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Mention Parenting Courses around a dinner table and you'll illicit a fairly dismissive response. "Why would you go on a parenting course?" asks one friend. "Surely it's all common sense?" "Aren't they just for people who aren't coping?" queries another. Not anymore. While it used to take a court order to get a parent to go on a course, now middle class couples are flocking to them. On any given weekday night across the country you'll find groups of well-dressed, professional mothers and fathers wearing name badges and taking notes on how to deal with everything from their two-year-old's tantrums to their eight-year-old's homework aversion.

"Parenting is definitely more on the social agenda now, with programmes such as *Super-nanny*," says Sue Kennelly, head of Parent Network Scotland. "People are thinking more about how they parent because it's there in their front rooms every night. It's being seen as a skill you need to learn rather than just something that comes naturally. It's not as if you wake up and zing, the baby's there and you know what to do for the next 18 years!"

The biggest provider of such courses is Parentline Plus. This year alone they've had 8000 parents enrol at their 12 centres. "The people coming here have changed. They now recognise that going on a course is not saying, 'I have no skills, I can't cope'. It's saying, 'I want to learn more, I want support and help to get it right'. Parenting courses are a forum to discuss what works," says trustee Suzie Hayman.

Today, parents are more aware of the impact they have on their children and they want to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. "The most likely thing for parents to do is to copy their parents," says family therapist Dr Mary Spence. "The second most likely thing for them to do is the opposite. We need to find somewhere in between and that's how parenting courses help – by giving parents a broader repertoire on how to handle things."

As a full-time mother, I kind of felt I was doing enough already – I'd given up my career, did I really have to give up my Tuesday nights as well? But curiosity (and self-doubt) got the better of me. I rang and was put on a course starting that night. Without time to think about it, I was about to subject my three- and one-year-old daughters to a whole new style of parenting.

WEEK ONE

My first parenting class gets off to a bad start when I have to bribe my three-year-old out of the

car with promises of ice-cream and leave her screaming on the roadside (father-in-hand) while I tear off for my first 7.30pm class. Fighting for a parking space in a crowded high street, a driver leans out of his window and tells me to 'calm down'. Well, this is what I'm here to learn. Parenting has given me many things, but a relaxed, chilled-out approach to life is not one of them. The New Learning Centre promises 'calmer, easier, happier parenting'. I am hopeful.

I walk into a classroom of thirtysomethings... and Gillian. Gillian, I will come to learn, is a woman with a mission – an ex-school teacher, she's passionate about the centre and its principles. On first meeting, however, she's a little disconcerting; she smiles a lot and makes us wear name badges. We go round in a circle introducing ourselves.

Most couples have similar concerns. Interior designer Margaret and her City trader husband Dan have two children aged six and four. "We've had a nightmare summer," they admit. Their holiday in the South of France was ruined by their four-year-old's constant temper tantrums. "We were with friends and I was so aware of how she was behaving. By the end of the holiday, I was at my wits' end."

Jess is due for her second baby at Christmas. She and her film producer husband Eric have a 'spirited' three-year-old. "We want to find a way to deal with her stubbornness that doesn't involve sweets and TV," she says.

Miriam and Bob have three children aged six, five and 22 months. Miriam is a full-time mother and Robert works in the City. "We want to start enjoying our children again – at the moment there's so much shouting and nagging, it's hard to see the positive in them," they say.

Gillian starts the class. "We've found that homes are rather unhappy when it's the four-year-old in charge. So tonight I'm giving you permission to be in charge," she says. "I know you all want to make your children happy but if this is your goal, you're going to fail several times a day. Your role is to get your children into good habits and this way they're more likely to end up having a happy life."

Tonight's big lesson is about Descriptive Praise, or 'DP', as Gillian calls it. "Telling your children off rarely yields the outcome you want. The way to create cooperation is through praise," she says. We learn that it's not good enough to just say, 'well done' or 'good boy' – you have to describe what you're praising."

I team up with another parent and we practise saying, "Well done for taking your plate over to the sink," and suchlike. At home, ►