

CHARLIE'S LITTLE ANGELS

BOGEYMAN
TACTICS

Mother-of-two Charlotte Butterfield takes a look at the invisible henchman of parenting who gets drafted in when disciplining becomes a little too hard to manage



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August 30th. That's the first time Father Christmas reared his bearded head in our house this year. Not in a leaving presents and muddy footprints type way, more in a bellowed, "You'd better pick up your toys right now because Santa is watching!" Part of me is amazed that eight months of the year had managed to pass without a reference to Saint Nick's voyeurism, although a larger part of me is a little ashamed I had to resort to using his name in vain purely because my own request for tidiness had gone completely and utterly ignored.

While most mothers hope that they manage to strike the balance between authoritarian and friend, the truth is, my children have become immune to my shrill nagging, so a little extra help from the North Pole is occasionally warranted.

But I'm not alone in turning to an invisible figure to instil some discipline. When I was young, we had to behave, "or the policeman will come". Fast-forward 30-odd years and the fact that I've spent my life avoiding crime is more down to a deep-

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rooted abject fear of the boys in blue (or khaki in the UAE) than any moral or ethical reasons. Instilling such a phobia against a brigade of people who are actually there to help you is a slightly skewed concept, but my sisters and I have arguably turned out just fine, so who am I to question the theory?

Recently I was just as perturbed as my kids when we were out for lunch with some Italian friends and their children. There was an extraordinary amount of non-eating going on at the kids' end of the table so, in the middle of the mayhem, came a slow, sinister knocking, which immediately cut through the chaos. The knocker - my friend's husband - then whispered to his wide-eyed children, "L'uomo nero! [The man in black!] He is here! Quick - eat your food before he comes in!" You have literally never seen lasagne shovelled into mouths so fast. Even my own children, who had no idea what was happening, had hamster cheeks full of pasta and eyes full of fear of the unknown. It took a fair few days for them to sleep well after that particular mealtime, although their table manners are noticeably improved, so every cloud has a silver lining.

The bogeyman is a recognised figure of fear across the world, and his incarnations are as sinister as you can get. In Spain and parts of Latin America, 'el hombre del saco' carts off naughty children in a sack. Likewise, misbehaving children in Bulgaria run the risk of being spirited away by a scary monster-like man called Torbalan - a fate to be avoided at all costs. That Torbalan fellow, man he's mean. But Bulgarian kids can count their lucky stars they're not in Mexico, Chile or Argentina, where children are in fear of a bloke called El Cuco, who has made his home under children's beds and is ready to pounce and - wait for it - eat them (yes, you read it right) should they not go to sleep straight away. Because, goodness knows, nothing sets the scene for a night of restful slumber more than an invisible cannibal lying just beneath your bed.

What all these menacing threats have in common is a simple case of parents calling in reinforcements, of the 'wait till your father gets home!' school of thought. It basically says, "I am unable to take full command of this situation, so I am going to create a character far more compelling than me to make you be good." Suddenly I don't feel so bad for conjuring up the jolly hirsute Mr Claus to help make my living room toy free. At least the threat of being on the naughty list isn't quite as bad as the threat of being carried off in a sack, or giving a cannibal indigestion. Although, to my kids, the idea of no presents come Christmas morning is probably just as fearsome. **A**

