

# Richard Glover

## How to Ruin a Child

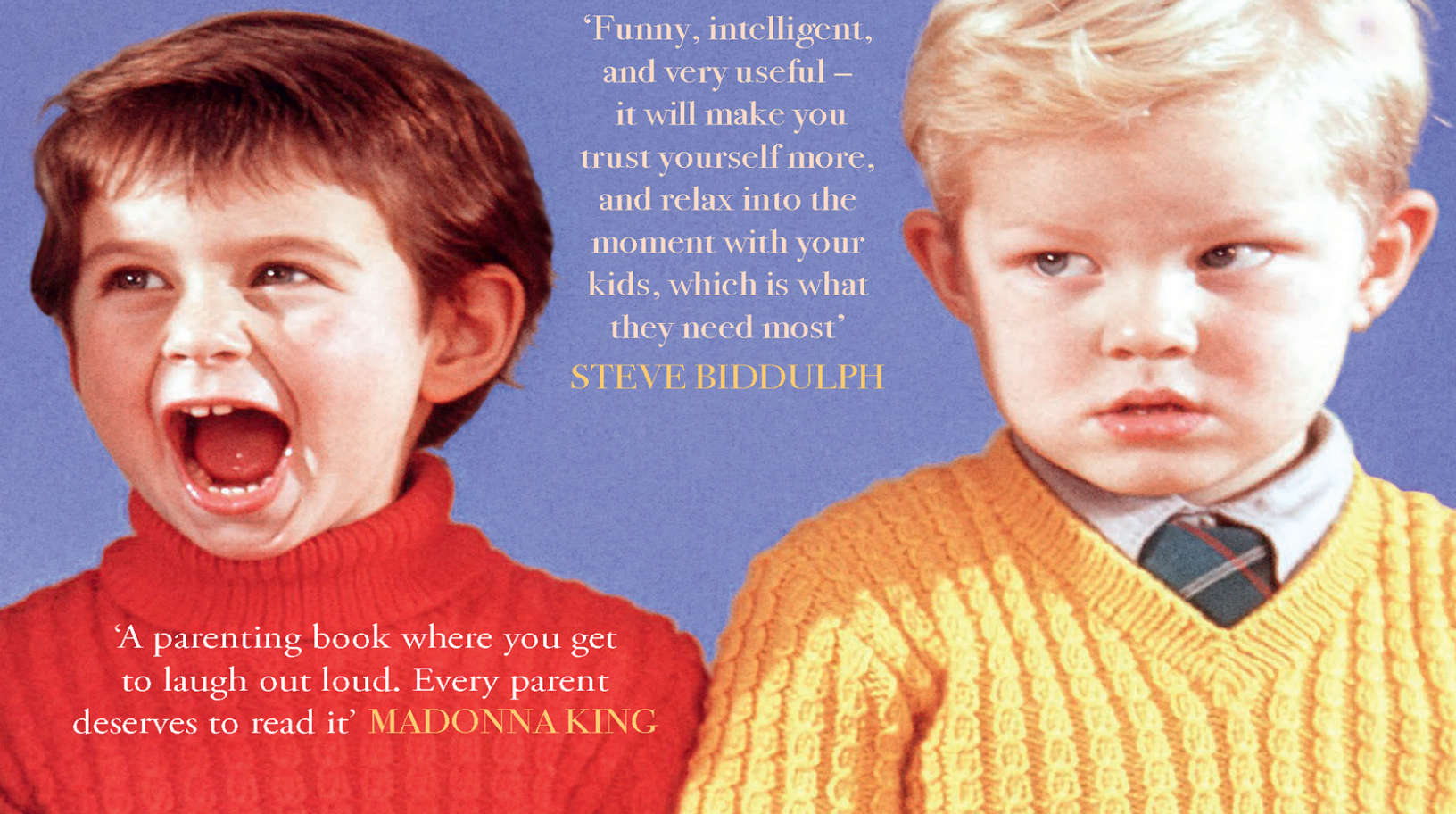
A journey into the alarming,  
hilarious and ever-changing advice  
given to Australian parents

‘Funny, intelligent,  
and very useful –  
it will make you  
trust yourself more,  
and relax into the  
moment with your  
kids, which is what  
they need most’

STEVE BIDDULPH

‘A parenting book where you get  
to laugh out loud. Every parent  
deserves to read it’

MADONNA KING





# How to Ruin a Child

A journey into the alarming,  
hilarious and ever-changing advice  
given to Australian parents

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## BOOKS

## NOTE TO READERS

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## DEDICATION

*For my children and grandchildren –  
who, of course, have all enjoyed perfect parenting*

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## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

I've avoided putting constant quote marks around the word 'expert', even though most of them were no such thing. You can make your own mind up when to apply a healthy measure of scepticism. (Hint: nearly always.)

# Introduction

Who'd be a parent? Everything you do is wrong – at least according to somebody. The whole world believes it has the right to give you advice. And yet that advice changes all the time.

This is a book about the ever-changing instructions given to generations of Australian parents. If you have wondered about the way you were parented – and where the ideas came from – you may find the answer here. If you wonder about how your own children tackle the task of parenting, you may meet the guru they've been following. And if you're a young parent yourself, wondering why you are given such a hard time by nearly everybody, including your own parents, perhaps there's satisfaction in knowing that they, too, were constantly being told they were doing it all wrong.

Why write about parenting? My reason: it's at the centre of our lives. We are all formed – not entirely, but significantly – by the way we were brought up. Many of us then become parents ourselves, helping form the next generation. Some, later, have the chance to be involved grandparents. As children, as parents, hopefully as grandparents, many of our most important moments revolve around parenting, and the various ways in which it can be done.

There's also the issue of human misery. So much unhappiness has been caused by past generations of experts offering a stream of strident, poisonous parenting advice. That advice rarely had a basis in science, or even in the close observation of children. Most of it was written by people who had no children of their own, yet it was delivered with such force and certainty. The result, often, was a bawling infant left alone in a bedroom,

with a bawling parent alone on the other side of the door – the result of the ‘rule’ that it was wrong to comfort a crying child.

Add to that the generations of children who were never told they were loved or admired by their parents – the result of the ‘rule’ that such openly expressed affection was damaging.

So much misery, with so little point. And on the basis of, really, nothing at all. No science. Often no first-hand experience. Maybe it’s time the advisors were held to account.

My own mother wasn’t great when it came to parenting. Maybe that’s another reason I’m so interested in taking this journey into the past. My mother largely left my life when I was 14, when she found herself consumed by a great love affair, but even before that, I knew her heart wasn’t in it. She’d have loved the recommendation, still common during my childhood, that mothers should have limited physical and emotional contact with their child. She always thought children were germ-y. Later, when I had children of my own, she thought them so germ-ridden she made them sit on a washable bedsheet on the two occasions when they came to visit her house: my two boys sitting on a plastic pouffe in the middle of a sea of sheet. The pouffe was so small, they had to sit back-to-back, only one child able to see the TV she’d helpfully switched on. I still remember my older boy, eight years of age, positioning himself so that his little brother could see the screen, while he sat straight-backed, staring patiently at a blank wall.

Not all mothers were like mine, but some of her attitudes were generational. During my childhood, most children weren’t driven to sport on the weekend, or even to school. You’d make your own way to these things, by foot or bicycle. When you came home, it was rare – in my experience anyway – to be asked whether your team had won. In my book about the 1960s and 1970s, *The Land Before Avocado*, I quote the Australian filmmaker Stephan Elliott. It was the era, he says, before the three Ss – seatbelts, sunscreen and the supervision of children: ‘If you drank enough cask wine, it was almost like you didn’t have kids.’

And, according to my mum, and pretty much everyone’s mum, praise or excessive attention was the last thing you should give a child. Don’t let them get too big for their boots! Later, a few generations on, parents began to overdo the praise and attention, at least according to their critics. It was

the era of ‘A prize for every child!’ It’s a debate we’ll visit later in this book.

Our parents weren’t, most of them, making these decisions in a vacuum. Behind every generation of mothers and fathers stood an army of advisors: columnists, authors, nurses, priests and officials. Most of these experts were dogmatic about the rules they promulgated. After all, those rules had been formulated by no less an impressive figure than the expert themselves. And any deviation from their rules would produce a dire result: you’d ruin a child.

Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Have we finally arrived at perfect parenting? Is today’s advice the best? Should we enjoy chuckling at the rules of the past, while cheering the wisdom of the here and now? Did they get it right in 1910? Or in 1970? Or in 2026? Should we forgive our parents for the way they parented us? You’ll have to make your own mind up about that. This book has a different mission. I hope you might discover and laugh about the ideas that fashioned the way you were brought up. You might shed a tear or two. You’ll also meet the people who tried to influence your parents – and discover their (usually) child-free lives. And, like me, you might read about some of the madder ideas and think: ‘Oh, at last I know which book Mum was using.’

And, for the current generation of parents, history offers a consolation. When relatives, and other busybodies, tell young parents that they are ‘doing it all wrong’, and that different (usually stricter) methods would make everything go smoothly, the experience of generations of Australian parents is wonderfully reassuring. Parenting is tough, however you do it. And the outcome, whatever your method, is usually the production of a perfectly decent human being. With the help of the past, we may even learn to be more critical of the experts. We may learn to ignore what the novelist Rachel Cusk once called ‘the dictatorial lust belonging to the scientists of baby management’.

Along the way, you’ll also learn about the supposed dangers of allowing a baby to suck its thumb. And how allowing a child to use a dummy is a ‘lesson in self-indulgence’ from which they might never recover. And you’ll understand how the wearing of tight trousers, however natty in appearance, may lead to masturbation and thence to a life of sexual deviancy. Give me a moment to change out of my current pair of stovepipe jeans just in case that theory proves to be correct.

I hope there'll be some surprises. Who knew that, over many decades, there was such an explicit injunction against cuddling your baby? 'The less handling of the baby the better' was standard advice for the first half of the 20th century. Or that toilet training was meant to start *three days* after the baby was born and be completed 'after the first two or three weeks' – any problems to be solved with 'a soap suppository' or by 'tickling the anus'? Could such an approach to toilet training possibly work? Who knows, but I wouldn't want to be doing the laundry in that household.

You'll also learn how education reduces the size of a woman's breasts, why condoms prevent women from receiving health-enhancing hormones, and why, if you are a young mother, you should position a mirror in a well-lit space.

You may conclude that it was especially tough being a parent in the era of rigid rules. Don't hug them! Don't praise them! Don't feed them just because they are hungry! Otherwise, they'll turn into 'spoilt little tyrants', suffering from 'mental illness' and living 'a life of crime'.

Or you may come to the view that parenting was even harder in the 1970s and 80s – with large numbers of mothers joining the paid workforce, by choice or necessity, but without the childcare, equal pay, workplace culture or paternal involvement that might make such a life feasible.

Here's the truth, at least according to me: for all the appalling difficulties of the past, it's never been more difficult to be a parent than today. The old advice, however nutty, was largely consistent. Now everything is up for debate. Which will you be? A so-called Tiger Mum, giving your children 'the best-possible start in life' by enrolling them in constant activities; or the 'relaxed parent', worried about the dangers of over-scheduling? Will you join the controlled-crying crew, in which a few nights of sobbing will grant a future heaven of household harmony; or will you think it monstrous to allow a child to cry itself to sleep? And how will you battle through the thicket of terms – 'authoritative parenting', 'attachment parenting', 'authoritarian parenting', 'gentle parenting' and the rest of them? Will you 'Dare to Discipline', to cite the name of one book, or commit yourself to 'Heart-to-Heart Parenting', to quote another?



The 'little tyrant' at work, trying to gain a little attention. Photo of the Yardley family by Max Dupain, c. 1939.

*Max Dupain, c. 1939, courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW*

My point is not to pick sides – well, not at this early stage – only to make an observation: today's parents face more challenges than ever. There's a culture war over how to parent, with various battlefronts including discipline, screen time, toxic social media, the rise of body anxiety among girls (and, more recently, boys), and – is this the worst of all? – ever more complex child-safety seats, which remain impossible to instal without a PhD in Engineering.

I know this seems an odd thing to emphasise, but this week, as I wrote this foreword, I swapped cars with my son, which meant shifting the car seats. This must be the origin of the expression 'hell on wheels'. When I

was growing up, children would often stand, untethered on the back seat of the car, like missiles ready to be launched should the driver hit the brakes. By the time I was a parent, we had baby capsules to instal, that's true, but the older children sat on foam boosters which were easily slipped into place. Now, it's all 'press harness C into slot B, then connect anchorage point D into holder A, then pray to whatever God you believe in before pushing the thing from side to side and discovering it rocks like a boat in heavy seas'.

There's also, now I'm a grandparent, the constant demand for Pa to unlock his phone so we can 'watch a Godzilla video, but not one of the scary ones, and not one of the boring ones either, but one that is a *little bit* scary'. It's quite a nuanced request. I told you it was harder now.

Most of all, I hope this book will create some sympathy for all the parents, over all the decades, who have tried their best. They loved their children, endured the sleepless nights and the eternal worry, only to be told by the experts that they were doing it all wrong.

They'd ruined a child.

## CHAPTER 1

# ‘I Blame the Parents’

‘I blame the parents’ must be one of the most popular phrases in Australian English. The words have been used over decades by school principals, judges, politicians, columnists and every other category of whingeing wowser. And not only do bad parents ruin their own children, they also ruin the children of others. To quote Zoe Benjamin, who published influential Australian parenting guides from 1917 to 1950, one poorly raised child could ‘infect a whole neighbourhood with evil practices’.

According to the secretary of the South Australian Children’s Department, slack parents were to blame for the increase in illegitimate births in 1914 (‘the result of the girls being let out late at night’), and they were likewise responsible, according to Sydney’s chief health officer, for the outbreak of diphtheria in 1949 (‘the parents,’ he said, ‘are entirely to blame’).

In 1918, according to one newspaper report, bad parents were the cause of boisterous children disturbing others on the trains, while in 1954 bad mothers ‘not exercising control over their adolescent daughters’ were responsible for a notorious murder in New Zealand. In Rockhampton in 1939 parents were called out for allowing their children to ‘murder the King’s English’, while in Melbourne in 1945 they were to blame for the drop in religious observance. A thousand other examples clamour to be quoted. If ‘I blame the parents’ had been a song, it would have topped the Australian charts every year for a century.

It was the mother, of course, who received the harshest criticism. She was liable to ruin her child before it was even born. As Australian writer Maybanke Anderson put it in her 1919 book *Mother Love*: ‘Her unborn child may be influenced by her desires, her thoughts, her affections.’ The

education of a child ‘begins at conception’, Anderson wrote, the pregnant mother needing to be ‘patient, cheerful and industrious’.

The same view was put by Mrs Everett Ellis in her 1902 *Advice to Australian Mothers*. Mothers who insisted on being social butterflies while pregnant created problems for their offspring that might last a lifetime: ‘That son is undersized; that one suffers from a chronic indigestion that makes him morose and disliked; this daughter has a complexion like mud; that one is anaemic, haggard-looking.’ A complexion like mud! And all because of too much dancing.

Then, after the birth, the mother had to continue to restrain her emotions. Otherwise, she might be tempted to cuddle the child, and that really would ruin everything.

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Why were parents so often viewed in such a poor light by their fellow citizens? Mostly it was the failure to provide discipline. There’s a half-lost language of corporal punishment – words and phrases that were in common usage during my own childhood, but which have now fallen into disuse. It was a vocabulary of ‘six of the best’, of ‘the cuts’ and ‘birch’ (as a verb, rather than a type of tree). There was ‘I’ll get out the feather duster’ (What? Cleaning again, Mummy?) and ‘I’ll box your ears’ (Using what sort of box?). As well as: ‘I’ll give you something to cry about,’ ‘It’s for your own good’ and – that most unlikely of suggestions – ‘This will hurt me more than it hurts you.’

There was also ‘just wait until your father gets home’, ‘a clip around the ears’ and ‘washing your mouth out with soap and water’ – a common punishment for swearing. I once saw it inflicted on a ten-year-old friend. The poor boy twisted and spluttered and half-vomited as his mother forced the cake of soap into his mouth. Even in the oldest parenting guides this method is rarely recommended, although Maybanke Anderson, a significant figure in many progressive Australian movements, was a big fan in her 1919 guide: ‘The easiest way to teach the little child to refrain from foul language is to insist that after every utterance his mouth and tongue need cleansing, and must therefore be washed . . . a lasting lesson on the filthiness of foul speech.’

My friend's mother, 50 years later, was in complete agreement with Maybanke. Her vigorous commitment to the method left a big impression on me and, I assume, her son. Years later he stole a car, so let that be a warning. Although, to be fair, I assume he avoided swearing during his arrest.

Mostly soap was set aside in favour of other instruments of torture. In the *Catholic Weekly* of February 1949, the ferula was recommended. In this context, it's a whalebone wrapped in leather and shaped either like a ruler or like the sole of a shoe. Either way, it was used for whipping children. As early as 1659, the English writer Charles Hoole thought it too severe a weapon. As he put it in his *Art of Teaching Schoole*: 'As for the ferula, I wish for many reasons that it might be utterly banished out of all schooles.' He was clearly a progressive thinker, even if he was yet to learn how to spell the word 'school'.

For those lacking a ferula there were plenty of alternatives. The *Bundaberg News* of March 1955 listed weapons currently in use in classrooms: the birch, belt, ruler, blackboard pointer and cane. Novelist Barry Oakley talked about 'the baptism of leather' at his Melbourne Catholic school in the 1940s, with Brother Conroy carrying his strap 'gunman-handy in a hip pocket of his shabby black habit'. More vicious instruments were used against Indigenous kids. In his memoir *Moon and Rainbow*, artist and writer Dick Roughsey, also known as Goobalathaldin, describes his Queensland mission school in the 1930s: 'The boy to be punished was laid face-down on a table and held by four men while he was belted on the bare bottom about fifteen times with a piece of rubber from an old car inner tube. I can still remember the blisters.'

Occasionally, parents would express regret about the punishment they'd inflicted. One 'mother in Victoria' wrote to the *Australian Women's Weekly* in February 1980, responding to a questionnaire about family life: 'I can never forgive myself for strapping my children. We live in a little hell of our own and I cry a lot inside for my children and wish I could turn back the clock and start again.' The same survey found that nine per cent of the 30,000 respondents 'remember being physically damaged by their own parents in childhood'. Half of this group said they worried they'd be violent with their own kids.

Physical punishment was commonplace in homes and schools until the latter years of the 20th century, at which point it became less mainstream,

although plenty of it still goes on in some homes. Anyone my age has memories of how it worked – in my case, repeated punishments of ‘six of the best’, delivered by the school’s deputy principal in a failed attempt to stop me smoking. Meanwhile, at home, my mother would chase me with a jewelled slipper – the sparkling, fake-jewel side used for severe crimes, the flat sole for less serious misdemeanours. My wife has similar memories: being hit on the legs while at home, and, when at school, on her hand with a ruler. At her primary school in Sydney’s North Parramatta in the late 1960s, the deputy principal had a square of red carpet in his office, which he told children was dyed red with the blood of children he’d caned. If a kid was naughty, but not naughty enough for a caning, they were told to stand on the red square and stare for ten minutes at the cane, positioned on the shelf to match the eyeline of a nine-year-old child.

There’s nothing special about these memories. Many will have worse stories to tell. Readers now may be horrified by these methods, but, for much of the twentieth century, the main complaint was that the strap was not being used enough. In Sydney’s *Sun* newspaper of 30 June 1954, a married woman in Merrylands wrote a letter to the editor:

Right up to the time we girls married, in my case when I was 25, we had to be home when our parents considered it late enough to be home, and if we weren’t home by then we received the same punishment as we did for cheekiness to our parents . . . Our parents, our fathers just as often, if not more so than our mothers, put us across their laps and laid on the strap as hard as they could.

Her final strapping, she reveals, occurred ‘a few weeks before her marriage’. In other words, she was still being whipped by her parents, both father and mother, as a 25-year-old woman. She thought this was a good policy, deserving of emulation. Similarly, when Miles Franklin, in her autobiographical novel *My Brilliant Career*, wrote about her experiences as a governess, the reader is meant to cheer when she finally overcomes the reluctance of the parents and gives the children a well-deserved thrashing: ‘Jimmy hollered with renewed energy to attract his mother, and I continued to rain blows across his shoulders.’

And it wasn’t only the children who apparently required a good wallop. For the headmaster of Grafton High School, speaking in

December 1939, the main problem was that he was not permitted to also cane the mothers and fathers. It was they, he said, who were largely to blame for all poor behaviour he faced. Like everyone else, he blamed the parents.

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Researching this book, I've been surprised by many things. Here's just one of them: this enthusiasm for the strap, cane or slipper was supported by parents, teachers and various officials, but it was not supported by the parenting guidebooks, even in the first half of the twentieth century. Experts whose rules about child rearing were generally harsh and rigid were not keen on physical punishment.

Australian nurse Stella Pines felt so strongly about the issue, she needed to leap constantly into capital letters, as she did in her *Daily Telegraph* column in January 1933:

Slapping and whipping are not educational. It is an easy way out for parents, but is only an anger response of which parents should be ashamed. Children must be GUIDED to do the right things: they need to feel that parents UNDERSTAND. Slapping only shows the child that you are stronger than he is, and he learns to fear instead of love you . . . At any rate, GIVE UP SPANKING THIS YEAR.

Zoe Benjamin, who led parenting classes at the University of Sydney, agreed. As she wrote in her 1950 book *The School-Child and His Parents*: 'Using the stick or the strap with older children should be regarded as a sign of weakness and inefficiency on the part of the adult.' For some parents, she added, such violence 'appeals to one of the primitive impulses, the sadistic pleasure of inflicting pain'.

The same message was heard from Melbourne's Irma Schnierer in her 1941 book *Making Childhood Happier*: 'Beating children with a cane or flogging them is not only an abominable custom, but a real crime . . . The harm it does is greater than the apparent usefulness at the particular moment.'

So why did the parents keep belting children even when told not to? While the experts decried physical punishment, they also painted an alarming picture of any child allowed to run wild. A good caning might

seem of little consequence when compared to the horrors of ‘a spoilt child’. More to the point, smacking and belting seemed to fit the general injunction from the experts to ‘be tough’.

Dr Margaret Harper, who supervised the training of infant nurses in New South Wales, was adamant that parents should be resolute from the start. In her 1926 guide *The Parents’ Book*, Harper saw crying as ‘a necessary part of the baby’s daily exercise . . . no child should be fed simply because he cries’. The book, which ran to 20 editions over 30 years, also pressed the virtues of rigid routine: ‘Regularity in all the events of the day should be maintained from birth. The mother should have a timetable for her baby and should adhere to it as strictly as possible.’ Failure to follow these instructions could, even in the first three months, produce life-long problems: ‘By allowing bad habits to be formed they may damage their child for life, both in body and in character.’



This baby is just doing their 'daily exercise', according to Dr Margaret Harper. No need to 'be fed simply because he cries'. Photo taken by Ruth Hollick, Melbourne, c. 1920.

*Ruth Hollick, courtesy of the State Library of Victoria*

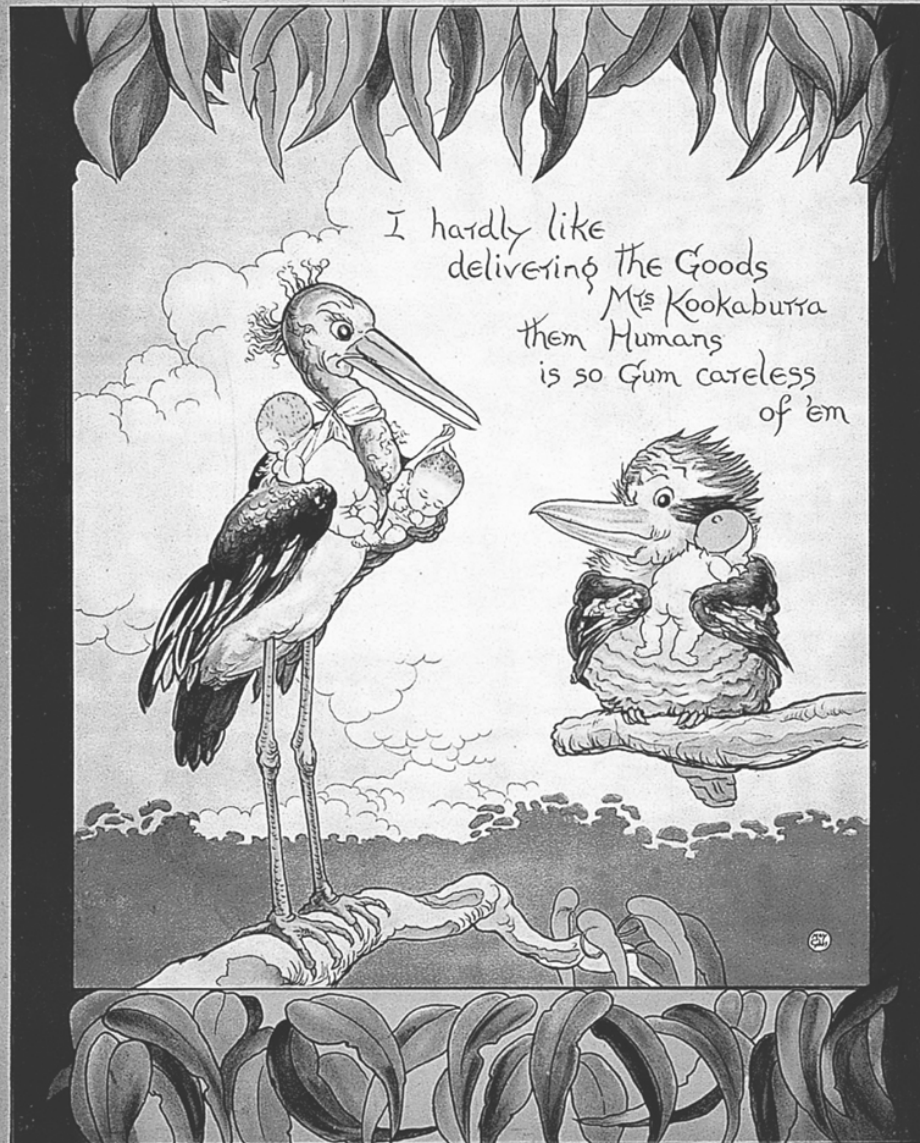
Zoe Benjamin promoted the same message in her 1944 booklet *Education for Parenthood*, describing the miserable prospects of the spoilt child, a 'mother's darling' who would go on to live a life of misery. She also bemoaned the lack of knowledge among parents: 'Why do children continue to be disobedient, tell lies, destroy their toys, tease other children, suck their thumbs and have temper tantrums? Why are so many adolescents so rude, so unmanageable?' Her conclusion? It was the parent's own 'incapacity' that was to blame for what she called the child's 'depravity'. Or again, in her 1948 book *The Emotional Problems of Childhood*: if only parents understood the 'science of mothercraft', they would 'realise that many of their difficulties with the children are due to their own weaknesses and faults of character'.

Sir Frederic Truby King, the influential New Zealand expert, talked of mothers who were ‘densely ignorant’ and in desperate need of education. In the 1930s, the NSW Health Department made the same point about parental incompetence – using an image from the celebrated artist May Gibbs. It featured a stork in conversation with a kookaburra, both rendered in Gibbs’ distinctive style. The stork, ready to hand over two new babies, makes the tart observation:

I hardly like delivering the Goods  
Mrs Kookaburra  
them Humans is so Gum careless of ’em.

I don’t quite know what ‘gum’ means in this context – a joke about gum trees, I guess – but you get the drift. Australian parents were out of their depth and needed education. The illustration featured on the cover of *Our Babies*, the official guide given to many Australian parents, and was used in every edition from the mid-1930s until the late 1950s. By 1957, when the cover illustration was last used, *Our Babies* had been issued to almost a million parents in New South Wales alone – all of them told how inept they were, before they’d even turned a page.

# DIVISION of MATERNAL & BABY WELFARE



**DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH  
NEW SOUTH WALES**

The famous May Gibbs was hired to deliver the official message to parents: 'You lot are hopeless.'

[www.health.nsw.gov.au/about/history/Documents/poster15-maternal.pdf](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/about/history/Documents/poster15-maternal.pdf)

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Inside *Our Babies*, the message was repeated: ‘Maternal instinct alone is insufficient equipment for a mother . . . mothers are slow to accept this . . . in every sphere of human endeavour it is training that counts.’

W.J. Thomas agreed in his book *Plain Words*, published in Sydney in 1942: ‘The ancient fallacy still persists that a mother is “naturally” the person most capable of rearing her baby. Obviously this is wrong. An ignorant mother is the most dangerous person to rear a child.’

Truby King disciple Sister Mary Jacob, writing in her 1948 book *You and Your Baby*, conceded that some women made good mothers, but she complained about the ‘thousands of others who are bunglers and who, through ignorance, make more or less a failure of their job . . . the neurotic, unhappy, self-pitying mother is really dangerous, as a vicious circle is formed through the child acquiring diseased patterns of personality from his parents, particularly from his mother.’

I find myself wondering about this ‘neurotic’ mother, and whether reading Mary Jacob’s diatribe would necessarily have been that helpful. While parents needed education, their children needed assessment. They were to be weighed, measured and tested, each child judged against standards that listed their model height and weight, the circumference of the head, chest and abdomen, the number of teeth, and the vocabulary that should be expected by certain ages.

‘Test weighing’ was also recommended, a process described in some detail by Sydney’s Dr Margaret Harper. The baby should be weighed, she instructed, and then fed, and then weighed again, taking care not to remove any soiled nappies. A spring-based weighing machine wasn’t accurate enough; one with moveable weights should be used. The before-and-after weighing ‘should be done after every meal for 24 hours’. Only then could the mother calculate how much breastmilk was being ingested.

