

I'm happy to be a Tigress – as long as there's some fun too

by Anne McElvoy

1 TRULY, Dave¹⁾, I try to be the Tiger Mum you want us all to be. I have wagged fingers about messy handwriting, imposed Louisa May Alcott and the book chap known to our youngest as "Charles Chickens". I may be the last parent in north London to hold out against the use of "Me and John" and my 10pm cry to zombie-eyed teens is "Get OFF those devices!"



2 The Prime Minister thinks parenting classes might help us have higher expectations of our young. If there is one for how to instil urgency into a chap preparing for mock GCSEs by sleeping or a younger sister who gamely tries music exams without remembering to practise scales until the day before, then they are most welcome in my life.

3 Like most ideas teetering on the brink of parody, this one has a nub of good sense. The Prime Minister is really addressing his comments to teachers who need to aim upwards for children from poorer homes and parents who, having been failed by the education system themselves, find it hard to instil discipline and aspiration into their own children, perpetuating low social mobility.

4 But criticizing parents is fraught with perils. A young teacher I know tells the delightful story of trying to raise interest among parents in a deprived area in their children's homework. One single mum proudly told of how rigorous she was about homework, sleep times and reading. "That's wonderful," cried my friend, supportively. "I wish you were the mother of all my children."

5 Even when the words come out the right way, the flaw in the PM's approach is that it tries to be all things to all families. Because David Cameron is conscious of his privileged background, he falls into the "me too" trap of suggesting that everyone needs the same thing. But today's middle-class parents are already vastly ambitious for their children. When you have "got" 11-plus exams, GCSEs or university entrance in the family, a pall falls on everyone else.

6 Wanting a touch of Tiger syndrome in our approach to education is no bad thing in a world that will get more focused on competition and innovation. 36 I see Asia's best education thinkers worrying as much over how to encourage and bring enthusiasm and surprise into their rigid systems.

7 A London headmaster whose name I shall protect from the health and safety police started the recent exam-heavy term by abseiling down into the assembly hall dressed as Superman. How mad, wonderful and memorable. Our schooldays need a twist of that, to offset the Tiger toil.

adapted from *Evening Standard*, 2016

noot 1 Dave = David Cameron, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 2010 to 2016