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Those Televised Supernannies May Be Just a Bit Too Super

By SUSAN GILBERT

The five Priore children were kicking, pinching and screaming at one another on television. The decibel level rose even further when Joe Priore, their father, shouted for them to stop and then proceeded to spank them, assembly-line style.

"The screaming, the yelling - this is not a happy home," said Nina Priore, their mother, her hand shaking.

The Priores had sought help from "Nanny 911," a reality show on Fox that began last fall. The show dispatched Stella Reid, a matronly British nanny, to their house in Long Island. A week later, the children were well mannered, the parents were calm and all appeared to be well. The prescription? Stop spanking and yelling. Have a "rewards board" as an incentive for good behavior. Spend quality time together.

The Priores are among the dozens of American families who have had parenting makeovers on "Nanny 911" or "Supernanny," a similar program that made its debut in January on ABC.

The shows, both of which have been renewed for next season, are popular among parents. But pediatricians and other child development experts say that they are only partly rooted in reality.

The discipline challenges presented on the shows are in some ways typical of those that real parents face, and much of the advice is based on the same techniques that the experts themselves use.

But some advice is simplistic or questionable, the experts say, and the families in the shows appear extreme, their children more out of control than those in most American families. Some doctors also worry that endings may not be as happy as they seem and that appearing on the shows may leave some children with emotional bruises.

"The lack of consent of the children concerns me," said Dr. Deborah A. Borchers, a pediatrician in private practice in Cincinnati and a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics committee on early childhood adoption and dependent care. "As the children get older, they'll watch the videotape of the shows of them being portrayed as brats, and they'll be embarrassed."

Potentially complicating matters for families on "Nanny 911" is the lure of compensation. Some episodes end with families being rewarded with vacations. Other forms of compensation are used, said Paul Jackson, executive producer of "Nanny 911," in an e-mail message, but he declined to elaborate. "Supernanny" does not pay or reward its families.

Interviews with some parents who have appeared on the shows and the producers provide a glimpse of the experience as it is lived off camera. The parents say that they have learned valuable parenting skills and that their children are better behaved. But they also say that some of the lessons came in a form that was at times hard to take.

Evelina Gorbea, whose family was on "Supernanny" in March, said she and her children found some aspects of the experience difficult.

Ms. Gorbea said her family was recruited for the show in a shopping mall in Los Angeles, after a scout saw her son, Adam, then 2, running away from her.

Before the show, she said, she had never considered seeking advice for Adam's difficult behavior. "I figured it was a stage and it would pass," she said.

At first, Ms. Gorbea said, her children were excited about appearing on the show, "but after a while they were getting exhausted."

She added that she was unprepared for the negative way that her family appeared. She knew that it was a problem that Adam monopolized her attention - clinging to her ankles as she walked and sleeping in bed with her and her husband, Robert. But she was upset when she heard her older children - Meye, 8, and Demetrius, 9 - say harsh words about Adam on television.

"It was heartbreaking when Meye said, 'Adam's a mom hog,' and Demetrius said he wanted a vacation without Adam," Ms. Gorbea said.

Still, she said, the positives for her children outweighed the negatives. "They saw how Adam's behavior was toning down and that I wasn't as stressed out as before," she said.

The producers of both programs say they take precautions to protect the children from the potentially negative effects of being on the shows.

"The families are screened by trained counselors," said Mr. Jackson of "Nanny 911." "We look for children who are fundamentally stable and secure and won't be badly influenced by the experience."

Nick Powell, executive producer of "Supernanny," said that a psychologist interviews the children and parents ahead of time. "This is to make sure that the families are robust enough to go through the experience of having their methods questioned and challenged," he said.

Mr. Powell and Mr. Jackson said that their shows had psychologists available while filming, but that they have never had to use them.

In an interview, Nina and Joe Priore said that the experience of being on "Nanny 911" was mainly positive because their children's behavior has improved: they do chores and there is less yelling and hitting. But the Priores said the process was stressful and upsetting at times.

One of the most difficult moments was when the nanny gathered the children's toys in garbage bags and took them away to punish them for not straightening their rooms. "The children were a little upset," Mr. Priore said. (The nanny returned the toys by the end of the show.)

