

Want your child to get ahead? Britain's strictest headteacher has a harsh lesson for parents first

Katharine Birbalsingh, the new social mobility tsar, says adults who fail to play an active role in education are holding children back

By [Camilla Turner](#), EDUCATION EDITOR 17 October 2021 • The Telegraph



Katharine Birbalsingh: 'If children can be taught good habits - such as turning up on time and dressing smartly - they will grow into successful adults' Her belief that “tough love” brings out the best in children has earned her a reputation as “Britain’s strictest headteacher”.

The outspoken head of Michaela Community School in north London is [notorious for her “no excuses” policy](#) that means pupils can earn a detention for offences ranging from turning up to class without a ruler to breaching the silence policy by speaking in corridors. Now Katharine Birbalsingh has vowed to bring the same principles to social mobility after being appointed as the Government’s new tsar.

In her first interview since being named as [the new chairman of the Social Mobility Commission](#), she explained that one of her main priorities will be tackling bad parenting. “This idea that the state should look after your child’s schooling is ridiculous,” she told The Sunday Telegraph. “Honestly, I think it’s ridiculous.”

Ms Birbalsingh, 48, said she believed that parents failing to play an active role in their children’s education was one of the biggest obstacles to social mobility.

‘Role of parents is to teach their child’

“I have spent my life trying to improve schooling for children,” she said. “But all parents should be teaching their children all the time, from the moment when they are born to at least 16.

“You know that your role as a parent is to feed them. You know that your role is to make sure they get bathed. You know that you need to hold their hand when they cross the

street. You understand that instinctively. We need families to understand that part of their role as parents is to teach their child.”

Ms Birbalsingh, who was made a CBE last year, rose to prominence at the Tory party conference in 2010 where she delivered an impassioned speech about how schools have been “[blinded by Leftist ideology](#)”, leading to a lack of discipline and bad behaviour. She earned a standing ovation for her scathing attack on a “culture of excuses” and the dumbing down of standards in schools, which she said had driven her from being a Marxist to voting Tory for the first time that year.

But such was [the furore sparked by her speech](#) that shortly afterwards she parted ways with the south London academy where she was deputy head. With the backing of the then education secretary Michael Gove, she got to work [setting up her own free school](#), which opened in 2014.

Founded on strict disciplinary principles and a traditional teaching ethos, Ms Birbalsingh’s approach appeared to be vindicated when the first cohort of pupils’ GCSE results were four times the national average.



GCSE results at Michaela Community School were four times higher than the national average

Speaking to The Sunday Telegraph at her school in Brent, Ms Birbalsingh said everyone was so preoccupied with what was happening in the education system that the role of the family in education had been overlooked.

“I think too often we concentrate too much on what the state is doing,” she said. “I think that focus on families is rarely made by the media, by anyone really. I think it’s because parenting is hard and everyone knows it and no one dares say that we all need to get better at parenting. But I think we do.”

Dangers of smartphones and the internet

Not only were many parents unaware of the importance of reading to their children when they were toddlers, she explained, they were also in the dark about [the detrimental effects of early exposure to technology](#).

“These days, tech is seen as a bit of a babysitter and parents don’t realise the damage they are doing to their children,” Ms Birbalsingh said. “It is very hard for a child to like reading if the alternative is a phone. A phone has lots of colours, flashes, things jumping out at you - a book is flat and black and white, it cannot compete. By the time they’re older the child then doesn’t read.”

Parents needed to be taught about the danger of allowing their children unsupervised access to the internet, she explained, adding that youngsters can easily be led astray by gang members or targeted by paedophiles.

Unsurprisingly, she believes parents - like teachers - should be in a position of authority over their children, rather than trying to be their friends. “That doesn’t mean you don’t have a loving relationship, of course you do. But your child should admire and respect you, they shouldn’t think of you as their mate,” she said.

“You need to be in charge. Sometimes parents end up going down the route of trying to be too friendly with their child. People think that in order to be a good parent you need to be really friendly, in order to be a good teacher you need to be super soft. In fact being a good teacher and a good parent means holding the line.”

Being strict is about setting high standards

Ms Birbalsingh grew up in Canada before moving to the UK with her family when she was 15. Her mother is Jamaican and father is Indo-Guyanese. She read French and Philosophy at Oxford and went on to teach French at a series of inner city London schools, writing about her experiences in an anonymous blog which was later turned into a book titled *To Miss with Love*.

Another frustration for Ms Birbalsingh is [the lack of options for children](#) after they leave school other than university. She said some youngsters end up “wasting time” on useless degrees simply because “there is nowhere else to go”.

“People tend to think there are lots of apprenticeships out there. Well, there just aren’t,” she said. “There is very little for children who wouldn’t go on to university. Not everyone needs to be able to go to university to be hugely successful. There are all kinds of jobs out there that you can do without going to university - there aren’t many routes for that and there ought to be.”

Ms Birbalsingh intends to use her new role as social mobility tsar to encourage more schools to return to the traditional approach to teaching that she has pioneered. Pointing

to a folder of laminated letters of gratitude from fellow headteachers, she said she already had around 600 visitors each year who come to Michaela Community School and see first hand how their approach works in practice.

“Being strict just means keeping your standards high,” she explained, adding that handing out detentions for seemingly small transgressions - such as turning up to class without a pen - would benefit children in the long run. If teachers let these things slide, disadvantaged children would fall further and further behind. But if children can be taught good habits - such as turning up on time, dressing smartly and remembering the right equipment - they will grow into successful adults.

“So our role as teachers is to support children in developing the kinds of habits that will make them into successful adults,” she said. “All these ideas, when it comes to schools, I would want to try and get happening across the country.”