

A cry for help went up from the National Union of Teachers' conference last weekend: "We must curb children's unruly behaviour" and I doubt that anyone who has come into contact with groups of children would disagree.

Too much teachers' time is taken up dealing with back-chat and low-level disobedience that can escalate into swearing and violence against staff.

The NUT has suggested a nationally-agreed list of rules. It would probably help, but it's a narrow measure that doesn't get to the roots of the problem. Very few discussions about bad behaviour do.

Chris Howard of the National Association of Head Teachers was on the mark. She said standards of behaviour in wider society were filtering into schools. When children see Wayne Rooney swearing on the pitch and going unpunished, they think they can get away with it too.

The other factor she fingered was parents failing to support teachers when they discipline their child. This is crucial. Children often play one parent off against another and a united front is key to survival in what has become a battle of the generations in some households. It is no different with teachers and parents, although I can understand why some parents fight tooth and nail to stop their child being excluded from school: they may have to give up their job to look after them if they are expelled.

The reasons for parents working full-time are mixed. Some do so because they want the smart car and holiday abroad. Some need to because they cannot survive financially any other way, even though they would prefer to spend more time with their child. Yet all Labour's help is focussed on getting parents to work, not looking after their children, and the Tories have a similar focus - offering parents an extra £50 a week towards childcare costs.

Supporting parents who choose to work full-time rather than not helping those who want to be at home weakens the influence that parents have over their children. A working parent of a four-year-old may only see that child for three waking hours a day during the week - and that will be spent on breakfast and bedtime routines.

Parents working full-time, particularly single parents, are usually stressed from rushing from the school to work and then getting back to the childminders in time. Everything falls on their shoulders. How much discussion of the day's events can a parent fit in during teeth-brushing, assuming they have the mental energy?

If children don't think they are getting enough of their parents' attention, they will misbehave at home and at school. They may even use bad behaviour as a weapon to force parents to give up their job, but by then a lot of damage will have been done.

I support parents seeking to work part-time when their child is at school, but full-time seems too much to ask - especially of the child.