

# ***Parenting the Demanding Generation***

**Dr Aric Sigman**

Evidence-based entertaining talks adapted for pupils, staff, parents at schools, employees, conferences, corporate:

**Online Safety & Screen Time**

**Managing Screen Time/Preventing dependency (including gaming and social media)**

**Vaping: What You Need to Know *Now***

**Protecting Children's Mental Health/ Preventing Problems**

**Child Anxiety: Understanding and Preventing**

**Doing Your Best in Exams**

**Body Image and Pressures Of Physical Appearance**

**Preventing Alcohol Problems: a new understanding, unrecognised effects**

**'Soft' Drugs? Vaping, Cannabis, Ecstasy: mental health, addiction & school grades**

**Relationships & Sex (balanced, sensible and evidence-based):**

- **Sex and Relationships ... for Boys**
- **Understanding Sex and Relationships (co-ed or parents)**
- **Understanding Boys, Sex and Relationships (for girls)**

**Boys, Girls and Pornography**

**Parenting the Demanding Generation**

Talks also available as a webinar

# About Dr Aric Sigman



Dr Sigman, an American, is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Biology, Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a Chartered Scientist awarded by the Science Council. As a health education specialist, he lectures primarily to children, parents and staff at schools, as well as to medical schools and to NHS doctors. He is a member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood and has also worked on teenage health education campaigns with the Department of Health. He is a peer reviewer for the medical journals *Acta Paediatrica*, *Preventive Medicine*, the *Nature* research journal *Pediatric Research* and the author of five books on PSHE-related topics, including *Getting Physical*, which won The Times Educational Supplement's Information Book Award. His biology paper on body image was the 'Scientific Article' for an Edexcel Biology A-level exam paper.

Dr Sigman has twice been invited to address the European Parliament Working Group on the Quality of Childhood in the EU in Brussels, once on reducing alcohol misuse among children and adolescents, and again on the impact of electronic media and screen dependency. The International Child Neurology Association scientific committee invited him to address their global conference. His paper on 'Screen Dependency Disorders' is published in the *Journal of the International Child Neurology Association* and he was recently invited to write papers on screen time for *Nature: Pediatric Research* and preventing future alcohol problems in children for *The BMJ* (British Medical Journal) and *BMJ's Archives of Disease in Childhood*. He has co-authored international research papers on adolescent sexual behaviour.

The EU Working Group published his report on the impact of electronic media and screen dependency, as well as his second report on preventing alcohol misuse among children and adolescents in the EU. Dr Sigman is the co-author of four recent All-Party Parliamentary Group reports on childhood mental health.

He has a long history of health education work for children and young people, appearing on the BBC's *Going Live* and then *Live & Kicking* for most of the 1990s. He also wrote health and psychology columns for several BBC children's and teenage magazines and *Brain and Behaviour* column for *The Times Educational Supplement* magazine. Dr Sigman travels abroad frequently to observe unusual cultures such as North Korea, Turkmenistan, Congo, Bolivia, Tonga, Bhutan, Far Eastern Siberia and many others, often volunteer teaching.

## ***Parenting the Demanding Generation***

**This document is a supplement to the more detailed points outlined in the lecture.**

When thinking of ways to support children's wellbeing – the idea of boundaries, rules and the consequences of breaking them, along with the notion of exerting authority over children would to many seem a contradiction in terms - or a throwback to the 1950s. In the recent trend toward so-called positive discipline, parents have been encouraged to be friends with their children, to provide them with choices in many matters and to negotiate more. To enhance a child's wellbeing 'You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative'. However, being warm and friendly is not the same thing as trying to be best friends with our children.

Although paved with the best of intentions, the result hasn't always been what we expected. Without clear boundaries and clear figures of authority children develop a sense of entitlement, self-centredness *and* they are also less happy, secure and socially viable.

In addition to looking at current studies, I travel extensively to a variety of cultures including North Korea, Bhutan, Mali, Tonga, Congo, Myanmar, Borneo, Laos, Iran, Vietnam, Bolivia, China, Japan, Burkina Faso, Far Eastern Siberia, Sumatra, South Korea, Philippines, Chile, Jordan, Uganda, Romania and Cambodia, among others, to observe child welfare and development. This is a marvellous reality check against the fashions and trends in child rearing that come and go in our own culture. I'm interested in identifying universal common denominators for child wellbeing that appear in the most remote and unrelated places on earth. I found that **although our society may have 'moved on', children's needs have not ... and they never will: clear boundaries and figures of authority along with discipline and consequences are a basic health and wellbeing requirement for all children across time and space.**

### **Authority**

Even as we chant 'put children first' ever louder, we have actually retreated from parenting. We are confused: unable to confidently distinguish between being authoritative and authoritarian, many of us have chosen what appears to be the safer option. And many teachers, policemen, doctors – have gone to great lengths to obscure obvious signs of hierarchy and control. This loosening-up of overt hierarchy and power relations may seem cosy and kind, but it has helped to undermine the authority that children desperately need.

