

'Honey, I shrunk the kids'

Jon Sutton and Aidan Horner speak to the children of psychologists, and the psychologists themselves, about their parenting

Most psychologists become wearily resigned to others' perceptions of them. When we tell people our profession at parties, we're not surprised if the response is 'Ah, are you analysing me then?' And if we tell friends that we are to become a parent, we may face jokey accusations that our children will become part of some big experiment (especially if we have been blessed with twins).

Such stereotypes may be based on flat-out fiction, perhaps films such as *Peeping Tom*, where the lead character is used as a guinea pig in his psychologist father's experiments on fear and the nervous

system, or on myths, such as the idea that famous psychologist B.F. Skinner raised his own daughter in a box (read Deborah herself debunking this at tinyurl.com/iwasnotlabrat). But we can't ignore real-life examples such as Hermine von Hellmuth, widely regarded as the first child psychoanalyst, who was murdered by the 18-year-old nephew she had raised. When he came to trial, he told the court that he killed her because she treated him as 'her experimental guinea pig [*Versuchskaninchen*]'.
So might we find a modicum of truth in amongst the tall tales? Should we be

adding a qualifier to Philip Larkin's *This Be the Verse*: 'They fuck you up, your Mum and Dad (particularly if they are psychologists)'? Surely any adult is liable to take their work home with them at the end of the day... how could what we know about human behaviour *not* bleed into our family life?

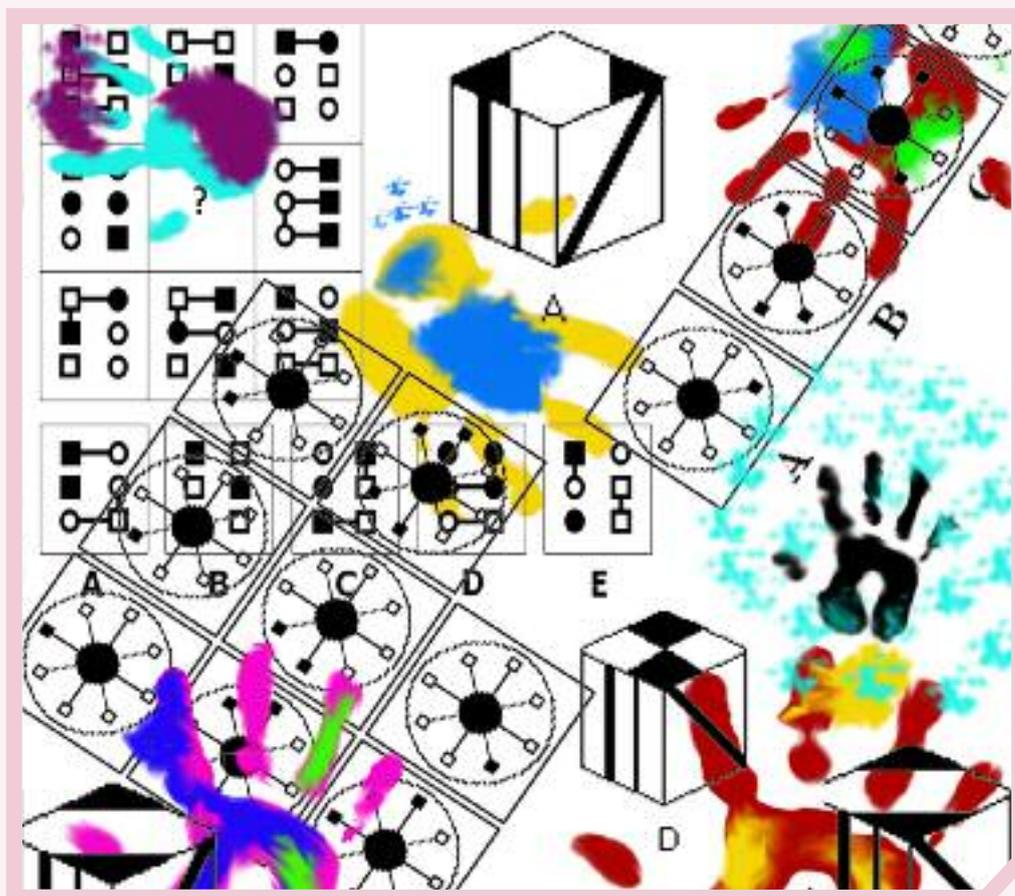
As there seems to be surprisingly little empirical research on the impact of parental profession (of any type) on parenting style, we decided to talk to people – those who have grown up with psychologists, and psychologists themselves about the impact of psychology on their relationship with their children.