How this was to be achieved at home, without the expense of hiring scales, was not explained.



Correct weight: baby Evangeline is rewarded with a smile at Adelaide's School for Mothers. Taken by Gabriele Francis, c. 1909.

*Gabriele Francis, courtesy of the State Library of South Australia*

Toilet training, weaning, feeding, sleeping and even cuddling involved a strict, unvaried timetable. This cult of the clock didn't shift much, in most manuals, until the late 1950s or early 1960s (and, even then, it departed only to reappear decades later). The same clock could be used when it came to 'sun kicks', in which babies were placed naked in direct sunlight. According to the official *Our Babies* guidebook: 'Mothers should stand

alongside baby's cot with a watch or clock in hand and time accurately the period during which he is exposed to the sun . . . increasing it by one minute daily, and a larger area of the body exposed each day, until baby is fully exposed for 15 minutes each, back and front, completely nude.'

Truby King, in particular, was a huge fan of such tables and graphs, listing the precise length of time to be spent on bathing, eating, sleeping and 'mothering'. His adopted daughter, Mary Truby King, even extended the rules to cover adults. Her book *Mothercraft* includes a table listing the required hours of sleep from one month of age (21 hours a day) to age 50 years (seven hours), which, personally I think is not nearly enough.



Everything by the clock, and the bigger the clock the better – especially when regulating 'sun kicks'. A still from *Modern Motherhood*, a 1930 NSW government health education film.

*Museums of History New South Wales - State Archives Collection: Office of the Director-General of Public Health; NRS 4911, Health education films. NRS-4911-1-[Film322]-[A000021481]*

\*

Another problem was allowing children to be the centre of attention. As Nancy Keesing wrote in *Lily on the Dustbin*, there was an extensive Australian phrasebook to silence children who wished to be heard as well as seen. ‘Save your breath to cool your porridge’ might be said to the talkative child. Or ‘You could argue the leg off an iron pot’. Or even ‘I’ll hang you on the wall for a picture’. Tougher language greeted children who showed signs of being pleased with themselves: ‘Don’t get too big for your boots’; ‘No one likes a skiter’; ‘Pride comes before a fall’; ‘Don’t get too big for your britches’; ‘Don’t develop a big head’; ‘No one likes a bragger’; ‘Everyone hates a big-noter’, ‘Don’t be so full of yourself’, ‘Don’t get ideas above your station’, and so, endlessly, on.

I certainly remember a lot of this from my own childhood.

**Me:** Guess what, Mum? I got nine out of ten on my maths exam!

**Mum:** Oh, so what question did you get wrong?

Or:

**Me:** Did you see that goal I kicked, Dad?

**Dad:** Yeah, but what about the stupid goalie who let it through! He was terrible!

Perhaps it was particularly tough on teenage girls. The comedian and writer Wendy Harmer remembers confiding to her mother that she was worried about her looks. Instead of reassurance, the reply was: ‘Maybe you should learn the piano.’ My own partner, Debra Oswald, plucked a real-life discussion from her childhood for use in her play about teenage angst, *Dags*:

**Gillian:** What am I going to do, Mum, I’m so fat and ugly.

**Mum:** Well, you’ll just have to develop a nice personality, won’t you?

She assures me she already had a nice personality.

This concern about excessive self-confidence started early. In 1915, the *Myrtleford Mail* advised that it was permissible for children to occasionally sing or recite for their parents’ friends ‘but too much publicity for children is a mistake. It is apt to make a child think itself of undue importance and to overrate its abilities and attractiveness.’

*The Australian Mothercraft Book*, published in the 1930s by the Mothers' and Babies' Health Association of South Australia, agreed:

[The child] must not be kept too much in the centre of the picture, he must not be ruined by a too adoring family circle. He develops the tendency to show off and later, when he leaves the family circle to enter a less admiring world, his nervous system is apt to suffer a severe shock and he may be unable to make the necessary adjustments to life.

I love that phrase: 'a less admiring world'. I recall being required by my parents to recite a Banjo Paterson poem for their friends, during one of their parties in the late 1960s. I stood in front of the couch, and the long-suffering guests stood in front of me, cradling their drinks and smoking cigarettes. I was about nine years old. They applauded at the end, which, of course, only encouraged me. These days, when I recite Banjo Paterson for friends, perhaps after a few drinks, I realise the South Australians were right. I find myself in a 'less admiring world'. Sometimes my friends throw things.

Melbourne child psychologist Dr Irma Schnierer urged action in her 1941 book *Making Children Happier*: 'Children dislike giving "performances" and are angry with parents who compel them to display themselves. If the child likes it, there is something wrong that needs to be nipped in the bud!'

The exclamation mark is her own. She warned that the future may not be bright for such ambitious show-offs. Indeed, such a child may end up embracing a life of crime 'as he always strives to be in the limelight, either by fair means or foul'.

A life of crime! I deny it all. Although my recitations of Banjo Paterson are surely in breach of some sort of law.





Any urge to show off must be nipped in the bud. Once a child gets a taste for theatre, there is often little a parent can do. Taken in February 1940 by Ray Olsen for *Pix*.

*Ray Olson, for Pix, February 1940, courtesy of the State Library of NSW*

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Trawl through the stories of well-known Australians, and you'll find plenty of warnings about the dangers of a big head. In 1929, for example, junior footy star Haydn Bunton was juggling offers from nearly all the clubs in the then Victorian Football League. 'It would have been a game son who got a big head with my dad,' Bunton recalled. 'In fact, his stern advice to me when eventually I left to play in Melbourne was, "If you get swollen-headed, don't come back to this home. I want no son of mine to become too big for his boots."' "



Footballer Haydn Bunton and his big boots. Just don't wear them home, Haydn.

A few years later, in the early 1930s, Betty Ware was growing up on a property on the Murray River near Mildura, under the watchful eye of her two uncles. They were, she writes, keen to make sure she didn't become a show-off: 'Any skating would earn a comment like "Let me know when you are raffling yourself, I might buy a ticket."' "

And it was not just Anglo families where praise was seen as a contaminant. Consider Li Zhang's memoir *The Reluctant Migrant's Daughter*, in which she talks of growing up in the 1950s with Chinese parents who would have fitted in perfectly with my own:

Fear and respect were taught to children in traditional Chinese families. Love was kept silently in the heart. There were no displays of love; touching, hugging and kissing were frowned on . . . praise, compliments and encouragement were rare.

At least the punishments were different in her family. My mother had her diamante slipper; Li Zhang writes about a child kneeling, holding a heavy basin of water over his head, until he was close to collapse. For once, my mother seems like a bit of a wimp.

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Society, it seems, was perpetually in decline. 'Worse than our grandparents' generation, our parents then produced us, even worse, and soon to bear still more sinful children,' as the Roman poet Horace put it in about 20 BCE. The constant message: due to bad parenting, the next generation will be a hell of a mess.

The only thing to do, the experts decided, was to advocate for a firm cap on cuddles, in the hope of improving the situation. Which brings us to Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Cap on Cuddles and Other 'Corrections'

When I was a toddler, growing up in Papua New Guinea, my mother was forced to rush me to the local hospital. I'd developed a terrible rash on my forehead. As my mother later told the story, the doctor was enormously concerned, peppering her with questions, right up to the point when my mother wondered out loud: 'I don't suppose it's being caused by the sticky tape?'

She'd been circling my head with adhesive tape in an attempt to correct my sticky-out ears. The doctor concurred that the tape was causing the rash, and that she might consider leaving my ears alone. She did so, and the rash disappeared. Mind you, the month or two of 'correction' worked. My ears are now not sticky-out at all, which may be why my mother so often told the story. She believed she'd done me an enormous favour.

I used to recount this incident to friends as just one more tale about my crazy mother, but researching this book, I've discovered she was following advice from her own childhood. Here, for example, is *The Australian Woman's Mirror* from 30 June 1931: 'Infancy is the only period in which steps can be taken to train the ears . . . the cartilage is pliable in early childhood.'

In fact, the magazine concludes, 'outstanding ears' when spotted in an adult are a sign of early neglect. They should not be blamed on the poor disfigured person. Instead, they 'shed a light on their possessor's mother or nurse'. The *Sun News-Pictorial* of May 1932 agreed: 'Mothers who neglect these simple precautions lay themselves open to blame from the children when they reach adult life.'

If not addressed, ill-angled ears would end up sticking out ‘like elephant flaps’, according to one article in September 1930, again from *The Australian Woman’s Mirror*. The child would then grow into ‘one of those unfortunates whose big, outstanding ears are always a subject for cruel jests’. Certainly, added Brisbane’s *Telegraph*, in January 1930, ‘a pinky-white and well-shaped ear never yet adorned the head of a vulgar person, nor has any person of refinement been afflicted with a large-lobed, ill-shaped ear’.

This training of the cartilage – a sort of orthodontics of the ears – sometimes failed to produce the desired result. In such cases, advised the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* in April 1932, ‘the hair can be arranged in such a way that the defect will be entirely disguised’. Perhaps I should thank my mother once again.



Me, my mother and my ‘outstanding ears’. The application of sticky tape, circled around the head, was my mother’s solution. It worked!

Parents, in particular mothers, were encouraged to act decisively on all manner of ‘defects’. They were told to paint chemicals on children’s fingers to stop nail-biting, and to instal inflexible cardboard sleeves to prevent thumb-sucking. In other families, posture was the problem. Sydneysider

Eugénie McNeil wrote about her sister Lydia, who was tall and inclined to stoop. She was required to wear a bracer, ‘a sort of calico straightjacket, into which she was buttoned every morning’. Others preferred stripping the child naked. Sister Mary Jacob, in her 1948 guidebook *You and Your Baby*, suggested the slouching child be told to remove their clothes: ‘It is a good idea to stand a child who is inclined to slouch in front of a mirror undressed, and show him the ugliness of wrong posture and the beauty of good posture.’

The encouraging news: if you did everything recommended by the experts, then parenting became a breeze. ‘You won’t have any trouble, if you do the weaning in the proper way,’ advised Dr Irma Schnierer in November 1950. Or to quote Zoe Benjamin: if you apply scientific methods, ‘many of the problems of child management disappear’.

Others joined the chorus. Morning sickness, according to New Zealand’s Truby King, ‘rarely troubles women who fit themselves for pregnancy by active healthy habits’. Even birth was said to be pain-free. According to the 1938 edition of *Our Babies*: ‘Childbirth among primitive people is a normal function, safe and practically painless.’ To achieve the same ease ‘we must educate the mothers to understand and to use their muscles and joints which are specially designed for this purpose.’ In other words, if the birth proved painful, you only had yourself to blame.

At this point you may wonder whether any of these experts had ever met an actual baby, never mind given birth to one. In truth, their experience was limited. Zoe Benjamin, a pioneer of Australia’s free kindergartens, was unmarried and childfree. So was ‘noted psychologist Miss Mary Smith’, who wrote in Adelaide’s *Sunday Mail* for a quarter of a century. Dr Margaret Harper, that fan of inflexible timetables, was also childless. In a period of prejudice, she lived for over 50 years with her close friend Helen Wark in Sydney’s Wollstonecraft. It’s a moving story – the two women died within a fortnight of each other – but it didn’t include parenting. Other advice came from Catholic priests, who, I’ll take a punt, were either childless or claimed to be. Herbert Spencer, whose social Darwinism was such a poisonous influence, was also celibate. He believed marriage and children were fatal to any man’s intellectual ‘undertakings’.

Meanwhile, Truby King, perhaps the key ‘influencer’ of his time, had no biological children. In his forties, he offered to adopt a six-month-old child, Esther Gordon, from a staff member who’d fallen on hard times.

‘King was impatient and insistent’, according to the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. The mother felt she had few other options, although ‘consenting to the adoption was a decision she was to bitterly regret’. King and his wife, Isabella, almost immediately left the child for six months while they travelled overseas. On their return the adoption papers were signed, and they changed the child’s name from Esther to Mary. They also banned any contact between the child and her biological family. It was an order that, as a young woman, Mary was forced to secretly subvert. So, perhaps, they were not the ideal adoptive parents.

Many other experts, especially in the period before World War II, shared this lack of firsthand knowledge. They include Miss Stella Pines, ‘trained child welfare expert’; the splendidly named Miss Mary Lush, kindergarten pioneer; Western Australia’s infant health chief Dr Rita Stang; and Elizabeth McMillan, Gallipoli nurse turned parenting guru. None had children of their own. This is not to deny their good intentions, or, in some cases, their great achievements. It’s also hardly surprising that the professional women of this era – the doctors, nurses and officials – were nearly always unmarried and childfree. The ‘marriage bar’, banning married women from the federal public service, was in place until 1966. Similar restrictions were in place in the various states and in the private sector. So, it’s hardly their fault.

All the same, few of the early experts of parenting had time at the childrearing coalface. And that’s weird when you consider their overwhelming confidence that parents would find their job ‘easy’, if only they did what they were damn well told.

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So, what did writers like Zoe Benjamin mean by ‘the new science of motherhood’? And why were newspaper columns full of warnings about ‘the urge to pick up the baby’?

The idea of ‘a cap on cuddles’, as it was later called, goes back to the late nineteenth century. In the US, Dr L. Emmett Holt’s bestselling guide *The Care and Feeding of Children*, first published in 1894, argued that babies should be largely left alone. Crying, he said, ‘is the baby’s exercise’. As for playing with the baby: ‘Never until four months and better not until six months.’

One of the earliest Australian guides, Edith Aitken's *The Australian Mother's Own Book* of 1912, had the same message:

A baby should never be allowed to get into the habit of expecting to be taken and dandled every time he whimpers . . . if no notice is taken of him the cry becomes first piteous, then clamorous, and when he has gained his point the little tyrant becomes all smiles and graciousness . . . Regularity at meal-times should be insisted on, the time for going to bed should be regulated and fixed, and no departure from the time fixed should be allowed.

The official Queensland baby guide, first published in 1931, also recommended rigid rules: 'From the earliest days baby should work for his living. Crying and sucking are forms of exercise for the young infant . . . Teach him to understand that he cannot get his own way simply by crying for it.'

Some say these warnings against picking up the baby were driven by concerns about the spread of germs in those prepenicillin times, but when you read the books, it's not the key concern. Too much affection, the authors believed, would ruin a child's personality. Truby King, in his 1913 *Feeding and Care of Baby*, described the toxic impact of an overly responsive mother:

To save a lusty, honest cry she will pacify an infant with a 'comforter,' or with food given at wrong times, and may thus ruin the child in the first month of life, making him a delicate, fretful, irritable, nervous, dyspeptic little tyrant who will yell and scream, day or night, if not soothed and cuddled without delay.

Here he is again, from the same book, describing a baby's ability to manipulate his mother, when just a few days old:

There are few sights more pathetic than that of the weak mother not daring to lay her child down because he will cry for the snuggling warmth of her arms . . . And when the mother has yielded during the first few weeks to the demands of her child's cries, the chains of her slavery are curiously hard to break.

Reading his words, I become a little teary. Was his adopted daughter, the renamed Mary, ever allowed to feel this ‘snuggling warmth’? And how strange to use such a tender phrase. It’s as if he understands that it’s natural to provide ‘snuggling warmth’ to a baby. Maybe that’s his point: he’s indicating the superiority of those – like himself – who can triumph over such weak human impulses.

The anti-cuddle crusade had many leaders. In the 1920s the American behaviourist John B. Watson used even stronger language. ‘Mother love is a dangerous instrument,’ he wrote in his 1928 book *Psychological Care of the Infant and Child*: ‘An instrument which may inflict a never-healing wound, a wound which may make infancy unhappy, adolescence a nightmare, an instrument which may wreck your adult son or daughter’s vocational future and their chances for marital happiness.’

Cuddling the infant, he added, ‘would condition children to expect such behaviour as they grew up’. The result could be the creation of a ‘Mama’s boy’, suffering from ‘too much mother love’.

While hugging and kissing were not a great idea, Watson did allow that a handshake might be exchanged first thing in the morning:

Let your behaviour always be objective and kindly firm. Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit in your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning. Give them a pat on the head if they have made an extraordinarily good job of a difficult task.

It’s one of the sadder facts in the history of parenting advice that three of Watson’s four children went on to attempt suicide, one of them, late in life, succeeding.

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Australian mothers were constantly warned about the dangers of too much affection. Miss Mary Lush in *The Growing Child*, published in 1932 by the Victorian Council for Mental Hygiene, thought it reflected the mother’s own defects. Such a mother ‘tries to obtain, through the child, the things she feels to have been denied her’. Anyone suffering from such neediness should, she wrote, try to acquire a hobby, which I guess is as good an excuse as any for the existence of golf.

*Our Babies*, the official guide in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia, agreed: picking up the baby when he cries ‘makes him a little tyrant’. Or again, a few pages later: ‘By seven months he may have learned a lesson that will cost him dearly – to demand constant stimulus and to depend upon others for his own happiness.’ Yes, just imagine a baby having to depend on others for their own happiness. Why don’t you make your own fun, you tiny bastard?

The booklet also told parents to avoid ‘tickling to produce a laugh’, which, personally, would reduce my grandparenting skills to zero.

Routine was crucial. Truby King’s pamphlets featured a 24-hour clock. The baby was to be fed five times in each 24-hour period, in four-hourly intervals, at precisely 6 am, 10 am, 2 pm, 6 pm and 10 pm. The child was then meant to sleep, with no additional feeding, from 10 pm to 6 am. A set time for ‘mothering’ – once every 24 hours – was also included.

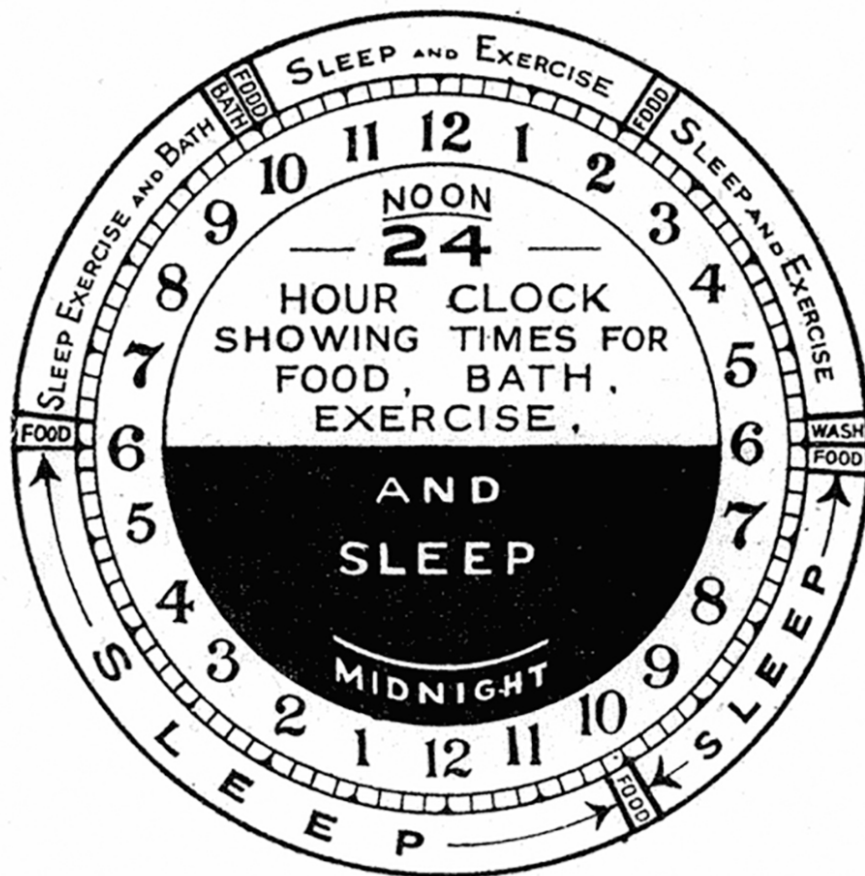


Fig. 23. Clock Face  
For Four-hourly Feeding

The Truby King clock demanded the baby be fed every four hours – with no variation, and nothing at night.

*Encyclopedia of New Zealand*

Even the equipment purchased by parents reflected the no-cuddle consensus. The playpen, which I'd assumed was a way of keeping children from danger, was promoted as a method of avoiding physical contact between parent and child. As the Adelaide child psychologist Mary Smith argued in 1952, a playpen helped reduce the need for adult contact: 'He becomes used to his barricade and when he crawls he is happy to have his toys to himself without the constant attention . . . of an adult.'

And why hold a child's hand when you could instead tether them via a leash, much like a dog's harness? These were popular items: there's even a photo of Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones, out and about with his

mum, Doris, in 1945. He would have been just under two years old. Mind you, in Keith's case, they probably should have kept it on for life.



Life on the leash: Keith Richards, later of The Rolling Stones, with his mother, Doris, in 1945.

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These ideas of rigid routine suited the times. Truby King's 1913 *Feeding and Care of Baby* was published just two years after Frederick Taylor's 1911 *The Principles of Scientific Management*, the influential guide to establishing efficient routines at work. The clocks of the nursery chimed

with those of the factory. The official *Our Babies* booklet made the link explicit:

It is wonderful how a baby will adapt himself to a life of clock-work regularity – provided his mother is intelligent enough to overcome his first resistance. A baby that has been fed by the clock from birth will wake at the appointed hour as if he were a mechanical apparatus.

Fine, I guess, if you've always dreamed of having a baby who behaves like 'a mechanical apparatus'.

The clocks of childhood were followed by the three Rs of the school years: rote-learning, ranking and restraint. As the Queensland writer Joan Colebrook wrote in her memoir *A House of Trees*: 'When we were told to put our shoulders back and march in line, or stand silently and wait for the teacher to tell us what to do, the implicit understanding was it was necessary to learn to obey – that we were in fact small soldiers of the great British Empire.'

All of this was still in place when I was educated in the 1960s and 1970s. We'd stand to attention at assembly, sit in 'streamed' classes according to our academic ability, and – depending on gender – be judged on the length of either hair or hem. 'Too long!' for a boy's hair; 'Too short!' for a girl's skirt. Then it was onwards to a hierarchical workplace, and more obedience to the clock.

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Shortly after Federation, the New South Wales government established a royal commission into the falling size of families. Some mothers were showing their lack of patriotism by calling it quits after three or four kids. Officially known as the Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales, the report concluded that the new nation was under threat. 'The possibility of maintaining a "white Australia",' the commission concluded in 1904, 'depends on the question of whether we should be able to people the vast areas of the continent.' It warned that there was 'some force adverse to reproduction on the part of the people'.

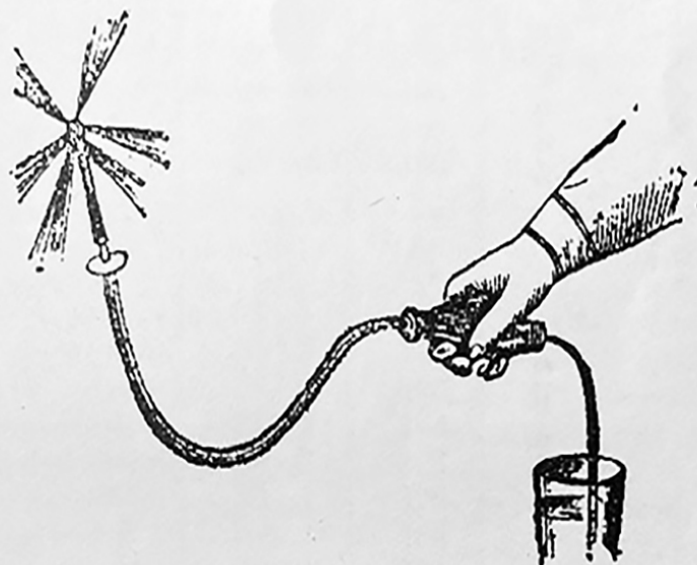
It wasn't that different to the speech made by Australian treasurer Peter Costello precisely a century later: 'If you can have children,' he said in 2004, 'it's a good thing to do. You should have one for the father, one for the mother and one for the country.' Costello offered a baby cash bonus to back up his words. Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, facing an earlier demographic crisis, had offered money *plus* a framed photo of himself. Australians, I believe, remain grateful that Peter stuck to the cash.

The royal commission was particularly worried about the sale of contraceptives. One table lists the 'preventatives' imported in a single month, January 1904, through Sydney's Customs House. It includes 9588 'French letters', a figure which shocked the commissioners but actually – I've done my own calculations – works out to be one condom for every 0.02 man in the adult population. So, it was not exactly a bacchanalia.

Other 'preventatives' were sold door-to-door by female hawkers, 'some of whom', observed the commission, 'wear a dress resembling that of a nurse', which sounds like the plot for a rather saucy period drama. Would Dame Helen Mirren be available? Many had catchy brand names, such as the 'Perfect Pessary' available from the 'No More Worry Co.' of New York. The most popular condom, according to the royal commission, was a brand called 'Never Rips', which, you must admit, is an admirable quality in a condom.

The royal commissioners were not the only people to be concerned about the shrinking size of families. In 1911, the *West Australian* described the falling birthrate as a 'revolt against maternity' and dubbed it 'race suicide'. In Sydney a 'Baby Week' campaign was launched. The aim was to fill the country with the native born: 'The lusty little chap who, if given a show, will develop into one of those fine types of men who have done and are doing so much to build up our nation.' There was no mention, of course, of Indigenous Australians who, according to the theories of the time, were fated to fade from the stage due to their supposed evolutionary inferiority.

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## SYRINGE.

THE Improved Appliance is a powerful Enema of Higginson's pattern, fitted with a new Vertical and Reverse Current Vaginal Tube, producing a continual current treble the power of the ordinary tubes used for this purpose, thoroughly cleansing the parts it is applied to. It is to be used with injection of sufficient power to destroy the active properties of the fluid without injury to the person, and if the instructions are followed it can be used with success and safety.

*Dr. H. A. Allbutt writes :—*

DEAR SIRS,

24 Park Square, Leeds, June 8th, 1886.

Your Improved Syringe is perfect with the Vertical and Reverse Sections, as every part will be thoroughly cleansed by its use. The Vertical holes will current into the most remote portions of the Vagina, and the Reverse holes will sluice out anything which may remain. It is a Syringe that should be used to cleanse the passage as a protection to conception.—I am, dear Sirs, yours truly,

Messrs. E. Lambert & Son.

H. A. ALLBUTT, M.R.C.P.E., L.S.A.

*Extract from "Hints on Nursing," 1890.—"Lambert and Son's Improved Vertical and Reverse Current Syringe is preferable for all vaginal injections, on account of its greater cleansing power and forward and backward currents."*

*MENA DREW says in "Monthly Nursing," 1890 :—"I prefer Lambert's Vaginal Syringe to Higginson's because the current is Vertical."*

vaginal syringe to Langerhans, because the current is vertical and Reverse, thus washing the vaginal secretions away better."

**Complete, with Directions for Use.**

The royal commission's report featured images of some of the alarming contraceptives on offer – including 'Lambert's Improved Vertical and Reverse Current Syringe', designed to 'sluice out anything'.

*Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales/State Library of NSW*

Children themselves, said the experts, should be recruited to the cause of population growth. In her 1913 book *Mother and Child*, Sydney writer Muriel Danvers Power offered advice when dealing with a fussy eater. Tell the child he is eating to be strong, she advised, so that he can have children of his own: 'These suggestions give a child a sense of physical responsibility to The Race, which cannot be given too early.' Now eat your beans for the sake of the Empire.

Did everyone agree that families should be bigger? Not quite. In July 1923, Melbourne's *Sun News-Pictorial* published a reader's letter:

Permit me a few lines in which to say that, as a woman, I think it is every woman's own affair whether she has children or not. Six years of married life leaves me the mother of four boys, and a total wreck—unable to care for these poor little innocents in a proper manner. Small wages and the high cost of living completes the tragedy.

The letter is signed 'SHABBY AND HUNGRY', and, a century on, misery still leaches from her words.

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Populate or perish? Maybe making parenting easier – by feeding children by the clock and letting them cry – would tempt more people into the role. It was a common theory but, in reality, the tough methods often made parenting even harder. Marj, a woman who visited a Victorian Baby Health Centre in the 1940s, told her story to historian Heather Sheard:

They [the nurses] were too inclined to be too rigid with the rules – they didn't give enough latitude. Things like – when the baby cries, don't pick him up and keep to the feeding times and hours. I tried to

do it, but I think I often had to give up. It was a stressful time . . . it was like bringing up baby by the numbers.

She then shared a common complaint: the rigid advice came from childless experts. As Marj put it: ‘All very well when you’ve not had the experience yourself.’

Or there’s Francis, who told her story as part of an oral history project conducted by the Nursing Mothers’ Association of Australia:

I would have fed him about two o’clock in the afternoon. Then he started crying at about 5 o’clock. However, I knew I shouldn’t feed him any less than four-hourly so he cried until 6 o’clock. He still cried and cried and I knew I shouldn’t feed him until 10 o’clock but sometimes I actually fed him at half-past nine because I couldn’t bear it any longer.

Later, in the late 1950s and 1960s, there was a new generation of experts who had children of their own, which may be part of the reason the advice began to change. The Sydney paediatrician Dr Clair Isbister dedicated her first book, published in 1958, to her own children, lamenting the way she’d been told to raise them:

How fashions change even in child management . . . we fed them by the clock whether they wanted it or not. We sat the little mites on pots when they were only a few weeks old, and we wept outside the door while our babies cried themselves to sleep. All because they were not going to be spoilt!

