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The Times (London)

**October** 13, 2007, Saturday

## **No nanny for little Mario. Or violin lessons**

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Carol Midgley on the mollycoddling of our precious children

I wonder how members of the pushy parents brigade felt this week when they read the full, gobsmacking story of the life of Mario Capecchi.

Doh! What am I thinking? They were obviously too busy ferrying their children to and from extra tuition in Kumon maths to relax and read the papers, so let me do the honours.

Capecchi is joint winner of this year's Nobel Prize for Medicine. He helped to pioneer the development of genetically modified mice to understand the fundamentals of human disease and other things that most of us couldn't fathom if our lives depended on it.

And where do we imagine that this super-achiever started his education? In some hothouse kindergarten collected each day by a Mandarin-speaking nanny? Not exactly.

At the age of 4 Capecchi was a feral urchin living off scraps of bread in northern Italy, his single mother having been arrested by the Gestapo and sent to the Dachau concentration camp. It was 1941 and the peasant family whom Capecchi's mother had paid to look after her son should she be imprisoned reneged on its promise and he was left wandering the streets, sometimes with gangs of other homeless children, sometimes staying in orphanages. In 1945, severely malnourished, he ended up in a Verona hospital, where vagrant children got one cup of coffee and a crust each day. At one point, beset with famine-induced fevers, Capecchi was kept naked on a stripped bed. By the time his mother, now liberated, tracked him down he was 9. She took him to America and put him in a Quaker school.

It was the first education he had had in his life.

Now, is this a story that will make the average neurotic parent stop and reflect while preparing their little darling's organic alfalfa packed lunch to eat at Saturday violin lessons? Will it register that, while they lie awake fretting that if they don't get their toddler into exactly the right feeder nursery then their whole life is doomed, here is a person who has achieved the very zenith of success yet lived his formative years like a pack dog?

Somehow I doubt it. Few creatures are more short-sighted than "helicopter" parents, hovering like wasps over every aspect of their child's life. They obsess over each mouthful of food that their offspring eat, only making them crave the forbidden fruit of a Sherbert Dab Dab. I know of one parent so nutrition centred that she would practically have a nervous breakdown if her children ate refined sugar: out of her sight they stuff their faces with Crunchies. Alpha parents pack their children's lives with endless "improving" activities but are blind to the greater truth that their kids are often miserable.

How have we reached a point where parents believe that the world will end if their child isn't primed for optimum success from the age of 3? Why must they always be in the most auspicious primary schools, bought places at the most coveted secondaries, get straight As in everything, with private lessons materialising if they drop to -the shame of it -a B? What happened to young people finding their own way in the world without sharp-elbowed parents handing them "achievement" in a gift-wrapped box? Mario Capecchi had appalling nutrition, zero parenting, not a single advantage in life. Yet this is the point he makes about those years: "When dealing with human life we cannot do the appropriate controls. Could such experiences have contributed to psychological factors such as self-reliance, self-confidence or ingenuity?"

A platinum-plated start in life is not always what children want or need. Rather than honing their ambition, it might have the opposite effect, becoming not a gift of opportunity but a tool of oppression.

No one, obviously, would wish Capecchi's early fate on a child. But too much pressure, too much cossetting, can inflict another kind of suffering. Psychologists report high levels of depression and self-harming among the children of overcompetitive parents. Yesterday Cambridge University's Primary Review reported widespread concern that inside schools, too, children face "excessive" pressure to do well. In the end Capecchi benefited from the opportunities that America offered, but his capacity to grasp them was not dependent on a childhood spent in endless piano classes.

The idea of their child one day becoming a Nobel prize-winner is something that would make the typical competitive parent implode with joy. The irony is that had their child asked to bring the young Capecchi home for tea, with his poor table manners and probably nits, he would have been shooed from the door as an undesirable play date.

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