

Modern Times: "Family Values"

UK TV documentary : 1998 : dir. Lynne Alleway : BBC : ? min
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A faintly tongue-in-cheek look at two upper-middle class British families struggling to cope with their unmanageable children. The first couple live in a 17th century Cornish manor house with their two daughters, Sophia (19) and Charlotte (+/-14), and son Richard (11). She is active in the Conservative Campaign for the Family, we are not told what her husband does. The second couple, John and Amalia, live in London with two children, Hector (8) and Roseanna (+/-12), whom they have consigned for the summer to a "New Learning Centre", where their behaviour will be "corrected".

The first family has a dominant, complaining mother, a quiet, well-nigh invisible father, and three noisy, squabbling siblings in a perpetual state of protest. We hear much from the mother of her Conservative philosophy of child-raising, observed mostly in the breach within her own family, and nothing at all from her brood as to why they spend so much of their lives goading her to distraction. The film follows the family preparing for their first holiday abroad (at a modest French caravan camp), and we witness a perpetual cycle of nagging, threats, exhortations and protest from mother, impotently reinforced by dad, while the two younger kids gleefully run her ragged at every turn.

Son Richard, in particular, is high-spirited, cheeky, and bouncing along through a constant rain of rebukes which wash off him without the least effect. Mother repeatedly complains that what he needs is "a really good thrashing", and that they "should have brought a stick", but is manifestly unable to restrain his attention-seeking, and as he watch, time and again Richard wins his way merely by wearing down parental opposition with his boundless energy. He nags and nags until he's allowed to drive the family car part of the way to a swimming trip, then immediately he gets behind the wheel drives far too fast, while his mother crossly orders him, over and over and over, to slow down. On the ferry to France, Richard is "bored" and resolves this by literally climbing up the walls of the ferry corridors, to another sea of complaints from mother. Arriving at the caravan, he immediately tunes the fitted radio to a rap station and jerks up the volume, is told to switch it off, switches it back on, has it switched off for him, switches it back on again, and so forth.

Mother is quite right. Richard *is* hungrily begging for a good spanking, but the problem is he doesn't receive **any** stimulus from his family but complaint. His parents are inept, even by their own reckoning, in channelling his energies down less confrontative activities, or providing him with more stimulating companionship. He's clad, of course, in ludicrous barrage balloon fashions (which mother also complains about, having bought them for him) and pesters his sister with the same glee as his mother, but there seems no genuine malice to him. He's very evidently a boy in want of strong male companionship, positive stimulation, and rules of reasonable behaviour which cannot be so blithely skated around. He's a mismatch in his own family. Mother frankly confesses she's never felt able to play with her children "as some parents do", or empathise with them at all, and pines wistfully for the days when nanny would

produce the offspring, scrubbed and on their best behaviour, for family teatime, before whisking them away to the nursery out of their parents' sight.

All so-called "fly on the wall" documentaries beg the question to what extent the people observed are performing for the benefit of the fly. In one particular scene, we watch daughter Charlotte gouging intently at the kitchen table with a Stanley knife while idly asking her mother in the next room what she would do if she (Charlotte) carved her name on the table? What she would do, say, if Richard carved some graffiti on this table? Mother vaguely promises that a beating would ensue in both cases, and Charlotte continues scoring deep into the table. It's so blatant an example of a child provoking parental retribution (mother of course does precisely nothing) that it seems phoney and acted out for the camera's benefit. But it also illustrates how inept parenting can produce an escalating cycle of bad behaviour from kids who *want* to be prevented, but know that they won't be. The family in this case are well-educated and middle class, and their rebellions are contained within the home, but the same inept parenting methods, in poor inner-city households, are what generate vandalism, antisocial behaviour and street crime. "The last 30 years have been an absolute disaster for the family" bemoans mother, discussing precisely these social trends. What she neglects to mention is that her own political party have been in government for almost all of those thirty years. If British society has gone to rack and ruin as she feels, it is they who steered it there.