An experimental approach

Let's kick off with the most obvious manifestation of a psychologist's profession in their parenting: those who take the tools of the trade home with them. There is indeed a long history of this, notably Jean Piaget, whose systematic study of cognitive development made heavy use of his own children and their friends. Others include

Winthrop Kellogg, who in 1931 adopted a chimpanzee, Gua, in order to study its development alongside that of his newborn son, Donald. Kellogg called the experiment to a halt on realising that, while Gua was becoming no more human, Donald was beginning to bark for food. A couple of years later, Clarence Leuba perhaps forfeited his 'Psychologist Dad of the Year' prize by attempting to determine whether laughter is innate by only tickling his infant son while wearing a 'cardboard shield' mask. Rather wonderfully, it is reported that Leuba suspected that the experiment had been ruined because of his wife's failure to fully observe his tickling rules.

In the intervening years, technological advances have meant that psychologists have all sorts of objects on offer when they decide to delve into the minds of their offspring. In *A Thousand Days of Wonder*, Professor Charles Fernyhough (Durham University) takes an intimate look at his daughter Athena's developing mind from birth to age three, and one reviewer (for the *Telegraph*) felt that 'the book really takes off when Athena is old enough to take centre stage; when she starts to run the show, participating and rejecting her role in her father's sometimes needy experiments'. Fernyhough's son Isaac has helped



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out too, wearing a SenseCam to document his Saturday (tinyurl.com/gkwk5pv). Taking this approach to its extreme, M.I.T. cognitive scientist Deb Roy embedded 11 video cameras and 14 microphones in his ceilings in order to record 70 per cent of his son's waking hours for his first three years, for what he calls the Human Speechome Project.

Some psychologists are particularly candid about this approach to their children's upbringing. Neuroscience professor Pawan Sinha reportedly stunned everyone, including his wife, by announcing at a birthing class that he was excited about the baby's birth 'because I really want to study him and do experiments with him' (which he proceeded to do by strapping a camera on baby Darius's head). (tinyurl.com/j5oj4om). Deborah Linebarger, a developmental psychologist who directs the Children's Media Lab at the University of Pennsylvania, has involved her four children in her studies of the effect of media on children, and she says simply: 'You need subjects, and they're hard to get.' She does, however, say that she doesn't 'want them to feel uncomfortable, like I'm invading their privacy', acknowledging that 'when you mix being a researcher with being a parent, it can put your kids in an unfair place'.

For most, childhood involvement in their psychologist parents' work seems fairly incidental and innocuous. Aime Armstrong told us: 'When I was six or seven, if I'd been really good, my dad would bring his black box home from work and let me do the puzzles inside. It wasn't until years later I realised they were all developmental psychometric tests – to me they were just the biggest treat ever.' Andy Kerr (tinyurl.com/hwzmbtk) writes: 'One did occasionally get the feeling you were being analyzed or judged, but I'm not sure how much of this was psychology, and how much of it was just mothers being mothers.' He adds: 'My sisters and I have taken IQ tests, MMPI, and countless other questionnaires, filled in myriad bubbles on answer sheets, and each time tried our best to guess what each text was *really* evaluating. We were almost never told the results. (Probably just as well.)'

