

UNITED WE STAND

TROUBLESOME KIDS AND AN IRRITATING HUSBAND? HELENA BONHAM CARTER'S PARENTING GURU HAS THE ANSWERS FOR **KATE LIBRAN**

M

y husband and I are sitting at a table, being instructed to look deeply into one another's eyes. Opposite us, a softly spoken American is coaxing us to make statements about what we like in one another, with real feeling. I'm not in a loving mood, as we've bickered about the best route to the appointment. But I grit my teeth and tell my husband, Charles, that he's sensitive and intuitive. That he

makes me laugh. And that he's kind. Then it's his turn.

Our coach is Noël Janis-Norton, 66, a parenting guru with an easy smile and a calm manner. She has been a secret celeb favourite for a while, but she hit the headlines recently when Helena Bonham Carter went to see her with Tim Burton, and announced that not only were her children transformed by her methods, but, even better, so was her other half. Bonham Carter had grown sick of being the "policewoman and nagger" at home. "Tim used to say, 'Where's such and such?', and I'd scurry around looking for it," Bonham Carter said. "Now I make him do it."

Janis-Norton explains: "I teach basic communication skills that bring out the best in everyone, including the parents. I help parents become more united and, over the years, this has improved countless marriages."

We've come to see Janis-Norton for some help with troublesome teenagers, but there is no doubt that, after 20 years together, my relationship with Charles has lost some of its sparkle. I'm often grumpy about being a one-parent family while he flies around the globe on business, and it doesn't exactly improve marital relations when he announces, an hour before a dinner party, that he's off to New York. Forget relationship sparkle; think relationship sparks. And when he cancels our theatre outing (again) for an "important meeting", my verbal assault can be heard at the end of the street.

Now, however, I'm looking into his eyes like a love-struck teenager while he "affirms" me. "I loved the way you looked when we went out yesterday. You really care about our family." I find myself becoming rather cross that he hasn't mentioned my wit or sexual allure. And I say so. "So, are you a glass-half-empty type?" Janis-Norton asks. "We like to get people to focus on what their partner can give them, rather than what he can't." As we carry on talking, she also notes how frequently I interrupt Charles. "I'm listening to you," she says, looking at him intently.

Janis-Norton started out as a teacher in New York, then ran a highly successful school for troubled children in London, before setting up her parenting advice business. She still sees people referred by social services, but her clientele now is mostly London's movers and shakers. Are celebrities'

problems different? "They have the difficulty that many rich parents have — they feel guilty that they're not spending as much time with their children as they think they should," she replies. "So, often, they compensate by buying stuff and being too indulgent." For the rich and famous, she offers her live-in supergranny option. She trains the parents, teachers, her clients' staff, the children's tutors and music teachers in her methods; and she is on call 24 hours a day, at a cost of about £1,500 a day. For the rest of us, there are her parenting CDs, free talks and her personal or Skype consultations.

We opt for a private session (cost: £120), mostly because Charles finds it easier to schedule regular 7am slots on Saturdays. ("I've noticed that you're very committed to our parenting sessions," is how it is suggested I deal with this, rather than: "You've ruined my bloody lie-in.")

It turns out that Charles and I are not good at presenting what parenting gurus call "a united front". As for my own childhood, my mother has a personality disorder — and she bolted when I was 13. So when it comes to maternal skills, sometimes it feels as if I'm navigating blindfold to the moon.

We've raised two frequently polite and spirited daughters, Sophie, 13, and Amanda, who is 16 — and aims to get her GCSEs exclusively by trying on clothes in Westfield shopping centre. Both girls are into door slamming, arguments, defiance and homework procrastination. Add to that occasionally refusing to eat, going to bed yawningly late and Facebook addiction.

I respond to their bad behaviour with nagging, shouting, grounding, threats and more threats (most of them never carried out). We've become what the Americans call a CRU (child-rearing unit) — meaning I'm a slave to my kids. It doesn't seem odd, because it's like that in most of our friends' houses. But, yes, we live in the house of hormones — our teenage daughters rampaging at one end of the scale and my erratic self at the other.

Janis-Norton offers a solution in her 16 Skills Programme, most of it based on common sense ("The only thing about common sense is that it's not common," she observes wryly). The first of these is descriptive praise — not the superlatives like "wonderful" or "brilliant" that can leave kids feeling inadequate. Instead, she teaches parents to motivate their children by noticing little steps in the right direction and being specific ("I notice you didn't slam the door when your sister annoyed you"). The other key is reflective listening — which involves imagining what your child is feeling and verbalising it. So when your daughter says she doesn't have any friends, you don't respond: "But look how many people came to your party." Instead, you reply: "I think you're feeling left out." The 16 skills — which include everything from setting rules to rewards and consequences — are about getting back in charge, emotionally and practically.

Some of the techniques are specifically designed to help us achieve the united parental front that's essential for successful child-rearing. Daily

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15-minute, solution-focused talks, for instance. "You may want him to do the washing-up every day, he may suggest once a week, and you settle on three times a week." Janis-Norton also instructs us to convey – in a polite manner, every day – something that annoys us in our other half. This way, resentments don't build. Another unusual aspect of her programme is an insistence on each person doing something fun every day. "It could be anything from soaking in a bath to reading," she says. "A happier partner impacts positively on the relationship."

In the first few days, we find her programme hideously demanding. We spend our time listening to CDs (with titles such as *Never Ask Twice*), thinking up answers for our solution talks, and having special time with the kids.

Things starts to change almost immediately, however. The dynamic between the children alters. Initially, Sophie is furious that Amanda is getting so much positive attention and blossoming – and, uncharacteristically, Sophie starts to behave badly. But after only a week, there's no shouting in the house. Sophie is feeling settled again. Plus, Amanda is being co-operative and, astonishingly, she's becoming academically motivated.

What about hubby? Well, I'm loving our dates. I've stopped interrupting Charles, have started really listening to him and am beginning to feel some of the excitement we had in the early years of our relationship. I'm loving receiving my daily dose of descriptive praise, too. Okay, so it's being emailed from Zurich this week. But, hey, I'm looking on the bright side now. ●



Burton and Bonham Carter were 'transformed' after seeing Janis-Norton

TIPS FOR FAMILY HARMONY

DESCRIPTIVE PRAISE Instead of over-the-top commendation, which people don't believe (so it doesn't cause behaviour to improve), notice and mention exactly what your child or other half is doing right.

PREPARING FOR SUCCESS What goes wrong in families tends to have gone wrong before, so it doesn't come as a surprise. Make plans that help everyone to do the right thing – preparing the environment, the child and yourselves – so you're more likely to stay positive and consistent.

REFLECTIVE LISTENING is a way of responding when people are upset. Instead of trying to solve the problem for them – which is disempowering and doesn't teach them to be self-reliant – or dismissing it, imagine what your child or loved one is feeling and reflect that back in a word.

ESTABLISH RULES AND ROUTINES Make your boundaries clear, then follow through calmly.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY for making your own fun rather than expecting your husband/wife or your children to make you happy.