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Mad Science

Is the latest parenting research driving you batty?

By Lisa Bendall

From the day she was born, my daughter slept every night for six or seven hours straight. I know what you're thinking – I'd hit the baby jackpot, right? But instead of thanking the sleep gods, I was tearing my hair out. Since my midwife gave me strict instructions never to let Emily go more than five hours without a feed, I'd set the alarm so I could rise, strip my baby of her onesie and wipe her down with a wet washcloth in a fruitless effort to wake her.

My mother was baffled. "Never wake a sleeping baby," she said, shrugging. My youngest sister had slept through the night from birth, and since Mom had three other children to care for, she simply counted herself lucky. But then she wasn't reading paediatric society position statements on the Internet, nor was she drowning in parenting tomes. Ultimately I did follow my mother's advice, mainly because I couldn't interest my infant in a midnight snack. But I felt guilty for listening to my mom instead of the experts. And I worried I was doing something wrong.

This self-doubt seems pandemic among my parenting peers, and it's a far cry from our parents' days when they'd plunk us in playpens and get on with the vacuuming. More professional attention is focused on child rearing today than at any other time in history. Moms and dads have at their disposal literally dozens of approaches for taming Tommy's temper tantrums.

Our parents and grandparents relied on a few common parenting principles, maybe turning to a neighbour or Dr. Spock when they really needed advice. So why are we second-guessing ourselves at every turn? Why have we let a bunch of people with white coats and clipboards turn us into nervous wrecks?

Sideswiped by Mixed Messages

It's easy to forget we are actually the experts on the subject of our own children. One day we might peruse a book that encourages us to trust our intuition, but the next day pick up a newspaper and read about the vital role of Latin flash cards in wiring a toddler's brain. The implication is that we can wreck our kids with one misstep.

"Parents believe that everything they do is so consequential," says Richard Koestner, a psychology professor at Montreal's McGill University who studies what motivates children. The result? Many of us are too involved in planning every aspect of our children's lives, he says. It's known in psychology circles as hyperparenting. We read all the books. We absorb all the theories. We buy all the Baby Einstein videos. We eschew free play for Kindergym. We agonize over the best age to introduce peanut butter. We drive ourselves batty weighing the benefits of Montessori against the public school system. Some of us have even been convinced – based on the latest research, of course – that our influence begins in utero, where our baby's temperament and learning capacity can be shaped by every choice we make. "Not only is this stressful," says Koestner, "but it can lead parents to neglect their own personal well-being and their marital relationship." That's the technical way of saying it can make us lose our minds.

“You start to doubt you’re doing the right things with your kids,” laments Kathy Price of Calgary. A single mom of Andrea, 7, and Emily, 3, Price really feels the pressure when she reads about research that claims kids from broken homes are more likely to grow up troubled. “I think, This is all my fault, they’re going to turn into little hooligans because they don’t have both parents in the house.”

Indisputably, researchers have made some important contributions to parenting. Sudden infant death syndrome has been reduced by 30 to 50 per cent since the benefits of putting babies to sleep on their backs became widely known in 1999. But we take it too far: panicky parents are now compelled to buy respiratory monitors and mattresses with built-in ventilation systems.

And there’s no shortage of new material to keep us über-vigilant. As Ann Hulbert wrote in *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children* (Vintage), there are five times more parenting books rolling off the presses today than in 1970. (And you thought it was enough to juggle the advice of two grandmothers!) Websites and media are also keen to proclaim the latest groundbreaking child-health discoveries, whether it’s a link between maternal anxiety and colic, or proof that emotional literacy helps make the grade in kindergarten.

It Wasn’t Meant to Be

Gordon Neufeld, a Vancouver developmental psychologist, father of five and co-author of *Hold On To Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers* (Knopf Canada), notes that pop culture has replaced child-rearing customs that took thousands of years to evolve. Previous generations relied on parenting precepts that were handed down through the years. And they almost certainly weren’t surfing the Net for the latest in neonatal neuromapping. They just did what was generally known to be right.

It’s harder to pass down knowledge when extended families are so rarely living together under one roof, says Neufeld. And besides, we’ve been coached by an army of experts to dismiss much of that wisdom as old wives’ tales anyway. By ignoring what our grandmothers have always known, aren’t we throwing out the baby with the bathwater? Case in point: modern moms and dads mock the notion that going outside without a scarf will bring on the sniffles. Yet, a recent study suggests that a chill can indeed lead to catching a cold. Go figure.