Brisbane paediatrician Dr Phyllis Cilento, writing in 1965, shared a similar experience:

I remember sitting waiting till my watch pointed exactly to 2 pm before I would feed my eldest. Meanwhile he yelled with hunger and rage, and the tears poured down my cheeks in sympathy.

Even Dr Vera Scantlebury Brown, one of the few pre-World War II experts to have children of her own, admitted the difficulty of following the rules she’d helped promulgate. Her young son was ‘rather overtired and beside

himself', she wrote in a letter to her parents in December 1929, 'so I fear I broke the rules and gave him a little nurse and he went off to sleep at once – dear wee pet'. In her handwritten letter, preserved in the University of Melbourne archives, she lists the extenuating circumstances. They'd had a big day at Brighton Beach. Plus: 'He is getting four teeth through and it is very hot. He was so good all day.'

It was only 'a little nurse', but it required such detailed justification.

Scantlebury Brown, by the way, had two children: Edward and Catherine. Isbister had four: Peter, James, Helen and John. And Cilento had six: four of whom became doctors, one an artist, and the youngest – Diane Cilento – an actor who married Sean Connery and earned an Oscar nomination for *Tom Jones*. More on all three women, and their various battles, a little later.

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So, did everyone believe in the clock, the calendar and the cap on cuddles? The mothers of Australia, listening to their sobbing babies, were not the only ones to have their doubts. Buried in the voluminous transcript of the Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate is the evidence of Dr William Litchfield, honorary physician at the Sydney Hospital for Sick Children. He'd been asked about Sydney's 'foundling hospitals', in which 'illegitimate' babies, having been taken from their mothers, were housed. It was a system of 'limited handling', of the sort later advocated by Truby King. 'The baby,' Dr Litchfield reported, 'is put into its crib and just picked up every two hours and fed.' The absence of the mother's breast milk was one problem, Dr Litchfield concluded, but 'it is the picking up and playing with the children, and nursing them, that has a stimulating effect – on the skin, the blood and the circulation. The mere nursing and handling of the child, apart from the food, has a beneficial effect.' Without such handling, he told the 1904 royal commission, the baby 'dwindles away'.



The grim Waitara Foundling Home, photographed in 1900.

*Courtesy of Hornsby Shire Council*

In one Sydney institution, the Waitara Foundling Home, the infant mortality rate, Litchfield reported, was around 80 per cent. Of the 529 children admitted, 423 died in their first year of life. Alone, one imagines, in their cots.

William Eury, the senior inspector of the New South Wales Children's Relief Department, gave similar evidence about the Waitara Foundling Home: 'The baby goes in without its mother . . . It is in the nursing. If the baby misses the nursing; if she does not get the nursing, she misses it, and will pine away and die.'

To our ears, these seem the most obvious thoughts – that a baby requires, deserves, a loving touch. Yet this idea was not the orthodoxy for a big chunk of the twentieth century. In fact, the deadly Waitara Foundling Home offered the baby greater contact – every two hours – than was to be offered in the every-four-hour or (in initial weeks) every-three-hour feeding system, soon to be imposed so widely.

But 'over-handled' babies, as Truby King described them, were not the only peril faced by the Empire. Another peril gripped the nation. More women were being educated. Why was that such a problem? Well, it had to do with the size of their breasts. For more, read on.

## CHAPTER 3

# The Peril of the Educated Woman

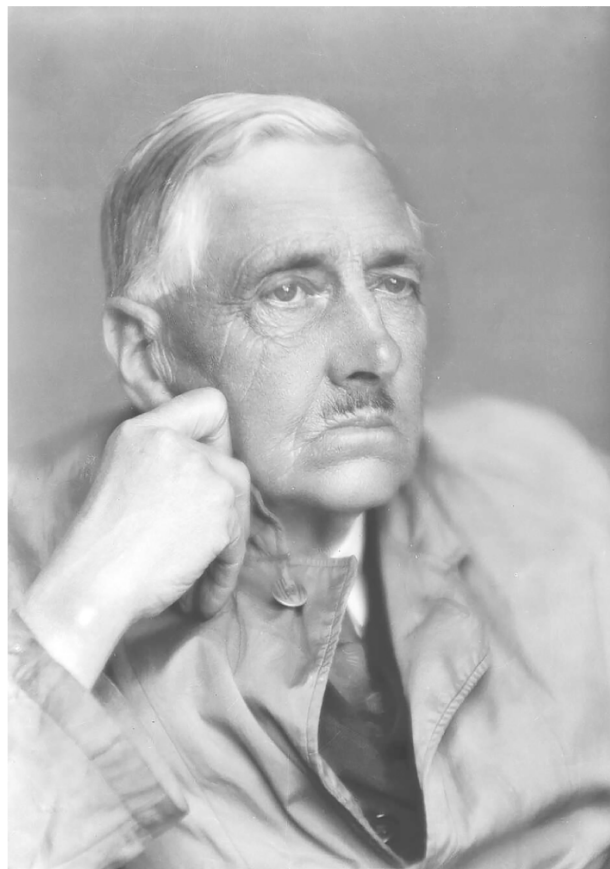
The educated woman tends to be flat-chested. That was the view of our old friend Truby King. Speaking to the Australasian Medical Congress in 1914 he outlined the problem: ‘If an undue proportion of the energies and blood-supply go to the brain and the voluntary muscles there will not be enough left over for the rest of the system.’ The result, he said in his paper *Education and Eugenics*, would be an increase in number of ‘flat-chested, over-pressured girls’ who would be unfit for maternity. Women should instead be trained to become good mothers, ‘for the benefit of the race’. He also advocated that if women were to be given education, it should be on womanly topics:

By giving due attention to matters which are of special interest and importance to women, and along which many of their best aptitudes go, we should be enormously lessening the strain. In other words, in so far as we can introduce matters connected with home life, and give them a greater interest, we shall be doing an enormous benefit to the women, and prospectively to the race.

You might wonder why the theory wasn’t also applied to men. The idea that developing the brain might cause other parts to shrink – and shrink so much as to be unusable – might cause many chaps to reconsider all forms of intellectual activity. Another point: King’s flat-chested theory lacks any evidence. A study of large-breasted women who are also extraordinarily intelligent may be needed to prove the point. I may be just the person for the job. Perhaps I could get a grant.

King, it should be noted, was not a minor figure. He established programs in Dunedin, London and Sydney to teach his methods of feeding-

by-the-clock and limited cuddling. His Plunket Society and Karitane parenting centres are still going strong today, although they now disavow his views. Knighted in 1925, he became, in 1938, the first private citizen in New Zealand to receive a state funeral and, in 1957, was the first New Zealander to have his face on a postage stamp. And what a face it was. He had a large head with arresting eyes – eyes of a ‘visionary, almost of the fanatic’, to quote the sermon given at his funeral by the Bishop of Wellington. In photos and paintings, his lips are perpetually pursed, his gaze a little disapproving, as if he’d just spotted someone hugging a child.



Sir Frederick Truby King with the eyes of a ‘visionary, almost of the fanatic’. Just don’t let him see you hugging a child. Photograph taken by Stanley Polkinghorne Andrew, c. 1930s.

*Stanley Polkinghorne Andrew, courtesy of National Library of New Zealand*

While King condemned educated women, it didn’t influence his own choices. His Scottish wife, Isabella, was dux of the Edinburgh Educational

Institution for Young Ladies. By 1914 she was writing a regular newspaper column, syndicated to about 50 New Zealand newspapers, promoting her husband's enthusiasm for maternal sacrifice. As she put it in a 1923 column:

Perfect parenthood demands continuous effort; self-sacrifice tempered with gladness, thankfulness, and a due sense of responsibility – the realisation by the parents that a tiny child has been entrusted to them, a Divine gift, with Divine rights; theirs to make or mar, a character to mould, a future citizen of a great Empire, with an immortal soul.

\*

Later we'll talk about the fathers. But first a question: who'd be a mother, given these burdens? You're told to have multiple children for the sake of 'a great Empire'. Next you are told not to cuddle them, the one pleasure available amid the sleepless nights, the varicose veins, the aching breasts and the rest. Then you're told that your baby will sleep 22 or 23 hours a day – which may have happened once, to one child, but only one – but the figure is given as the norm, as if to make you feel uniquely cursed.

Many of these experiences – the sleepless nights, the fractious days, the bossy advice from outsiders – are shared by the women of the 1920s and those of today; a connective tissue between mothers separated by a century. When I think about both these sets of mothers, in the 1920s and the 2020s, wiping a cool cloth across a hot forehead or patting a child to sleep, it's as if a century of depression and war, of technological change and social transformation, have shrunk to nothing. It's a parent and her child, the challenges and delights.

Back at the start of this book, I argued that 'right now' is probably the toughest time to raise a family. But let's spare a thought for that mother from a century ago. She had the usual struggles with exhaustion and frayed nerves, but other unnecessary burdens were added to her load. She was told a family of three, four or even five was not good enough. She was (mostly) told she couldn't work outside the home. She had few labour-saving devices. She was called a monster if breastfeeding wasn't possible. She was demonised for wanting to cuddle her baby. And if she reached for a book, in

the hope of a little distraction, she was told such intellectual activities would shrink the size of her breasts.

The only message for today's women, once you accept the views of Truby King, is this: if you want a breast reduction, don't consult a surgeon; visit a library.

\*

Truby King wasn't alone in these wacky beliefs. In 1882, many Australian newspapers reported the views of Dr William Goodell, Professor of Diseases of Women and Children at the University of Pennsylvania, and 'one of the best medical authorities of the time'. Under the headline 'How Women are Spoiled', Goodell criticised the idea of female education:

The fact is our girls are over-educated. Now forcing that portion of the brain which is the seat of our intellectual faculties, and forcing it especially during its nascent and growing stages, stints those centres which preside over animal life. This energy is withdrawn from the reproductive centres, and physical development becomes arrested. Precocious cleverness is attainable only at the cost of physical development. The brain cramming of our boarding schools . . . breeds a host of sickly girls, who swarm on every class of society.

Goodell expressed particular sympathy for the future husband of such a woman:

She becomes engaged to some unwary youth, who bewitched by her face and charmed intelligence sees not the frail body . . . Unequal to the obligations of marriage, she at first tolerates them, then loathes them. Soon repugnance merges into aversion and hate. The husband is driven to unfaithfulness . . .

So, education not only stops you having babies, it also forces your husband into infidelity. Who knew?

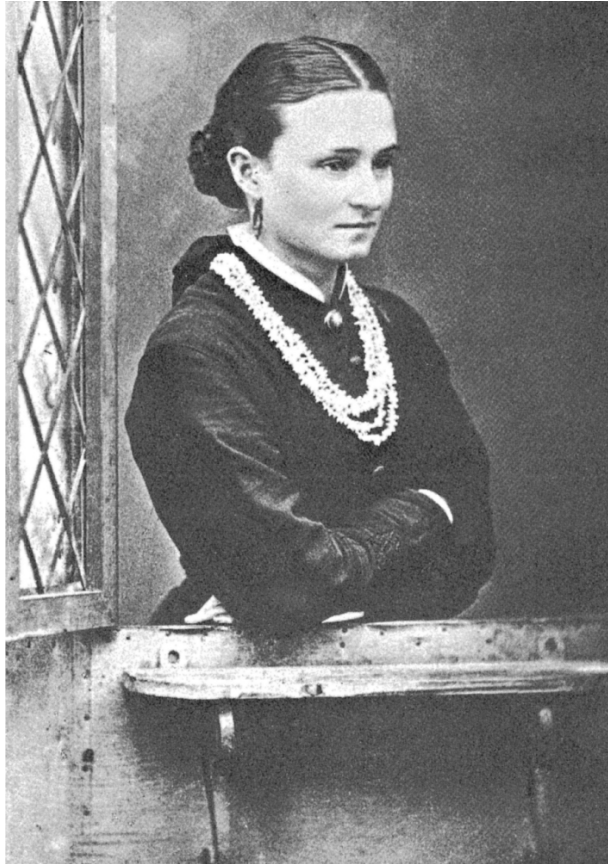
Truby King argued that female participation in sport was adding to the crisis. Quoting 'an English authority', Dr John Ballantyne, King invoked the 'splendidly-developed college woman of America', which sounds like he was a bit overexcited. Alas, the sentence then turns sour: 'Great as she

was at tennis, hockey, and the rest, [she] tended to be sterile, and tended to have puny offspring, towards which she was unable to perform the duties of mother.'

Exercise among women, he concluded, unless very moderate, damages the nervous system – an opinion we should share with Serena Williams, who won the Australian Open when she was two months pregnant with her first child.

King also believed it had been a mistake to allow women to vote, a milestone achieved in New Zealand and Australia ahead of anywhere else in the world. (The two countries still argue about who was first. Kiwi women were the first to vote; those in South Australia, the first to win the right to vote *and* stand for office.) The whole thing was an antipodean disaster, according to King, leading to declining birthrates 'almost the lowest in the world'. Women, distracted by voting, were failing in their proper role. As Truby King didn't quite put it, they were choosing elections over erections.

Hannah McLeod, Matron of the Women's Hospital, Sydney, put the same view in the 1907 guidebook *Handbook of Domestic Science*: 'In grasping at the shadow of public and political rights, women may lose the substance and fail in their natural duty to God and man.' Tell that to the Australian suffragette Maybanke Anderson, mother of seven; to Louisa Lawson, mother of five (including her poet son Henry); or to Edith Cowan, the first woman to be elected to an Australian parliament and a mother of five.



Despite the dire warnings, many women were interested in both motherhood and suffrage. For instance: Edith Cowan, mother of five and the first woman elected to an Australian parliament.

*Wikimedia Commons*

Worse, said the critics, female voters would only vote for handsome men. It was a fear that wasn't realised, according to historian Clare Wright. In her book about the campaign for the vote, *You Daughters of Freedom*, she quotes James Stewart, a Queensland Labor senator, who, in 1902, gestured across the chamber to the newly elected representatives from South Australia. 'The honourable senators,' he said, '[are] all fine, big, rough, upstanding men, but not particularly handsome.'

So, that was a relief.

All the same, according to Truby King, Australia and New Zealand were in the middle of a fertility disaster – with women embracing education, sport *and* voting. The nations Down Under were not doing enough, well, down under.

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King's ideas, and those of nearly everyone else, were influenced by eugenics: the idea that breeding should be discouraged among 'the undesirable' and encouraged among 'the desirable'. Between the two world wars, the theory was enormously popular, particularly among people who considered themselves members of 'Team Desirable'. Eugenics was sometimes called 'racial hygiene', a term which later became associated with Nazi Germany and its efforts to breed a 'pure race' through sterilisation and industrialised mass murder. In this earlier period, the term also included people from one's own ethnic group who were diseased (particularly with venereal disease), had criminal records or were simply poor. Such people, said the 'racial hygienists', should be discouraged from having children. Some advocated compulsory sterilisation, others said it should be voluntary. The Nazis, it should be said, also targeted these groups, although 'racial purity' was their main obsession.

The British birth control advocate Marie Stopes was particularly concerned about the drop in fertility among what she called the 'A1' class of parents, as opposed to the 'C3' group. Stopes believed sterilisation should be offered to those who were diseased, prone to drunkenness or of 'bad character'. In 1918, in her book *Wise Parenthood*, she also included families where the children were 'puny and utterly unsatisfactory'. As someone with mild asthma and less-than-impressive arm muscles, I wonder whether she would include me.

It was not by chance that Stopes established her first birth control clinics in poorer areas: the aim was to reduce births among those of 'feeble' stock. In an article published in Sydney's *Mirror* newspaper in January 1919, Stopes outlined her 'simple, clean and easy way' of solving the supposed crisis:

The way out is this: The sterilisation of all potential parents who are bodily or morally hopelessly and irremediably diseased and unfit. Everyone with any experience of life will be able to think of such examples – the drink-sodden, or, even worse, those with rabid, perverted instinct. These and other types no sane person in the world could hesitate to decide ought not to be 'endowed' for the wretched children they would bring into the world.

Legend has it that Stopes cut her own son, Harry, out of her will after he married a woman who wore glasses. It's a hard story to believe, and I'd look up the references except I'm afraid to admit that, as I research this book, I'm wearing a pair of glasses myself. Oh, OK, I'll do it. So, here it is, via the obituary of Harry Stopes-Roe published by *The Times* in 2014:

She [Marie Stopes] was outraged when he chose for marriage Mary Eyre Wallis, daughter of the scientist Sir Barnes Wallis . . . Mary's crime was being short-sighted, which Stopes viewed as a eugenic blight, declaring: 'Mary and Harry are quite callous about both the wrong to their children, the wrong to my family, and the eugenic crime.'



Marie Stopes with husband Humphrey and son Harry in 1933. Harry was later cut out of her will because he married a woman with spectacles.

*Fox Photos/Hulton Archive/Getty Images*

Stopes refused to attend the wedding and wrote her son out of her will. Upon her death in 1958, he received nothing except her 13-volume edition of the *Greater Oxford English Dictionary* – no doubt affording him the chance to look up words such as 'bilked', 'swindled' and 'fleeced'. The bulk of her fortune went to the British Eugenics Society and the Royal

Society of Literature. Mind you, as *The Times* noted: ‘As it happens all four of [the couple’s] offspring wore glasses.’

Presumably cheap ones. Given the lack of inheritance.

\*

Marie Stopes wasn’t the only fan of eugenics. Truby King, while believing in the power of a healthy environment to overcome hereditary defects, was, like Marie Stopes, worried that poor people were breeding quicker than the well off. As he put it: ‘The most urgent and pressing need of our vast Empire is ample British-born population . . . In all civilised countries a smaller and smaller percentage of new population is being derived from the best sources.’

The result, he said in a 1933 letter to a friend, could be dire:

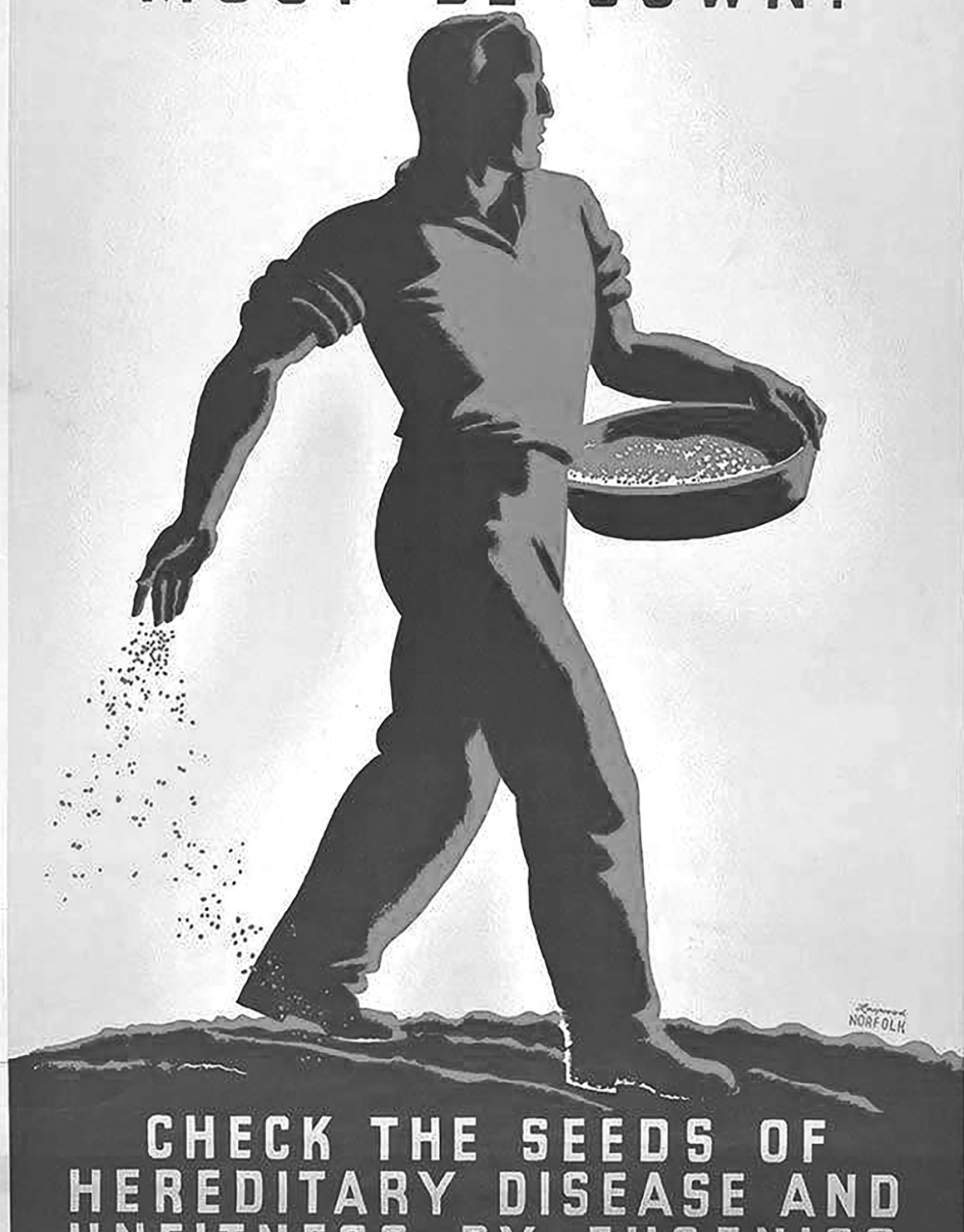
Within a quarter of a century we shall both be slaves of Mongols, or on the other hand, we shall save the British Empire for people of our own race, language and ideas . . . The Caucasian is not played out . . . But we must go back to family life, abandon ‘race-suicide’, people our countries with our own race, and not abandon them to Asiatics.

The aim was ‘racial survival’, which meant breeding from ‘good stock’. As a 1920s poster from the British Eugenics Society put it: ‘Only healthy seed must be sown.’

Which brings us back to the education of women and why many thought it should be deplored. By interfering with motherhood, education would rule out precisely the sort of middle-class mothers the eugenicists were keen to encourage. As Truby King put it: ‘It is impossible for me to convey how strongly I feel that the common education of men and women upon similar lines was one of the most preposterous farces ever perpetuated . . .’

Herbert Spencer, the British writer, had long been worried by the impact of education on the supply of good quality mothers. Despite having a better diet than girls from poor backgrounds, upper class girls were failing to breed in sufficient numbers. Wrote (the childless) Spencer in *The Principles of Biology* in 1867:

**ONLY *HEALTHY* SEED  
MUST BE SOWN!**



*Harvard*  
NORFOLK

**CHECK THE SEEDS OF  
HEREDITARY DISEASE AND  
UNEALTHINESS BY EXAMINING**



Did Marie Stopes have me in mind? A 1920s poster from the British Eugenics Society.

The deficiency of reproductive power among them may be reasonably attributed to the overtaking of their brains, an overtaking which produces a serious reaction on the physique . . . [and] the very frequent inability of such women to suckle their infants . . . Most of the flat-chested girls who survive their high-pressure education are unable to do this.

The myth of the ‘flat-chested, over-educated woman’, popularised by Spencer, continued for much of the century that followed. Here, for instance, is the *Australian Women's Weekly*, in April 1965, interviewing an American professor, Dr Edwin Strassman, about his view that the ‘better the brain, the smaller the breasts’: ‘The intelligent, flat-breasted woman is often frigid and infertile,’ he told the magazine. ‘Men have always recognised this instinctively. The flat-chest is a warning the woman may not function well as a female.’

Education, he added, only made matters worse: ‘Art and science are not a woman’s role. Only unhappy women are driven to excel in these fields. Women’s role is reproduction.’

Again, I mention the date: 1965, just short of a century since Herbert Spencer was first blathering on about women whose cleverness left them flat-chested.

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Some, though, saw a different problem when it came to a woman’s breasts. Dr Clair Isbister was one of the most prominent Australian paediatricians of her time – a regular on Australian television and radio, whose book *Birth, Infancy and Childhood* went through four editions between 1965 and 1980. She, too, raised the issue of breast size. But this time around, the problem was breasts that were too large:

The sex symbols of Hollywood are the most notorious failures as wives and mothers, and the more unbalanced the vital statistics, the

lower the incidence of breast-feeding. This is possibly an indication of some hormone imbalance, since the small, narrow hips are as unsatisfactory in labour as the large breasts are for feeding.

Which just goes to show: if you are a woman, you just can't win.

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Could Truby King's methods of minimalist parenting encourage more of the 'right' people to have children? He believed so. Parenthood, he said, had become too stressful – 'one important factor in the declining birthrate'. Babies, he seemed to imply, were best if they were self-raising, rather like flour. The British mathematician Dorothy Wrinch, writing in 1930 under the pseudonym of Jean Ayling, agreed, arguing that the 'professional classes' were retreating from parenting because it was too difficult, particularly for professional women. Only working-class women were willing to have babies, she argued in her book *The Retreat from Parenthood*. And this would create an enfeebled nation.

Her solution was a government-run 'Child Rearing Service' at which parents could leave their children for months at a time. When the children did come home, they would be subjected to scientific parenting. Or to put it in more prosaic language: fewer cuddles. If a middle-class child lived a life of routine, spending most of its time alone, it would take pressure off the parents. This would then lead to an increase in the number of posh children, presumably with names like Henrietta and Algernon. What ho! Hurrah! Problem solved!

\*

The Karitane and Plunket organisations established by Truby King still mention their founder but have abandoned most of his ideas. Other organisations have changed their names – insisting the views of their founders have been left in the past. Family Planning NSW, the oldest family planning service in Australia, was established in 1926 as the Racial Hygiene Association of New South Wales. It changed its title in 1960. More recently, in 2020, Marie Stopes International also decided to abandon its name, distancing itself from the eugenics-based obsessions of its founder. It's now known as MSI Reproductive Choices.

Oh, and a final point before we move on. There is no known correlation between the level of education and the size of a woman's breasts. Nor any link between breast size and the ability to have a child, breastfeed or enjoy sex. Which, I guess, means the end of my research program into the well-stacked and yet well-informed.

Instead, perhaps we should focus on the husband – and learn how to keep him happy. Which brings us to Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4

# Keeping Hubby Happy

If well-educated women were a problem, so were unhappy men. Imagine you are a new mother, coping with the physical impact of birth, as well as sleeplessness, anxiety and the rest of it. You may think you have enough on your plate – but there's more. According to expert advice, repeated for more than a century, you were also required to soothe the emotions of the father. As Clair Isbister, paediatrician and author, put it in one of her ABC radio talks in the 1950s: 'There are so many broken marriages these days that so easily could have been saved if the wife had realised that her husband may be feeling neglected.'

The father was said to be jealous of the attention granted to the baby. Here, for instance, is *The Land* newspaper in December 1924, describing what it believed was the most common type of mother:

Her husband falls into the background the moment she has a child . . . The house is no longer a thing to take delight in for its own sake, it is merely a dwelling place for the baby. Her husband becomes 'Dada,' and is useful inasmuch as he provides food and shelter for the baby.

The mother, according to the newspaper, becomes obsessed with the baby, which destroys any interest she might once have felt in 'other matters'. The result? 'Her husband may remain technically faithful, but he never contrives to love her in the old way.'

Four decades on, in July 1965, there was a similar message from the *Australian Women's Weekly*. In a piece titled 'How to be a Successful Mother', it depicted the justified misery of a husband sidelined by the relationship between mother and newborn child:

A husband slams doors, snarls at the kids, demands exclusive use of the TV to watch the Saturday football game. Why not? He has been gone all week, taking other people's orders. No one has paid him much attention as either a free creature wanting pleasure or an executive providing for and in charge of his house which is just now being sullenly swabbed out by some funny-looking harpy in one of his old T-shirts and shabby jeans. I know who that scrubwoman is, and how she resents him. But where is his wife, who might have sat down with him with a fresh face, and a cool drink of something, to watch the game with him? We haven't seen her for some time.

The article is full of advice about how this 'funny-looking harpy' might keep the new father on side. 'Leave his clothes in excellent order. Leave the snacks he likes in the fridge and whatever he likes to drink.' And, when feeding breakfast to the kids, you'll need to 'make whatever morning food your husband expects'. The magazine counsels against talking too much about yourself: '[Avoid] bending his ear with your ghastly day when his own may have left him drained and disheartened.' It suggests sex should recommence promptly, six weeks after the birth.

The key thing, according to the *Weekly*, is to prevent yourself going stale: 'You might go to a few exhibitions – anything outside your special knowledge, such as Old Glass, Speedboats, Eskimo Art.' It's a list that seems oddly specific. Is a discussion of Old Glass really going to pique his interest? What are you meant to do with the baby while you are viewing the Speedboats? And will he murmur 'fascinating, darling' when you describe what those arty-farty Inuit were up to? The article doesn't say.

It does say you should work on your appearance. You need to 'take that going-to-the-guillotine look off your face' and remind yourself what a 'funny looking harpy you've become'. Better still, 'get a full-length mirror and instal it in a good light'.

I love the detailed instruction about the mirror. It must be installed in an area with 'good light'. Presumably the magazine was worried women might be tempted to buy a mirror, and then pop it in an ill-lit hallway, just to flatter themselves that they were only 'harpy adjacent'.

At this point, in the mid-1960s, the *Australian Women's Weekly* was, per capita, the most widely read magazine in the world. It had about three million readers a week – more than half the country's female population,

with a big chunk of the men peering over their shoulders. History doesn't record whether there was an uptick in the sales of full-length mirrors, but perhaps readers dutifully moved an existing mirror, resting in a dark corridor, into a room with better light.

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Make sure you have a mirror handy, just to check the extent of your decline.  
Photo by Charles Hawkins, c. 1863–78.

