How do you handle bad-tempered or badly behaved children when they’re not your own, asks Ilona Boniwell, mother to two step-children, her own two teenage sons and a toddler

“Ilona Boniwell on family

Can you love other people’s children?”

Jason’s facial expression is like a slapped arse. All my attempts at interacting with my lovely son are met with a gruff ‘leave me alone’ – that’s if I get any response at all. What’s up, I ask? Is it his girlfriend? His mates? Has the school got to him again, or did he stay up until 2am and is simply knackered? Deep down I doubt it’s anything serious – Jason occasionally lapses into unfriendly, unresponsive moods, and will metamorphose into his usual cheerful self once he’s ready. However, in the meantime, he’s not really the best company.

Unfortunately, I know too well how disagreeable Jason gets when he’s in a negative mood. His aggression usually starts when he’s inarticulate or his friends are taking), but the rules are the rules.

So, a ‘perfect’ family lunch. One teenager in a passive-aggressive mood, another in a rage. Lovely! I will spare you the description of the rest... I’m proud to say that as a couple and as a family, we’ve gone a long way to establish clear rules and boundaries, and both my husband and I try to respect them as much as we can, striving to give out consistent signals of outward behaviour. I just wish it was that easy when it comes to emotions boiling on the inside.

Blood is thicker than water

The dire truth is that even when both our eldest teens are tricky to handle, my husband and I become more upset with the step-children, and more sympathetic towards our own. While I know Jason was spreading negative emotions, making no effort to respect the family lunch atmosphere, with my mother’s hat on, I feel sorry for him. Easy excuses – he’s almost an adult, an example of the group we belong to. For example, you might say, yours is the best country in the world. And you might increase your self-image by discriminating and holding prejudiced views against the out-group, which you don’t belong to. For example, the French are such a bunch of losers. And it can work in families, too: my son is good, your son is bad.

As the Sunday family lunch draws closer, the atmosphere is tense. My husband doesn’t appreciate teenage moods. He believes everyone should strive to contribute to a convivial family ambiance even if they’re feeling lousy. I don’t disagree – the implicit rules of community living demand that we try not to impose our emotions on others. Our respective younger families, too: my son is good, your son is bad.

What can we do? What helps? Certainly, the proximity, because the out-group can come into the circle of the in-group. Certainly honesty, empathy and communicating – being honest with your partner about how you feel, while stepping into their shoes and understanding their perspective (with all the baggage of pain and guilt you both may have). And of course, the positivity, recognising each other’s strengths and sharing good times together. Research demonstrates that when we experience positive emotions, biases diminish or disappear altogether. And let’s not forget about love – new studies show love is much less of an accident waiting (or not) to happen, and is much more of a choice and ongoing work.

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Read Love 2.0 by Barbara Fredrickson (Plume, £9.66)