

# TV's New Nanny Show Is No 'Mary Poppins'

By CHARLES GOLDSMITH Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL *September 30, 2004; Page B1*

LONDON -- Two-year-old Charlie Woods is a terror: He throws his toys on the floor, bites people and erupts in constant tantrums. His new nanny sits him on a staircase "naughty step" until his boredom prompts better behavior.

She orders Charlie's parents to impose the same regimen. "Don't ask him," the nanny barks to Charlie's mother when he bolts from the dinner table. "Tell him, 'I want you to sit at the table and have some dinner.' "

This is a scene from "Supernanny," the latest reality show on British television trying to make the trans-Atlantic leap. It chronicles the methods of Jo Frost, a 34-year-old English nanny for 15 years until she answered a TV producer's ad last year. Visiting a new household on each episode, Ms. Frost teaches children to behave and parents to parent. With her very firm approach, she's a traditional nanny from the country that invented the profession in the 1800s.



ABC/Tom Queally

Jo Frost, in the American version of 'Supernanny,' which ABC plans to air later this season.

Executives at Walt Disney Co.'s ABC and News Corp.'s Fox fought to buy the rights to "Supernanny": ABC won and flew Ms. Frost to Los Angeles, where she is now filming a U.S. version that ABC intends to air later this season. Fox is going ahead with a different version of the nannying format, without Ms. Frost, which it plans to call "Nanny 911." It's likely to feature several nannies, including perhaps a strict English type, who will critique the child-rearing techniques of fellow nannies.

Both networks have put out calls on their Web sites seeking parents at their wits' end. "Are your kids driving you nuts? Is your house a zoo?" ABC asked in its casting call. "Are your kids out of control?" Fox asks prospective families. "If so, give yourself a break and contact Nanny 911!"

The question looming overhead is how strict English nannying techniques will play before U.S. audiences. Brits and Americans have different views on parenting styles and the role of nannies in the home. The traditional English nanny, as trained by famous schools such as 112-year-old Norland College, is typically much harsher than most U.S. parents. Many Americans, for whom the words "British nanny" tend to conjure up Mary Poppins, may find some of Ms. Frost's take-no-prisoners methods surprising.

"I don't think many American families would be comfortable with that type of authoritative, dictator-type behavior," says Pat Cascio, owner of Morningside Nannies, a Houston nanny-placement agency and president of the International Nanny Association. In the U.S., she says, "There's a lot of resistance to the nanny taking full charge."

A climactic moment in "Supernanny" comes when Ms. Frost, after observing the household for two days, confronts the parents with their shortcomings. "Steve, you panic," Ms. Frost lectures Charlie's father. "He says 'Jump,' and you say, 'How high?' " She imposes a rigorous set of rules and discipline, including a firm timetable for meals, baths and other activities.

Among Ms. Frost's other techniques is to limit a child to 10 toys and to impound one in a "toy confiscation box" each time the youngster acts up. Using a black felt-tip marker, she writes out stringent household rules and posts them on the wall. Examples include, "No disrespecting house, toys or each other" and "No fighting,

hitting or kicking." She instructs parents to kneel down to the kids' eye level and use a low, authoritative voice in laying down the law. "I want your voice to drop," Ms. Frost tells Kelly Steers, a frazzled single mother of two whose family was featured in one of the British episodes. "Go to their level. Hold their arms and legs so you don't get hit."

After spending a week in the household, Ms. Frost leaves the parents to fend for themselves for a week, before returning to show them their errors on videotape. "Nothing was consistent," she says to Ms. Steers, reprimanding her for her daughter's relapsed misconduct. "You're to blame for all that." Ms. Frost preaches the importance of a stepped-up disciplinary routine: First, a verbal warning; next, sanctions, such as the toy confiscation.

Some Americans cringe at the idea of being hectored in that way. "Nobody wants to be told they're a bad parent," says Sue Downey, co-founder of Philly Nannies, a support group for nannies in suburban Philadelphia. "Parenting is a very personal thing."

As to whether Americans will find her too bossy, Ms. Frost says, "I hope the American audience will take it at face value and realize that Jo Frost is honest but fair." She has some experience dealing with U.S. kids, having nannied for a California family for six months. Citing privacy considerations, Ms. Frost declined to supply phone numbers or other details about any of the families that have employed her in the past.

Charlie's mother, 30-year-old Lucy Woods, says Charlie's behavior has shown lasting improvement since her episode of the show was filmed back in February. "He's still incredibly lively, a handful," Ms. Woods says of her son, "but we're in charge now, he's not." She says Ms. Frost's most effective trait is that "she doesn't take no for an answer. She's quite a bully, but in a nice way. She forces you to carry on."

The U.K. program's producer, Britain's Ricochet Productions, selected Ms. Frost from among hundreds of nanny applicants who replied to ads. About 50 were put before cameras, and a handful were tried out with families. "Jo stood out because of her directness and honesty," says Nick Powell, the show's executive producer. The program was dreamed up by a Ricochet team including Mr. Powell, a 41-year-old father of three young children whose household has employed several nannies.

Television has a mixed record transforming British shows for the U.S. Another stern British woman, Anne Robinson, quickly grated on U.S. viewers when she brought her quiz show, "The Weakest Link," to General Electric Co.'s NBC. And NBC failed spectacularly last year with its sitcom "Coupling," whose script was funny in Britain but fell flat when performed by American actors.

The translation of "Supernanny" depends on much more than Ms. Frost's nannying style. The pace and production techniques of British programs are often very different from those in the U.S. "Supernanny" on ABC is expected to be faster and more polished than the British version.

"British shows are more subtle," says Andrea Wong, head of reality programming for ABC. "We really have to change the editing style, really pace it up, give it much more punctuation." For example, the moment that Ms. Frost tells the parents what's wrong in the household will be "more ceremonial," she says, to provide dramatic punch. And the ABC version will feature more interviews with Ms. Frost about her views of family dynamics. Ms. Frost also will have a softer look, replacing her severe black suit with a purple one.

As Mr. Powell sees it, the issues facing parents in the U.S. and Britain aren't very different. "The cries for help from families facing problems are virtually the same," he says. "People are seeking solutions." He says that many parents are working longer hours than ever -- leading to guilty feelings about being bad parents and to disciplinary problems.

Does Ms. Frost's parenting advice last? "There is always some improvement," Ms. Frost says. "If you have eight issues [to deal with] maybe six vastly improve and others still have some work to do."

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