*Charles Hawkins, courtesy of State Library of Victoria*

Assisted by the mirror, the new mother could take action to improve her appearance. This was a view that was widely expressed – sometimes with a gentle tone; at other times, in a harsher manner. Melbourne marriage

counsellor Frank Richards, in his 1969 book *How to be Married . . . and Happy*, recommended an urgent exercise program after giving birth:

It certainly adds nothing to your glamour to have a stomach sticking out in front and breasts sagging nearly to the waistline. With some women it is hard to tell if they have had their baby or are still pregnant!

The exclamation mark, with which his work is littered, is presumably there to indicate the laughable nature of such a person.

Richards is not short of advice when it comes to a wife lifting her game. He advises deodorant and ‘plenty of talc’. He also advocates the regular shaving of hair from legs and armpits (but never in front of the husband), and the re-application of lipstick and eyebrow pencil just before the mother retires to bed.

This can’t hurt your skin, and is just enough to give your face a little colour. It also helps the appearance first thing in the morning. No woman looks her best when she wakes up, and that touch of lipstick improves the effect.

Of course, it is her ‘duty as a wife’ to feed her husband well, which means three meals a day: breakfast (‘you must get up and run around him a little’), a cut lunch to take to work (with an occasional cake that he can ‘proudly’ share with his workmates), and dinner, which should be served briskly. When he walks in the door at the end of the day, ‘the children should have clean faces and hair brushed. You should have your lipstick on and, what is equally important, you should have the dinner on.’



‘Clean faces and hair brushed’: children at Carlton State School in Melbourne, in 1947, hopefully reading up on how to behave when dad comes home.

*Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria*

Most of all, the new mother should realise she always faces the possibility of competition. Richards notes that most ‘housewives’ have time for a cigarette or a coffee or a chat over the back fence, and so:

Can she honestly say, then, that she ‘hasn’t got time’ to set her hair up in a few rollers through the day, and put on her make-up just before her husband is due home from work? Remember he sees plenty of attractive females during the day, either at or travelling to and from work, and if his wife doesn’t bother with her appearance, sooner or later he could very well start comparing her with them, much to her disadvantage.

Richards went on to write one other book, a guide to contraception using ‘natural methods’. If your aim was avoiding pregnancy, I’d have thought just reading his first book would be enough.

So, who was this Melbourne man with such a forensic interest in how a woman might anoint her body – the lipstick, the talc, the shaved armpits,

the deodorant, and the late-night eyebrow pencil? Frank Richards was a Catholic priest. Of course he was.

\*

Others agreed that the poor father needed attentive handling. In October 1979, the *Weekly* ran excerpts from a new book, *The American Father: A New Approach to Understanding Himself, His Woman, His Child* by Dr William Reynolds. The problem, argued Reynolds, echoing *The Land* newspaper of 1924, was the jealousy that springs up in a father once his first child is born:

Jealousy in husbands over children is rampant. The basic premise of marriage – that mother and father are lovers – is usually left out of parenting advice books. [After the first child is born] the man moves out of his position as lover and into a new position as father.

The result, according to Reynolds, is that the man sees ‘himself demoted’ and will therefore start seeing another woman.

This idea that a husband’s infidelity could be blamed on a somewhat-distracted mother was commonly expressed, followed by various suggestions as to how the husband’s loyalty might be encouraged.

Some books such as the Catholic guide *The Choice of a Husband*, distributed in Australia by the Daughters of St Paul, recommended a bit of effort in the kitchen. ‘The quality of the cooking,’ author Pierre Dufoyer advised in 1964, ‘is one of the elements which keeps [the husband] faithful to their home.’

The same book suggested an intriguing balancing act when it came to being well informed. Women, it says, should develop some knowledge of politics and literature during the time when they are trying to find a partner – but ‘of course, they should not try, later on, to argue with their boyfriend (or husband) on these subjects, nor show off their knowledge in company; these are real dangers for a cultured woman who lacks discretion’.

Hopefully, one supposes, such a woman will be too busy in the kitchen tantalising her husband’s tastebuds to share her grasp of astrophysics and the early poetry of T.S. Eliot. Especially in front of visitors.

The American sex therapist Dr LeMon Clark, writing in 1949, offered ‘two rules for wifely behaviour’: ‘First feed him well . . . then wait for

thirty minutes before unloading on him your troubles of the day.’ The second rule was to ‘bring your children up to think well of him’. Oh, and the wife also must have sex with the husband, or as he creepily puts it: ‘He has the right to expect acquiescence on her part.’ I think this adds up to more than two rules, but maybe maths was not Dr Clark’s strong suit.

This idea of mandatory sex was widely stated, particularly in American marriage manuals. Women who have a ‘disinclination to engage in intercourse as frequently as their husbands wish’ are being foolish, according to the bestseller *The Basis of Happy Marriage* by Louis Berg and Robert Street, published in 1955 and reprinted until the late 1960s. ‘She risks losing him to another woman, and it will not be entirely his fault.’

Or again, from the same book with its oddly formal language: the wife has ‘very definite duties apart from her obligation to render normal sexual service to her husband’, the authors say, ‘otherwise she may find her husband seeking the society of a more suitable mistress’. These ‘very definite duties’ involve helping her husband find ‘sexual relief’ during ‘certain regular periods in which intercourse is neither practicable or convenient’. Sure, he could practise abstinence while his wife is menstruating, ‘but there is no reason to force it upon him when the simple expedient of the female hand or oral connection can remove the necessity’.

The cruder the attitudes, it appears, the more pompous the language. The authors go on to suggest the wife should also agree to sex with the lights on, so that the man is given ‘the opportunity of viewing the physical charms of his wife’, adding, in a nod to female sensibility, that the wife’s body ‘should be casually observed and not gloated over’.

Personally, I prefer gloating.

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So, let’s say you’re a woman and you’ve accepted all this expert advice. You’ve cooked a nice dinner, installed a well-lit mirror so you can observe your own declining appearance, remembered to keep quiet about your insights into science and literature, popped on some lippy before bed and offered a monthly bit of ‘hand relief’. You’ve also fitted a new lightbulb in the bedroom to enable some gloat-free perving.

Surely, you’ve done enough. Alas, not yet. According to the expert advice, there’s something even weirder required of you. You must laugh at

his jokes.

Here's the *Australian Women's Weekly* in June 1970: 'It's a good idea, too, if he tells you a joke, to laugh about it later on, to let him see that you enjoyed it and remembered it. Be your husband's best audience.'

Or a half-century earlier, the *Hobart Mercury* in January 1922: 'If you want to keep your husband happy and contented and home-keeping the main rule is to laugh at his funny stories. He will sit purring in the armchair and never think of going to the club.'

Or, even earlier, here's the Sydney *Evening News* in October 1901, in a piece called 'The Management of Men', noting that many men love singing comic songs, despite a complete lack of talent in the area. In such cases the woman should 'bear the comic burden with the best grace she can'.

Maybe prancing around nude in an over-lit bedroom doesn't seem so bad after all. Give it five or ten minutes, then you can get back to the crying child, the cracked nipples and the sleepless nights.

\*

This reductive view of the role of the father – useless and needy – was commonplace, at least until the 1960s and 1970s. It still survives today. There are some good fathers depicted in current popular culture – the devoted and inventive Bandit Heeler in the children's cartoon *Bluey* is an obvious example. But there are still plenty of deadbeats, the sort of dads who, in an advertisement, might be seen putting the laundry detergent into the fridge, or some other hilarious piece of male foolishness. It's a long tradition. Witness the 'Mere Male' column that ran in *New Idea* for three decades, or the *Weekly's* 'Father' cartoon in the early 1960s featuring, each week, the dad doing something stupid. In one example, the father is washing the household crockery under the shower. In another, he's clearing up after dinner by hoisting up the tablecloth into a bundle containing all the dirty plates, cutlery and glasses. The caption for the latter reads: 'There! What's so hard about clearing a table?'

Then, and often today, dads are depicted as lazy, ignorant and self-involved, always ready to disappear to the pub or the golf course unless placated by means of sex, food or, at very least, a woman willing to laugh at their jokes.



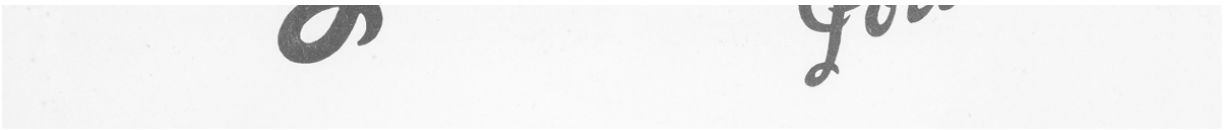
"Penfold's is the only bottle I fancy"

*Buy a bottle to-day*

**Penfolds**

ROYAL RESERVE

*Dart*



The father as selfish idiot: an advertisement for Penfolds from 1938.

*Australasian Pictorial Album, 1938, courtesy of the State Library of NSW*

In the real world, things were more complicated than that negative image suggests, even in the period before the 1960s. The ‘good father’ did exist, at least in terms of the definitions of the day. It was the era of the ‘male breadwinner model’. According to the 1956 Australian census, only 12.6 per cent of married women were in paid employment. In most couples, gender roles were firmly delineated – there was ‘her indoors’ and him ‘out at work’. It’s true some women found this stultifying, and some men went on to express grief at their lack of involvement in parenting. And yet, when you read accounts from the time, some level of contentment was often expressed by both women and men.

Call it ‘false consciousness’ if you like, but, in oral history projects, we often meet stay-at-home mothers from the 1950s who describe themselves as fortunate. They saw their husband’s role as being a dependable breadwinner, and – if they were lucky – so did he. Grace Ferguson, interviewed in 1998 as part of an oral history project about Australian employment, talked about life in the 1950s in a Melbourne working-class suburb: ‘I was chief cook and bottle washer . . . I enjoyed it because I love the kids and that was my role and that’s what I had to do. I wasn’t bitter about it.’ Like many others who spoke to the interviewers, she offered a definition of a good husband – one who could be trusted to bring the pay packet home in one piece. Her husband, Les, interviewed for the same project, proudly offered the same definition: ‘I never had my wife down the factory waiting for payday like a couple of other people did.’

The Australian fatherhood project, conducted by five Australian historians, studied a mass of oral history testimony from 1919 to 2019. There are passages of great bleakness with women talking about their experience of domestic violence, or men describing the desperate scramble to put food on the table. Often, though, there’s something heroic about these couples, as they together raise a family in tough economic times. In their 2025 book about the project, *Fathering: An Australian History*, the authors begin with the story of Patrick Doran, a Melbourne builder who married in 1950 and started a family of three. Interviewed later in life, Patrick talked

about the limited role of the father during this era: ‘I put food on the table and paid the rent, I was the breadwinner, so I had to keep going at work.’ At another point he says: ‘I can’t see a big deal in a role for the father, but just be there.’

Patrick may have had a limited role in parenting, but he was hardly off playing golf, visiting the pub or requiring an audience for his jokes. His son Luke, also interviewed, recalled years of struggle: ‘I can remember my father coming home after work on hot days and he would just lie for an hour, just inside the front door, and my mother would rub his shoulders . . . he’d be absolutely exhausted when he came home and he worked for a pittance. Just struggle, struggle to finish the house, to pay the mortgage, to feed and put us through school.’

Later – from the late 1970s – things began to change. The ‘male breadwinner model’ gave way to families in which, typically, both partners had some form of paid employment. As we will see later in this book, the change was embraced by many men and women, but often with a proviso. Women complained that paid work was just another burden, with no change to their workload at home. There was also indifference, they noted, from governments and employers, both of whom did little to provide any form of assistance, despite being beneficiaries of the dual-income era. And men, too, had a complaint: the culture now expected them to be engaged fathers, spending ‘quality time’ with their children, while the economic realities pushed them in an opposite direction. Given the lack of equal pay, it often made more sense for the father to keep his fulltime job, while the mother worked part-time. Employers were not interested in offering flexible hours or parental leave, particularly if the employee was male. And working hours were getting longer, not shorter.

In other words, both men and women were dealing with new expectations of how life would work, but without being offered the tools necessary to achieve what was now expected of them. And, still, the guidebook experts were telling them it all should be easy. Instead, as the decades went on, even more would be expected of both mothers and fathers.

All the same, if you want to criticise the fathers of the 1950s, do spare a thought for hard-working Patrick Dolan and his hard-working wife. Him – lying on the floor, too exhausted to go more than a few steps past the front door. And her – lovingly rubbing those aching shoulders.

## CHAPTER 5

# The Only Child – and Other Monstrosities

Back in 2015, I wrote a book, *Flesh Wounds*, about the strange family in which I grew up, with a distant, narcissistic mother and a heavy-drinking father. To repeat a line from the book, I never felt like the favourite in my family, which is hard when you're an only child.

Actually, being an only child is always tough – even if you have loving parents. In fact, according to a whole century of child-rearing manuals, loving parents are the *worst* thing, especially for the 'lonely only'. Even in the 19th century, when the single child was a rarity, the experts were worried. The American psychologist G. Stanley Hall called them permanent misfits, and believed that being an only child was 'a disease in itself'. A.A. Brill, the American who first translated the work of Sigmund Freud into English, was keen to wish away people like me: 'It would naturally be best for the individual and society if there were no only children.' The French writer and demographer Arsène Dumont agreed: 'The life of an only child is an uninterrupted lesson in egoism lasting 20 years.'

I came across Dumont's assessment in the findings of the 1904 Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales. Small families, the commission concluded, were not only a brake on population growth, they also had a terrible impact on the children themselves. As the royal commissioners put it:

The benefit of large families . . . cannot be overestimated. It is recognised that members of large families educate one another; that 'only' children and members of small families are less well-

equipped for the struggle of life . . . their social efficiency is impaired by selfishness.

The head of the Congregational Church, Reverend Nicholas Hennessy, told the royal commission that children found in large families are 'more capable, more alert, and more prompt, more pugnacious and more fitted for the battle of life'. His Church of England counterpart, Rev William Saumarez Smith, concurred – telling the commission that only children were in danger of 'becoming very spoilt and self-willed'. He noted that he had eight children himself and could not find fault with a single one of them.

In 1911, Sydney's *Sunday Times* quoted an Austrian study by Dr Josef Karl Friedjung. Of the 100 only children he reviewed, just 13 were normal – 'the remaining 87 were defective in one way or another'. Dr Friedjung found that the great majority suffered from nervousness, including 'fears of the dark, of dogs and of sheep and cows'.

As an only child, I say he's wrong. I quite like dogs.

In 1927, the views of British doctor Alice Hutchison were reported under the headline 'The Only Child Evil'. It was 'only childism', she argued, 'and not alcohol, that was the greatest curse of this country.' It was 'producing that terrible monstrosity – the only child'.

Why a monstrosity? The problem was that the only child never received caustic comments from their siblings, or as Hutchison called it 'the corrective salt of juvenile criticism'. Local writers agreed. In one piece from 1934, published widely, the author noted that 'many a boy or girl who is a misfit at school, and even later in life, is an only child'. Again, the problem was the lack of siblings to give them a good bagging:

Most serious of all the disadvantages is the lack of that healthy competition which is always present in a large family. There are no severer critics than one's own brothers and sisters. There are no keener rivals than members of one's own family. Brains are quickened and wits sharpened. Children with brothers and sisters are never allowed to get an exaggerated opinion of their own importance.

Ah, the poor only child, lacking a big brother to give them a wedgie, put ice blocks in their bed and fart on their head. As the *Bundarra Advocate* put it in April 1906, ‘Give me a boy who has had his head punched by his bigger brother.’

Irma Schnierer, the Melbourne child psychologist, agreed. The only child, she wrote some decades later, ‘uses his unique position to become a veritable little tyrant’. In Schnierer’s view, the only child is so often ‘pampered and spoilt’ that she recommends that parents of such children ‘may even have to conceal their love’ for the child. ‘Suppression of love,’ she writes, ‘may be very difficult sometimes, but the healthy development of the child is at stake.’

I wonder how Schnierer dealt with her own daughter, Herta, an only child. Did she and her husband feel it necessary to ‘conceal their love’? I feel sad at the thought.

According to Zoe Benjamin, writing in 1957 in *Baby* magazine, the only child was also likely to prove a source of moral contagion. Secretive play in which kindergarten children undress and show each other their private parts was often, she said, ‘suggested by an only child’.

An instigator of preschool strip shows? Your honour, I deny it all.

Even as late as October 1960, the *Australian Women’s Weekly* had its concerns. According to its columnist, parents lavish the only child with gifts and tend to ‘exaggerate his talents’. Even worse, the child understands that the parents must be miserable – having failed to produce any additional children. He feels that his ‘parents are unhappy because they have no other children and that he must somehow make up to them for this tragedy in their lives’.

In 1960, to give a little context, the Australian ‘fertility rate’ – the average number of births per woman – was 3.55. It is now about 1.5, and there are plenty of one-child families: about 15 per cent of families in the last available count. So, we only children may still be an offence against nature, but at least we’re becoming more numerous. Hurrah for us.

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Irma Schnierer, as quoted above, did not restrict her concerns to the only child. Even worse was the first born who was then given a sibling. Thrown from their throne by the new arrival, there was no limit to how badly they

would react. The child will try to ‘distract attention from the new baby to himself, either by especially good or especially bad behaviour’, wrote Schnierer. He often ‘turns his deep hatred against his innocent little brother or sister. Some cases are known in which elder children have even tried to kill the younger ones in order to get rid of them.’

You see! We members of the group ‘Only Child’ may be monstrosities, constantly encouraging others to take off their clothes, but at least we aren’t killers.

Schnierer thought every child had problems, linked to their family position, with one exception: the middle child. ‘The child between is really the happiest and is more easily handled,’ she wrote in her 1941 book *Making Childhood Happier*, theorising that ‘if the middle one is suppressed from above, he himself suppresses in turn. There is a balance of forces.’

Yeah, sure. Tell that to Jan from *The Brady Bunch*.

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We’ll come back to the middle child in a moment, but Schnierer wasn’t the only one to be alarmed about almost every rung on the birth-order ladder. The first-born child, in particular, was often targeted – whether that child ended up an ‘only’ or the first born of many. Sir Francis Galton, cousin to Charles Darwin and the man who coined the word ‘eugenics’, saw the first born as an evolutionary hurdle, inferior to their younger siblings. ‘Research,’ he wrote in a 1910 letter to *The Times* of London, has ‘shown that the eldest born are, as a rule, inferior to the younger born in a small, but significant way.’



The oldest child doesn't always have murderous intent. This one seems quite happy about her younger sibling. Photo by Ruth Hollick, Melbourne, c. 1910–30.

*Ruth Hollick, Melbourne, c. 1910–30, courtesy of State Library of Victoria*

He set his sights on the laws of primogeniture – that trusty plot-generator in the novels of Jane Austen. Galton proposed a change in the law that would mean wealth and status would not always go to the first born male relative. This, in turn, would mean a beneficial change to the House of Lords, which could choose a (yes, still male) candidate from each family. Galton, it should be said, had a dog in the fight. He was the youngest of nine children.

*The Times*, for its part, conducted a thought experiment to see if Galton was right. It came up with a list of famous men, then investigated their birth order. Of those on the *Times* list, only Goethe was a first born, while others came further down the family ladder – among them, Shakespeare (a third child), George Washington (a fifth), and Benjamin Franklin (his mother's tenth, and his father's seventeenth).

Galton may have had a point, but the exact mechanism which led to the inferiority of the first born was much debated. The most common view was that more mature parents would pass on their more mature characteristics. This theory seems more Lamarckian than Darwinian to me, but it didn't stop the social Darwinists from cheering it on. Perhaps they ignored the Theory of Evolution in favour of 'The Pancake Rule'. Let me get the scientific wording right . . . Oh yes: 'The first pancake is never as good as those that come later.'

Galton's assertions added to the panic in Australia. The size of families was shrinking! That meant fewer troops for the Empire! And fewer high-quality Australians, as the 'first born' increased as a proportion of the population. It's an interesting theory, which I'd like to present to a few first-born Australians such as Ash Barty, Cathy Freeman, Helen Garner, Tim Flannery, Sally Morgan, Miles Franklin, Banjo Paterson, Saint Mary MacKillop . . . well, you get the idea.

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So, what about the youngest child? Surely, they were OK? Not so fast. Just like the only child, they nearly always became spoilt tyrants. Here, for example, is Melbourne's *Sun News-Pictorial* from June 1940: 'The youngest child is kept ever young. He is referred to as the "Baby" regardless of his age. He is never given the chance to grow up properly.'

What if the youngest was born after a gap? Well, that made it worse. Brisbane's *Courier-Mail*, in April 1940, warned of the perils of the late-onset child:

Problems frequently arise when a child is born long after the rest of the family . . . Only too easily does the little one become pampered, overprotected, and 'shown off,' and develops into the proverbial spoilt child. The father is over-anxious for his progress, and the mother likes to keep him as her 'baby' too long.

Perhaps, dear reader, you know such a child, usually nicknamed 'Definitely-the-last'. You may be currently nodding your fierce agreement with *The Courier-Mail*. Or perhaps you are yourself such a child. In that case, please accept my apologies for all this criticism. Especially since it's presumably the first criticism you've ever received.

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So, is there anyone who is safe? Irma Schnierer, you might remember, thought the middle kids were OK, but not everyone agreed.

Zoe Benjamin, always enthusiastic about social Darwinist theories, saw the whole thing as a battle for survival. Here she is in her 1948 book *The Emotional Problems of Childhood*: 'It is very difficult for the youngest child when still another baby is born, because he now finds his role usurped by the newcomer, while, perhaps, having still to contend with the hostility of the elder ones.'

The *Australian Women's Weekly*, in July 1974, agreed. The writer described a family she claimed to know: the first born was a confident boy called Peter, while the last born was a girl, Penelope, who disliked school and found games boring. Penelope, however, was 'such a truly beautiful child . . . that her appearance successfully eclipses the less satisfactory facets of her character'.

How lucky is that? Peter is brilliant and Penelope a total bore – but at least she's good-looking! The middle child, however, misses out on both his older brother's talent and his younger sister's looks. The *Weekly* tells the bleak tale:

Robin, of course, is the middle child. Ten years of age, he is 'middling' at everything. He is neither particularly clever nor especially good-looking. At school, he is neither popular nor noticeably unpopular. In so far as his presence is of any account whatsoever, it is 'put up with' by friends and foes alike.

The answer, said the *Weekly* in December 1975, was to realise 'the middle child or second child syndrome is a definite clinical term and is commonly seen in medical practice . . . it requires expert handling both from parents and sometimes from competent medical advisers'.

If only Mike and Carol Brady had called in the doctors, maybe poor Jan Brady could have been spared her eternal refrain of 'Marcia, Marcia, Marcia.'



Marcia, Marcia, Marcia: Jan Brady laments her middle-child status in the 'bunch'. © ABC/Getty Images.

*ABC Photo Archives/Disney General Entertainment Content via Getty Images*

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Did these attitudes change over time? Well, a little. Mostly they were replaced by theories influenced by Frank Sulloway, an American academic who published the book *Born to Rebel* in 1996. Sulloway's theory was that first-born children were generally conscientious and conservative, following the lead of their parents. Those born later, finding the role of parental pet already occupied, would busy themselves finding a new niche. They'd be more prone to be radicals, challenging the status quo.

His theory made complete sense to anyone who had a total suck as an older sibling and an insane hippy as the last-to-arrive. What a shame that a subsequent large-data study, published in 2015 by the US National Academy of Science, showed that while first borns did score slightly higher on IQ tests, generally birth order had zero effect on almost everything else – emotional stability, agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness or imagination.

So much for a century or two of fevered, alarmist speculation.

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Many people agree the youngest child in a family is pampered and spoilt. Where we differ with the experts is in the explanation of why this is so. The early child psychologists offer complex psychoanalytic theories about the fear of growing older, which in turn produces a desire to hang on to one's identity as a 'mother' or 'father', and a reluctance to allow the last-born child to grow up.

I say baloney and propose my own theory which, simply expressed, is: 'Standards! They do fall!'

One acquaintance of mine, a chap in his forties, has a couple of sisters, one of whom is the first born. This is how he describes the situation when they were growing up: 'If she [the eldest] wanted to go out at night, she'd be wearing a neck-to-knee dress, and she would still have to put on an overcoat before Dad would be happy to let her leave the house. The youngest one would go out at night dressed in, well, a bikini.'

A mutual friend nods his agreement. His older sister was treated like a character in a Jane Austen novel, always under supervision. A peck on the cheek? Maybe, but only if the chaperone was in the room. A night out? OK, but be home at 10. By the time of the last-born daughter, it's: 'Invite the boy home for the night! At least we'll know where you are. Now, do you want Dad to pick up some condoms on his way back from work?'

Standards get lower with each child, but it's only because the parents have lost the will to live. They've given up. The last child represents the final charge of the cavalry. The castle's gates have already been smashed open. They are swinging on their hinges. The old order has already been overthrown.

It's a big contrast to the first born. With the first born, everything must be perfect. They are fed a diet of high-quality vegetables and organically reared meat. The staff, by which I mean the mother and father, are in the kitchen night and day, pausing in their culinary efforts only to read linguistically challenging books and to perform ethnically diverse folk dances for the child's amusement. Photographs are constantly taken, recording such significant events as 'First Burp', 'First Wriggle' and 'What We Took to be a First Smile but in Retrospect was Just Colic'.

As the child grows older, the parents establish a loving and educationally rich system in which the child is permitted to watch one hour of television each week, providing it's a wildlife documentary by David Attenborough. Ballet shoes are purchased. A violin – a violin! – is not considered too great an expense. The first soccer game is witnessed not by one parent, but by two parents, four grandparents and an uncle visiting from New Zealand. The child, inevitably, is considered 'gifted'.

It's at this point that the second child is born. Standards immediately plummet. The hand-operated mincer, in which baby food had been freshly prepared by the staff, is lying untroubled in the bottom drawer. Instead, supermarket slop is purchased in bulk. The bedtime reading session, which, with the first child, involved 50 minutes of funny voices and entertaining asides, now lasts the three minutes between when Daddy first lies on the bed and when Daddy begins snoring. The number of photographs shifts from five a day to one every six weeks. The stylish Oshkosh jumpsuits in which the first child was dressed have been replaced with \$5 knockoffs from Target.

Television viewing is still restricted to 'Attenborough documentaries', but by now the definition of 'Attenborough documentaries' has widened to include *The Lion King*, *Moana* and the season finale of *The Block*. The soccer entourage has dwindled to one rather hungover father, whose interest seems to be largely focused on the sausage sizzle. And the request for a kazoo is declined on the basis of expense, although Mum still has her old guitar – 'Why don't you have a go on that?'

All this, of course, is just limbering up for the arrival of the third child, at which point standards collapse into the nearest gutter. The definition of 'toddler food' has now grown to include a serve of nachos and some gnawing on the edge of last night's pizza. This is consumed while watching

an ‘Attenborough documentary’ – one that appears to involve Bruce Willis shooting people in an American airport.



It's the youngest you have to watch. Four siblings from the Ham family, photographed by Ruth Hollick, c. late 1920s, Melbourne.

*Ruth Hollick, Melbourne, c. 1920-48, courtesy of State Library of Victoria*

The third child will be six years old before being the subject of a single photograph, and even then, it's just their right leg intruding into what's really a photo of the dog. The child, by this time, is dressed in clothes handed down from a second cousin in Cessnock. They have been soaked for a week in Napisan. Not to criticise Napisan, but it has failed to remove the four generations of stains. The child looks like they're wearing Desert Storm camouflage.

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And so we are left with the question: which is the worst ticket to draw in the birth-order lottery? Ignoring, of course, the perfectly credible study, cited above, which says it's all nonsense.

Maybe it's time for some personal candour. The only child probably is the worst thing to be. I was certainly not spoilt – my parents were devotees

of the no-cuddle rules of the time. But I would have loved to have some siblings. Not to have my head punched by a bigger brother, but to have others with whom to share some fun.

Siblings would have been hilarious and inspiring when growing up, and, later, would have been there to share a few burdens. When your parents are reaching the end of their lives, with care homes to arrange and funerals to endure, imagine being the only one to shoulder it all. On the upside, I have cousins, five of them, all in England. The one with whom I'm the closest has taken to calling me 'brother'. She starts her emails to me that way – 'Hello Brother' – which makes me well up with emotion, proper sobbing if you want to know, in a way that rather proves my point. It's better to have siblings.

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In the end, the Australian press changed its mind about the monstrosity that was the only child. It took a while to happen – a century or so – but in the end the shift was achieved. In June 1978, the *Australian Women's Weekly* presented the headline: 'The Myth of the Miserable Only Child'. Here's a bit of the text:

In many instances, an only [child] is specially cooperative, courteous and willing to share . . . an only child never suffers the shock of losing his or her position to a new baby . . . often they are leaders rather than followers . . . virtually every study of IQ scores, school grades and professional achievements shows that only children rank well above those from bigger families . . .

Oh, stop it now. I'm blushing. But I'd still like a sister. I'd like her, if possible, to be exactly like my cousin Victoria.

## CHAPTER 6

# Weird Science

When it comes to promoting weird theories, there's no better person than a parenting expert. Elsewhere in this book, there's mention of 'racial hygiene', the 'cap on cuddles' and the tight-trouser theory of masturbation. But wait – there's more. Some of the most common theories were truly wacky. Here are just a few of them.

### Condoms are bad for women

Did the authors of child-rearing manuals have an economic self-interest in the arrival of more babies? Perhaps. Certainly, they sometimes sang the praises of sex without condoms. During intercourse, they theorised, women received a health-giving supplement from the man – a sort of vitamin pill supplied via a somewhat peculiar delivery system. Living without regular exposure to these 'substances' was supposedly injurious to a woman's health.