A world view

For those who don't enrol their offspring in their studies, formal or otherwise, might they nevertheless find it impossible

Psychologist, heal thyself

If you try to 'use psychology' on your young children, don't be surprised if they throw it back at you. Dr Paul Redford, a Chartered Psychologist at the University of the West of England, tells us: 'One of the toughest parts is putting the reading into practice – which is probably obvious for practitioners, but to non-practitioners it is a wake-up call. It is all well and good reading Carol Dweck's work about encouraging a growth mindset or Martin Seligman on raising an optimistic child, but the reality is you are faced with amazingly creative reactions to your encouragements to "try to think of another way of seeing this situation". "Why don't you think of one, you're the psychologist?" for example! Trying at that moment to think of the appropriate response is challenging. I have often wished I had a "Dwecktionary" of appropriate growth-based language to learn.'

As for Aime Armstrong (pictured), she appears to be raising a third generation of psychologists. 'Because my parents were psychologists and I am now following in their footsteps, I am more aware of my children's behaviour and how I am with them



than I might otherwise have been. Sometimes they turn the tables on me though. My seven-year-old daughter asked me to bake her a rainbow birthday cake with a 3D mermaid that was half inside the cake and half outside. Not trusting my ability to deliver such a culinary feat, I suggested that a simpler cake design might be more practical. Undeterred, she remarked "You can do it, Mum, it might be challenging, but you'll find a way, don't give up..."

to leave a psychologically minded approach outside the family home? There

"many children of psychologists report feeling more aware of their own minds"

are some evocative illustrations of this in Micah Toub's book *Growing up Jung: Coming of Age as the Son of Two Shrinks*, such as

where he writes about how his dad

tells him, 'That's good that I died in your dream, Micah. It means you're integrating your inner father and becoming more independent.' After he confesses his fumbled attempt to lose his virginity as a teen, Toub's mom informs him, 'You have to *be* the erect penis in your life.'

Whilst that may be an extreme example, other psychologists have blogged about avoiding the temptation to put 'emotional subtitles to our children's lives' (tinyurl.com/hsc9w7c). Is this what the children themselves experience when they grow up with psychologists – a mental maelstrom that's liable to baffle and embarrass, a constant direction inwards towards mental states?

It's certainly notable how many

children of psychologists report feeling more aware of their own minds and those of others due to their upbringing. When clinical psychologist Sarah Marzillier, who was raised by two psychologist parents, spoke to her father John in *The Psychologist*, she said: 'I think psychology taught me that certainties are really myths that we tell ourselves to help ourselves feel better about an uncertain world. I think that has helped me to be more accepting towards others and ultimately myself.' And in discussion with her psychology graduate daughter Melanthe, Chartered Psychologist and novelist Voula Grand said that she feels she 'grew up very psychologically minded... As you had done with the fairy tales, you both used to ask me to tell you the famous psychological studies over and over again, you were fascinated.'

Dr Charlotte Russell (King's College London) is the daughter of Cambridge psychologist James Russell. She says her father 'was very interested in us, what we said, why we said it, what we doing and why... Most adults aren't interested in children at this level and looking back I'm sure that's a very positive thing to have – to feel that your actions are interesting is

very important! At the time though sometimes it could be infuriating, as obviously you don't know why you are saying and doing many of the things you're saying and doing when you're a child... And so you end up confabulating!

This idea that what psychologists pass on to their children is a general world view, an approach, is supported by Aime Armstrong, now a psychology postgraduate. 'My parents met at teacher training college,' she tells us, 'and Dad's fascination with psychology and helping young people to learn led to him becoming an educational psychologist. Dad taught me not to make assumptions about people, and to love learning for the pure joy of discovery, rather than for the achievement of a particular qualification. He never pressurised me to do well in exams, or checked whether I'd done my homework, he just talked to me about everything and anything, and answered my endless questions about the world and people. He once said to me "I believe you can achieve anything you set your mind to" – that was amazing to hear from your Dad, but it wasn't about being clever, it was about being determined.' The York-based father and psychologist Tom Hartley agrees, but broadens this view to science in general. 'Science fills that function in providing an overarching

framework of values that come through in a parent-child relationship.'

