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Atrocious Advice from "Supernanny"

By Alfie Kohn

[This is a slightly expanded version of the published article, which was titled "Supernanny State."]

A despot welcomes a riot. Disorder provides an excuse to rescind liberties in order to restore calm. There are only two choices, after all: chaos and control. Even the creators of *Get Smart* understood that.

And so, too, do the creators of *Supernanny* and *Nanny 911*. Each week they poke their cameras into a dysfunctional suburban home where the children are bouncing off the walls and the parents are ready to climb them. There's whining, there's yelling, there's hitting . . . and the kids are just as bad. But wait. Look up there: It's a bird. It's a plain-dressed, no-nonsense British nanny, poised to swoop in with a prescription for old-fashioned control. Soon the clueless American parents will be comfortably back in charge, the children will be calm and compliant, and everyone will be sodden with gratitude. Cue the syrupy music, the slow-mo hugs, the peek at next week's even more hopeless family.

These programs elevate viewer manipulation to an art form. For starters, the selection of unusually obnoxious children invites us to enjoy a shiver of self-congratulation: At least my kids -- and my parenting skills -- aren't that bad! More to the point, these anarchic families set us up to root for totalitarian solutions. Anything to stop the rioting.

We're encouraged to pretend that living with a camera crew doesn't influence how parents and children interact, and to disregard what it says about these people that they allowed their humiliation to be televised. We're asked to believe that families can be utterly transformed in a few days and to assume that the final redemptive images reveal the exceptional skills of the nanny -- rather than of

the program's editing staff. By now, a fair number of TV dramas, and even some sitcoms, refrain from serving up contrived happy endings. Sometimes the patient dies, the perp outwits the prosecutor, the jerk is unreformed. Yet here, in the realm of nonfiction programming, a tidy solution must be found before sign-off. Perhaps it's reality television that's most divorced from reality.

We might just laugh off the implausibility of these programs except that they're teaching millions of real parents how to raise their real kids. To that extent, it matters that they're selling snake-oil.

Consider ABC's *Supernanny*. (Fox's copycat *Nanny 911* differs mostly in that a rotating cast of nannies shares top billing.) The show is rigidly formulaic: Jo Frost, the titular nanny and now bestselling author, arrives, observes, grimaces, states the obvious, imposes a schedule along with a set of rules and punishments. The parents stumble but then get the hang of her system. Contentment ensues.

The limits of the show, however, are less consequential than the limits of its star. Ms. Frost's approach to family crises is stunningly simple-minded; it's the narrowness of her repertoire, not merely the constraints of the medium, that lead her to ignore the important questions. She never stops to ask whether the demands of work and kids could be more gracefully reconciled if high-quality, low-cost daycare was available. She doesn't even inquire into psychological issues. Are the parents' expectations appropriate for the age of the child? Might something deeper than a lack of skills explain why they respond, or fail to respond, to their children as they do? How were they raised?

The nanny never peers below the surface, and her analysis of every family is identical. The problem is always that the parents aren't sufficiently vigorous in controlling their children. She has no reservations about power as long as only the big people have it. Kids are the enemy to be conquered. (At the beginning of *Nanny 911*, the stentorian narrator warns of tots "taking over the household"; the children in one episode are described as "little monsters.") Parents learn how to get them to take their naps now. Whether the kids are tired is irrelevant.

Supernanny's favorite words are "technique" and "consistency." First, a schedule is posted -- they will all eat at six o'clock because she says so -- and the children are given a list of generic rules. The point is enforcement and order, not teaching and reflection. Thus, rather than helping a child to think about the effects of his aggression on others, he is simply informed that hitting is "unacceptable"; reasons and morality don't enter into it. Then he is forced to "stand in the naughty corner." Later, the nanny instructs Dad to command the child to apologize. The desired words are muttered under duress. The adults seem pleased.

For balance, kids are controlled with rewards as well as with punishments. Those who haven't been eating what (or when, or as much as) the parent wishes are slathered with praise as soon as they do so -- a "Good boy!" for every mouthful. Sure enough, they fork in some more food. These children may be so desperate for acceptance that they settle for contingent reinforcement in place of the unconditional love they really need.

The little girl in one family is accustomed to having Mom lie down next to her at bedtime. Forget it, says Supernanny, and the tradition is ended without warning or explanation. When the girl screams, that only proves how manipulative she is. Later, Mom confesses, "I felt like I was almost mistreating her." "Do not give in," urges the nanny, and misgivings soon yield to "It's working; it's getting quieter" -- meaning that her daughter has abandoned hope that Mom will snuggle with her.

On another episode, a boy is playing with a hose in the backyard when his mother suddenly announces, "You're done." The boy protests ("I'm cleaning!") so she turns off the water. He becomes angry and kicks over a wagon. Supernanny is incredulous: "Just because she turned the water off!" There is no comment about the autocratic, disrespectful parenting that precipitated his outburst. But then, autocratic, disrespectful parenting is her stock in trade.

Supernanny's superficiality isn't accidental; it's ideological. What these shows are peddling is behaviorism. The point isn't to raise a child; it's to reinforce or extinguish discrete behaviors -- which is sufficient if you believe, along with the late B.F. Skinner and his surviving minions, that there's nothing to us other than those behaviors.

Behaviorism is as American as rewarding children with apple pie. We're a busy people, with fortunes to make and lands to conquer. We don't have time for theories or complications: Just give us techniques that work. If firing thousands of employees succeeds in boosting the company's stock price; if imposing a scripted, mind-numbing curriculum succeeds in raising students' test scores; if relying on bribes and threats succeeds in making children obey, then there's no need to ask, "But for how long does it work? And at what cost?"

In the course of researching a book about parenting, I discovered some disconcerting research on the damaging effects of techniques like the "naughty corner" (better known as time-out), which are basically forms of love withdrawal. I also found quite a bit of evidence that parents who refrain from excessive control and rely instead on warmth and reason are more likely to have children who do what they're asked – and who grow into responsible, compassionate, healthy people.

If you can bear to sit through them, the nanny programs provide a fairly reliable guide for how not to raise children. They also offer an invitation to think about the pervasiveness of pop-behaviorism and our hunger for the quick fix. "I guarantee you," Supernanny earnestly, if tautologically, exhorts one pair of parents, "every time you're consistent, [your child] gets the same message."

Granted, but what message?

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