Marie Stopes, birth control advocate and eugenicist, was particularly forceful on the subject. She recommended the use of cervical caps and quinine pessaries as contraceptives. She was less keen on both condoms and lesbianism, arguing that women needed what she called 'seminal secretions' to remain healthy. 'The bedrock objection [to lesbianism],' she wrote in her 1928 book *Enduring Passion*, 'is surely that women can only *play* with each other and *cannot* in the nature of things have natural union or supply each other with the seminal and prostatic secretions which they ought to have, and crave for unconsciously.' (Her italics.)

She acknowledged that gay women might not be the only ones missing out, listing three other categories of woman who might be in need: the

loving wife who was, for a time, separated from her husband by travel or illness; the wife burdened by a husband whose production was ‘insufficient to meet the needs of the personal equation’; and the unmarried woman who, in recognition of the present social code, couldn’t achieve ‘sex union’.

For all three – as well as, presumably, for gay women – she recommends a special dietary supplement of her own invention, making up for the regrettable lack of semen: ‘A woman’s need and hunger for nourishment in sex union is a true physiological hunger to be satisfied only by the supplying of the actual molecular substances lacked by her system.’ An appendix to the second edition of the book even gave a suggested recipe for such a pill. It comprises one grain of ‘prostatic extract’ and two grains of ‘orchitic extract’, with the recipe headlined as being ‘For Sex-Deprived Women’. She recommended one to three tablets daily.

These ‘seminal secretions’ were such good stuff that men should be cautious about giving too much of it away, especially if their work involves creativity. In her 1918 bestseller, *Married Love*, Stopes recommends intercourse be restricted to two bouts each month, perhaps involving several sessions over the course of a few days. That way ‘the chemical substances which go to [the semen’s] composition can be better utilised by being transformed into other creative work on most days of the month’. Unburdened by the need to produce sperm for much of the time, the man will be thus able to ‘conserve vitality’.

Marie Stopes was not alone in suggesting the magical properties of what I’ve now taken to calling ‘this noble fluid, this health-giving balm, this elixir of life and of creativity’.

Dr Phyllis Cilento, the prominent Queensland obstetrician, made the same claim in her 1964 book *Enjoy Your Family*. The book recommended a family size of four children – ‘a well-rounded family in the opinion of most people’ – and suggested the rhythm method or a diaphragm as a means of achieving this outcome. She, too, was opposed to condoms: ‘Anything that prevents the wife from absorbing through her tissues vital male hormones is depriving her of a valuable stimulus to the balance of her own hormones and to her sense of harmony and wellbeing.’ As for coitus interruptus, or ‘getting off at Redfern’, to use the quaint Sydney expression, it was also not advised: ‘The so-called “natural” method, in which the act is not completed is condemned not only by the scriptures but by psychiatrists as . . . destructive to the confidence and harmony of both partners.’

Could this seemingly wacky idea be true? One 2002 American study, led by Gordon G. Gallup Jr, claimed it was: it concluded that ejaculate compounds, such as prostaglandins, testosterone or oestrogen, had an antidepressant effect on women who regularly had unprotected sex. A later study, in 2014, could not replicate the finding, the author suggesting the original finding should be set aside as fanciful.

The first study, by the way, received immense media attention, the second almost none, which is another way of saying: 'Have you noticed how many newspapers are edited by men?'

## The characteristics of a wet nurse are transmitted to the child

Hiring a wet nurse to breastfeed your child was once a popular option. In wealthy families it was a way of avoiding what some saw as the tedium of breastfeeding. In poorer families, it was more commonly the result of a mother being unable to produce enough of her own milk, or of a mother required to leave home each day for paid work. A young woman, already breastfeeding her own children, would be paid to fill the gap.

Be careful, though, who you choose. In the 1912 guidebook *The Australian Mother's Own Book*, author and certified nurse Edith Aitken said great care was necessary: 'Discover as much as possible about her general health, disposition and (if any) hereditary traits.'

Dr W. Howard James, superintendent of Warburton Sanitarium, east of Melbourne, agreed. In his 1923 offering *Home Nursing and Ailments of Children*, he advised that 'the wet-nurse should be between the age of 20 and 35 years; her child ought to be about the same age as the infant she is to nurse. She should have a good constitution . . . her breasts should be firm to touch, not flabby; the nipples should be well developed, and the skin of the breasts should be well marked with prominent veins.'

You may think Dr James was spending too much time thinking about those young breasts. He later married a woman half his age, which may prove it. The bit about the wet nurse having a child born around the same time is, however, good advice: the composition of breastmilk changes to suit the age of the child. Isn't nature grand?

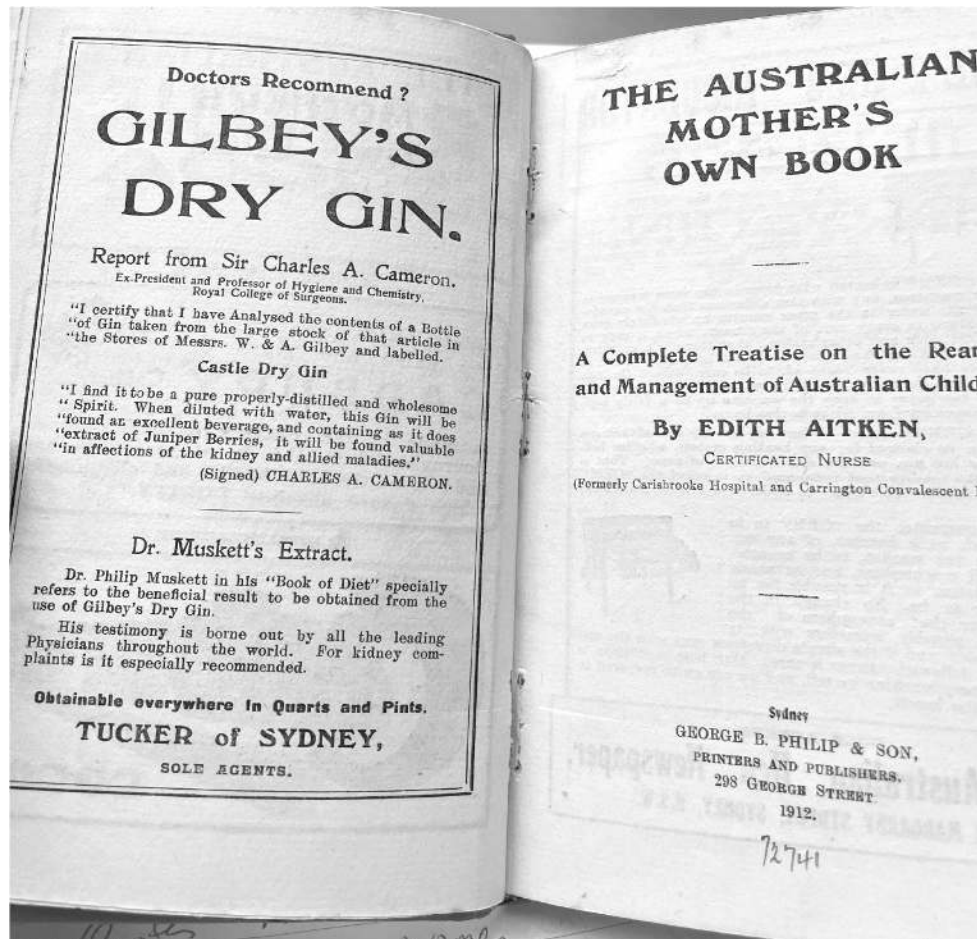
Others talked about carefully assessing the ‘character’ of the wet nurse, the idea being that a wet nurse could transmit her own qualities to the child through her breastmilk. The artist Michelangelo famously credited his wet nurse, the daughter of a stonemason, as the source of his own talents: ‘I took the hammer and chisels with which I carve my figures from my wet-nurse’s milk.’ In the 17th-century novel *Don Quixote*, a character praises breastmilk as the source of her religion: ‘I drank in the Catholic faith with my mother’s milk.’ And in some cultures, such as the Mughal Empire of North India, wet nursing created ‘milk siblings’, linked by the characteristics they had received from the wet nurse’s milk.

And then there was the 19th-century playwright August Strindberg, who was convinced that the Swedish nobility was being weakened by the characteristics they received from their peasant wet nurses. In his story ‘Unnatural Selection’, an upper-class boy nearly dies because the father refuses to hire a wet nurse, despite the urgent pleas of the child’s doctor. The father, though, is adamant: ‘By introducing the blood of the lower classes into aristocratic veins, lower class ideas, prejudices, and objectives might also be implanted.’

Modern science has a term for Strindberg’s theory. It is complete horseshit.

## If a mother doesn’t control her mood, her breastmilk will poison her child

Self-control was required when breastfeeding. According to Edith Aitken, the breastfeeding mother ‘should keep early hours, and strive to preserve a cheerful, even temper’. This may be one reason Aitken’s guide contains a few pages of advertising up the front, including one for Gilbey’s Dry Gin – that well-known helpmate when it comes to an even temper.



Gilbey's gin: it's virtually a medicine.

From Edith Aitken, *The Australian Mother's Own Book*, George B. Philip & Son, 1912

New Zealand guru Truby King proffered the same message in his 1913 guide *Feeding and Care of Baby*: 'Every means should be taken to avoid undue excitements, worries, and sources of annoyance, because the emotions have so much to do with determining the composition and quantity of the milk.'

Dr W. Howard James, whose attentive description of a wet nurse's breasts we encountered above, advised against gossiping, which 'unfortunately is often at the expense of a third party who is not present'. And, whether breastfeeding or not, he suggested mothers avoid reading literature. Here he is again, in a passage from his 500-page tome, *Home Nursing and the Ailments of Children*:

Novel-reading, again, is injurious both to health and mind; it carries one into unnatural and exciting spheres and takes from the solid pleasures of a woman's life. It means living on thoughts that are unreal, thoughts that will not develop the mind, but which take away from the power to perform the healthful duties of everyday life.

The Victorian government's official guide for nurses and doctors, *The Maternal and Child Welfare Manual*, first published in 1942, drove the anti-reading message home with an illustration of a breastfeeding mother, captioned: 'Baby must not be allowed to fall asleep at his work.' And then in capital letters: 'MOTHER SHOULD NOT BE READING NOR SHOULD SHE BE TALKING.' Meanwhile, the parents' guidebook *Our Babies* was more concerned about breastfeeding mothers who allowed themselves to be anxious. From the first edition in 1931, mothers were told they must 'try to cultivate a calm outlook and avoid, as possible, anxiety or worry'.



Don't be at all anxious about breastfeeding; just make sure you don't read or talk (or have negative thoughts). Illustration from the 1942 *Maternal and Child Welfare Manual*, published by the Victorian government.

*Maternal and Child Welfare Manual, Victorian government, 1942*

More alarming still was the advice of Sister Mary Jacob in her 1948 book *You and Your Baby*, who warned that breastfeeding mothers could be

infecting their child with ‘actual poisons’:

Women with happy, cheerful dispositions make good nursing mothers, while those who worry and fret and have not yet learnt to control their emotions will probably have an insufficient supply of milk or the milk will be of poor quality. It has been proved that strong emotional disturbances such as a fit of temper, grief, shock or anxiety can create actual poisons in the body which affect the milk and so upset the baby.

And, as we all know, the best way to convince a new mother not to be anxious is to yell, ‘WHATEVER YOU DO, DON’T WORRY.’

## The stages of childhood repeat the story of human evolution

The fancy name for this theory is ‘Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny’ and it comes in two parts. Firstly, that the individual human, in their development from foetus to adulthood, repeats or ‘recapitulates’ the evolutionary history that led to humans. So, when it starts out, the foetus is a bit like a fish with gills, then it becomes similar to a land-based lizard, then a tiny monkey and so forth. That’s rubbish, of course, but not as harmful as what came next.

The second part of the theory was that, once born, the child passes through the supposed stages of the ‘evolution’ of various forms of human society, from the so-called barbarism of hunter-gatherer societies right up to so-called civilisation of the Europeans. It’s why, said the experts, little boys like camping out in tents: they are experiencing the ‘hunter-gatherer’ stage of human development. A little later they might play ‘Cowboys and Indians’, thus reenacting their ancestors’ early tribal battles. As Australia’s Maybanke Anderson advised in 1919, you should see your child as ‘a kindly savage . . . the little child is greedy and frightened as were his savage prototypes’. Indeed, a boy’s urge to fight with other boys should be accepted: it was ‘an inheritance from [his] forefathers’.

The Rev J.T. Lawton was even more explicit in a 1932 talk for the Victorian Council for Mental Hygiene, published under the title *The Growing Child*: ‘It is now being generally recognised that on his physical side the child during the embryonic stage recapitulates the evolutionary

history of human development. The suggestion is made that the human being also recapitulates the mental history of the race [and] if wisely assisted, eliminates the primitive.'

It was all part of a social Darwinist worldview that saw some races as 'primitive' and thus destined to become extinct due to nature's 'battle for survival'. In Australia, of course, that meant Indigenous Australians, who were said to be dying out due to the inexorable laws of evolution. There was nary a mention of the mechanism through which these 'inexorable laws' operated: the rifles levelled by mounted native police and squatters, the dispossession of food sources, the poisoned flour, the introduced diseases and so on.

For parenting experts, these theories offered a teaching aid. The child – assumed to be white and male – was to be told how he was marching through the various stages of evolution towards 'civilisation'. Here's the Sydney author Muriel Danvers Power in her 1913 book *Mother and Child*:

One can so easily interest a child in the early days of the Human race and by pointing out that at first he was just a hunter, who matched his strength against the beasts and slew them for food, and how later, he found that by the power of his brain, he could control animals, and keep them near him instead of having to go out and fight every time he wanted a meal.

The author went on to suggest parents give the child a pet as he grew a little older, as it would help him make the transition, as his ancestors had done, between hunting animals for food and learning to 'tame animals for domestic use'.

The idea was still being promoted by Zoe Benjamin in her 1950 book *The School-Child and His Parents*: 'Children at birth are more or less little animals . . . children pass out of their predominately animal stage in infancy, but do not become even moderately civilised until they have passed through the youthful barbarism of their early school days.'

It's important to note that Benjamin is not using 'barbarism' casually; she sees it as a particular stage in the evolution of human society. She writes, for example, about humanity being involved in a 'slow and arduous progress from animalism to barbarism, and from barbarism to civilisation'. And she says this knowledge about evolution helps us understand a child's

slow progress: ‘We are trying to develop in children, in a very few years, standards of thought and behaviour that have been achieved by only a small proportion of our so-called “civilized” communities and that has taken them thousands of years.’

Even when dealing with children’s fear of the dark, as she does in her 1948 book *The Emotional Problems of Childhood*, Benjamin invokes recapitulation theory: the child is experiencing ‘a sort of latent racial fear, product of the thousands of years when darkness held many terrors and unknown dangers for man’. It’s part of the reason Benjamin, in the same book, is so strict when it comes to grandparents indulging a child: ‘He is being encouraged to give way to his natural primitive impulses.’



Children were believed to progress through all the stages of human history. This girl, pictured in a NSW kindergarten, presumably just invented the wheel.

*Museums of History New South Wales - State Archives Collection: Government Printing Office; NRS 21689, Images. NRS-21689-1-21-GPO3\_27767*

Or again in 1955, being interviewed by the *Sydney Morning Herald* about which toys to buy children at Christmas: ‘Little people under school age,’ the paper quoted her, ‘had a lot in common with primitive races when it came to mechanical things. They just did not know how they worked.’

Of course, all this talk assumes that human societies are arranged against a single measuring stick – one which leads upwards to the society inevitably inhabited by the person putting forward the theory. Other races, and genders, are merely rungs on a ladder leading to the glory that is the fully evolved European male.

It also assumes that a foetus has gills and then turns into a lizard. Modern science has a term for this particular theory, in all its forms. It is complete horseshit.

## Toilet training should start early. Very early

Toilet training, like everything else, was to be done to a strict timetable, according to all the early experts. In the 1890s, America's much-quoted Dr L. Emmett Holt claimed that toilet training could be achieved 'easily by the third month' of a child's life. Some, like Truby King, thought that schedule might be a bit slow. Here he is in 1913:

The bowels tend to move best just after a meal. If training be begun early, regularity can usually be brought about by the second month. The best method of training is to place a tiny chamber [pot] between the nurse's knees. Hold the baby on this, its back against nurse's chest and its body firmly supported. This should be done twice a day and always at the same hour. At first it may be necessary to use some local stimulation such as that produced by tickling the anus . . . If the above mild external stimulation fails, the mother may try passing the tip of a 'soft rubber catheter,' size XII, into the bowel, or the soft rubber nozzle of a small 'bulb-enema', specially made for babies, may be used in the same way.

Please do not try this at home.

King's adopted daughter, Mary Truby King, wrote the guidebook *Mothercraft* to promote her father's ideas in Australia. She claimed toilet training could be achieved by two weeks of age: 'If training is begun on the third day, baby will very soon learn to pass a motion at the same time everyday . . . it is possible to train baby so that he will not use the napkin for his motions after the first two or three weeks.'

Zoe Benjamin, lecturing to mothers in Sydney in 1950, wasn't far behind. 'Training,' she wrote, 'can begin at six weeks.' She suggested holding the child over the toilet after each feed. Later, when the child is capable of sitting on the toilet, he should be left for ten to twenty minutes – but not scolded if there is 'no result'. The mother, she says, should praise the child and show her approval when he has been 'good' but should ignore the matter when he has not 'done his duty'. She believed that every child should be toilet trained by one year of age.

The recommended timing of toilet training kept on lengthening. As usual the experts issued dire warnings, but increasingly they were warnings about the dangers of attempting it too soon. In the April 1957 edition of Australia's *Baby* magazine, US expert Joseph D. Teicher was particularly concerned about the use of suppositories and enemas to encourage the child. 'Such manipulation', he writes, 'can cause pleasures which may later lead to undesirable sexual practices.'

By 1965, the Australian paediatrician Dr Clair Isbister was recommending that toilet training should happen between eight months and two years of age, and issued her own warning of the dangers of doing it too early: children trained from early babyhood, particularly boys, will often relapse at 15 months, become 'very difficult' at about 21 months, and 'become bedwetters at 4, 5 or 6 years of age'.

By 1982, in the *Australian Women's Weekly* guide to parenting, the starting time had become '18 months to two years'. And, by the mid-1980s, Penelope Leach's best-selling guide *Your Baby & Child* suggested an even later deadline. In the dog-eared edition from 1986, lurking on my own bookshelves, she says: 'Research has shown that no matter when you begin to introduce a baby to a pot, he will, on average, become reliably clean and dry by the middle of his third year.'

The timing, in other words, has been perpetually extended. Wait another three decades, and we'll probably leave it until the child leaves home.

## Tiny babies are trying to manipulate their mothers

In 1977, a final report was published by the Royal Commission on Human Relationships – a unique Whitlam-era innovation which saw thousands of Australians, both experts and individuals, give evidence or write letters about the state of the family. Among the witnesses was Dr Kim Oates, from

the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children in Sydney, who talked about the ‘unreal parental expectations’ he often faced. He recounted a recent case in which he’d been speaking to a parent about their baby. ‘Don’t talk to him,’ the parent told Dr Oates. ‘He’s been really naughty and he needs to be punished.’ The baby was two days old. Or another parent, talking about her five-month-old baby: ‘He just wants to spite me. He keeps rolling over and over.’

‘Being naughty,’ the doctor concluded, for many of the parents, ‘consisted in the baby not being toilet trained, no matter how young, and baulking at food.’

So, where did these parents get such ideas? Dr Oates, who went on to be the boss of the Children’s Hospital, first at Camperdown and then at Westmead, didn’t say, but in truth they came straight from the experts of previous decades.

This is one of the oddest, and least scientific, arguments made by so many of the early ‘experts’: the notion that the newborn baby, even in the first days of life, was already on the lookout for signs of weakness. Here’s an example from the *South Coast Times*, March 1950:

One of the earliest surprises experienced by parents is the quickness with which an infant learns how to take advantage of any weakness on their part or that of other adults, and to recognise those from whom he can extract indulgence.

Your baby, in other words, may look cute as it lies there in the cot, but really it’s a calculating manipulator. The main technique used by the baby is to cry when it is hungry or wishes to be cuddled. This must be resisted at all costs, says the same columnist. ‘The common habit of picking up baby every time he cries is hard to break. Yet there is no surer way of ruining a baby . . . nothing could be more foolish.’

By seven months, the columnist argues, you could have already wrecked your baby’s life: ‘He may have learned a lesson that will cost him dearly.’

The idea of the days-old ‘master manipulator’ was amazingly resilient – despite all evidence from developmental psychology that such intentional strategies are an impossibility given the development of the infant brain.

Call me soft-hearted, but if a baby is too small to manipulate its own toes, I don't believe it can manipulate its mother.

Three and a half decades later, in 1979, the *Australian Women's Weekly* had a slightly different view, but only about the age at which the baby might start their campaign. 'You can't spoil a baby until he can manipulate you,' said the magazine, concluding that this occurred at about six months.

Of course, it's true that toddlers become adept at using tears to get their way, especially if there's an ice cream involved. But the idea that newborns are capable of the same calculations is, as Dr Kim Oates understood, complete horseshit.

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The experts believed all sorts of bad habits had their starting point in the first weeks, or even days, of a child's life. Whether it was manipulating the mother, or sucking their thumb, or even – egad – 'the solitary vice', early and brutal intervention was the only way to stop a life-ruining habit. Which brings us to Chapter 7.

## CHAPTER 7

# Bad Habits

The Australian singer Billy Field, in his biggest hit, lamented his own 'Bad Habits'. He doesn't specify which habits, although the lyrics suggest a wild night out. When the child-rearing manuals talked about bad habits, which they did all the time, it was usually misbehaviour closer to home. But there was always a warning: do nothing about the habit and it would ruin the child for life. Or to mention another great Australian song, you'd be placing your child on a 'Highway to Hell'.

## Thumb sucking

The 1960s Australian columnist Ross Campbell had a soft spot for children who sucked their thumbs, even those who couldn't stop. It must be like trying to give up smoking, he wrote in the *Australian Women's Weekly*, 'while being forced to carry around a pack of cigarettes'. Campbell, who wrote tenderly and humorously about his four children, was typically relaxed about this particular 'bad habit'. Others vigorously disagreed. The habit, it was variously stated, led to jaw deformity, teeth irregularities, 'nervous instability' and migraines. As the *Cairns Post* put it in May 1954: the child 'will grow teeth which will prevent it ever becoming a film star'. The paper made no mention of the buck-toothed Australian star Chad Morgan, already on his way to being a country music legend.

It wasn't only a child's teeth that would be deformed. According to Melbourne's *Sun News-Pictorial*, May 1932, when a child sucks their thumb, they often hook their index finger over their nose, leaving the nose permanently flattened. 'Many a girl has reached adult life,' said the

newspaper, ‘with a just cause to wish her mother had been more firm regarding the thumb sucking habit.’

There was also an impact on the child’s personality, according to the ‘Times Doctor’ from Perth’s *Sunday Times*. Here he is in May 1954: ‘[The child] will slip into the easy habit of thumb-sucking to comfort himself rather than face up to his troubles. Every child must be trained to face up to things that happen in life.’ He should be told ‘he is getting too old for such babyish tricks’.

So, what causes this terrible, life-destroying affliction? Here the experts disagreed. The problem emerged, according to Sister Mary Jacob in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, August 1957, due to either ‘underfeeding or overfeeding’ – which does seem like a bob each way. Adelaide child psychologist Mary Smith, writing around the same time, said it was a sign the child was lonely. The *ABC Weekly*, in October 1955, saw a darker cause: ‘It is the way she comforts herself because she is deeply disturbed.’

Occasionally, parents were warned against overreacting. According to the *Cairns Post*, in May 1954, if parents used force to stop the habit ‘the unhappy child will develop some unpleasant habit later on, often one associated with sex’. Better, perhaps, to take a tip from the *Adelaide Mail*, February 1950, and leave it to the playground. Most of the time, the paper’s columnist says, the habit of thumb sucking is ‘cured in a satisfactory and harmless fashion by the ridicule of the child’s playmates’.

Yes, but what if you didn’t want to rely on your child being viciously mocked by their peers? Were there other cures? Oh, yes.

Matron C.A. Fall, of Sydney’s King George V Maternity Hospital, writing in the January 1957 edition of *Baby* magazine, suggested placing mittens on the baby’s hands. Sister Muriel Peck, Victoria’s leading baby health expert of the time, suggested ‘a crocheted finger stall may be put on the thumb and fastened around the wrist’. Another Victorian, Dr Isie Younger Ross, writing in 1940, suggested you should ‘bind a piece of padded cardboard onto the arms to prevent the elbow bending’. Sister Mary Jacob, writing in 1948, instead advocated ‘encasing the hands in cotton or flannel bags, pulling long sleeves beyond the hands and tying the ends with tape’.

Others recommended painting the chosen thumb with chemicals such as wormwood or bitters, or inserting – this is Brisbane’s *Sunday Mail* in July 1951 – ‘a non-removeable “hay-rake” cemented to the child’s teeth, keeping

the thumb out'. Or maybe it would be easier to splint the thumb, advised Perth's 'Times Doctor', just don't tell the child why you are doing it:

Splint the thumb for 10 days or so because of some imaginary ailment. If the child thinks this is being done because he has got something the matter with his thumb he will accept it quite readily. If, however, he thinks you are doing it to break his habit it will be of no avail.

Sometimes the advice was even odder. A reader of the *Australian Women's Weekly* had this suggestion in August 1961: 'Buy your thumb-sucking child a pipe and encourage him to "smoke" it. This worked wonders with my younger brother, who had several pipes with different coloured bowls.' A prize of £1 was duly despatched to Miss K. Walsh of Grange, South Australia.

True, some were more sanguine, especially if the child was young. America's Dr Benjamin Spock, sometimes seen as the instigator of more relaxed attitudes, said his interest in children's welfare began while serving in a hospital and being horrified by the stiff cardboard sleeves fitted over the arms of children who'd been sucking their thumbs. Others agreed the various cures could be worse than the disease. 'Thumb Sucking Harmless' said the headline in the *Illawarra Mercury* in 1952. And in 1965, Australian paediatrician Dr Clair Isbister declared it 'an overstated problem'. These days, parents are usually told to not be at all concerned until the child turns three or four.

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Meanwhile debate hovered – and still hovers – around the dummy. Was it better or worse than sucking your thumb? Matron Fall, whose mitten method was mentioned above, was in favour of the dummy when desperate. She argued that at least the dummy could be later thrown away, while, as Ross Campbell noted, the thumb was always with you. Most, though, had doubts about the dummy. Melbourne's Muriel Peck said they should never be used as they were 'carriers of disease'.

*Our Babies*, the free guide given to so many Australian mothers, was particularly fierce on the subject. A slogan appeared on the bottom of many of its pages: 'The Dummy – the unsuccessful mother's confession of

failure.’ A little rude? I think so. The booklet called them ‘a constant germ trap’ resulting in ‘serious and far-reaching injury’, including enlarged tonsils and narrower jaws, and possible death. Dummies attract flies, the guidebook explained, and then the fly deposits on the dummy all the ‘filth brought from his breeding ground as well as some of his own excreta and vomit, all laden with deadly germs. Is it any wonder that so many babies die in the fateful first year of life!’

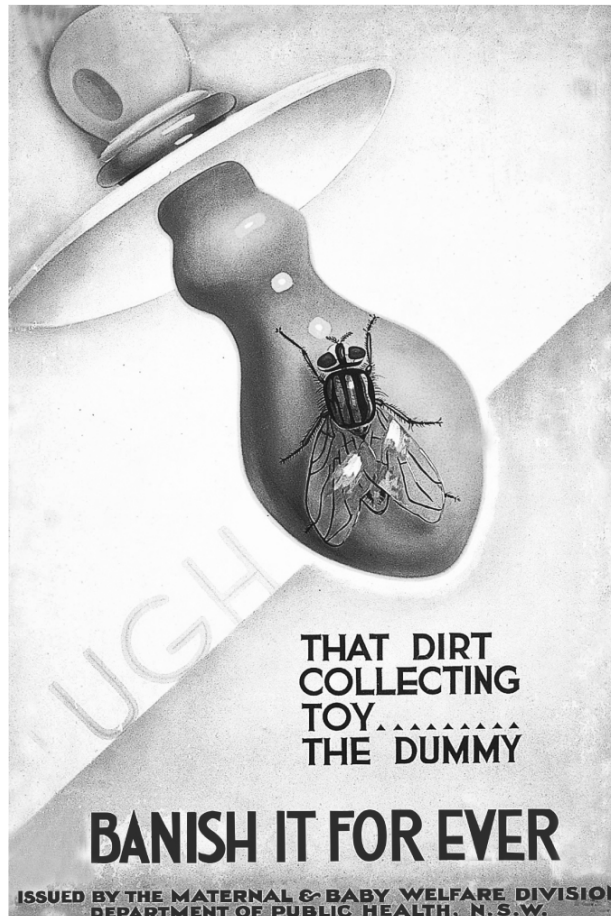
The upbeat exclamation mark is their own. The booklet was replete with a picture of a fly sitting on a baby’s dummy and a repeated line, set in bold type, across the bottom of the page: ‘The House Fly – Baby’s Enemy, the Undertaker’s Friend’.

They also thought the dummy destroyed a child’s character: ‘The dummy is the first education in self-indulgence which a child receives.’

The Sydney doctor Gertrude Buzzard Dunlop agreed in her 1928 guidebook, describing a dummy infected by ‘the filthy feet of the faecal-feeding fly’, a phrase in which she clearly took particular personal pleasure. She continued: ‘Not only are the flies’ feet plastered with millions of germs, but, as the flies crawl over food, they frequently vomit and defaecate, sometimes fourteen times a minute.’