There seems to be an unconscious misperception that authority and sensitivity, love and compassion are in some way mutually exclusive, and that by exerting authority (including compulsion and threats) we, in some way, diminish the caring we want our children to have and the love and trust we want to feel from them.

But our concerns are not justified. For example, a large-scale study by Britain's Institute of Education involving 12,500 families and children, combined with a major research review concluded: 'Multiple studies have documented that children who have authoritative parents – that is, both firm disciplinarians and warm, receptive caregivers – are more competent than their peers at different developmental periods including preschool, school age and adolescence ... contrary to popular understanding, "authoritative" parenting leads to better-adjusted, more competent children.'

Those who require more research in order to feel less queasy about displaying authority with our children may be interested to hear that cross-cultural studies with titles such as, 'Rules, legitimacy of parental authority, and obligation to obey in Chile, the Philippines, and the United

States' have found strong links between rules and parental control and authority and children having fewer behavioural problems and higher 'self-efficacy'. Authoritative parenting also leads the child to disclose more to their parents which is later "important in maintaining positive, respectful and trusting relations during adolescents' transition to autonomy'."

### **Being Friends?**

Some parents have difficulty in setting and enforcing limits and boundaries for their children, unconsciously deciding that being their friend is more important than being their parent. But stop and think: friends are equals so when parents try to be friends with their children, it sends a confusing message. When our children break our rules, we'll need to encourage the right behaviour, but our children won't understand the change of role. This conflict of interest creates inconsistency in our role as parents and undermines our children's feelings of security.

Our role in our children's life is to be their parent, not their friend. This need not be an adversarial relationship, but simply one in which we **make it clear who is in charge**. This gives our children a solid, secure base from which they can explore the world. Despite what they say or do, our children realise underneath it all that they are, in fact, children, and don't know how to 'do' life yet. If they feel that no one is in command and behaving like a parent, they'll often challenge our (lack of) authority, trying to provoke us into rising to the occasion.

### **Boundaries**

Parenting with flimsy or few boundaries might make us feel as if we are being 'nice', but while at first our children may enjoy getting away with things, they will eventually feel that their parents don't actually care enough to do the hard work of parenting. A child who feels his parents don't care about him will feel *unsupported* and is likely to experience more problems. As is the case with authority, boundaries make children feel safe and secure. And while they may not act or look happy when we impose a consequence, setting boundaries and enforcing them shows children that they actually matter to us – that they are loved enough to motivate a tired, overworked parent to deal with them, as opposed to taking the easier option and conceding. We'd all prefer to enlist our child's co-operation and even endear ourselves to them in the process – but parenting also involves the not-so-feelgood aspects....

### **'Natural Justice'**

It certainly isn't children who have an aversion to boundaries and consequences. They seem to possess a sense of what we could loosely call natural justice. A predictable fair system of rules and consequences provides them with a sense of coherence. Far from diminishing a child's world, restrictions and consequences are liberating.

There is certainly nothing wrong with our children knowing – *feeling*– our anger being vented as a consequence of their unacceptable behaviour, provided they know – *feel* – that we love them. A key part of their social and emotional development is to learn that their behaviour has direct effects on the emotions and behavioural reactions of others. As parents, we are introducing them to this concept in a controlled and loving way.

We may empathise with a child's desire to assert his or her own will, but we are still the adult, and should always act like it. We can offer our children choices, but we cannot allow their preferences to run our lives. As parents and teachers, we must still provide structure and support for our children, even if it doesn't taste good. The relevance of this spreads far and wide: clear and consistently enforced limits and boundaries teach our children the protocol of life, so they can grow up, fit in and cope.

Though it may take years, our children will appreciate it, especially when they have children of their own.

## **Practical Suggestions - dependent on age**

**Shift children's self-focus** – encourage children to help others and to think and feel for others. This can be done on a casual ad hoc personal basis or through more organized means – Scouts, Brownies, community/school schemes and activities involving volunteering and informal helping, religious activities.

