

Is baldness enough?

Louis Appleby

Andrew, as anyone who saw *QED*'s first excursion into child psychiatry will remember, was the kid from Hell, who lay screaming on the floor of a do-it-yourself store as his helpless parents wrung their hands. The cameras followed them as they journeyed to the Maudsley where DIY parenting skills were taught. The family emerged happier, more insightful, and able to deal at last with Andrew's tantrums; the programme was a minor triumph. But the sequel, *Is Love Enough?*, was not far short of farce.

The subject of this latest story from the Maudsley children's unit casebook was whether a couple who wanted to care for their baby were capable of doing so, hence the cloying title. Unfortunately, it was quickly clear to anyone with a modicum of common sense that there were big problems. The woman was of low intelligence and suffered frequent, uncontrolled fits. Her husband, former lover of the woman's mother, seemed not to understand what the fuss was about.

No doubt it was for these sound reasons that the assessment was brought to a premature close, leading to a recommendation of social service supervision. But from the way the process was depicted you wouldn't have guessed it. It looked instead as if the decision was based on something as thin as the hair at the back of the baby's head. Indeed it *was* the hair at the back of her head. No fewer than three times the infant's bald patch was remarked on and taken as evidence of neglect. It was, the hospital team insisted, the result of being left lying on the floor to rub her head from side to side in frustrated self-stimulation. At which households up and down the country must have exclaimed, "Our Wayne's got one of them!" As do thousands of babies who spend time on their backs, playing happily.

Not only that; black marks were awarded to the mother when she responded only slowly to her baby – though the reason was that she was carrying out an IQ test under instruction at the time – and to her husband after he persisted in letting the child support her own weight. Not old enough, he was told. She likes standing, he replied – and knowing looks were exchanged behind the two-way mirror.

The press are fond of portraying medicine in this way, picking up on something mundane that appears to be imbued with significance. When someone says that left-handed people are less intelligent or prone to schizophrenia, or that heart disease can be predicted from fingerprints, it makes the news. But the most important scientific papers pass unnoticed. It is an understandable fascination but a mediaeval one. You can picture the scene a few centuries ago: the wise folk of the village are gathered round. "See!" they are saying. "The child has the Sign upon him!" Only now it is the mark of Bad Parenting.

But none of this was the worst part of *Is Love Enough?* because, unable to show the parents' faces, the production team opted for a series of camera angles directed at other body parts in what looked like deliberate mockery. The mother's permanently drooping mouth appeared in close-up. Another shot was taken side-on to both their bulging stomachs, as if they were Harry Enfield's Slobs. What on earth was *QED* trying to say here? That fat people shouldn't be parents?

Although it is not hard to criticise what was shown, it is equally easy to imagine how the final product came about. The success of the first programme makes a follow-up inevitable, but a new focus is needed, along with a new 'victim', as the media sometimes call their subjects. But as time passes, no-one suitable turns up. In desperation the TV people are forced to settle for a couple whose faces cannot be shown, and to spin out an assessment whose outcome is obvious.

As a result the professionals seem to be making a meal of something that could soon be their bread and butter. The assessments of parenting demanded by a society concerned to protect children now fall regularly to psychiatrists. But on what should their decisions be made? How can we tell if they are correct? How bad does parenting have to be before children are removed? Perhaps another programme on another day will ask the crucial questions.

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