The children of the second family, Hector and Roseanna, display none of these symptoms of open revolt. Mother in this case seems chiefly concerned about Hector's fidgeting, Roseanna's shyness, their domestic untidiness, lateness for school, and things of that order. The two children are given into the hands of an American woman whose "new learning centre" is founded on the simple psychological premise of bombarding children with "positive reinforcement". That is to say, they will be nagged with praise whenever they do the least thing correctly, until sheer emotional fatigue bludgeons them into surrender. We watch Hector and Roseanna visibly squirming under this drip drip drip – a Chinese water torture of patronising (or more correctly, *matronising*) commentary on the minutiae of their behaviour.

Have you noticed, incidentally, how it is always women, and always with American accents, who materialise on such programmes as "experts" on the Right Way to cope with disruptive child behaviour? These are indeed the shock troops of the New American Matriarchy, schooling the rest of the world on how to raise its children, and there seems lamentably little resistance to their evangelical philosophy, or the political agenda underlying it.

One of the "new learning centre"s requirements on agreeing to take children for corrective treatment is that the parents themselves must also attend a "parenting skills" class run by the centre itself. John and Amalia return from one such sermon to sit around the breakfast table and draw up a list of fundamental "house rules" with Roseanna and Hector, consulting the children themselves for a share of the rules. At the centre itself, we later discover, children are required to submit to a list of no fewer than **54** cardinal rules, such as "Control Your Inappropriate Responses". How insufferably smug must one be to expect a child of eight to comprehend such an edict? We see another boy condemned to attend the centre, evidently boiling with suppressed indignation at the regime, being commended sarcastically by the presiding "therapist" for his compliance. "You can *think* whatever you like in your own heads" she tells his class with a tang of victory in her voice, "so long as you obey the rules on the outside". The boy evidently disagrees, and she tells him so, applauding him for having learned to smother his "negative attitude" in her earshot. You don't have to agree with us – her teaching philosophy seems to be – you simply have to do what I say (and you must *pretend* to agree with it by word and deed).

This is theatre of the grotesque. The Edwardian nanny has resurfaced in the shape of the late twentieth century educational psychologist, suffocating and browbeating children in precisely the same way, under the pretext of "positive reinforcement" (complementing kids on their accomplishments, rather than endlessly criticising their faults). So Hector and Roseanna

learn to control their “inappropriate responses”, and their parents are delighted with the results. In the final scene we watch the “therapist” debriefing the family on its achievements. The children have a nervous, harried look about them. Roseanna is about to be packed off to boarding school (that traditional upper middle class solution for tiresome children) and is asked how she feels about it. She denies that she has any anxiety about the prospect at all. Asked what she is looking forward to most, she answers bluntly “Being away from home.”

As with other recent TV documentaries on the pitfalls of modern parenting attitudes, this one pertinently refuses to join up the dots, makes no comment, draws no conclusions. The viewer is left to infer what they will from what they have seen and heard. This is perfectly admissible in itself, except that one yearns for some coherent critical analysis arising from the evidence presented. A major flaw however is that, while the parents (or rather the mothers) are consulted at length about their attitudes to child-raising and how they view their own children, the kids themselves are merely observed by the camera, acting up, being irritating, sloping sulkily about. They are never consulted for their opinion of their parents, nor even to account for their own misbehaviour (carving up the kitchen table for instance). One would dearly love to have heard the children’s comments on that “new learning centre”, for example. The response would probably have been voluble and expansive. Ultimately the programme itself treats children as little problems to be sorted out, and not as people who might themselves have a valid comment to make on their own upbringing. Nevertheless, by presenting what anecdotal evidence it does, in the form that it does, it leaves the audience free to conclude what it will about current thinking on the subject. If this is a rectal thermometer in the 1990s British middle class family, the temperature can hardly be said to be reassuring.
Recommended.

See also “[Driving Mum Crazy](#)”, “[What Kids Want... and How They Get It](#)”, and “[Cutting Edge: Boys Alone](#)” for further evidence of a grand social experiment in disarray, and subject index under [BRATS / SPOILT CHILDREN](#), [DOCUMENTARIES](#), [FOREIGN TRIPS & HOLIDAYS](#), and [SCHOOL](#).