

# My Child Can Do No Wrong

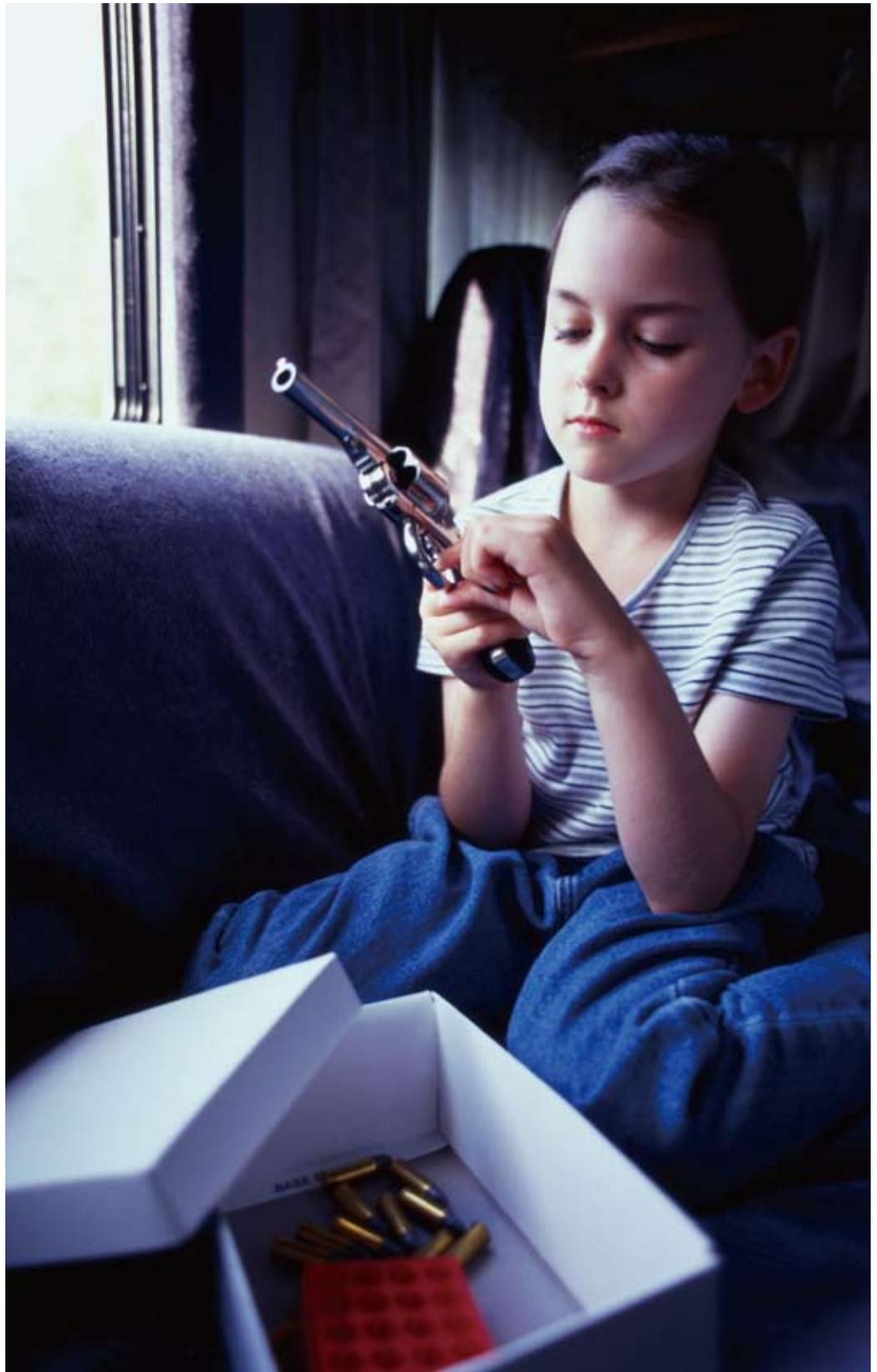
## ...Or can they?

By Ellen Swabey

**I**t's every parent's worst fear: the moment you realize something terrible has happened to your child. From that second on, nothing can ever be the same. But what if it's your child hurting others? Teenage shooters, psychopaths and rapists all have parents, just as Nobel prize winners, CEOs and Olympic medallists do. How much does the direction your child takes in life depend on you?

