount of distress for all involved. Thankfully you don't need draconian measures to help - a dose of common sense and a basic grasp of some of the principles of psychology, preferably combined with parental experience of your own, are generally enough to defuse most situations. The most important thing for parents of young children to realise when dealing with minor behavioural difficulties is that their offspring are highly manipulative. I don't mean this in a sinister sense - they are just using what limited tools they have to get what they want out of their parents. And we parents, thanks to years of evolutionary conditioning, are very susceptible to their methods.

Take crying - a young baby quickly learns that the easiest way to attract attention is to cry, and few parents can comfortably stand by and ignore it. At first crying is used to indicate distress and hunger, but it can soon be used for less important reasons, including boredom and loneliness. Night-time crying in toddlers is a classic example - a couple of hearty cries in the early hours invariably means a cuddle and possibly the rest of the night in bed with mum and dad. This is a result that positively reinforces future crying and, all too often, signals the start of many a sleepless night for the parents.

Temper tantrums are another example of basic parental manipulation. Toddler spots a chocolate bar in the supermarket, mum refuses to buy it, so he throws a wobbly - everyone stares and mum concedes. Another result, and it's not difficult to predict what will happen if he doesn't get his own way next time.

By the time parents seek help from their health visitor or GP such manipulative behaviours are normally well established. I once knew a couple whose three-year-old refused to go to bed without her parents. By the time they came to see me they were having to all go to bed together at 7pm, with the parents only able to sneak back downstairs when their daughter had dropped off to sleep. It may seem ridiculous but you would be amazed how often, and how quickly, otherwise sensible parents can find themselves in this sort of situation.

The answer is to avoid rewarding unacceptable behaviour. It's hard to ignore a screaming child in a supermarket, and caving in may seem the easiest option, but you end up rewarding the tantrum and making a rod for your own back. Only reward acceptable behaviour and try to ignore the unacceptable whenever possible. Young children generally dread being ignored more than punished. Indeed, paradoxically, losing your rag and shouting "go to sleep" at your toddler in the early hours is often seen as a reward - better a stropky parent to play with than none at all. I never said it was going to be easy!"

Trust me, I'm a child psychologist
Source: Radio Times



No further information currently available. I did not see the programme. The following observations flow from discussing it the following day with a friend who did, and implicit assumptions in the text above.

The Federici technique, in value-neutral terms, can be summed up thus: Children who have failed, or been unable, to forge close emotional bonds in infancy lack the tools to recognise or respond to nurturing affection when it is offered. The solution is to strip down their identities, remove from them any sensory distractions which could facilitate their solitary fantasy lives, and compel them to bond with a given adult by keeping them within arm's reach of him/her while they perform their allotted schoolwork and household chores. The rewards and punishments schedule include extension of the agreed period of close supervision and a "pindown" technique (physically restraining the child onto the ground until he/she complies). The child is left no alternative but to seek emotional sustenance from the only permitted other – the parent (although in Sergei's case, not his natural parent).

The fascistic nature of this approach is self-evident. By use of quasi-Pavlovian conditioning technique, sensory deprivation and an **absolute** loss of privacy, total obedience is exacted. The child is not physically shackled to the parent for the duration of the programme, but the technique stops only one step short of it. Convicted murderers on America's death rows are not subjected to such a total abnegation of their personal dignity. It is described above as a "controversial" and disturbing technique, but only from the vantage point of current parenting philosophy, which arguably has generated many of these behavioural problems through its own ineptitude and disarray. Federici's reasoning is itself clearly founded in the same precepts of "good parenting" and, to that extent, in his strategy of "healing" he merely carries the same flawed reasoning to an alarming conclusion. The child, like a badly-painted nursery, must simply be stripped down to the bare walls and painted again.

It is all in the best interests of the child of course, like so much of current "child protection" theory. Alarmed and disquieted parents viewing this are not, for example, expected to question whether the programme makers had any right recording and broadcasting this deeply humiliating regime without the "informed consent" of the children involved. The children are subjects in an experiment, and only the consent of their parents is required. If a

child misbehaving during the course of treatment is “punished” by extending the period of treatment a further week, would not even an autistic child conclude that the treatment itself must be a punishment?

Federici’s technique – learning to love through unconditional obedience – is on the one hand a desperate resort of today’s failed parenting philosophy, and on the other hand a perverse parody of the Victorian parenting ethos which is its diametric opposite. The Victorians also believed in unconditional obedience, but they did not resort to shadowing their children twenty-four hours a day, or grappling them to the floor in response to tantrums. They did not deprive them of television, books and games – they merely packed them off to boarding school, and left the cane to do its necessary work.

Why is humiliating a child and denying it any freedom of movement whatsoever less cruel or abusive than simply to spank it? How is an adult physically pinning a child flat on the ground “acceptable” punishment, when the slipper and cane are monstrous and brutalising? One notes with wry amusement that the *Radio Times* columnist and psychologist Dr Porter both make Freudian slips – giving in to a child’s emotional manipulation is “making a rod for your own back” – the documentary “carries a whacking emotional punch”. They both resort instinctively to chastisement metaphors, when it is precisely the **abstinence** from chastisement which may be causing many of the behavioural “disorders” so mystifying parents today. “Love and understanding haven’t worked,” bleats RT, “and the parents are at their wits’ end”. Well, perhaps because love and understanding aren’t the only ingredients necessary in raising a socially well-adjusted child!

I am generalising too much, of course. There is all the difference in the world between a Russian street kid, a Romanian orphan or an autistic child and a pampered, acquisitive over-assertive one who is not accustomed to having his trivial wants denied. Tantrum at the supermarket check-out? A sound slap is still the most effective deterrent. It may be embarrassing to witness, uncomfortable to deliver, and painful to receive. But at least we can finally dismiss the old standby argument about violence teaching violence – there is ample evidence in the news that a generation never beaten at home or school are exhibiting far **worse** social violence than the generations conditioned through corporal punishment. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The success of modern parenting must be measured by the conduct and attitudes of modern children. I would not hesitate in giving it an “F”.

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