A double-edged sword

So, what of the parents themselves? Do psychologist parents feel different from non-psychologists? And if so, are they entitled to? Our highly selective, unscientific, poll of psychologist parents revealed some interesting commonalities.

Perhaps the most obvious question is whether psychologists try harder to understand what their child is thinking and why. One psychologist dad from Cambridge we spoke to describes parenting succinctly as 'the toughest theory of mind problem I've ever worked on'. This seems to epitomise a psychological mindset, as not only does he want to get inside the minds of his children to understand them better, he couches this desire within psychological terminology.

The US-based psychologist Sarah Rose Cavanagh, whose research specifically focuses on emotional regulation, says: 'I sometimes feel like I could be a more laidback, natural parent if I wasn't constantly overthinking everything.' But then again, 'I would probably overthink everything even if I had gone into another field.' Is her overthinking because she's

a psychologist, or is she a psychologist because she's predisposed towards overthinking? Interestingly, Sam Evans, London-based father and language psychologist, said: 'I sometimes feel that thinking about scientific problems can make me a bit "absent" when I'm at home.' Perhaps it can take cognitive effort to detach from that mindset and just play.

Most parents report being more aware of the developmental literature, or at least more able to find and understand relevant material when required. This can be a double-edged sword though. Akira O'Connor, father and cognitive psychologist with interests in memory and *déjà-và*, told us it didn't help him make a better decision: 'It just made me more conflicted about the decision I would almost certainly have made anyway.' However, when his son showed signs of colour blindness, he 'knew to get some Ishihara plates, and... understood some of the

more complex psychophysics in the books [he] was reading'. Similarly conflicted, cognitive neuroscientist and memory expert Kim Graham thinks being a psychologist 'causes you to worry sometimes about whether they have particular disorders', but conversely her knowledge allows her to understand her children's 'behaviour [and] developmental stages' and helps in 'explaining it to them'.

Certainly an increased awareness of developmental stages and psychological disorders can lead to an increased tendency to 'diagnose' your child. Dr Paul Redford is married to Dr Emma Halliwell (both work at the University of the West of England). He tells us that 'discussions regarding our children or parenting can end up debating the relative evidence base of "stage based" developmental approaches compared to the evidence regarding the age of onset of enduring personality characteristics, which I guess in other households might be nipped in the bud as "it's just a stage they are going through".'

Conversely, knowledge of the large amount of variability throughout development can bring comfort. Information for parents on developmental milestones rarely highlight the large amount of variance common to any



'These days I feel more editor than psychologist, but many moons ago I spent three years of my life researching bullying in 7- to 10-year-old children. So when my two boys hit those ages, was I ready with words of wisdom? Well, given my emphasis on the different roles in the bullying process I did find myself advising them to ignore the school's apparent advice to not get involved if they saw bullying occurring. But I did also find myself saying "Just punch him in the face, really hard", which I'm not sure is an entirely evidence-based approach.

I have found other areas of psychology influential, though. For example, I'm a big fan of the social identity approach to leadership, and I at least attempt to follow this in family life as well as in the workplace. A leader can be seen as someone who embodies a social identity that is shared with other group members – and who exerts influence on this basis. Being one of us, doing it for us, crafting a sense of us, making us matter.

'But in my kids' eyes, I doubt I'm an inspirational leader. I'm "a doctor, but not a useful one".'



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psychological measure, and to psychological development in particular. We tend to be aware of the theories relating to development, and the quality of evidence that is used to support these theories. But does this allow us to do anything more than justify whatever path we have blindly chosen? Redford admits he did 'over-read developmental literature after my first child looking for an "evidenced based approach" to parenting, but soon realised that I was also clearly demonstrating confirmatory bias, in that I was just looking for evidence to support the parenting style that I had chosen/fell into.'

So, do psychologists

feel a 'breed apart' as parents?