Fourteen times a minute! Presumably it was even worse in Queensland. That state’s official guidebook, *Care of Mother and Child*, was also down on the dummy, and not just due to fly-borne disease: ‘The infant who has been trained . . . to demand a dummy will develop later into the spoilt little tyrant who demands his own way always, and constant entertainment.’

It may also lead to alcoholism, according to Maybanke Anderson in her 1919 book *Mother Love*. She acknowledged that some would find her theory difficult to accept, but ‘perhaps they have never noticed in the drunkard’s face the excessive development of the muscles used in drinking’. Here’s her argument: once you’ve over-developed your sucking muscles by using a dummy, you’ll need to find a use for those muscles once you reach adulthood. And what better use for those sucking muscles than going hell for leather on a bottle of whisky?



A dummy was dirty but also 'the first education in self-indulgence which a child receives'. The peril of the 'pacifier' was the subject of many campaigns, like this one in the mid-1930s from the NSW Department of Public Health.

*NSW Department of Public Health, c. 1930s*

## Poor table manners

Table manners are in decline. They have been for some time. As the *West Australian* complained in May 1919: 'No one who has been brought up to regard the feelings of others can help but notice the change for the worse in manners at table . . . and yet no one seems inclined to enter more than a mental protest against this reversion to savagery.'

My mother would have agreed. She fought a constant battle against the savage in her midst, one called 'Richard'. I would be told off for resting my elbows on the table, even though I still don't understand the nature of the

crime. Was our kitchen table so ill-built as to be unable to support the weight of my flimsy arms?

Parents placed great importance on table manners. This was particularly intense in families like mine – families who would now be called ‘aspirational’, in that they came from working class backgrounds but hoped they, and their offspring, could improve their station in life. Manners, studied by the parents and then taught to the child, were a way of leaping up the social ladder.

My mother’s list of rules was long and often baffling. Bread, she said, could not be cut with a knife; it had to be torn with the hands. Then again, those same hands couldn’t be used to handle a lamb chop; the job of extracting the meat that lay close to the bone was reserved for a knife, however difficult that might be to achieve. Only a ‘savage’, she told me, would pick up a chop. The rules were intricate and hard to remember. Asparagus was to be eaten with the hands, but it was appalling to do the same thing with a green bean. The soup spoon should be scooped away from the body, while the dessert spoon was to be scooped in the opposite direction. (Don’t be angry if I have this the wrong way around. I was only six!)

When, occasionally, guests came to dinner, we’d be supplied with napkins. Or serviettes. I was told that one term was ‘correct’, while the other was ‘common’. All these years on, I can’t recall which way around it went. I’ve just looked it up. The ‘posh’ term is napkin, while serviette is ‘common’; just as ‘lavatory’ is posher than ‘toilet’ and ‘spectacles’ posher than ‘glasses’. Keen to fool anyone who might guess her proletarian roots, my mother was never happier than when she could work all three into one sentence: ‘If you want to use the lavatory, just leave your napkin on the table; you’ll spot the door through your spectacles.’

My mother agreed with the *West Australian*: things were getting worse with every passing year. All one could do, said the paper, was to hope you had a straight-talking friend: ‘Not one of us are perfect, and few have the good fortune to be associated with the absolutely candid friend who takes pride in pointing out our defects.’ Perhaps, for me, that ‘candid friend’ was my mother.

So how to do it all correctly? Luckily many publications provided handy summaries for the guidance of children.

Here’s the *Albury Banner* in May 1902:

Drink from the cup, never from the saucer.  
Teaspoons are left in the saucer, not in the cup.  
Little children only have the napkin arranged as a bib.  
Making a noise, either in eating or drinking, is vulgar.  
Always cheerfully defer to older people and to guests.  
Eat slowly, and do not fill the mouth with large quantities.  
Eat the food served or quietly leave it on the plate without remark.  
Avoid drumming with the fingers or feet; it is the height of  
impoliteness.  
If in doubt at any time as to what is proper follow the example of  
others of more experience.  
Patiently await the coming of your turn; do not follow with the eyes  
the food served to others.  
Never unnecessarily handle the dishes, or in other manner exhibit  
nervousness or impatience.  
Do not feel obliged to 'clean up the plate'; especially do not make a  
laborious display of doing so.  
Do not ask for any particular part of a fowl or similar dish unless  
asked your preference; in that case always indicate something, and if  
there be really no choice designate the portion with which the host  
can most conveniently render service.

It's quite a list. Some of it is good advice, of course. I'm with them when it comes to the horror of people making chewing noises. But what's wrong with wearing the occasional bib when eating something messy? Also strange, at least to modern ears, is the advice in other newspapers to never comment on the food, even in the form of a compliment. As the *Evening Journal*, Adelaide, advised in April 1905: 'It is not considered elegant to display too much enthusiasm at table. A gentle indifference to the pangs of hunger and thirst are considered good breeding.'

I must report that there were fewer articles about table manners as the years went on. I also wonder, for all the effort my mother put into training me, whether I now obey any of her rules. I pile peas onto my fork – using my fork 'as a shovel', her term. I tip the soup bowl up to drink the last drops. I use the bread to soak up the last of the sauce. And I might sit on the lounge – rather than the sofa; then use the toilet – rather than the lavatory. Thank God she's no longer around to see my antics through her spectacles.



Manners maketh the child – and the bear. Pam Beanham, aged four, photographed by her father, Harry, a keen amateur photographer, in Sydney, 1942.

*William Harry Beanham, courtesy of State Library of NSW*

## ‘The mummy’s boy’

Over-indulgence, and too much of a mother’s love, was said to produce that most unfortunate of children, ‘the mummy’s boy’. It was unclear whether a female child would be similarly injured by this surfeit of maternal affection.

The problem, said *The Courier-Mail* in July 1941, had been intensified by the war. ‘In the absence of the father, the baby fills [the mother’s] own emotional life.’ She ‘is inclined to over-indulge and pamper him’. The result would not give pleasure to the returning serviceman: ‘It will be a great disappointment to a soldier father to come home to a family of spoilt, over-indulged children.’

By 1946, the *Weekly Times* was advising prospective brides to keep an eye out for ‘badly spoilt mummy’s boys’: ‘A girl should stop and think before she tied herself to a man like that.’ *The Mail* in Adelaide agreed in April 1951, blaming over-indulgent mothers for creating tyrannical husbands ‘who get a perverse pleasure in dominating their wife’: ‘The man is a psychiatric case. It is easy to find the cause and lay the blame. The man’s mother is the real offender. In childhood she gave in to him too much . . . these tyrants are being bred now by doting mothers.’

The phrase continued to be used through much of the century, particularly as a way of policing boys who might show a softer side. Take this reader’s letter in the *Australian Women’s Weekly* of October 1972: ‘I have made a point of telling my children I love them, and I enjoy their show of affection to me. Recently, my two-year-old gave me a bear hug in front of an acquaintance. Her reaction: “A mummy’s boy, eh sook?”’ But times were starting to change, and the letter writer was aggrieved on her son’s behalf: ‘I’m glad my son was too young to understand. In a few years a thoughtless remark like that could stop him demonstrating his love.’ The ‘mummy’s boy’ slur, though, retained its power. In 1989, when ACT schools were allowing use of the cane, but only with parental permission, one letter writer to the *Canberra Times* worried that if he refused permission his child would be called ‘a mummy’s boy’.

The phrase, of course, was part of a whole attitude to gender in which boys and girls needed to be brought up quite differently. And while it’s true that young humans can bring their own predilections to the table – the boy obsessed with trucks; the girl obsessed with dolls – it’s also true these choices have often been encouraged, or, worse, insisted on. To borrow a phrase I’ve used elsewhere, gender becomes a straitjacket rather than a smorgasbord.

Are things better now than they were in 1910 or 1940? Recently I visited the shops to buy some clothes for my grandchildren. Thirty years ago, it was blue for boys and pink for girls. Now it’s even worse. It’s military camouflage for the boys – grey and brown splotches – and sparkly pink princess outfits for the girls. It’s as if people are afraid their two-year-olds might momentarily forget which team they’re supposed to be on.

Flipping through the racks, trying to find something for my oldest grandson, I decided against the desert camouflage. Whatever the Australian

Army's difficulties with recruitment, I'm confident he will be able to avoid deployment overseas until he's at least six.

## Self-gratification or 'the solitary vice'

Here's a surprise. Masturbation does not make you go blind. Maybe that warning – 'Stop it or you'll go blind' – was delivered to children in America or Britain, but I've yet to come across an Australian expert who makes this claim, despite its continuing appearance in jokes and memes. That's not because the Australian experts thought masturbation was danger-free. According to them, it would produce almost every other human malady. Your eyesight might be all that was left.

Here, for instance, is Sydney's Muriel Danvers Power in her 1913 book *Mother and Child*, describing the impact of masturbation: 'The pleasant feeling which is experienced at the beginning ends in a spasm of the nerves, which leaves the body absolutely wasted of all nerve force, drained of all nervous energy, exhausted as is the body of a person who has had a fit.'

The memory becomes dull, says Danvers Power, the child cannot grasp his lessons, and inevitably descends towards the bottom of his class. 'Slowly she or he . . . becomes weak and wasted . . . illness and injury and probably madness will be the result.'

The threat was considered great to both boys and girls. Most early parenting guides routinely describe all children as 'he', but when discussing masturbation, they go out of the way to include both 'he' and 'she', noting that both sexes were subject to the peril. And the risks were great. The result of masturbation, said Danvers Power, could even include death: 'When the body is not naturally strong, a general wasting may be followed by consumption, or life may be ended by some other terrible disease.'

Danvers Power cautions against blaming the child, 'any more than you'd blame a child for playing with a loaded gun. You blame the person who leaves the gun about.'

How, in this case, the 'gun' is to be secured is unclear. Somehow, I don't think a gun safe is going to work, although a stiff zipper may do the trick.

Zoe Benjamin, in a 1917 lecture, agreed about the risks associated with masturbation. It may, she wrote, 'be an early sign of either mental deficiency or moral delinquency'. If not cured early, before the age of three,

it would become a habit impossible to shift, even with the use of punishment: ‘After that age, severity rarely has any effect, as it may lead to secrecy and lying, with a consequent debasing of the moral fibre of the child . . . it is a good plan to make the older child feel that the habit is a sign of illness which will lead to a lack of strength when he is older.’

Truby King, naturally, was part of the alarmist chorus. In 1913, he approvingly quoted an article from the UK medical journal *The Lancet*: ‘The effect upon the physical and moral development of the child may be serious when masturbation is begun at an early age or is frequently practised . . . even little children of eight or nine years may become centres of moral infection, which may involve a group of playmates or even a whole school.’

In other words: ‘Stop it or you’ll become a centre of moral infection.’

Before King specialised in infant health, he was the superintendent of the Seacliff Lunatic Asylum, New Zealand’s largest psychiatric facility. In that role, he reported to the government that six to eight per cent of his male patients suffered from insanity due to self-abuse. Mind you, he later noted, ‘a very large proportion of the mental patients had been bottle-fed’. Presumably the bottle-fed masturbator had little chance of sanity.

So, what are the causes of this terrible vice? Opinions differed. Zoe Benjamin in 1917 thought it was a product of clothing that was either too tight or too dirty, depending on the child’s social class: ‘Among neglected children, dirty clothing is a frequent cause but with otherwise well-cared-for children, tight clothing is often responsible, especially with those little boys whose pants, for the sake of a smart appearance, are braced up far too tightly.’

Muriel Danvers Power agreed about the danger of ‘having clothes drawn up too tightly between the legs’, but was also concerned about any child who lives in a two-storey house, as ‘sometimes they form the habit through the sensation caused by sliding down bannisters’. If you grew up in a single-level home, you may wish to take a moment to give thanks.



Beware the bannister, a known cause of masturbation alongside tight clothes and eating eggs. Photo by Rob Hillier.

*Rob Hillier, courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW*

Causes are one thing, but how should the vice be cured? Marion Piddington, in her 1926 guidebook, recommended that ‘from the cradle little hands should be watched, to see that they did not play with the sex organ’. With older children she recommended taking care with their clothing. In particular, you should ‘provide pants for the little boy without pockets’. Queensland’s 1939 guide *Care of Mother and Child* added this suggestion for the girl who masturbated: ‘Train the child to go to sleep lying on her side with one or both hands between cheek and pillow.’ Very easy to achieve, I’m sure.

Zoe Benjamin recommended looser clothing, ‘occasional bathing of the parts with cold water’, and, in younger children, ‘mechanical and physical means, such as tying the hands’. In her 1917 lecture she also, somewhat mysteriously, recommended a surgical procedure: ‘If such measures are fruitless, then a slight operation in the case of both boys and girls may be

the only cure.’ For the boys, she advised circumcision, although what she meant for the girls is less clear.

Others were more explicit about the surgical options. In his thumpingly large 1923 guidebook, *Home Nursing and the Ailments of Children*, the Australian doctor W. Howard James ranted about this ‘life-destroying practice’, ‘this shameful thing’, ‘this secret vice’. ‘If the habit is not overcome,’ he wrote, ‘the result is frequently insanity in its most awful form.’ He was particularly concerned when the vice captured a young girl:

The practice in some girls is so strong that it becomes a species of madness, and is known by the name nymphomania . . . in these cases it is sometimes absolutely necessary to remove by operation all the sexual parts (the clitoris and the nympha) from the genital before a cure can be affected.

Suddenly loose pants and cold baths don’t sound so bad. Dr James, by the way, was medical superintendent of the Warburton Sanitarium in Victoria, a health facility established by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1910 and run according to the theories of the US cornflake king and anti-masturbation obsessive Dr John Harvey Kellogg. Like Kellogg, Dr James advised that masturbation could sometimes be tackled through diet: ‘Milk is a better food than eggs; the latter tends to excite the sexual desires.’

Please don’t tell the Australian Egg Corporation or they’ll launch a campaign.

Muriel Danvers Power believed the answer was to appeal to the child’s sense of honour. Here she is in her book *Mother and Child* in 1913:

Impress upon the children that they must never touch the front passage except to wash and keep it clean . . . teach them that some day when they have grown to be men and women they will marry, and then will be the time for them to use the wonderful organs which God has given them.

I don’t know about you but, from now on, mine’s going to be called that ‘wonderful organ’.

Oh, and another thing: you’re terrible, Muriel.

Only the South Australians seem to have been more relaxed. As early as the mid-1930s, the state’s main guidebook, *The Australian Mothercraft*

*Book*, saw masturbation as a problem, but one that should be largely ignored: 'It must be taken calmly and the child's attention directed to other things.' Then again, the South Australians were also the first to have female voters, and to boast a premier who wore pink hotpants. They've always been ahead of the times.

## CHAPTER 8

# The Battle to ‘Save the Babies’

It's a strange fact, both alluring and disturbing, that if you are alive today it's because countless generations of your forebears had luck on their side. Generation after generation, your ancestors were among the children who survived long enough to breed, rather than among the many who died, often in the first year of life. All of us owe our existence to these countless, repeated strokes of good fortune. Even in relatively recent times, surviving childhood has been a battle. In 1904, 82 infants out of every 1000 live-born Australian babies died before their first birthday. The figures were even worse in big cities such as Melbourne and Sydney. Visit an Australian graveyard and you'll see those statistics etched into granite – the names of babies buried before their first birthday. The rate today, by the way, is about three deaths per 1000.

The experts of the early 20th century may have had some strange views, but they did get one thing right. In a world without widespread refrigeration, breastfeeding could help a child's chances. Babies who were fed cow's milk were much more likely to die. It often took a day for milk to travel from the dairy to the household. The milk might have been sourced from cows with tuberculosis, stored in unwashed containers, even contaminated by manure. It would then be kept in a house without refrigeration, the baby's bottle left to warm by the fire or kept in the cot, then served up in the morning. The result, often, was ‘summer diarrhoea’, one of the main causes of infant death.

Health campaigns began across the country, often under the banner ‘Save the Babies’. In the ten or twelve years from 1917, baby health centres were established in most Australian states, first funded by private donations, later in partnership with government. Mothers were advised

about the benefits of breastfeeding, and, when that was not possible, told how to store and ‘humanise’ cow’s milk, adding water, fat and sugars so it better matched breast milk.

‘Save the Babies’ sounds like a noble campaign, but, in recent decades, it’s had its critics. What was called ‘scientific parenting’ was, some argue, an army of middle-class experts marching into working-class homes. The nurses would criticise the methods of the family matriarch and sometimes destroy the mother’s confidence in breastfeeding – the very thing they were trying to promote. And, while it was badged a humane campaign to stop babies dying, some historians argue it was more about preserving the workers and soldiers needed for Empire, thus securing a ‘White Australia’.

It’s true, also, that the ‘Save the Babies’ campaigners were sometimes motivated by self-interest, building their own organisations and influence. Truby King would routinely overstate his own role in the reduction of infant mortality, ignoring the part played by better sewerage, smaller families, the spread of refrigeration, improvements in medicine, even the move away from horse-drawn carts and the flyblown droppings that would result. And when King trumpeted that New Zealand’s infant mortality rate was the best in the world, he never mentioned that the data didn’t include Māori deaths. Those deaths were – to quote the 1936 *New Zealand Official Year-Book* – not included ‘due to the fact that a considerably lower standard of accuracy and completeness of data exists’.

King sought dominance for his own organisation and defeat for others. Reading his speeches, you’re left with the impression that every Antipodean child who made it to their first birthday should have offered him personal thanks. In Victoria, the result was a turf war between the organisation he helped set up – the Society for the Health of Women and Children of Victoria (the Plunket Society) – and an already established local group, the Victorian Baby Health Centre Association. For years both groups opened centres, jostling for influence and funding. King was self-serving and bombastic, but his Australian opponents seemed to mention ‘New Zealand’ a little too often, as if this was more a battle between competitive cousins than an ideological war.

The battle for dominance was unattractive, but it’s difficult to condemn all of those involved. Both organisations featured people, nearly all of them women, working in difficult conditions with poor pay, or no pay, or half-

pay over decades. Together they saved many babies. The opposing trenches included many inspiring people.

One of them, on the anti-Truby side, was Sister Muriel Peck, who was employed as the infant welfare nurse at Victoria's first baby health centre and became a key figure in the Victorian Baby Health Centre Association. Peck walked door to door in the slums of Richmond, meeting mothers and encouraging them to visit the new clinic. They did so in large numbers. 'Any initial fears as to the success of the venture and as to whether the mothers would "cotton on" to this new service, were quickly dispelled!', according to an early history. 'The mothers just rolled up.'

Similar centres followed, with Peck working side by side with another pioneering female medico, Dr Vera Scantlebury. Nine centres had been established by June 1918, mostly in inner-city suburbs like Richmond, Carlton and Brunswick, with Peck also giving lectures in rural areas, speaking to mothers in a specially kitted-out railway carriage.

Meanwhile, from 1919, the Plunket forces, led by Sister Maud Primrose, opened clinics, a nurse training school, and then, in 1924, the Tweddle Baby Hospital, of which Truby King himself was medical advisor. A cartoon in the Australian edition of *Punch* showed the two groups fighting for possession of a hapless baby, with the caption 'Mine' 'No, mine'. The two fighters in the cartoon were men, but – in the real struggle – nearly all the combatants were women. The Tweddle Baby Hospital had generous funding from Melbourne businessman Joseph Tweddle, but it was Maud Primrose who pressed for its establishment. The nurses she trained at Tweddle were formally known as 'Primrose nurses', hinting at the mix of self-promotion and self-sacrifice which often marks this story.

Some say the anti-Truby forces – Muriel Peck, Vera Scantlebury, Isie Younger Ross and their colleague Kate Campbell – represented an Australian bulwark against Truby King's inflexible methods, 'softening' his message for Australia. That may be a bit of a stretch. Sometimes the tone in their pamphlets and books is a tad less rigid, but most of Truby King's ideas were endorsed by both organisations. Turf wars are sometimes over matters of philosophy, but sometimes they are just about turf.



Sister Muriel Peck aboard Victoria's Better Farming Train, c. 1925.

*State Library of Victoria / H28737/18*

Here, for instance, is the 'anti-Truby' Muriel Peck in the 1939 edition of her book *Your Baby*. Immediately after birth, she says, the baby should be taken from the mother to be bathed and put in a crib, thence to be returned to the mother six hours later for breastfeeding. Breastfeeding should then occur at three-hour intervals during this early period, with nothing at night. The baby should then be shifted to four-hourly feeds, the timetable matching that of Truby King. Like him, she was against 'over-handling': 'it is unwise to over-excite the babe and while he is lying happily in his cot he should be left alone . . . naturally he should not be picked up every time he cries'.

Vera Scantlebury recommended the same feeding routine. In her private letters, Scantlebury expressed annoyance over Truby King and his 'insulting' supporters but defined the issue as more a matter of personality than any real difference of policy. The problem, she wrote, was their egotistical insistence that everybody should 'bow down' and embrace the 'EXACT scheme they wish to adopt'.

Isie Younger Ross, another member of the Victorian anti-Truby team, endorsed the shared worldview in her 1940 book *The Happy Mother and Child*. To summarise: no night feeds, don't rock the baby to sleep, don't allow thumb-sucking or dummies, begin toilet training as soon as he can hold his head erect (pressing his anus if he doesn't apply himself), and beware of picking him up: 'How quickly the young baby realises the power of crying.'

I don't mean to criticise the Victorian crew of Ross, Peck, Scantlebury and Campbell. They cared about the underprivileged, battled the prejudice facing women in medicine and saved many young lives. Someone should make a movie about them. On the other hand, I don't believe they were 'softies' subverting the Truby King system. The guidebook for nurses and doctors, written by Scantlebury and Campbell, and a standard text in Victoria from 1947 to 1972, allowed some variation when it came to rigid feeding times, but, unless there was a problem, babies were still to be left unfed 'for an 8-hour interval at night'. The guidebook also advocated giving children sleeping drugs for all sorts of conditions, from fussy eating to masturbation. Times, of course, change. My point here is that they were not an early flowering of hippy parenting.

The real disagreement between the two groups was a technical battle over the fat and protein content of cow's milk given to babies. Truby King had a patented – and pricey – method of modifying cow's milk, sold under the brand names Karilac and Kariol. His critics thought the branded additives were unnecessary and a burden on the poor. There were cheaper ways to 'humanise' cow's milk. This, as usual, caused Truby King to hit the rhetorical roof: 'God put 1.4 per cent protein into breast milk,' he thundered, 'and I tell you that anyone who gives a baby more than 1.4 per cent protein is blaspheming God Almighty.'

The battle between the two groups was sufficiently intense that, in 1925, the Victorian government announced an inquiry to be headed by Vera Scantlebury and a British doctor, Henrietta Main. They toured New Zealand and Victoria for nearly six months before concluding there was no real difference between the two systems, despite all the heated arguments. Scantlebury and Main observed that the disputes had 'materially retarded the progress of the child welfare movement in Victoria'. As a result, in 1926, the Victorian government set up a Department of Maternal and Child Health to take control of the fractious sector. Scantlebury, now married and

calling herself Scantlebury Brown, was appointed 'part-time' director, the result of a ban on married women being appointed to fulltime government jobs.

Muriel Peck became her assistant, and later godmother to Scantlebury Brown's second child. The two rapidly established a new training system for nurses. To qualify, all nurses had to complete the same course – a course that made it clear that Truby King's expensive additives were unnecessary.

How God Almighty responded to this development is not known, but I imagine Truby King was the one doing the blaspheming.

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The Victorians were not the only ones to experience a turf war over Truby King's influence. In Tasmania, the chief health officer was Dr Emanuel Sydney Morris, who after visiting New Zealand wrote an official report criticising the Plunket nurses for 'extreme rigidity and dogmatic loyalty to the system'. In South Australia, the most important local figure was Dr Helen Mayo, who'd co-written the state's official child-rearing handbook. Her view, delivered in 1925 to the Royal Commission on Health, was similarly brusque. In her opinion 'the chief drawback to the Plunket system is the fanaticism of the nurses, it becomes practically a religious cult with them'.

Meanwhile in New South Wales, tensions had risen between King's disciple, Elizabeth McMillan, director of the Tresillian Mothercraft Home in Petersham, and Sidney Innes-Noad MLC, president of the body which ran Tresillian, the Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies. At issue, again, was King's 'humanised milk' emulsion, which Innes-Noad regarded as a ripoff. At one point, a shipment of the product arrived, addressed to the Tresillian home. Innes-Noad forwarded a sample to the NSW government laboratory, just to see what was in it. The lab, according to Innes-Noad, identified a small amount of glucose, together with fatty matter: 'a mixture of cotton-seed oil, arachis oil and fats, probably suet and butter'. Innes-Noad refused to take delivery of the consignment and said no-one was willing to admit ordering it. In the end, McMillan was sacked, accused of secretly using King's product. She went off to start a rival organisation to support King's methods. It was the Australian Mothercraft

Society (Plunket System) and it rapidly launched King's Karitane Mothercraft Home in Sydney – with McMillan as matron.

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Whatever the disputes about the alternatives to breastfeeding, there was consistency about the 'breast is best' message. If anything, the message was delivered with too much fury, as if every author was involved in a competition called Who Can Be the Biggest Bastard About Mothers Who Don't Breastfeed.

As usual Truby King was a contender, expressing his contempt for mothers who bottle-fed their baby. Here he is in one of his earliest books, the 1905 *Feeding of Plants and Animals*:

Nutrition given by the mother is always best . . . But this is not the attitude or feeling of the mother who rears her child by means of a bottle. For the most part she is densely ignorant of the duties of maternity, and does not realise the injustice she is doing to herself and her offspring.

Or, in 1909, in an address called *The Wealth of a Nation is its People*: '[The child who is not breastfed] may well ask of his mother . . . "did you rob me of my birthright?"' In fact, Truby King added, by not insisting on breastfeeding 'we have allowed the mother to sin'.

Or again in 1913: 'Consider the imitation mothers – no longer mammalia – to be found in certain classes to-day – mothers who should be ashamed to look any tabby-cat in the face.'

He wasn't the only one. 'Breast milk is a baby's birth-right. Don't rob him of it,' was the advice in the government booklet *Our Babies*, given over many decades to Australian mothers in three states. The guidebook, presumably read by many women unable to breastfeed, added the cheery note: 'Remember that a big proportion of the babies who die in summer are bottle-fed ones.'

Dr Grace Cuthbert Browne, director of Maternal and Baby Welfare in New South Wales, confessed there were sometimes complaints about Baby Health Centre nurses being overly critical of bottle-feeding mothers. Her typed 1952 internal report, kept in the archives of the NSW Department of Health, admits a perceived problem: 'It is contended that there is at times

regimentation of the mother, forcing her to breast feed her baby, and that she is harassed by active disapproval of her attitude, and made to feel guilty and culpable.’ Cuthbert Browne admitted there was some truth to the criticism, but only ‘in certain few cases’.

The criticism of mothers who ‘failed’ to breastfeed continued for decades and is sometimes witnessed today. In March 1966, Dr Clair Isbister, consultant paediatrician at Sydney’s Royal North Shore Hospital, was interviewed by the *Sydney Morning Herald* about her latest guidebook. She told the paper:

There is strong evidence from research studies that women who do not want to breastfeed are often maladjusted sexually and to the role of mother. These women need understanding and may need psychological help. It is very unfortunate that they often try to influence other women not to breastfeed.

At this point, I must confess to being a little conflicted. Of course, King and the others were right: most of the time, breast is best. It’s also true that, in the period of limited refrigeration, bottle-fed babies were more likely to die – six times more likely in some accounts. But did the advantages of breastfeeding need to be so cruelly argued, with so little regard to those who couldn’t achieve it? One heartbreaking example is the women for whom poverty was a factor. Giving evidence to the federal government’s 1925 Royal Commission on Health, Dr Marie Brown, an antenatal specialist in Adelaide, spoke of visiting a local home for unmarried mothers. The home also operated as a commercial laundry, much as such ‘homes’ did, infamously, in Ireland. The South Australian mothers, Dr Brown told the royal commission, were too ‘underfed and overworked’ to breastfeed their babies: ‘The mothers have told me that they have not really had enough food to provide the children with breastmilk.’

And poverty is not the only barrier to breastfeeding. Decades ago, I remember sitting in a food court with my friend Angela as she bottle-fed her baby. I could feel the cloud of tut-tutting rising from a nearby table. I had the urge to stand up, walk over, and say: ‘She’s had breast cancer, you idiots. Leading to a double mastectomy. Exactly what breasts would you like her to use?’

You'll be pleased to know – or perhaps not – that I managed to restrain myself.



The horror! The horror! Hopefully this bottle-feeding mother in Sydney's Narrabeen in 1947 had not heard of Truby King. Photo by Sam Hood.

*Sam Hood, courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW*

Also, in the cause of not putting breastfeeding on a *complete* pedestal, I have amused myself with the ultimate case of nominative determinism – the mysterious process by which a builder is named Mr Brick and an undertaker is Mr Death. Puffed with national pride, I must tell you the best ever example is Australian. The head of our breastfeeding association, for many years, was Mrs Lee King.

Oh, and then there's my mother. She always said I was breastfed, but not by her. 'The natives did it,' was her response when I asked, a reference I assume to Danota, the loving local woman who, when I was a child in Papua New Guinea, was effectively my real mother. I now find myself hoping that August Strindberg was right, and you can inherit someone's character through breastmilk. I'd love to have inherited a little of Danota's endless love and kindness.

