

Just wait till I tell... my coach

American parents are calling strangers for advice on parenting. Now the trend is spreading here

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It's a scenario familiar to parents everywhere: a tearful eight-year-old refuses to take no for an answer while his two-year-old brother insists on climbing all over the TV stand. Unlike most other parents, Valerie Weber resists the temptation to scream. Instead she speed-dials.

At the other end of the phone a placid voice dishes out advice to the 35-year-old mother-of-two on how to deal with her little rascals: 'Put your hand firmly on the toddler's back and lead him away from the TV. Then send his big brother to a secluded spot, a self-quieting place.'

The woman talking her through her latest domestic crisis is not a friend or relative; she's a proponent of the latest must-have lifestyle phenomenon in homes across America: the parent coach.

Each week Weber spends about 30 minutes on the phone with Jill Herman, a mother-of-two and a former pharmaceutical company worker who has reinvented herself as a parent coach.

'It's nice to have this neutral voice,' said Weber, who pays \$150 (£90) a month for the service. 'People need validation.'

Sharon Weatherbee agrees. The 37-year-old accountant, of Halifax, Nova Scotia, pays \$200 to consult a parent coach for 90 minutes a month. The latest challenge for her coach was the fussy eating of her five-year-old daughter, Erin. The coach suggested a schedule of fast-food treats on some days and vegetables on others. When Erin still refused to eat her greens the coach resorted to Plan B: she could choose from one of three vegetables - or she would have to eat leftovers.

'It does work,' said Weatherbee. 'Erin was actually eating salad the other day.'

Parent coaching is attracting a huge following across the United States. Fans see it as a convenient new way of sharing the stresses of raising children in the modern world. And like almost every other unusual concept born in the US, it's coming to Britain.

The idea is simple: trained experts are available at the end of a phone line or over the internet to advise on any aspect of childcare, any time of the day or night. Fees range from \$40 for a one-off session of 25 minutes to more than \$400 a month for a full 'service contract'.

Despite critics warning that such 'hands-off' coaching methods might fail to identify real problems in parent-child relationships, the demand for third-party advice and the will to pay for it are fuelling one of America's next big growth industries.

'Books on parenting are bestsellers second only to diet books in the United States, and this advice by internet and phone is a form of that - an attempt to fill a hole,' said Professor Ned Gaylin of the University of Maryland's family studies faculty.

Lifestyle coaching has been popular in America for years but the specific market in parenting is new. 'People didn't even know the words "parent coaching" when I started,' said Gloria DeGaetano, founder and chief executive of the Parent Coaching Institute, a Washington state-based organisation that trains would-be coaches.

Now it's going global. DeGaetano reports recruits from Britain, Hong Kong, Australia and Hawaii.

Former Northampton police officer and mother-of-two Sarah Newton spent a year training in Oregon then set up [coaching4teens.com](http://www.coaching4teens.com), one of the first British parent coaching operations using the internet. Her service also offers block bookings of phone sessions.

Newton, who has extensive experience dealing with young offenders, says it is not just another American fad. 'I can appreciate how people would think that, but I see a time when every parent who can afford a coach will want one.'

Sally Kidder Davis, one of the first six parent coaches to 'graduate' from DeGaetano's academy, says her new career is about more than simply advising her clients how to discipline their children when they misbehave. 'It's a partnership with parents. I'm not saying I have all the answers but sometimes it helps just to talk through ideas.'

Kidder Davis used to work in community health education and mental health, and is a parent to three adopted children aged 11, 12 and 15. She says that completing DeGaetano's curriculum was the hardest thing she has done. 'The coursework took two years and there were a lot of late nights studying. It was very challenging.'

While coaches such as Newton and Kidder Davis are properly trained and qualified, more unscrupulous operators have little experience in parent-children relationships and are in the business to make a fast buck. Parents are being urged to exercise caution.

'It really is "buyer beware",' said Susan Walker, a family studies professor at the University of Maryland. 'The qualifications of anyone advising on childcare are very important, and it's up to parents to know what they're getting.'

'The internet has made a lot more people available to parents and they will turn to immediate sources when they can't get information in other ways.'

'If parents are willing to make such a financial investment, it shows me they are committed to their child's welfare.'

Walker said there was much good information available on the internet anyway so parents didn't need to pay for it. 'There are so many low-cost sources of information available - their tax dollars already support it.'

Gaylin believes the reason for the explosion in parent coaching is obvious: twenty-first-century living and the break-up of the traditional family unit. 'The tragedy is that we live isolated lives and the internet has become a community in its own right. Raising kids should be something we share, but we don't. Before, we had older sisters, brothers, parents from whom to seek advice. By and large, we're a nation that looks for experts, and the best experts are family members. The best credentials for coaching are raising good kids.'

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