Interestingly, this question frequently brought out the scientist in those we spoke to, with many saying they didn't know as they 'didn't have the appropriate control condition'. Our personalities, profession and parenting style are likely to be so interrelated that it simply isn't possible to talk about them as separate entities. But one thing is sure: nobody is feeling that being a psychologist means they hold all the aces. We spoke to Professor Tanya Byron, clinical psychologist and presenter of such TV programmes as *The House of Tiny Tearaways* and this year's *Child of Our Time*. 'People presume that I will be mother of the century,' she said, 'a child psychologist as a mother, what could go wrong? Thankfully I'm not and have managed to bring up my children Lily and Jack with a strong boundary between my personal and professional self. Indeed, the only star chart in my house when they were growing up was one they once made me. And now as young adults they are threatening to write a book entitled: *Tanya Byron – Great with Other People's*

Kids but Shit with Her Own! Of course I know they are only joking...'

Perhaps any sense that our background is going to help us win the game of life quickly folds when faced with the reality of parenting... let's not kid ourselves, Mum and Dad are not in charge, and whether they're plumbers or psychologists makes very little difference. We might mould our children, but surely more than anything they mould us (see box on previous spread).

Back to basics

The common perception seems to be that having a psychologist as a parent is not going to pan out well... to give a possibly unreliable example, Nicole Kidman's break-up with Tom Cruise was blamed in some quarters on her father's position as a renowned psychologist. Others can certainly be wary: Professor Elizabeth Meins (University of York) told us that her daughter's best friend and boyfriend were 'quite anxious' about meeting her and husband Professor Charles Fernyhough. 'They asked whether we'd be able to assess their personalities immediately. Athena's eye-rolling at such a notion clearly means that having us as parents at least means that she won't ever make silly assumptions about psychologists psychoanalysing you the moment they set eyes on you.'

Generally, though, the children of psychologists we spoke to painted a positive picture... McKenzie Lloyd Smith told us: 'The first thing anyone ever asked me when growing up, when they found

out what my parents did, was "So can they read your mind?". But, despite this common childhood misconception,

having two exceptionally good

psychologists as parents has been nothing but a benefit to me, both in childhood and continuing into adulthood.'

The parents were perhaps not quite so sure, seeing both positives and negatives. This shouldn't be a surprise though: being self-critical is perhaps part of the mindset

'Until a few years ago I never thought of myself as the parental type. To be quite honest, I wasn't very interested in children. My daughter entering the world has changed this completely. Not only has it awakened the "father" in me, but also the "developmental psychologist". I love watching (and occasionally helping) my daughter try new things – manipulating objects, categorising things, trying to communicate.

I vividly remember when she had first learnt the word *cat*. I was walking to the park with her in the buggy and she pointed towards a four-legged animal and proudly stated "Cat". Here was a young mind forming semantic categories by probing the boundary conditions of a newly learnt word, moving from the specific cat in our house to similar looking animals in the wider world. Unfortunately she was over-generalising – this animal was obviously a dog.

I try to keep experimentation to a minimum where my daughter is concerned, but I do feel the way in which I interact with children is partly shaped by my psychological background. I find myself asking them *why* they want a particular toy and not another, *why* they don't want to eat pasta tonight when it was yummy yesterday. Perhaps I'm trying to get them to see things from a different perspective; to think differently. This isn't a conscious decision by me, I seem to do it naturally when talking to children. I like to think it might be useful to them in some small way, but I'm sure they find it more annoying than anything else.'



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often associated with psychologists. Although we might be more predisposed towards thinking about our child's behaviour in quiet periods, all the theory in the world can't help in the fast-paced world of actually interacting with your child. Sam Evans (UCL) sums this up, simply stating, 'Kids don't give you much time to reflect on the way that you parent.' Perhaps we are just like all the non-psychologist parents out there, winging it from day to day, trying to apply what we know about the world to provide the best possible environment for our children to flourish.

Indeed, scrambling round for our own words of wisdom to close, it's writers and not psychologists we find ourselves turning to. Make your children feel safe, advises author Joel Stein (tinyurl.com/jxwvyme). And above all, don't take the whole thing or yourself too seriously: as Roald Dahl wrote, 'A stodgy parent is *no fun at all*. What a child wants and deserves is a parent who is SPARKY.'