

Sister's house out of control

Dear Barbara

My sister's household is, in my opinion, totally out of control. She is a single mom and has two children, age 5 and 7 and a teenager from a previous marriage.

My first concern revolves around the younger children. During the week, when they have to go to school in the morning, they consistently go to bed well after 9:00 P.M. and are often still running around the house at 11:00 P.M. The hours between 6:00 and whenever they finally go to sleep are pure and total chaos. The kids are literally bouncing off the walls. My friends and I with children the same ages usually put them to bed around 7:00 P.M. on weeknights and 8:00 P.M. on weekends. We think the kids are suffering because of this.

Is it healthy for children 5 and 7 to be going to bed as late as they are?

My second concern is that kids are rarely outside. In the winter, they are never in the yard, or out skating, skiing or tobogganing. It breaks my heart. Even in summer, video games are their best friends. We believe this is extremely damaging to both their physical and mental health. Our kids are outside after school until dinner, and spend pretty well every weekend outside. Don't kids need fresh air to survive?

Given that the kids are often screaming, crying, throwing tantrums and running around like maniacs, I think we already know the answers.

I am sure there are many households where the parents are too lazy or too tired to do what's best for their kids. It's really sad, because these lives are in our hands and the effects are permanent.

Dear Brother

Your sister needs support, not advice. Underneath laissez-faire attitudes, there is often depression. It sounds as if your sister is feeling quite overwhelmed. The "bouncing off the wall" children although almost unbearable can be better than experiencing depression once the children are settled. Therefore many depressed parents let children stay up late.

It has been demonstrated in many studies that children can sense their parent's emotional pain, and keep up rambunctious misbehaviour to distract the parent. When emotionally drained, it is more difficult to respond to the demanding behaviour of the children. This lack of response provokes the children to further wild behaviour because they want the parent's attention. Without it, they feel unnoticed and unimportant. A vicious circle is created.

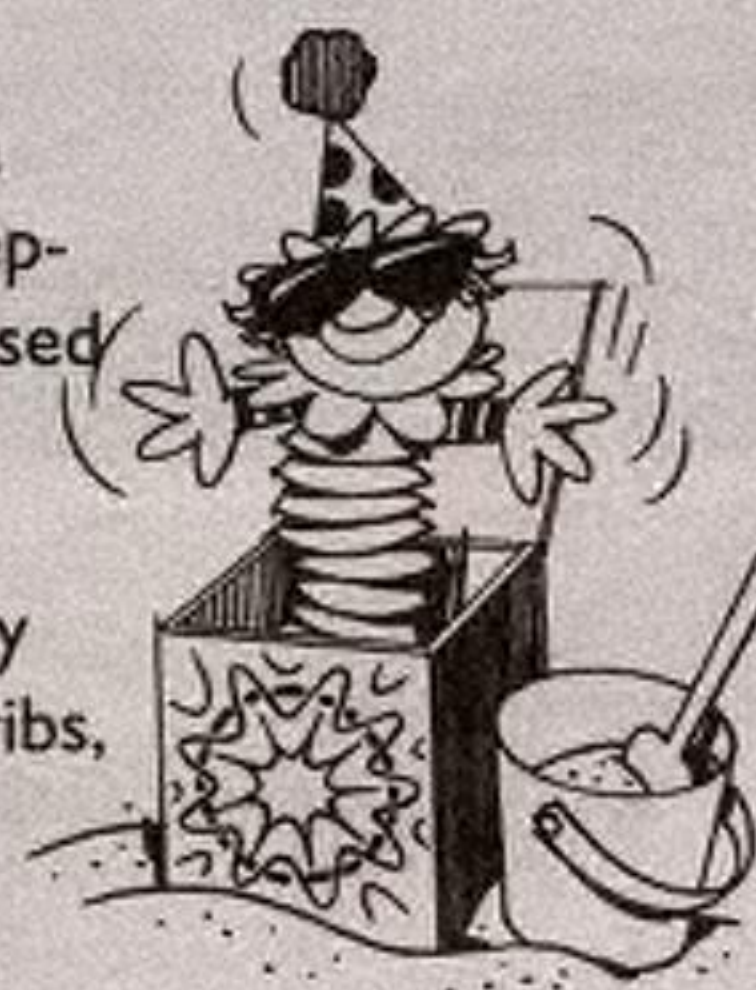
I agree with you that there are many households where parents are too tired (emotionally weighted down, not lazy) to do what is best for the children. Perhaps life would run more smoothly in your sister's home if the children went to bed earlier, played outside with friends and she organized her home differently. I bet your sister would agree.

You may be able to help her by asking how things are for her. If you are not comfortable talking about emotional issues, perhaps you could give your sister a break by inviting her children over to play with your children. "Time out" for moms can help them "recuperate" emotionally — and therefore respond more easily to the incessant emotional demands of young children. ♣

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