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Why did Truby King become so obsessed with breastfeeding? After all, he was a psychiatrist rather than a paediatrician. As was common, the call of Empire was involved. In late 1904, King and his wife, Isabella, went to Japan on a holiday. They noticed that in Japanese villages, women would breastfeed for the first 10 or 12 months, and sometimes to 18 months. Later, on the same trip, King noted the ‘fitness and excellent physique on the Japanese army’ and decided he knew the cause. Breastfeeding, he assumed, had created these fine soldiers, and therefore it would help protect the British Empire. As he put it in 1909: ‘The most urgent and pressing need of our vast empire’ was for a fit and healthy British-born population.

According to King and his devotees, his campaign rescued breastfeeding from the brink. One Plunket Society publication claims that ‘for about a quarter of a century suckling had gone almost completely out of fashion’ until Truby King’s intervention, when it became virtually universal in New Zealand.

It appears true that breastfeeding was under pressure in the late 19th century, especially once industrialisation created factory jobs that separated mothers from their babies – the baby often left in the care of a neighbour, older daughter or elderly relative. And there’s evidence that breastfeeding, at least in the first month of a child’s life, did become more commonplace in both Australia and New Zealand in the early decades of the 20th century, especially as the dangers of badly handled cow’s milk were spelt out.

But by the end of the Depression, the campaign to promote breastfeeding was fighting against the tide. Dr Younger Ross, the woman who’d helped fund Victoria’s first baby health clinic back in 1917, wrote in 1940 that the number of women breastfeeding was already ‘diminishing’. The statistics back that view. By combing figures from New South Wales and Victoria, historian Philippa Mein Smith concluded that from 1904 to 1928 breastfeeding rates were fairly stable – around 93 to 96 per cent of babies were breastfed at least in their first month. Then, around the start of the 1930s, breastfeeding declined, almost in lockstep with the growth of the Baby Health Centres and the rigid advice that was being handed out. It was a decline that continued, across Western countries, for decades. By 1964, only 29 per cent of Australian babies were being breastfed at six months.

The bottle had won out over the breast. Its victory was aided by the rise of commercial formulas that (falsely) promised better nutrition than was available from breast milk. And the dangers of the bottle were reduced by the arrival of home refrigerators. Editions of *The Housewife Magazine*, an Australian publication in the 1930s, feature several advertisements for competing models, signalling their introduction into ordinary homes, a process that led to widespread adoption by the 1950s.

Maternity hospitals, weirdly, also seemed to go out of their way to promote bottle-feeding. In 1977, the Royal Commission on Human Relationships reported on the way new mothers were treated within Australia's hospitals. During the day, the baby would be breastfed by the clock, every three or four hours, but contact with the mother after 10 pm was forbidden, the nurses giving a bottle if necessary. The royal commission concluded: 'Mothers should have greater freedom in these matters . . . [They] should be allowed to determine the amount of time they wish to spend with their babies . . . and feeding routines should allow the mother to breastfeed on demand, if desired, and to night feed.' What a radical idea!

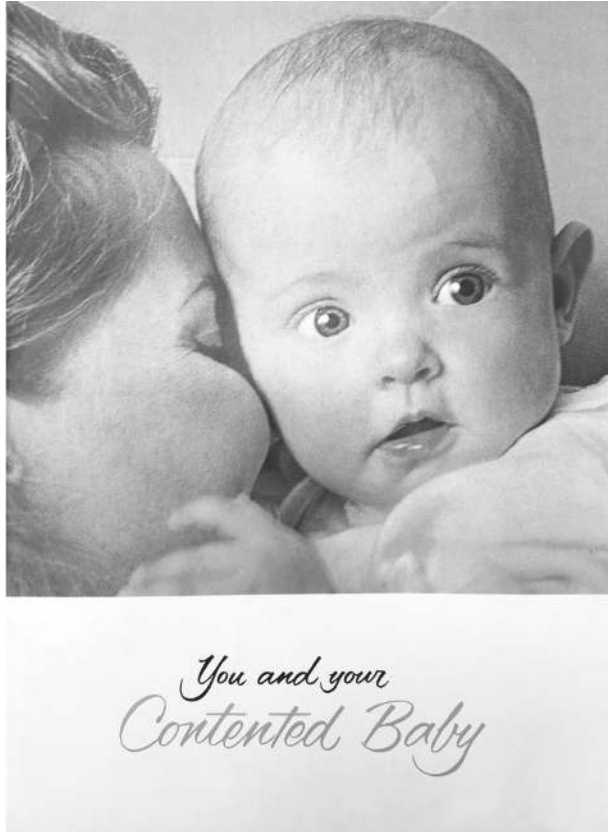
Meanwhile, hospitals gave free samples of commercial formula to new mothers – a marketing godsend for the manufacturers, which continued into the mid-1990s. The free formula often came with a booklet published by the formula suppliers, such as *You and Your Contented Baby*, published in 1970 by the 'medical department' of the milk company Carnation. Also, the tone of advertising became more insistent. In 1920, the advertisements for Glaxo powdered formula began by singing the praises of breastfeeding: 'Blessed indeed is the mother able to nurse and feed baby herself . . . but if your baby cannot have healthy breastmilk, he must have Glaxo.' By the 1960s, the ads instead asserted that Glaxo should be a mother's first choice.

From the 1960s, the child-rearing guidebooks were also shifting their advice. They began to advocate early weaning, often at six months, echoing advertising from the commercial baby food industry. Some mothers also faced social pressure to limit breastfeeding. One South Australian woman, Sue, was interviewed for an oral history project conducted by what is now the Australian Breastfeeding Association. She recalled breastfeeding her first son beyond nine months in a small town in the early 1970s: 'So many people had told me that he'd be homosexual if I didn't stop breastfeeding that I actually forcibly weaned him for his first birthday.'

The decline in breastfeeding had many causes. Refrigeration made it safer to use alternatives. Advertising and marketing played a part. The rise in the number of working mothers made it a challenge to feed only with breast milk. But could the rigidity advocated by Truby King and others also be to blame?

The Australian Breastfeeding Association believes so. In its own history of this period, the association suggests a range of factors was behind the decline but ‘chief among them were the emphasis on rigid feeding schedules originating in the ideology of scientific mothering and the influence of Dr Truby King’.

In other words, the insistence on letting the baby cry for food when hungry, and the inflammatory language around the ‘moral duty’ to breastfeed, plus the requirement for ‘test weighing’ to check enough milk was being consumed – a task not required if the child was bottle-fed – made the whole thing so stressful, unpleasant and shame-inducing that the experts killed off the very thing they were trying to promote. The association also notes that the science behind Truby King’s by-the-clock feeding was all wrong. By the 1960s, it was becoming clear that ‘demand stimulus’ – that is, responding to a child’s hungry cry – was crucial in maintaining a mother’s milk supply.



One of the free booklets given to new mothers, in this case from Carnation, which recommends its own evaporated milk for bottlefeeding.

*Courtesy of State Library of NSW*

So, what would happen when the 'clock' lost its magical power, and a new generation of parenting gurus tried to adopt a less bossy and less alarmist tone? And what would happen to the mothers and the babies, the fathers and the grandparents, caught up in the change? Roll on, Chapter 9.

## CHAPTER 9

# It's OK to Cuddle – the Rise of Child-centred Parenting

In the *Australian Women's Weekly* of April 1971, there's a wonderful piece by 'Sydney reader Barbara Gordon', in which she reflects on how the prevailing advice changed somewhere in the gap between her first and second child. She wrote:

So, you're a middle-class, middle-aged mum. You had your first child, let's say a girl, in the late 1940s or the early 1950s. Like as not you were utterly clueless about babies, so you turned to the experts and bought a book on baby care. The commandments laid down were hard and fast, and you went about in a permanent state of terror that you might break one of them. Zealously you let your tiny mite scream herself purple while you waited in a bath of nervous perspiration for the radio beeps to confirm the fact that it really was six o'clock, and not three minutes to, before you fed her.

To feed her three minutes early, you had been led to believe, would do something terrible to her digestion and could also bring about that most frightful of post-natal calamities, an upset routine. Your life, and that of your bewildered husband, was governed by the clock. Feeding time, pottie time, sunning time, sleeping time, mothering time, bathing time. You became so engulfed by anxiety and exhaustion your milk dried up, you grew as thin as a stick, became shrewish and unapproachable. Your husband took up golf.

Even so, you gallantly carried on, even though your mother-in-law told you you were a damn fool and ordered you 'to feed the poor darling before she screams herself into a convulsion, you

stupid girl.’ But even your formidable mother-in-law couldn’t budge you from your duty. No one applauded you for this martyr-like adherence, least of all the baby.

By the time your first baby was about two, your baby-care book was very ragged – and you were pregnant again. Intent on giving your second baby the same chance in life as your first, you bought a nice, new baby-care book. But baby-care experts had had a change of heart in the intervening years. This new book was mind-blowing. In a nutshell it told you that your first baby’s rigid upbringing had been not only wrong but downright dangerous and would doubtless cause serious psychological traumas in later life. As of now, you read with bulging eyes, anything goes where baby is concerned. To hell with routine. Treat your baby as you would like to be treated yourself if you could only shrink enough to fit into the bassinet. Feed your baby when it’s hungry. Pick up your baby when it cries. Play with your baby. Talk to your baby. Relax with your baby. Let it live a full, gay, mad life.

So with number two, Rafferty’s Rules were the order of the day, carried out with just as much enthusiasm as Rigid Routine was with number one. No more clock watching, no more hours of bellowing, no more pottie balancing, no more nothing, except fun, fun, fun . . . Your mother-inlaw told you you were a damn fool ‘spoiling the poor little darling like that. He’ll never be able to accept discipline, and he’ll become a misfit, you stupid, stupid girl.’

Later in the piece, the brilliant Mrs Gordon talked about the arrival of child number three, by which time she had ‘neither the money to buy a new book nor the time to read it’. Finally, the bossy baby gurus were out of her life. From then on, she made her own decisions, which she found quite a relief.

It’s a vivid summary, though Barbara Gordon seems to have responded to the new advice faster than most. While it’s true that some 1950s experts were beginning to advocate the shift from ‘Rigid Routine’ to ‘Rafferty’s Rules’ it was slow to reach the mainstream. It’s hard to put a date on these things. Benjamin Spock’s first book was published in 1946, with its compelling opening words, ‘Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do.’ In the United States it rapidly became a bestseller, perfectly timed for the post-war baby boom. In Australia, though, prior to the 1960s, Spock

was hardly an influential figure. Enter his name in the National Library of Australia's Trove database and there are fewer than forty mentions in Australian newspapers and magazines for the two decades leading up to 1960. The book, in this period, was neither reviewed nor extracted.

Local authors received more prominence – and they took longer to abandon the stern methods of the past. Sydney paediatrician Clair Isbister published her first book in 1958 under the title *What is Your Problem Mother?* It has a different tone to the manuals published a decade earlier by people like Zoe Benjamin and Irma Schnierer, but, as we'll see later in this chapter, it's hardly an all-out embrace of permissive parenting. Besides which, by the time Isbister was writing, Spock himself had experienced a change of mind. The second edition of his *Baby and Child Care*, published in the US in 1957, is more conservative than the first edition – with Spock worried that parents had taken his advice too far and needed to embrace a bit more discipline.

It's not really until the late 1960s and early 1970s that mainstream Australian publications like the *Australian Women's Weekly* began to regularly reject the idea of inflexible routines and limited cuddles. The notion of 'attachment parenting', promoted by the British researcher John Bowlby in the late 1950s and later developed by Mary Ainsworth, took even longer to arrive. Between about 1960 and 1970 there is a shift, but it's this: the experts start disagreeing with each other. And the debates became increasingly strident. Welcome to the culture wars. From here on in, parents would be asked to choose sides, often in debates that still rage today.

They were asked to decide on their attitude to sleep training – variously called 'controlled crying', 'controlled comforting', 'CIO' (which stands for Cry It Out), 'responsive settling', 'self-soothing'. Or 'child torture'. It all depended on who was speaking.

Or they could choose to practise 'responsive parenting', otherwise known as 'gentle parenting', 'attachment parenting', or 'respectful parenting'. Or, according to its critics, 'creating a child tyrant who will ruin your life for ever'.

A mother could choose to breastfeed for as long as possible, into the fourth year perhaps, because to do otherwise would be to deny what's best for her child. Or she could accept the view, put with equal force, that breastfeeding is a patriarchal weapon used against women, designed to keep them in the home and out of the workplace.

These old battles, which began in the 1960s, have, in more recent years, been joined by new skirmishes.

You should let them ‘free range’. That’s according to some guidebooks. Or you should be protective, knowing today’s world can be dangerous. You should give the gift of music lessons. Or, from the other side, understand it’s bad to ‘overschedule’.

A good parent – some say – will ban access to all laptops, phones and screens until the child is six. Or 12. Or better 16. It’s the only way to protect them from having their brain turned to mush. Or the alternative view: if you don’t allow them early ‘access to their devices’, you’re denying them the skills they’ll need to succeed in a digital world.

And what do you shout if your child is about to fall off the monkey bars? Do you say, old-style, ‘Watch out, you’re about to fall, you idiot!!!’ Or do you say – more recent version – ‘What’s your plan?’

There’s now a culture war for every family, and every child, and every situation.



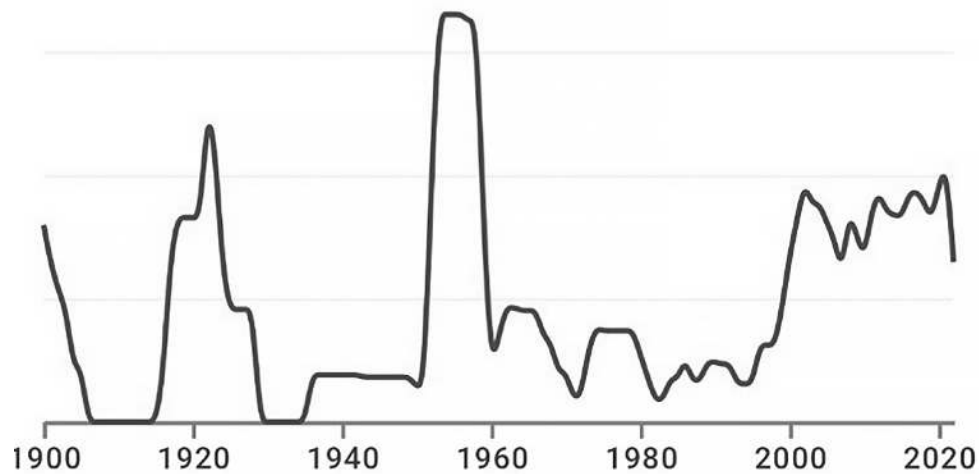
What’s your plan? Photo take by Ivan Ive for *Pix*, 9 August 1939.

*Ivan Ive for Pix, 9 August 1939, courtesy of State Library of NSW*

The Australian historian Manning Clark famously described Australian history as a battle between the ‘enlargers’ and the ‘straighteners’. In his telling, an ‘enlarger’ like Governor Lachlan Macquarie was followed by a ‘straightener’ – in Macquarie’s case, ‘the flogging parson’ Samuel Marsden. Likewise the ‘straightener’ Robert Menzies eventually gave way to an ‘enlarger’ in Gough Whitlam. Perhaps the parenting wars are similar: a perpetual struggle between the hard nuts and the soft touches; the disciplinarians and the libertarians; the rigid and the relaxed; the legalistic and the laissez-faire. It’s hard to find neutral words to describe both groups, words without judgement, but it’s worth a try. Both sets of parents love their children and want to give them the best start in life.

The battle was, and remains, hard fought, through various books, courses and more recently websites, podcasts and ‘influencers’. Viewed from a vantage point high above the field of battle, victory was won by the ‘softies’ in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by a ‘hard nuts’ backlash in the late 90s, which stuck around for the best part of a couple of decades.

How to measure the changing fortunes of both sides in this debate? One way is by tracking the term ‘little tyrant’. It’s occasionally used to describe an authoritarian political leader, but not often. Mostly it’s featured in books or articles about child-rearing. It’s a verbal talisman for those who believe, rightly or wrongly, that children should be subjected to greater control. Google’s Ngram Viewer can track any term over time, counting its use in digitised books, newspapers and magazines. Perform a search for the phrase ‘little tyrant’ for publications in English and the graph shows peaks in 1920 and again in 1953, with dips before and after. Then there’s a slow climb back to prominence from the early 2000s. It’s not a perfect measure, of course, but it does show how the ‘softies’ defeated the ‘toughies’ sometime around the 1970s and early 80s, only for the ‘toughies’ to make a comeback.



The rollercoaster ride of the phrase 'little tyrant', a handy guide to the battle between the softies vs the hard-nuts.

Google Books Ngram Viewer: [books/google.com/ngrams](https://books.google.com/ngrams)

Of course, both armies were always present on the battlefield. Even in the flower-power 1960s and 1970s there were plenty who were horrified by the 'child-centred' policies of books like the first edition Dr Spock. As one US conservative put it in 1969, a whole generation of children had been 'Spocked when they should have been spanked'. All the same, a new note was being sounded. Experts began advocating for a more child-centred approach.

Let's return to Clair Isbister. By the time of her first publication in 1958, Isbister was already consultant paediatrician at Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital, a role she held from 1948 until she retired in 1980. She was 'the nation's best-known paediatrician', according to her obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'proxy mother to thousands of Australians'. Four editions of her bestseller *Birth, Infancy and Childhood* were published between 1965 and 1980, alongside many other titles. She was a social conservative, twice standing for Fred Nile's Christian-conservative political party, Call to Australia, but she still advocated for a cautious retreat from the 'cap on cuddles'.

'Babies need handling and stimulation,' she wrote, 'but it can be overdone.' Or again: 'Nursing soothes them, but excessive nursing makes them too dependent.' It was fine to let them cry, she said, but not for hours on end: 'I suggest a ten-minute limit on crying. After that a cause must be

found.’ She recommended reading a story at bedtime – a previous no-no – and noted that ‘nursing a baby who wants close contact and needs company is not spoiling him’. Then again, she also argued that there are dangers with the ‘let them do anything’ policy. There’s a ‘need for discipline’, she said in the 1980 edition of her guidebook: ‘Many fear that we are now in a disintegrating society that will be destroyed by its passion for allowing the individual to do as he likes, regardless of what is happening to the child, his environment and society.’

Isbister objected to homosexuality, which she called a ‘terrible problem’. She was down on feminists who, she said, had a ‘hatred of men’. And she disliked screen dramas such as *Number 96* and *Alvin Purple*, calling them soft porn. On the other hand, she wrote with respect about children and their rights, and broke with the reflex of blaming everything on the parents, in particular the mothers. ‘Often,’ she wrote in 1971, ‘the trouble is no fault of their own.’

You could say Isbister was having a bet each way, but perhaps it’s fairer to see her as a transitional figure. The new child-centred ideas were gaining in popularity. In January 1974, a long piece in the *Australian Women’s Weekly* advocated for John Bowlby’s ‘attachment’ view of parenting, which it summarised as the belief that the ‘child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother’. It’s worth remembering that even as this idea hit the mainstream, young Indigenous Australians, the stolen generations, were still being removed from their families, as they had been since 1910. This deliberate policy of racial and cultural erasure saw, in some communities, one in three Indigenous children removed from their families. So, no ‘attachment parenting’ for them.

In 1974, according to the *Weekly*, a turning point had been reached. The *Weekly*’s article, based on Bowlby’s emphasis on the bond between child and mother, is headlined: ‘Four Popular Ideas on Child-rearing – and Why You Should Ignore Them’. All these ideas – notions of feeding-by-clock and a limit on cuddling – were being swept away. ‘Far from spoiling, the responsive mother is ensuring the future emotional and intellectual strength of her child,’ said the magazine. Similarly, early toilet training, as recommended to an earlier generation, was now linked with ‘learning problems in arithmetic’. Thumb-sucking was fine, according to the *Weekly*, and it was natural for the baby to touch his or her genitals. So much for Zoe

Benjamin and her injunction against tight pants and her enthusiasm for genital surgery.

The medical profession, the magazine cautioned, would still give the old-fashioned advice of 'Don't let the little one get the upper hand' and nurses in hospital maternity wards would still describe crying as the baby 'just exercising their lungs'. There were still books being published, warned the *Weekly*, saying you shouldn't be 'giving in to his demands'. Such books, the magazine now said, should be ignored.

For all the *Weekly's* certainty that a new dawn had arrived in 1974, it wasn't so simple. A bugle had been blown in what was to become an ongoing war. Even the *Weekly* itself was hardly holding the line. A piece later that year could have been written by Truby King himself. A child who awakes at night and tries to come into your bedroom should be put back into his own room, the magazine said, with the door locked to prevent further excursions. With an older child, the parents should set a time 'when he should disappear into his room, not to be seen or heard from until morning'.

By 1978, however, 'cuddle culture' was clearly winning. The *Weekly* addressed its three million readers with extracts from *The Baby Book for Fathers* by the UK writers Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick. 'The child should be fed whenever he seems hungry,' they advised. 'Picking up baby because he is crying is not spoiling him; it is giving him what he needs.' Was there no end to this soft-hearted hippy revolution? And did Kerry Packer, proprietor of the *Weekly* and a notoriously tough father, know his bestselling magazine was peddling this stuff?



No cap on cuddles: the Ho family, photographed in Melbourne by Bec Matheson.

*Bec Matheson, [www.becmatheson.com](http://www.becmatheson.com)*

The ‘Swinging Sixties’, it’s sometimes said by historians, didn’t reach Australia until the 1970s. Perhaps the parenting revolution had the same delay. The first steps may have been taken by Dr Spock in 1946 but it took until the 1980s to be thoroughly mainstream in Australia. It was not until 1980, for instance, that *Our Babies*, the official guidebook for five decades in New South Wales (and for various periods in Victoria and Western Australia), was completely rewritten. The advice had softened over time, but with this 1980 edition the past was swept away. The child could sleep in the parental bed. Dummies were OK, providing they were kept clean. Toilet training should not be even considered until well into the baby’s second year. Masturbation was natural, although when the child is older you could point out that it shouldn’t be done in front of others. And there was no point in fixed routines: ‘No two babies are the same in appearance or behaviour. Each one is a new person, with his or her own patterns of sleeping, feeding or crying.’ The child should be fed ‘as often as she seems hungry. Her appetite is her own . . . try to be as flexible as you can. Accept that her need for food is as urgent as it sounds.’

The baby was even, finally, a ‘her’.

The child, the booklet concluded, 'needed to feel loved'. It recommended the four As: Affection, Attachment, Acceptance and Approval.

Truby King and friends would be turning in their graves.

In particular, the old prohibition against praise was finally being overthrown. Just as a previous generation was warned about the terrible impact of too much praise, there were now warnings, just as dire, about giving too little praise. Here, in the *Weekly* of July 1981, are regular columnists Reg and Dena Leighton:

Our courtrooms are full of unloved and unloving youngsters. 'My parents were always on my back', say many juvenile offenders. 'Yet when I did things right they never praised me.' . . . Listening to some parents, all you hear is: 'Stop that! Don't! Come away! No!' Every comment seems negative.

Praise, they advised, was the best strategy. Maybe, finally, it was OK to be 'too big for your boots'.

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This shift in the rules of parenting wasn't happening in a vacuum. Australia in the 1970s was experiencing big changes. Women were joining the workforce as never before. Fathers were being urged to take a greater role in parenting. And liberation movements were arguing the case for everything from gay rights to feminism. Motherhood was no longer seen as compulsory – a patriotic duty which every woman would strive to fulfil, the price of their citizenship. As historian Michelle Arrow has pointed out, one of Gough Whitlam's first acts when he became prime minister in 1972 was to remove the luxury tax on the contraceptive pill. Motherhood, Whitlam was affirming, wasn't everyone's goal.

If this all sounds like a nirvana of women's rights, that's not how it felt to many. Women were being asked to take on new roles in the workforce but without the childcare, workplace policies, part-time work or equal pay that might make such a juggling act possible. As one writer put it in the *Australian Women's Weekly* of April 1965: 'We are not emancipated, we are only halfway there. We have merely established the right to do two jobs instead of one. Men have yielded nothing.'

I've mentioned already the Whitlam government's Royal Commission on Human Relationships, which, from 1974, took evidence on subjects such as childcare, equal pay and family violence. The commissioners – Justice Elizabeth Evatt, journalist Anne Deveson and Brisbane's Anglican Archbishop Felix Arnett – received written or verbal testimony from thousands of Australians, many revealing intimate aspects of their lives. After the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975, and the election of Malcolm Fraser's conservatives, the royal commission came under attack. Fraser said some of its recommendations would 'fill every family in Australia with horror'. Yet for all the political argy-bargy, the evidence collected remains a brilliant source for understanding the pressures on families as traditional norms started to shift.

Many women wrote to express their frustration with the realities of motherhood. Michelle Arrow, who studied thousands of submissions for her book *The Seventies*, noted the desperation that was often expressed. One group of mothers, writing to the commission in February 1976, put it this way: 'It might only be 8 to 10 years that the woman is at home but that is a long time and it feels like being in jail.'

Or from another:

I am discriminated against in terms of conditions of work and job satisfaction. As a mother I work seven days a week all year, every year, with occasional help from my husband. I am 'on call' every night and it is rare for me to get an undisturbed night's sleep. It is five years since I had a holiday . . . Yet I am expected to cope with all this, full time, for the 'love of it'. Love is supposed to be my satisfaction and reward. Of course I love my family; but the idea that women produce children purely for their own pleasure is a fallacy sponsored by an affluent and shortsighted society intent on genocide.

It was a return to anxiety over the birth rate, and over what was once called 'race suicide'. Parenting, in particular mothering, was just too tough.

The royal commission recommended that parenting courses needed to shift focus so that the father understood his equal role. And the country also needed sponsored childcare for all mothers, whether they were in paid work

or not. As one submission put it: ‘Everyone needs a holiday from work, why not mothers?’

The expanded role of the father was teased out in various testimonies. One man gave evidence about his battle to attend the birth of his child at Sydney’s Parramatta Hospital in 1975. Permission had been denied – he told the commission – but he finally persuaded the authorities to allow him to be there. It was an experience, he hoped, which would allow him to be ‘more able to share in the caring of the child’. The commission also heard about a parenting course being run in Western Australian schools, noting evidence that the boys ‘are as interested, if not more so, than girls in the area of child nurturing’. And it commissioned research into the small cohort of stay-at-home fathers, published as a separate book, *Fathers at Home*, which featured fifteen Melbourne couples in which the fathers were fulltime caregivers.

It’s hard to be a pioneer, and I wouldn’t want to take anything away from the achievement of those fathers. Some mothers, though, may be amused to read how taken aback the men were when they discovered the difficulty of the role. One, for example, confessed he had planned to combine fulltime caregiving duties with establishing a vineyard in his ‘spare time’, only to find he had none. He told interviewer Jan Harper: ‘How often I look back at the day and recollect that I have washed a few things, swept a few things, cooked a few things . . . the evaporation of time is depressing, and being depressed is depressing.’

The personal was the political, as feminism had long taught. There were submissions from the Women’s Electoral Lobby asking that male workers be granted leave to care for unwell children. Others pushed the need for paternity leave after a birth. The commission also noted the changing nature of the family. The landmark Harvester Judgement of 1907, setting a minimum wage for Australian workers, assumed that the male pay packet be sufficient to support a wife and three children in ‘frugal comfort’. The judgement reflected the reality of the workplace. In 1933, for example, married women comprised just 5.4 per cent of the workforce. By 1973, the commission noted, all that had changed: half of the mothers of preschool-age children were working, despite the shortage of childcare. Paid work had become normal for young mothers, but with no real change to either of their roles – that of ‘mother’ and that of ‘employee’.

Couples were also having fewer children, a trend that has continued. In 1947, the boom year of the baby boomers, Australia recorded 24 births per 1000 people. By 1975 the birthrate had reached its lowest point since 1938, with 17 births per 1000. It's now 10.8 per 1000. Most women still expressed the view that motherhood was part of their life plan, but the commission added a caveat: 'Women are reluctant to state that they want no children, because it is generally considered socially unacceptable.' That, by the way, is no longer the case: in the respected HILDA Survey, released in 2025, 14 per cent of Australian women and 15 per cent of men were happy to reveal that they never want children.

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A few years after the royal commission's 1977 report, the *Australian Women's Weekly* launched its own project, 'The Voice of the Australian Woman'. Announced in February 1980, it was a survey consisting of scores of questions about sex, motherhood and employment. It received 30,000 responses, a third of which included letters often sharing intensely personal experiences. Alongside the royal commission, it provides another vivid insight into the high hopes and sad stresses of a period in which everything changed.

While 80 per cent of women rated having children as 'important' or 'very important', it didn't work out that way for everybody. Women, said one respondent, were required to have a family 'whether they want children or not'. In her letter to the magazine, she said she believed she'd been a 'quite good' mother – 'often, however, I feel that my life has been limited and diminished by a role I didn't truly want.'

Or, from another respondent: 'I have four children. I love all of them, but it's clear that four is too many . . . my husband, I am quite sure, would not have left me if we had only had two.'

The letter was brief but expressed a whole world of anguish.

Over fifty years had passed from the similar letter I quoted earlier, the one from the mother who signed herself 'SHABBY AND HUNGRY' in the pages of Melbourne's *Sun News-Pictorial* in 1923. She had described herself as 'a total wreck', unable to care for children, 'these poor little innocents', given her small wages and the high cost of living. The two

women, separated by half a century, both had four children. Both were living a life of despair.

Sometimes, over time, not much changes. The put-upon – or the oppressed, to use a more formal word – are left to howl across the decades.