Luckily, some of us – like Price – can still call our mothers. “I get a lot of advice from my mom,” she says. “She doesn’t read books. She’s from the old school.”

Why Science is Sexy

If that child-rearing tradition is so essential to our species, then why do so many of us turn to the latest and greatest > breakthroughs for answers to our parenting questions instead of to our parents, friends, aunts and neighbours?

For one thing, researchers are stellar self-promoters. Some labs send press releases straight to the newspapers instead of going through the regular research-publication channels. “And the media seizes hold,” says Neufeld. That gives parents a false sense they’re making decisions based on indisputable fact, he says. What we may not realize is that the sample group was tiny, or that the newspaper reported the findings out of context.

“You have to join the dots to see the big picture, and then you can glean the meaning,” says Neufeld. “These bits and pieces of information can be very dangerous.” And contradictory, points out Koestner. For example, while one recent study shows children with stay-at-home moms score better in developmental testing than those in daycare, another 2005 report claims stay-at-home babies are actually more stressed than their daycare peers if their mothers are unfulfilled or exhausted. Likewise, conflicting reports both demonstrate and dispel the dangers of co-sleeping.

“You’re pulled around with all this advice,” says Sabina Ball, a mother of two in Surrey, B.C. “You don’t trust yourself anymore, and you just don’t know who you can trust.” After reading about both sides of the debate, and fretting over possible health risks, Ball has declined routine vaccinations for her kids. But she remains unsure about her decision. “You’re going to blame yourself for anything that happens. You just have to say ‘screw it, I’m going to do it,’ and live with the consequences.”

We’re Looking for Easy Answers

Compounding the problem may be our accelerated daily pace. In modern-day North America, faster is better. We live by the clock, gulping down prefab food and driving to dance class because it’s quicker than walking.

So when it comes to dealing with our kids’ behaviour hurdles, are we sometimes looking to experts for express solutions? “Absolutely,” says Barbara Moore, a family sociologist at Acadia University in Wolfville, N.S. When parents have so little time with their children as it is, their stance is often “let’s get this problem dealt with and over with as quickly as possible so we can settle down and have harmony.” Who wants your 30 minutes of quality time marred by a standoff over bedtime?

Moore adds, “I think parents are sometimes so tired of the stress of trying to pull it all together that they’re looking for a quick fix.” Can you say Nanny 911?

Pressure to Produce the Perfect Child

Today we have fewer children than previous generations, and naturally we are more invested in seeing each one happy and successful. As a result, we weigh the small decisions carefully and are more likely to turn to experts to secure our kids’ well-being. We’re also being judged as never before. “When there are problems, society is quick to blame the parents, but we’re not always there to praise the parents who aren’t having those problems,” Moore points out. “All we hear about is when kids have to be sent off to boot camp.” The very idea that there is a “right” way to do things makes it easy to criticize ourselves – and even our friends and fellow parents – for not employing the latest technique or measuring up to some crazy standard.

Giving Ourselves a Break

Perhaps it’s time for us to take a breather. Parents get so caught up in the Newspeak of developmental discoveries that we lose sight of the children right under our noses. When Frank Falcone introduced three-year-old Tristan to the potty, for instance, the Toronto dad and his wife relied on books that promised that, with the right outside influences, Tristan would be “intrinsically motivated” to master toilet training on his own. But the experts didn’t bank on the little boy’s stubborn streak. A power struggle developed, and it took nothing less than a rowdy (and messy) confrontation to get the job done – a total departure from the soft-sell approach his parents learned from their potty-training library.

“There were stern words, and there was a lot of crying,” recalls Falcone. But it worked. “After that we stopped listening to the outside advice. I felt like I was parenting honestly, without store-bought tricks or techniques.”

Reclaiming Intuition

Instead of reaching for expert advice at every turn, psychologist Gordon Neufeld suggests you look more closely at your kid. “Don’t ask, ‘What should I do when...?’ Ask the question, ‘What do I see? What does my child need from me? What’s going on in her?’ The better you can see a child from the inside out, the more naturally you can trust your intuition as a response.” It might not have to come down to a book burning, but we can read about research with much more discerning eyes – and remember to take it all with a truckload of salt.

That advice would have helped me when my daughter was a newborn. Almost seven years later, a bomb could still go off in Emily’s bedroom without waking her. The difference now? Instead of lying awake rehearsing my defence before Children’s Aid, I’m taking a page from my mother’s book and grabbing a good night’s sleep while I can.

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