

School exclusions are on the rise, and it's not just teenagers. But one woman is turning tantrums into good behaviour – and keeping kids in the classroom

INTERVIEW BY LIBBY PURVES



OSCAR IS SIX, tiny, charming and clever and on his third "fixed term exclusion" from school. He risks being permanently expelled for his aggressive tantrums.

Jack, aged eight, hunches in the playground with no friends: sometimes, due to his rages, his whole class has been evacuated from the room for their safety. Olivia, nine, turns in seconds into a mass of scowling, pushing fury. All are losing education and distracting classmates: watch with dismay as a maths teacher tries to explain improper fractions while a child volcano seethes under her uniform, brewing another eruption.

News of the rise in permanent exclusions in England – the highest in a decade before the pandemic – might suggest teenagers with knives, but it's the cosy, colourful world of early school that is seeing disruption, injuries, and heart-breaking decisions to remove troublemakers. Heart-breaking because exclusions can blight a whole future.

We see Oscar, Jack and Olivia – with the permission of their remarkable parents and teachers – in *Don't Exclude Me*, a two-part BBC2 documentary about the work of behaviour consultant Marie Gentles, who has been asked to help a primary school in Southend.

Gentles is a calm, smiling, firm and wise presence: talking to her even I feel my stress levels drop. She sits in a classroom watching like a benign cat, missing nothing. Face to face with an angry child she quietly insists on attention and eye contact, and explains in words and gestures that it isn't them she dislikes but their behaviour. She assures them she can help.

"Behaviour is communication," she explains. "Feelings running loose. It's our duty to help them understand and control it". Despite the psychological depth of her work she comes at it without jargon, in words a raging child can understand. She worked for ten years at a Pupil Referral Unit – or PRU – after a traditional teaching degree, in which she reflects there

The Gentles touch

wasn't much talk about behaviour management. "When I first started I was startled, scared – I remember these tiny children, when they kicked off, being really scary. You felt your heart beating faster. Now, when I look at a pupil I just see the behaviour as a shell. Inside it, they're people, individuals. You don't want to crush the person inside, just help control that storm of feelings."

THIS IS NOT the voyeuristic "poverty porn" of shows like *Benefits Street*. The school is well equipped, with good teachers (both male and female) and concerned parents. We watch staff accepting guidance from Gentles: one says that you'd think it would be hard to be told how to do your job, but actually it's good to ask for help. The children's parents work with Gentles at home too, as she demonstrates how to react, reinforce good behaviour and not despair at setbacks.

"I feel passionately about behaviour, and it's good that we're talking more about it. But dealing with it, you inevitably get emotionally entwined yourself. So, as a parent or teacher, you need to understand that you are reacting, too. The child's aggression makes you feel you're failing. As a teacher it can make you just want to

exclude, to get rid of all these emotions." Small Oscar grumpily admits an attack. "Well done, you were honest about that!" Step by step she coaxes him towards the achievement of apologising to his victims. He glows proudly. Of Olivia, Gentles says, "She's soft inside, but doesn't show her vulnerable centre."

Her emphasis on language is fascinating: teaching the children to describe feelings. At the far extreme I've seen prison inmates decades older who lacked such loving attention, being liberated by drama exercises shouting Shakespearean insults and saying it's a relief to have words.

"When I started work at the PRU," she says, "99 per cent communicated their wants and needs by actions, and didn't know what to say: they just knew they didn't feel great inside, so told the world through behaviour. They needed to understand that feelings are OK but you can say them, and conduct yourself well in public without denying them." She teaches even the smallest the word "consequences", that outbursts have results. "Then he/she can accept them."

Some hark back to the days of slapping, being put in the corner, sent to bed with no supper.

'You don't want to crush them, just help control feelings'

MARIE GENTLES

Worse "consequences" than Gentles's benign ones. "It doesn't work if they're issued out of anger, or don't happen, or get overly used so you have nothing left. Balance them with reward and praise. Let them separate the naughty, bad, scary behaviour from who they really are."

It may sound soft, but when you see this kind, firm woman gently telling an infuriating child "We're going to work together on you not getting up and leaving class", it palpably works.

But it requires time, patience – and adults. Class sizes rise, weary teachers resign, budgets are squeezed, a consultant is seen as an "extra". At home, both parents may have to work; screens become babysitters. Gentles is – typically – balanced about that.

"Technology enhances our children in a lot of ways, but definitely has an impact on the

upcoming generation's social and emotional development. I speak to heads who say "Our reception cohort is fantastic at telling me how to use the interactive whiteboard, but have no social skills at all." And parents say "Oh, my child has to play on my phone as we walk round the supermarket." Sometimes they don't know how to just be."

SHE HAD "a standard childhood, not poor but not wealthy, middle class, good schools, Mum and Dad together. The main difference was that my mother and two aunts took foster children, so I had a lot of people to watch. You don't just learn from best practice, but from the opposite!"

It isn't about theory. "Mum was using all the strategies that I do, just not describing them in words." Gentles has two children of her own now, aged 18 and 13, and yes, she sometimes snaps. "Just last week I was working really long hours, tired, and I'd asked the eldest to do a few bits and he hadn't... grrrr! But after that moment I was able to recognise that I was communicating through my fed-up behaviour. Because I understood that, I could calm down, get round the guilt."

I observe that as a fraught young person I learned that you have to apologise to children when you're snappy, because I will they learn what an apology is? She laughing.

I raise the frequently cited case of bad behaviour, ADHD (prescribed the drug Ritalin to treat attention deficit activity disorder have risen sharply). diplomatic. "I'm not a medical professional. But what I can say is that in a child emotionally all over the place, their brain can look very similar to ADHD. I know how to regulate themselves. almost identical."

As for the other common worry especially need to run off energy, schools simply don't have the time. "Education is a squa every child fits. A young child may off energy, but if it's time for the then it's time for the maths les to manage your behaviour and trying to. It makes everybody ha

CALMING INFLUENCE
Marie Gentles, seen here with Olivia (left) and Nevejan (right), brings an air of patience and understanding to even the most turbulent classroom. Inset below: Jack is just one of the children benefiting from Gentles's intervention



