



Pushover Mum: Lessons from shutdown so far

Things I have learnt in these last few exceptional days have surprised me somewhat. Some are perhaps trivial and joyful - I am not too old to join Instagram and enjoy it, for example. Others are more significant, and potentially life changing.

So, what, you may wonder, have I learned? That Maslow was right, and our basic needs have to be met above all else – cue toilet roll panic buying, or that we are fantastically versatile and creative and can adapt successfully to almost any conditions imposed upon us? No, these things do not surprise me, they confirm what I know about how fearfully and wonderfully made we are.

What I learned, quite surprisingly, is that my 6-year-old thinks I am too kind, a pushover, not to be taken seriously and nowhere near as scary as her teachers at school. And how, you may also wonder, was I given this insight into the depths of her psyche? Well, it was quite simple – she had been a first-class pain in the backside since we were all put into lockdown to keep safe from covid-19.

At every opportunity there was a thump, a pinch, a shove, a kick, a pulled face or a stuck-out tongue aimed at her sister. Snatching, shrieking, foot-stamping and all manner of avoidance tactics were becoming so common place in our lives that I began to question whether we would make it through a week of lockdown, let alone a number of months, without some serious repercussions. She was trying to say the least, in a way that is not totally unheard of, but with that level of consistency, thankfully, relatively infrequent in our home to-date.

I tensed up every time her younger sister approached me with a tear-stained face, knowing that I was about to hear yet another tale of woe inflicted on her. I initially took the approach that she needed to toughen up and deal with the reality of rubbing alongside her sister. Internally, I made a million excuses for why the older one was being such a pain – she's worried about the virus, getting sick, not seeing her grandparents, being off school, missing her friends, not being able to go on holiday at Easter etc etc. My general position was something along the lines of 'poor her, she's going through something really tough now' and so I made excuses for her behaviour, lots of them. And then, I had enough. This had been going on for a week, and it was relentless and making us all miserable. So, when she was merrily chatting away about her best friends that she missed so much, I asked her if she had ever hit them. A look of abject horror crossed her face as she gasped 'no, never!' So I asked her why not, she speedily replied that she did not want to get in trouble. When I said, 'who from?' it was very clear the worst thing that could ever happen to her would be to be sent to the head teacher at school.

This made me pause and consider, why my kind of 'trouble' that she had been in all week was so ineffective. I asked her if she felt the same way about getting in trouble with me and quick as a flash she came back with 'No Mummy, you are much kinder than all the teachers, you would never tell me off like that'. So there I had it, she didn't believe anything noteworthy would happen if she didn't do as I said.

I told her that was where she was wrong and the next time there was even a hint of unkindness to her sister it would be time out, followed by losing the next 'treat'. In these lockdown days, it has to be said these 'treats' such as a snack, a favourite tv show or a bike ride are precious. She took one look at me and laughed, yes laughed, as though I had told a funny joke. She said, 'don't be silly mummy if you told me I couldn't watch tv I would just walk in the room'. I told her in no uncertain terms that would not be happening and that I would stand guard at the door if necessary, to stop her going in. She gave me a long hard look and changed the subject.





That was 3 days ago. I have not had a peep of nonsense out of her since. She has been as kind as you like with her sister, extremely helpful and a general pleasure to have around. When I drew attention to this lovely behavior, she gave me a cheeky grin and said, 'I don't want to lose my treats do I Mummy?'

So that is my most important discovery of shutdown so far, it is something that others have said to me before and I have not fully appreciated until now. I have learned that I don't need to make excuses for my daughter's behaviour because she has the capacity to choose how to behave. Perhaps you all know that already and you are having a quiet chuckle while thinking 'what a silly pushover Mum!' but for me, and for my family, this was something worth learning. So now I know to look her in the eye and remind her who is boss at home, not in some scary schoolmistress way, but as her Mum, with kindness and a sense of humour, who knows where the boundary is firmly set and won't be done over by little miss cheeky pants.

In these uncertain times of fear, sadness, horror and distress let's take these small opportunities to look the mundane in the face and learn from it. Our usual escape routes are no longer available, we are denied the right to flee our homes when the going gets tough, distractions are limited - it is just us, at home, faced with ourselves and those who mirror us, there is much to learn I feel.