**Deferred gratification/impulse control** – encourage and reward it!

**Ration children's recreational screen time** – don't allow The 3-parent family to move into your house

**Increase green-time** – exposure to nature can make our children pay better attention to us and to be more caring to others.

**Sleep** – children need at least 9 hours sleep per night. Parents aren't in the best of moods if they're sleep deprived ... children aren't either.

**Just say 'no'** – and convince yourself that you mean it so it sounds genuine. Remember: disappointing your child is often very good for their development.

**Limit their choices.** Younger children may feel confused and as they grow older may also develop a sense of entitlement where everything comes with options.

**Pull rank.** Children need to know you're in charge. This will make them feel far more secure.

**Construct boundaries.** This framework gives them a structure and security and is the forerunner to obeying rules at university, work and the law.

**Self-esteem.** Don't feel you have to praise or accept everything your child does for fear of lowering their self-esteem. It's good for our children to learn to deal with some constructive criticism if they know we love them. And praising everything will render praise meaningless. Focus instead on developing their **self-control**.

**Spend more time, less money.** There's no substitute for eye-to-eye contact and full-on attention. Not only does this make our child feel loved, but it puts us in a much stronger position to influence them and sanction them when necessary. They also will be less likely to act out because they feel neglected. We mustn't keep looking at our iPhone or iPad when talking to our child, our undivided attention means a tremendous amount to them.

## **Teenage points**

Being rebellious is *not* representative of most teenagers

Expect some mood changes

Primary goal of the teen years is to achieve independence

How much room you give your teen to be an individual?

Ask yourself - "am I a controlling parent?," "Do I listen to my child?," and "Do I allow my teen's opinions and tastes to differ from my own?"

Think back on your own teen years

Are your children experiencing performance pressure, perhaps related to exams or getting into the best university? Do they rightly or wrongly feel you have unrealistic expectations of them? Are you so busy you aren't able to talk to them about these things?

Talk to your children early and often to enable them to vent pressures and concerns.

Pick your battles

Teens may want to shock their parents and it's a lot better to let them do something temporary and harmless; save your objections for things that really matter, like tobacco, drugs and alcohol, or permanent changes to their appearance.

Set expectations. Teens might act unhappy about the expectations but will likely try to meet appropriate expectations. Without reasonable expectations, your teen may feel you don't care about him or her.

Share your family values with your teen and talk about what you believe is right and wrong, and why.

Make appropriate rules

Reward your teen for being trustworthy.

Know what they're learning from the media and who they may be communicating with online. Don't be afraid to set limits on the amount of time spent

Will this ever be over? As they go through the teenage years, you'll notice a slowing of the highs and lows of adolescence.

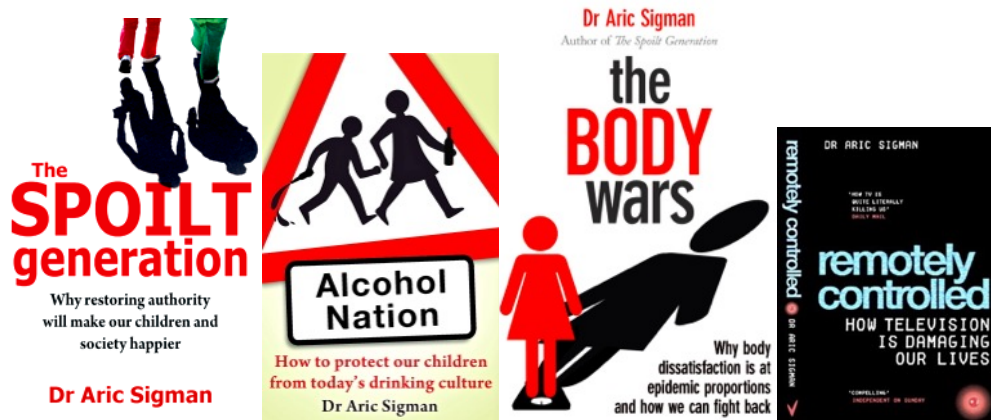
**Dr Aric Sigman is the author of the books:**

***The Spoilt Generation: Why restoring authority will make children and society happier.***

***Alcohol Nation: How to protect our children from today's drinking culture.***

***The Body Wars: Why body dissatisfaction is at epidemic proportions and how we can fight back.***

***Remotely Controlled***



**Evidence-based entertaining talks for pupils, staff, parents at schools, employees,  
conferences, corporate**

Further information: [www.aricsigman.com](http://www.aricsigman.com)

© COPYRIGHT 2024 Dr Aric Sigman  
Not for publication, Internet, social media or general public dissemination