

Attachment Parenting

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Parenting in our culture is a struggle. Bookshops are overflowing with advice to help us with crying babies, sleep problems, feeding problems, toilet training, temper tantrums and discipline; the same areas our parents had difficulties with, and probably our grandparents too. But these are not issues for parents in many contemporary cultures, and it is only in recent generations that these have emerged as the norms of parenting in western society.

What has changed, and how do others manage to avoid difficulties in these areas? The answers are not simple. Socio-cultural as well as personal beliefs and practices play a part in the expectations and assumptions that we bring to parenting. For example, there is a widely held belief that we should be raising our children to be as independent and as intellectually developed as possible. Factors such as the demise of the extended family, the spectre of unemployment for our children, and perhaps even the birth practices that the current generation of parents were subjected to have all contributed to these beliefs, which, in fact, do not usually produce easy parenting in any context.

At a family level, I believe that we still carry the scars of the several generations of advice from “experts”. Ideas such as “spoiling” a baby by attending to his/her cries, the taboo on the family bed, over-concern for the natural body functions of eating and elimination, and the idea that the formulated milk of another animal could possibly replace the nutrition and nurturing that come from a mothers breast have come from theorists, mostly men, and reflect a deep distrust of our instincts, as well as an incredible hard-heartedness toward our offspring.

The tide is turning, though, with Benjamin Spock, the author of what was the parenting bible for our parents, saying, in 1974, that child educators had “during the last few decades, greatly undermined parents’ self-assurance on knowing what is best for their child.” The trend towards gentle birth practices has had a flow-on effect, and women reclaiming their instincts and power in birth are more likely to trust their baby and their body in mothering as well. Breast-feeding, which is now more supported, enhances the instinctual and hormonal connection between mother and baby, and, formally or informally, can create a sisterhood and support network with other nursing mothers.

This “new” style of parenting works because it is what we are designed for, physiologically and developmentally. We are not a “caching” species, adapted to long absences from our mothers in nests and burrows; such animals do not cry (or they would attract predators) and their milk is extremely high in protein and fat, to sustain the young for long periods. We are in every way much closer to the continuous-feeding, carrying mammals, as our babies remind us when they cry to be

carried, to be fed frequently, and to be nestled up against our bodies in sleep. In fact continuous carrying (usually in specially designed slings and carriers), frequent and extended breastfeeding, and co-sleeping are the norm in most non-western cultures, and westerners are often amazed by the levels of quiet contentment among these babies.

There is an increasing wealth of research and writing supporting these practices, starting with John Bowlby's classic book on attachment between mothers and babies in 1969; his findings- that secure attachment between mother and baby in infancy predicts later emotional security and independence- have been validated many times in contemporary research. Ashley Montagu, in his 19-- book "Touch; the human significance of the skin", makes an impassioned plea for extended mother-baby contact. There are also many contemporary writers in this area such as William Sears, an American paediatrician who coined the phrase "attachment parenting", and who documents the wisdom of parents "wearing" their babies. Tine Thevenin's writing on "The family bed" lends support to parents who find that co-sleeping works well for them, and, with many others, dispels the myth that co-sleeping increases the risk of Sudden Infant Death. (In fact, some of the lowest rates of SIDS are found amongst cultures where co-sleeping is the norm; however smoking, alcohol or drug use by a co-sleeping parent does increase this risk.) Mothering magazine, from the US, covers all of these areas and more, in support of gentle parenting choices.

This style of "attachment" parenting does not guarantee conflict-free parenting. In fact, because of a robust self-esteem, children reared in this way will often argue and disagree, and in this way, attachment parenting can challenge parents to develop more democratic family dynamics. However discipline, I believe, begins with love and attachment, and attachment parenting, by keeping us in tune with our children, helps us sort out major from minor misdeeds and reminds us to keep a wider perspective on our children's behaviour.