When the mother of Belgian serial killer and child molester Marc Dutroux warned criminal authorities of the danger her son posed to society, her letters were ignored. "I have known for a long time and with good cause my eldest son's temperament," she wrote to a Prison Director in 1992, prior to his early release from jail. "What I do not know, and what all the people who know him fear, is the plans he has for the future." He was set free, but his victims, and indeed anyone familiar with the story, were to wish he had been kept inside. If this was your child, would you try to warn the police?

In the privileged environment of expatriate Shanghai, it is tempting to assume that our children, who have access to everything, could not possibly grow up to hurt others in this way. However, conduct disorders are now viewed as distinct neurological conditions, with identifiable differences in brain structure and traits that can be identified in children as young as three years old. How much is due to genes, and how much boils down to bad parenting? The debate rages on, but it appears that this kind of behavior is linked to both. You can be



predisposed to it, as you might be to heart disease or to a learning disability, but your environment will affect the degree to which it is expressed. "Like with language difficulties, psychological disturbances can be helped with appropriate care and assistance," explains Karlijn De Hoon, Clinical Director at the Essential Learning Group. This means that while children born with this genetic predisposition might not show the degree of empathy and self-control that a normal child would, with assistance they might be able to reach 60 percent of their maximum emotive capacity, and still function normally in society.

What seems to be more important than genes for healthy mental development is stable, consistent parenting. This isn't always evident in Shanghai; parents who struggle with demanding careers and the daily frustrations associated with expat life are not always emotionally available for their children. "The foundations of a happy family are the parents," says Dr. Paul Wang, Clinical Psychologist at Shanghai United Family Hospitals. "Children have their own struggles, but parenting affects how well they are able to deal with them."

What is good parenting? Most experts agree it means raising children in a manner that is consistent, stable and loving. This isn't about being a single parent or a married one; at an early age, positive parenting provides children with simple guidelines that teach them the difference between right and wrong, and offers appropriate consequences in the form of rewards or punishment. "Though a lack of response to traditional parenting strategies does not necessarily mean your child has a conduct disorder, children with a conduct disorder often do not respond to these kinds of strategies," warns Anne Muurlink, School



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Psychologist at the Western International School of Shanghai. "Because of common genes, the children who most need help often come from parents who struggle with their own mental health, and therefore fail to recognize warning signals," says Wang.

Which warning signals? There is no single sign that can predict whether a child will grow up to hurt other people. In fact, 50 percent of children exhibiting so-called antisocial traits as children grow up to be perfectly adjusted adults. "It's important to look for progression," recommends De Hoon. Some children have more natural abilities than others, but they should all be moving in the right direction.

Emotionally, here are four important signs to look out for:

Inability to connect. Does your child display empathy, and understand how his actions affect others? "While a two-year-old cannot grasp this, there should be progression, and an increased understanding with time," says De Hoon. There is

a difference between your child hurting something like an insect, and your child hurting another human being, or the family pet.

Lack of remorse. When you catch your child doing something wrong, does he/she look ashamed? This is how children learn the difference between right and wrong: by wanting to avoid the uncomfortable feelings associated with being caught. On the contrary, children with a behavioral problem can sometimes demonstrate pride at their achievements, even if they involved hurting another person or animal along the way.

Cool-headed manipulation. Do you ever worry your child has learned to talk the talk, without actually feeling what he or she is saying? "Psychopaths can be very clever and manipulative," warns De Hoon. For example, a psychological assessment of Norwegian mass shooter Anders Breivik at the age of four recorded concern that his smile was a calculated response to his environment, rather than

something coming from inside.

No self-control. Can your child self-regulate strong emotions, or do they cause him/her to lose control? This can express itself in different ways: some children hurt themselves (for example by banging their head repeatedly against the wall), some destroy property or toys, and some take it out on others. This happens when the feeling is too big for them to cope with. As parents, you can help your children manage strong emotions by teaching them to problem-solve.

What else can you do? Limit access to violence. Studies have found a link between violence on screen and violence in real life. "Aggression can be learned simply by observing and imitating it," warns Muurlink. This means checking the PG rating on movies and limiting access to violent games.

Choose a good school where pro-social behavior is actively taught and encouraged, and where there is a policy in place to support children with extra learning or behavioral needs.

Get involved. Ask your children lots of questions, and get to know their friends. "More importantly," says De Hoon, "get to know their friends' parents." If they have different values to you consider scheduling the majority of play dates at your home.

As parents, we owe it to society to be on the lookout for dangerous behavior in our children. Even though the chances of it happening are small, they are real. Teach your children the difference between right and wrong, and that their actions have consequences. Be the guardian of your own mental health. If you feel your efforts are not enough, and there is something consistently not quite right about your child, ask for help – before it's too late.