Watching the episode was also stressful, the Priores said, especially hearing Stella say the children were extremely rude and had the potential for delinquency. "I didn't sleep all night after seeing the show," Ms. Priore said.

Experts praise the shows for tackling real-life discipline problems: how to wean toddlers from bottles to cups; how to get children to go to bed and stay there; how to diffuse tantrums, minimize sibling rivalry and get children to clean their plates and their rooms.

What is unrealistic, the experts say, is the extent of the children's rudeness and wildness.

"I've been working with parents for 25 years, and the families on these shows definitely are not typical," said Nancy Samalin, a parent educator in Manhattan and the author of "Loving Without Spoiling and 100 Other Timeless Tips for Raising Terrific Kids."

When watching the shows, with their replays of the children hitting one another, defying their parents and uttering foul language, it is tempting to wonder if the children are prompted to ratchet up their bad behavior for the cameras. By the same token, the scenes at the end, with the households harmonious, may make some viewers question whether the endings are contrived.

"We don't distort or exaggerate," Mr. Jackson said. But, he said, the transformation is not always dramatic. "We've had to work hard to have an entertaining outcome."

To do this, he said, the producers might ask the parents to explain more clearly on camera something that they learned.

Such commentaries are especially valuable to the parents who watch the shows, said Dr. Suzanne Dixon, a behavioral pediatrician in Great Falls, Mont., and the editor of The Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics. "I write on prescription forms, 'Watch Supernanny,'" Dr. Dixon said.

"I've been lecturing parents and professionals about managing disruptive behavior for more than 30 years," she said. "It's hard to create as vivid a picture in a clinical setting as

'Supernanny' is able to do with a video and a commentary from Jo, the nanny, as well as parents saying, 'I know I shouldn't have done that, but ...' "

Parenting experts applaud many of the approaches that are taught on both shows, especially the need to be consistent, to discipline without hitting and shouting, to reward good behavior and to set aside time for unstructured family play.

But the experts object to some of the methods used. "There are times when the nannies use the word 'bad,' and I don't like labeling kids," Ms. Samalin said.

She was particularly critical of an episode of "Supernanny" in which nanny Jo Frost told 3-year-old Chase Christensen that he was too old to drink from a bottle and must now use a sippy cup. Colleen, Chase's mother, tossed the bottle into a garbage can and Chase, in a full-blown tantrum, fished the bottle out. "To quit cold turkey seemed to me to be very mean," Ms. Samalin said.

Some of the advice may also be inappropriate, experts say. A recurrent theme on both shows is children refusing to stay in their rooms at bedtime. The solution repeatedly advocated by the nannies is to let the children cry themselves to sleep, if necessary, an approach that is similar to a technique called controlled crying, developed by Dr. Richard Ferber, director for the Center for Pediatric Sleep Disorders at Children's Hospital Boston.

With controlled crying, known popularly as Ferberizing, parents let children cry in their rooms for a set amount of time before going in to check on them. In the 20 years since Dr. Ferber outlined the approach in his book "Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems," parents and pediatricians have debated not only whether it works, but also whether it is a justified form of tough love or a Draconian method of discipline.

Dr. Ferber acknowledges that his method is not appropriate for all children. "Controlled crying is not a cure-all for sleep problems," he said.

Dr. Ferber said the technique was useful for changing habits that could interfere with a child's ability to sleep alone, like falling asleep in a parent's arms. But, he said, controlled crying can do more harm than good if children balk at bedtime for other reasons, such as being put to bed too early, before they are tired, or because they have genuine anxiety about being in the dark.

"If the youngster's frightened at night, making him be by himself will make matters worse," Dr. Ferber said. In that case, someone may have to sleep in the room with the child until the underlying anxiety is treated.

Even when the nannies give sound advice to common parenting problems, experts say that the turnaround time for results is unrealistic: one week for "Nanny 911" and two weeks for "Supernanny."

"There's no way that a woman can walk into someone's house and have the kids behaving in a week," Dr. Borchers said. "The challenges are going to keep coming. There are no quick fixes in parenting."

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