

Befriending and scolding of children by strangers

In an article in the *Guardian* (26 November 2005) titled 'We have a responsibility to look out for all children – not just our own' Jenni Russell said man cannot now communicate in any way with a strange child, even if it is in distress, for fear of being mistaken for a paedophile. She adds: 'This is a historically unprecedented way for children to be brought up – leaving the job exclusively to parents and paid professionals'.

I will not try to repeat any more of what the article says – I agree with every word of it. I will just add a little about my own current experiences as a man of 83. Broadly there are two aspects, befriending and scolding.

I find that nowadays English children are so schooled to fear strangers that they react badly to any friendly approach, however slight. A mere smile discomfits them (in the dictionary sense of 'To throw into perplexity, confusion, or dejection, to disconcert'). Parents tend to react badly to the slightest approach to their child from a stranger. Regretfully I therefore refrain from making any such approaches. I agree with Jenni that the children lose by this new attitude of adults.

Contrary to what Jenni says, I have not yet got to the point of refraining from rebuking unruly children, though one has to beware of parental retaliation.

Finally, the question is what can be done to redress this? A change in public attitudes is needed. We all have a responsibility here.