

It's clear that the behaviour of some children - not all - is less respectful than it was - and is at times plain rude.

But it's not just their fault - it's ours too.

Children's behaviour reflects their parents' attitude and the attitude of the world around them. You see it time and again on the reality TV shows such as Families Behaving Badly. A four-year-old calls his mother a \*\*\*\*. Where did he get the word from? His dad.

But then swearing is commonplace. You see it on the football pitch. It's in films and soaps. Many children have a TV in their bedroom so the watershed is meaningless. They hear swearing all the time. People complain about women dressed scimpily, but walk into a newsagent and that is what you will see on the shelves. John Prescott told how he thought a gang of youths was going to film themselves beating him up at a service station until his security guards intervened. It sounded an awful experience, but violence has long been entertainment. Films revel in it and computer games award points for killing prostitutes or stealing cars.

Of course, they're not real, but what does "real" mean when people spend as much time in this fantasy world as they do in the "real" world?

Politicians talk about poor discipline in the classroom, as if teachers can cure all of society's ills, but teachers don't start with a blank canvas. It takes a lot to change a child, even at reception stage as the child already has four years of bad behaviour behind them. Teaching manners and consideration is really the job of the parent - though the government would have every parent out to work.

And to make it harder, we want teachers to teach children to tread a very thin line these days. We want children to be competitive without being aggressive; to question why things are the way they are without questioning authority; to respect diversity while accepting that there is universal moral code that we all must follow.

It must have been easier to maintain discipline when there was a cane to back up the teacher's personal authority. But now we teach children not to hit each other because violence is wrong, not because they will get hit much harder if they are caught doing it.

I don't think even "responsible" adults are clear about these complex messages. We try to teach children that they mustn't make fun of spastics or the only black kid in the class because it's what's inside that matters and then, over one weekend, the comments of Tony Blair and John Prescott have criminalized thousands of teenage boys who are doing nothing more than following fashion by wearing hoods.

It doesn't make sense, but then I get the feeling that this is too big a problem for even government to grapple with.

