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## One word from me...

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### Can sales techniques used in business work on lazy children, asks Charlotte Phillips?

"I 'm not going to bed. I'm ice-skating," says Tabitha, seven, hanging on to the banister for support and gyrating dangerously on the unsuitable hand-me-down high heels that I thought I'd banned months ago.

Bedtime for the youngest member of the Phillips household is proceeding with all the well-oiled efficiency of a rusty spring. Things aren't much better when it comes to her siblings.

"If you make me tidy my room, I won't finish my French revision and I'll fail the exam. Don't you want me to do well?" asks 13-year-old Alexandra pitifully, adopting the all-purpose wronged expression that has served her so well since she was a toddler.

There are times when persuading my children to do anything, ever, without resorting to blackmail, tears or alcohol, seems an impossibility.

But now parents have an unexpected ally. Nobody since Jane Austen has done more for persuasion than Robert Cialdini, a US professor of psychology who has made the science of influencing people his life's work.

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Obedience skill: Charlotte uses her new powers to persuade Tabitha, Sam and Alexandra that it's time for bed

Cialdini has used his understanding of human nature to come up with what he terms the six weapons of persuasion. They are based on universal patterns of behaviour - our tendency to follow the crowd and our overwhelming need to like and be liked by the people around us. There's also the fact that we are highly susceptible to suggestion, especially when we're tired or emotional, which would account for all the duff decisions I have made as a sleep-deprived and stressed parent.

His advice is much sought-after by businesses keen to hone their sales techniques, but he reckons there is a place for effective persuasion in every walk of life, including parenting. At first the connection sounds tenuous. But start thinking about the high-pressure jollyng-along required to get the average iron-willed toddler to do anything at all, and you begin to feel he may have a point.

Arm yourself with his weapons and you, too, so the theory goes, can manipulate basic human behaviour so that colleagues, friends (or in my case, three recalcitrant children) turn to putty in your hands. So powerful are his techniques that they come with a warning. There's a fine line between persuasion and manipulation, cautions Cialdini. Make sure you don't cross it. As far as I'm concerned, the moral issues trail some way behind the dazzling prospect of persuasion techniques so powerful that they will have the family flock skipping behind me in blind obedience anywhere I lead them.

Cialdini's latest manual (Influence: the Psychology of Persuasion, Collins, £10.99) offers ideas by the dozen, in marked contrast to my one and only persuasion technique, which consists of repeating a request in tones of gradually increasing volume and desperation.

It's clear, however, that not every tip will make the transition from executive lounge to domestic sitting room. Reluctantly, I ditch the personalised Post-it notes that apparently galvanise office workers into action, on the basis that "Stop that now!" and "How many more



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times do I have to ask you?" probably aren't the motivational messages Cialdini had in mind.

His tips on using snappy rhyming slogans are also out. "Beanz Meanz Heinz" is one thing; my own attempts ("It's time to try some DIY" or "Clean room today, no MRSA") quite another.

Instead, I begin with a one-word miracle. "Because" is apparently the persuader's dream. We are so used to assuming that it will be followed by a compelling reason that just to hear the word is to obey.

Given my children's selective deafness, the chance of a whole sentence, let alone a subtext, getting through seems remote, but it's got to be worth a go.

"Shut the door because it's letting out all the hot air," I say to 11-year-old Sam, who has walked blithely into the garden, treating the door in his customary way as a pointless barrier to free movement.

There's a pause, an "OK, Mum," and the door is gently closed.

Buoyed by my success, I go for something a little more advanced. Alex is slumped over her favourite magazine, while I clear up noisily around her. To enlist her co-operation, suggest the persuasion experts, pay her a compliment based on "genuinely likeable features".

"Alex, you're so organised," I eventually manage, unclenching my jaws sufficiently to expel the words without sounding overly irritated. "Could you load the dishwasher for me?" She looks at me. "Is that meant to, like, have an effect?" she asks, resolutely welded to her seat and magazine. "Oh, all right," she adds, a few seconds later, and gets up. I suspect my basilisk glare has had more impact than the compliment, but the desired effect has been achieved, and with no recriminations on either side. It's a qualified success.

For Tabitha, there's her very own incentive scheme - a card offering her the chance to win valuable bonus points for every painless bedtime. In a cunning twist, she gets two points as a free gift - something that will, allegedly, have her so motivated that she'll be chafing at the bit to clean her teeth and choose her bedtime story.

For two nights it's a complete success. Then, "Time for bed," I say, on the third.

"And?" she says, a monument to seven-year-old defiance. And singing "If you're a friend of Jesus, you're a friend of mine" and accenting every other word with a stamp of those unsuitable high heels, she heads into the kitchen.

Despite this, I feel that my persuasion skills have improved. Unfortunately, though, the ethics of total mind control aren't something I'll need to worry about for a long time to come.

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