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While some women embraced the workforce, others fought for the right to be a respected ‘stay-at-home mum’. To quote again from Michelle Arrow, there were two main groups who advocated for what was sometimes called ‘the sanctity of motherhood’: the Women’s Action Alliance (WAA) and Women Who Want to be Women (WWWW). Child-rearing expert Dr Clair Isbister gave speeches supporting the cause – among other things attacking Elizabeth Reid in her role as women’s advisor to Prime Minister Whitlam. Isbister believed Reid couldn’t represent the ordinary woman of Australia because she was divorced. The view that women were being forced into paid work was put by many. As one ‘over-55-year-old’ reader responded to the *Weekly’s* ‘Voice of the Australian Woman’: ‘The “liberated” woman ends up coping with two fulltime jobs. She has been conned.’

Some men, as mentioned in Chapter 4, also felt the pressure of changing times, with society expecting more involvement from the father, but without much modification to the expectations of being a good breadwinner.

Certainly, there was tension over the idea of the two-income family, with terms like ‘latchkey kids’ expressing the anxiety about children returning to an empty house after school. Paul Keating, later Australia’s twenty-fourth prime minister, tackled the subject of mothers in paid work when he made his first speech to parliament, in March 1970. The text could have been written by Women Who Want to be Women. Said the new member for the seat of Blaxland:

Husbands have been forced to send their wives to work in order to provide the necessities of life. Young mothers have been forced out of their homes by economic pressure . . . Family life is the very basis of our nationhood. In the last couple of years the Government has boasted about the increasing number of women in the workforce. Rather than something to be proud of, I feel that this is something of which we should be ashamed . . . How can we have

national growth without people? How can we survive without a population? Is this Government doing anything about child endowment? Is it doing anything to put the working wife back in her home? It is not.

He advocated doing more to encourage couples to have children, instead of relying on immigration to boost the numbers. 'The best migrant,' he said, 'is the infant Australian.'



A newly minted Vietnamese Australian, arriving at Melbourne airport in 1977, ignores the Member for Blaxland. Kevin Schreiber/The Age.

*Kevin Schreiber/The Age*

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Amid the pressures of combining work and home, some believed the rise of so-called child-centred parenting was making the job harder than it needed to be, leading to the decline in births that so worried Paul Keating. Bring back a bit of discipline, the argument went, and perhaps parents would be more amenable to having kids. You may think this idea had already been tried and found wanting. But history repeats – and the disciplinarians were about to make a spectacular comeback.

## CHAPTER 10

# The Backlash Arrives

When my partner, Debra, and I had our two boys, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the child-centred model was still the orthodoxy. The main guidebook we used was by the UK writer Penelope Leach. It was called *Baby and Child*, and was a bestseller in the UK, Australia and the US. I still have our battered copy, the cover held on with sticky tape, featuring the sales pitch: ‘At last, the baby book that is written from the child’s point of view.’ Was it excessively child-centred? I’ll come back to that question in a moment, but I do remember plenty of nights, standing in a darkened corridor, rocking a child to sleep, aware that the infant was only truly comfortable when I was at my most uncomfortable – leaning slightly backwards, and to one side, while attempting a tuneless warble of ‘Along the Road to Gundagai’. Then, when they were older, I’d lie beside them in their bed, willing them to sleep, and once again sang ‘Along the Road to Gundagai’. It was the only song I knew. I have a memory of one of them saying: ‘It’s alright, Daddy, I’ll go to sleep, but only if you stop singing.’

We were the very model of ‘child-centred’ parents. But not everyone agreed with our methods. A rebellion was brewing. From about 1990, our sort of parenting was criticised both by traditionalists on the right and feminists on the left. Those on the right said that ‘child-centred’ parenting was creating spoilt, ill-disciplined, whingey adults, a view that went back to the late 1960s, when conservatives like US columnist Stewart Alsop blamed Spock for creating a generation of ‘young jerks terrified of the draft’. But on the left, child-centred parenting was accused of a different crime. It was said that such parenting reduced mothers to slave status, locking them in their homes, in the perpetual service of their children. It was a tool, critics said, of the patriarchy.

The feminist argument was vigorously put by Sharon Hays in an influential 1996 book called *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. In that book and subsequent articles, Hays argued that Bowlby's 'attachment parenting' had never been proved – it was just a theory, based on animal studies and wartime orphanages. And it was part of what she named 'intensive mothering', which she defined as 'child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally-absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive'. During the 1970s and 1980s, she said, 'intensive mothering' had become the dominant ideology of child-rearing in Western countries.

Hays analysed two American experts, Benjamin Spock and T. Berry Brazelton, as well as my UK guru Penelope Leach. Hays described the 'child-centred' models of Leach and others as 'a series of taxing and exacting prescriptions for completely selfless, constant mother care . . . ultimately a perfect reflection of the cultural ideology of women as passive, nurturing caregivers . . . a means to keep women in their place.' She also argued – in an echo of the language of 'little tyrants' – that far from producing well-rounded kids, this sort of mothering could produce 'self-absorbed, narcissistic monsters'.

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Penelope Leach was certainly popular. *Baby and Child* was first published in 1977 and was reprinted multiple times during the 1980s and 1990s, clocking up two million sales worldwide. And Sharon Hays is right, to an extent, that the advice is centred on the child. It certainly differs from the 'don't spoil the little tyrant' advice of the past. Leach says a baby cannot be spoilt – they 'are not grown up or clever enough to be spoiled'. On the other hand, re-reading the book today, its advice doesn't seem *that* oblivious to the needs of the parent. Leach's argument, if I can brutally reduce it to a single sentence, goes something like: 'Parenting is tough and being unresponsive to the child makes it even tougher.'

Hays is undoubtedly right that many women are caught in what she calls 'the contradictions of motherhood'. They are compelled by need or desire to join the world of paid employment but also fervently want to be loving and available mothers. It's hell for some, of course, and an exhausting, occasionally thrilling hire-wire juggling act for everyone else. But, for me, Hays is wrong when she blames a particular style of parenting

for creating all this difficulty. Would life really be that much easier if you adopted the policy of ‘spanking a disobedient child’, to use her phrase? Or decided, as she appears to recommend, to rigidly breastfeed by the clock, rather than on demand? Would you really be better off if you refused to ‘negotiate’ with your child, an idea which Hays thinks sufficiently risible to put in quote marks? As we’ve seen, such methods – smacking children, ignoring them, letting them sob themselves to sleep, and refusing to let them be heard – were not exactly stress free. They often left mothers weeping in hallways and, decades later, regretting that they’d ever listened to such ‘get tough’ theories.



How about a bit of discipline? 'I'll tell you to do something peculiar, and you just do it.' Photo by Ivan Ive for *Pix*, 9 August 1939.

*Ivan Ive for Pix, 9 August 1939, courtesy of State Library of NSW*

And by laying all the blame on a particular parenting style, Hays shifts focus away from the public policy changes that really would make life easier. We could, for example, extend take-it-or-lose-it parental leave for the father. We could better protect women who want to leave a job and then return. We could offer more part-time work, for both men and women. We could have more protections for people who need to work from home. The Scandinavians – those most annoyingly perfect of people – are doing much of this. And it's made a difference to how men, women and families work. The story, if you would like to know more, is told by the Australian journalist Annabel Crabb in her compelling 2014 book *The Wife Drought*, and her follow-up, *Men at Work*, published in the journal *Quarterly Essay*.

Can you be a cheerleader for both the parent and the child? Leach believed so. 'Children,' she wrote in *Baby and Child*, 'do not need superhuman, perfect parents . . . they have always managed with good enough parents.' By feeding them when they want to be fed, and holding them tenderly, you make life easier for yourself – at least when compared to a sleepless night listening to a crying child. She also emphasised flexibility. If your baby hates bathtime, clean him with a washcloth. If breastfeeding doesn't work out, or you need to return to paid employment, just get some formula and don't worry about it.

And, sometimes, her advice doesn't seem child-centred at all, at least not in the definition provided by Hays. The child, says Leach, once put to bed, should never be allowed to leave its room. Leach is also not keen on children sleeping in the parental bed. And she has her own kindly version of sleep training, in which you enter the room, comfort the crying child, then leave. True, she instructs you to constantly return – but to do so while making it clear that there's no getting up: 'Once the child is in bed, getting out again should be banned or, better still, never considered.'

Hays positions Leach as the most child-centred of the three authors. 'Unlike the other two,' she writes in reference to Spock and Brazelton, 'Leach does not include a single chapter, section or subsection on the parents' need.' Yet, as we've seen, Leach's aim is to make parenting more enjoyable and satisfying. I do wonder, re-reading Leach and then Hays's version of Leach, whether any of the many fans of Hays's work have ever bothered to check whether the 'softy' Leach and her hippy accomplices Spock and Brazelton were entirely guilty of the crimes for which they were convicted. And yet 'intensive mothering' is still under attack today, blamed

for all sorts of ills. In September 2025, a Melbourne Institute demographer was asked about Australia's low birthrate, as it hit new lows. She blamed the cost of housing but also the pressure on parents to do the best possible job, leading to 'intensive parenting', in which 'parents are expected to invest a significant amount of their time, energy and money into the development of their children'. It was Sharon Hays's phrase, still being quoted thirty years on.

And, of course, it was an echo, 100 years on, of the views of Truby King and Jean Ayling. If only we put kids in their place, more people would breed.

I also wonder why Hays never considered the idea that some young mothers, having studied the evidence, might *choose* to adopt some form of attachment parenting, bending it to suit their own circumstances and those of their child. Young mothers are instead reduced to victims – having 'fully internalised' the values of the patriarchy and neoliberalism. It's a view of the world in which the mothers are robbed of their volition – that human ability to question the orthodoxies of their time. The ability to throw off the ideological shackles of the era is one of the inspiring things about human beings – a fact celebrated by the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson in his fine book *The Poverty of Theory*.

Sometimes, whatever the sociologists say, humans make up their own minds.

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I don't mean to be too defensive about Penelope Leach. Perhaps no one can give up on the expert they followed themselves. It's also true that some books and websites do set a high bar for the modern parent. I've read about experts who suggest parents learn sign language and teach it to their newborn, so communication can begin before spoken language is possible. On another website, the rigid feeding clocks of Truby King are replaced with even more complex daily sessions for the baby to develop 'fine motor skills', 'gross motor skills', and 'social skills' – an hour set aside for each. Then there are the self-proclaimed Tiger Mums – most famously Amy Chua in her 2011 book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* – with their arduous schedules of child development.

And what about the babies forced to endure opera while still in the womb? Does no-one think of the neighbours?

The Australian writer and translator Tiffany Tsao, in a gloriously spiky 2025 essay for the *Griffith Review*, wrote about the punishing requirements of modern parenting, and the surge of self-doubt it created in her. ‘I pushed the enormous double pram through streets and parks and malls,’ she wrote, ‘ankle-deep in the sense that having kids was a terrible mistake. I had been utterly unprepared for the avalanche of advice around how to raise small children “well”.’

Later in the same essay, Tsao paints a picture of the toddler years that any parent would recognise:

Temperament-wise I was all wrong, without the endless reserves of patience and gentleness that were apparently required. As a toddler, my eldest son was prone to white-hot bouts of screaming rage at seemingly everything: not getting to push the lift button, not wanting to get off the train at our stop, not wanting me to have eaten the leftover toast I had repeatedly asked him if he still wanted, to which he had repeatedly responded *no*.

The truth: parenting is hard. Penelope Leach said just that: ‘Bringing up baby is undeniably hard work.’ And what Tsao calls ‘the avalanche of advice’ often makes it worse, especially when the tone is judgemental – whether you are accused of being too involved, not enough involved, or involved in the wrong way. The judgemental advice never seems to take account of the personality of the child, or of the family in which they live. The typical child advice book is like a repair manual for a car – but published in a world in which each individual vehicle has been built to its own design, fitted with different working parts and garaged in a unique spot. In such circumstances, a universal guide – especially a finger-wagging one – may not be that useful.

I may have finally stumbled upon the point that this book is trying to make.

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My own childhood was relatively free of religion. My parents showed few signs of faith, but they believed that regular church attendance – mine, not

theirs – was a step on the road to social respectability. Every Sunday morning, I'd be dropped off at Presbyterian Sunday School. There we would make models of the three wise men from pipe cleaners, and then models of sheep using pipe cleaners, cotton buds and Clag Paste. It was so boring the clock appeared to go backwards.

At least my parents never used the Bible as a parenting guide. Others did. Joining the backlash against child-centred parenting were the religious conservatives. The 'soft methods', popular among hippy maniacs such as Debra and myself, had led to a decline in Godliness and in Discipline. The bestselling *Becoming Babywise* books, for example, began as a parenting course run by Anne Marie Ezzo and her husband, Gary, in an evangelical megachurch in Sun Valley, California. The first book, self-published in 1990, was subtitled: 'Bringing God's Order to Your Baby's Day and Restful Sleep to Your Baby's Night'. It was a return to the idea of letting them 'cry it out'. Truby King, had he still been around, could have sued for breach of copyright. The baby was to eat for thirty minutes every three hours, be kept awake for a further thirty minutes, then put down to sleep. By the third week, the last feed would be just before the parents' bedtime (Truby's 10 pm feed), then the child would be left unattended until morning (Truby's 6 am start).

The parenting wars involve confusing battlelines, and the Ezzos were eventually booted out of their church for 'stifling the mother's desire to comfort her children'. The church also felt the couple had overdone things by quoting the Bible as proof of their theories. The Ezzos said God himself had backed the idea of letting a child cry: 'Praise God,' they wrote, 'that the Father did not intervene when His Son cried out on the cross.' Apparently using the crucifixion as evidence for your latest parenting theory was a step too far. Who knew? This may be the first time I've agreed with the elders of an American evangelical megachurch.

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When people describe the techniques of high-school debating, they sometimes mention the 'straw man' argument. This is where you create a set of opinions so extreme they are laughable, and you then ascribe those opinions to the other team. In the parenting wars, this 'straw man' – or, more often, 'straw woman' – has long been the weapon of choice.

So, in attacking attachment theory, Sharon Hays paints Penelope Leach as a person who would allow children every liberty, until they entirely ruin their mother's life, turning her into a hapless slave. As we've seen, Leach doesn't quite say that.

Meanwhile, Gina Ford, Britain's current 'Queen of Routine', attacks 'gentle parenting', which she somehow defines as allowing children to watch cartoons on an iPad while eating dinner. Such parents 'are frightened to be firm with their children', she told one newspaper in 2025. Well, maybe, but since when did 'gentle parenting' mean 'You can watch *Paw Patrol* while chewing'? I'm sure that sometimes happens, but it's hardly recommended by advocates of the method.

Breastfeeding also has its critics, which might surprise you. In the real world, mothers choose all sorts of feeding methods, to suit themselves and the child. Some bottle-feed from the start, others mix bottle-feeding with some breastfeeding, still others breastfeed for the first few months before moving on. The critics of breastfeeding, though, assume it is always an all-or-nothing affair: nothing but the breast, continuing until the child is perhaps three or four, the mother unable to leave the child's side. Having fashioned this straw figure, Linda M. Blum, in her book *At the Breast* (1999), argues that breastfeeding is therefore only available to privileged mothers with husbands able to provide the years of financial support that's required. It's therefore part of 'a white, status- and class-enhancing project', which directs guilt and anxiety on working-class women who will need, at some stage, to take on paid employment outside the home.



What a toff! A mother participating in the 'white, status- and class-enhancing project' known as breastfeeding. Illustration from *You and Your Baby* (1948) by Sister Mary Jacob.

*From Mary Jacob, You and Your Baby, Shakespeare Head, 1948*

A third 'straw man' argument was the one targeting 'overprotective parents'. In 2008, an American journalist, Lenore Skenazy, wrote a piece for the New York *Sun* promoting what she called 'free-range parenting'. She wrote about allowing her own nine-year-old child to ride the New York subway alone, which, she said, gave him a chance to develop resilience and independence. Some readers cheered her on; others were doubtful: 'The New York subway at 9? That seems a bit much.' The resulting kerfuffle gave Skenazy a bestselling book – *Free-Range Kids* – and an invitation to go on speaking tours to places like Australia.

I interviewed her in 2010 at the Sydney Opera House for its Festival of Dangerous Ideas and, of course, she was a huge hit. The idea, I secretly thought, was not at all 'dangerous'. It fitted the nostalgia for an imagined and glorious past in which children were always completely safe and completely free. Parents, she proposed to much applause, were now

needlessly wrapping their kids in cotton wool, producing a generation of cosseted and fearful humans. And such parents couldn't even see the terrible damage they were causing.

It's true that, as a child in the 1960s, I roamed the neighbourhood without adult supervision. Then again, there really were perils in the woods. There were paedophiles aplenty, and some children were unfortunate enough to meet them. There were also adults who wouldn't believe a child if they dared recount what had happened. There were unfenced pools, poisons with easy-to-open lids, and drunk dads driving cars with little chance of being caught. And, to repeat an argument I made in my book about Australia in the 1970s, *The Land Before Avocado*, while it was fun to do 'circle work' – being thrown from side to side in the back of a ute, driven by an uncle who had a farm – some kids, occasionally, fell out and broke their heads. History, it is often said, is written by the winners. But also, I say, by the survivors.

Sure, Skenazy is right when it comes to some families. There *are* parents who are always hovering at their child's side; 'helicopter parents', to use the popular phrase. They solve every problem before their child has had their own chance to do so. These same parents are notorious for complaining to the teacher, assuming that any academic failure or problem with a fellow student cannot be the fault of their perfect child. I agree, that's bad. Of course, it's bad.

I'm also sure that there are some parents on the other side, parents who are overly laissez-faire. There's no neat media headline for these parents, but in the popular parlance it's expressed along the lines of: 'Those slackers up the road, they let those little monsters run wild, they should wake up to themselves.' Again, I agree. That sort of lax parenting is not good. Children like limits and rules. It makes them feel cherished. But here's the thing: both those groups – the ones on the two extremes – are in a minority, whatever the urgings of the media, the publishing industry and even the people you meet in day-to-day life.

While writing this book, I've learnt that nearly everyone has a story about nutty parenting. I rarely mentioned my project without being told a story from the extremes, either of appallingly harsh discipline or of children left to do whatever they liked. One acquaintance doubled up – describing her two siblings, both of them parents. In one household, the son had his pants pulled down and was spanked in front of visitors. Meanwhile, in the

other brother's family, the daughter would run amok, destroying shops and restaurants, to the apparent indifference of her parents.

I'm not doubting the stories, of which I've now heard scores, but in my direct experience, Australian parents are nearly always keen to steer a course between being overly protective and overly permissive. At what age should your kids go into town with friends to see a movie? Well, that depends. Are we talking Friday night? Or Sunday afternoon? Is the cinema in the rowdy end of town, or the calmer end? Are the friends sensible? Have members of the group made a similar bus or train trip, and thus know what they are doing? I've heard this debate about protection versus freedom a thousand times, nearly always in a nuanced and reasonable way.

Writers like Skenazy have an interest in presenting a world in which everyone has gone mad, and in which they are the only person to stop the rot. Meanwhile, the parents I know are trying to keep their children safe while also letting them explore the world. That means making their best possible assessment of their city or town, in all its delights and dangers, and of their particular child, in all her curiosity, wildness and smarts. Most of the time, I reckon, they do all right.

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The parents, you'll note, are always silly duffers in these books from recent decades – whether the book is left-wing, right-wing, feminist or churchy. The parents are trying to 'ruin a child', just like they were in 1920 or 1950. They are too protective. Or too neglectful. Or too child-focused. Or too lax. They are 'showing their privilege' by breastfeeding. Or, like robots, they are following a socially decreed model of motherhood dictated to them by neoliberalism and the patriarchy. Sometimes the language is not that different from that of the 1920s and the May Gibbs cartoon I quoted earlier:

I hardly like delivering the Goods  
Mrs Kookaburra  
them Humans is so Gum careless of 'em.

Parents – and in particular, mothers – are gullible fools or agents of doom. At one point, they were responsible for schizophrenia thanks to the now abandoned idea of the 'schizophrenogenic mother', popular from the 1950s to the 1970s. At another, they were to blame for autism: the 'refrigerator

mothers' popularised by the fantasist and plagiarist Bruno Bettelheim. Or they were to blame for moral decline. Or rubbish on the trains. Or tooth decay. Or obesity. Or, in the work of Sharon Hays, for their own exhaustion. Always there is 'maternal culpability'.

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Meanwhile, in every bookshop, there was a new generation of books that promised to help parents control their children. The backlash had arrived. The books had titles like *I'm OK, You're a Brat!* (1999), *Turning the Tables on Tiny Tyrants* (2000) or *My Kids are Driving Me Crazy* (2004). By far the most successful Australian title was *Toddler Taming* by the Sydney paediatrician Dr Christopher Green. First published in 1984, the cover of the fifth edition in 2014 boasted it had sold a million copies. Much of Green's advice is sensible, but he also showed a preference for firmness that struck a chord with many readers.

Green claims to have invented Controlled Crying, which he renders with initial capitals as if it were a brand name. Here's his method: when it's bedtime, put the child in their bed or cot, then leave. If they cry, wait five minutes 'before coming in to give some, but not full, comfort'. Then exit the room and wait seven minutes before re-entering to once more give 'some, but not full, comfort'. Next wait nine minutes; then eleven. You keep on extending the crying time by two minutes, and, once the child has been crying for an hour, you can 'as a last resort' administer a sedative. I assume to yourself.

He also supplies a method to keep young children in their room by tying a rope onto the door handle *inside* their room, and then out into the hallway to another door handle. He doesn't quite put it this way, but the result is like a security chain on a front door. The door can be opened, but not wide enough to achieve escape.

Green says Controlled Crying – let's allow him his proprietary capitals – will produce a reliable full night's sleep after three nights, or a week max. He says he successfully used the technique on his two boys, alongside his trick with the rope. Although why he needed to rope the door shut if both boys were so blissfully and immediately asleep is not entirely clear.

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The appetite for a tougher, power-to-the-parent attitude wasn't restricted to Australia. As early as 1970, the US author James Dobson was offering *Dare to Discipline*, arguing that permissiveness was leading to moral decay. In the UK, in 1978, Peter Mayle produced *Baby Taming: How to Stay in Control When Your Little Monster Tries to Take Over*. Mayle was an advertising executive who later struck it rich with the international bestseller *A Year in Provence*. His book, while meant to be mildly humorous, lays it on pretty thick:

What does your little monster want? Just this: your total and unquestioning obedience to every gurgle and yell . . . during the first years your baby will try and lay the foundations for a whole childhood of making you jump . . . they have an uncanny ability to conceal their real intentions, even during the first three months of life.

If they are slow to be toilet trained, it's a way of trying to 'impose their will on you'. Feeding on demand will 'quickly make your life hell'. Mayle is also a fan of sleep training: 'Resign yourself to a half-hour of high octane screeching for a week or so.'

The battle between 'tough' and 'soft' continued through the 1990s and onwards – with victory, if measured by sales and attention, going towards a stricter method of parenting. By the early 2000s, for instance, the UK parenting lists were dominated by Gina Ford, whose recommended program of rigid sleeping and feeding was not that dissimilar to that of the 1930s. In books such as *The Contented Little Baby Book*, she argued that babies should be 'allowed' a five-to-ten-minute period of crying before being comforted, and that feeding on demand was a mistake. At one stage, Ford claimed her titles represented 25 per cent of the parenting books sold in the UK. Meanwhile, on television in both the UK and Australia, the child-rearing star was 'Supernanny' Jo Frost whose method included much tut-tutting and the placing of children on 'the naughty step'. The show's success led to *Supernanny* programs in around 50 countries, featuring Frost herself or a local finger-wagging substitute.

Even tougher methods were promoted in the Channel 4 documentary *Bringing Up Baby*, screened in the UK in 2007 and on the ABC in Australia in 2009. The program featured, among others, the 'maternity nurse' Claire

Verity who explicitly advocated for the return of Truby King's methods. Her version was even harsher than the 1913 original. While Truby King advocated limited handling of babies, he never specified 'a ten-minute daily limit on cuddles'. But Claire Verity did. She also suggested leaving tiny babies alone in their own rooms – something now listed as a SIDS risk – as well as avoiding eye contact when preparing the child for bed. As she put it herself: 'I can't understand why anybody needs to touch a baby or pick a baby up.'

Blogs and parenting websites lit up. Some cheered on this late advocate of Truby King, most people criticised her, and no-one seemed to notice she'd made King's notoriously tough system even tougher. Even Gina Ford was horrified, calling some of the ideas 'child abuse'.

The 'tough crew' portrayed themselves in the minority, besieged by the 'gentle parents', who were also featured on the program. Meanwhile the 'gentle parents' said they were the true rebels, fighting the 'get tough' majority. This desire to be considered the brave warrior, fighting the mainstream, continues to be part of the parenting wars. Here, for example, is Katharine Birbalsingh, often called 'Britain's toughest teacher', arguing that you'd have to go back to the 1960s to find a parenting manual that puts the parent in charge. She told *The Times* in 2025:

It's almost impossible to access the kind of advice you would have gotten 50, 60 years ago. The stuff you'll get nowadays will be much more along the lines of gentle parenting, being friends with your children, not holding them to account.

It's 'almost impossible' since 1975 to get anything other than 'gentle' advice? Really? Would she like a list of the tough titles from the 1990s and 2000s? She could find such a list, a few pages back, in this very book. Why do people exaggerate so? Why do they always need to create 'straw men'?

Meanwhile, representing the child-centred crew, there's Kate Silverton, author of the UK bestseller *There's No Such Thing as 'Naughty'*. She's against 'timeout', 'naughty steps' and the rest, and, interviewed by the same newspaper, says it's her side that is now in the minority, fighting the trend towards toughness represented by people like Katharine Birbalsingh.

Everyone, I suppose, likes to be the underdog.

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Back in the 17th century, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote about children being little savages who needed constant correction. A century later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau painted the opposite picture: children were born inherently good. Neither of them based their theory on hands-on experience, or on any science. Like most of the experts that followed, Hobbes had no children and never married. In his book *Leviathan* he placed matrimony in the section called ‘Eternal Torment’, so probably not a big fan. Rousseau, it’s true, had five children – but he gave them all away to a Paris orphanage. This was done immediately after the birth of each child and – as he admits in his autobiography – in the face of opposition from the children’s mother. He didn’t think he was up to the task of raising them.

Neither man, however, felt restrained by their own lack of experience when it came to giving advice to others.

In the centuries since Hobbes and Rousseau, the view from the ‘experts’ has continued to swing between these two extremes: Hobbes’s evil child (who needs controlling) and Rousseau’s inherently good child (who requires your mere encouragement and protection). And, just like Hobbes and Rousseau, the trenches on both sides often include people who’ve never raised a child. Among the more recent experts, consider Gina Ford (no child); Supernanny Jo Frost (no child); Claire Verity (no child); and Katharine Birbalsingh (declines to say). The ‘gentle lot’, it should be said, are more likely to have children themselves. Kate Silverton, quoted above, has two.

Most parents try to find a middle path through these battlefields. They schedule a swimming lesson but also time for unstructured play. They try to find a sleep routine that somehow works. They hope for a warm, loving household that also has rules. So, would that middle ground finally win the day when it came to the experts? What would be the sources of advice used by Australian parents in the 2020s? And would the ‘let’s get tough’ backlash that began in 1990 finally come to an end? We’ll find out soon, but first some special pleading. It’s time to consider the grandparents.

## CHAPTER 11

# The Grandparent Trap or ‘Going Nuclear’

As a parent I was occasionally a naysayer. I’d veto ice-creams before breakfast. I had strong views about the use of crayons to draw rabbits on the living room wall. And I’d suggest that one craft project should be packed away before another was commenced. Now, however, I’m a grandparent. The naysayer has become the yeasayer. Within half an hour of the grandchildren’s arrival, toys are spread over every surface of the house. A tricycle is being ridden at high speed up and down the corridor. A plastic chicken that squawks when squeezed has been enthusiastically pressed into service. An art project, involving glue and paint, is underway on the kitchen table. The dog’s water bowl has been upended. Soft toys lie scattered as if by a hurricane.

It’s complete chaos. I’ve never been happier.

I now see the whole world through the lens of being a grandparent. A trip to the shops no longer involves just the supermarket, the butcher and the vegie shop. No, no, no. First, I must dart into the two-dollar shop for craft supplies. Glittery pipe cleaners, coloured ice-cream sticks, plastic baubles with which to decorate those pipe cleaners, and double-sided tape that will prove crucial to the production of a fantastical butterfly. Oh, and PVA glue to make slime, which also means a visit to the chemist to buy some contact lens solution, a substance – I now find myself knowing these things – essential for the making of slime. This stuff – plastic and chemical rubbish – is terrible for the environment. I don’t care.

‘You have no standards at all,’ says my son, somewhat playfully, when he arrives to pick up his children, stepping gingerly over the Lego, the

twisted pipe cleaners, the plastic animals and the recently created bowls of slime. ‘You’d let them do anything.’

I look at my son. He looks at me. The trouble is: all his accusations are correct. But it’s now the turn of his generation to produce another crop of decent human beings. It is for them to ban the eating of jelly just before dinner, and the drawing of rabbits on walls, and the throwing of balls when indoors. And my role? To always have the ingredients for making slime.

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Researching this book, I was surprised by the negative attitude to grandparents, persisting across decades. And I was shocked by the mid-century enthusiasm for the isolated and independent nuclear family – mum, dad and the kids, alone in the suburbs, distant from any relatives. What’s so good about that? Until recently, nearly all humans lived in extended groups in which parents were given support by others, including grandparents, aunties, uncles and plenty of friends who were called aunty and uncle. Most of the world still lives that way, including many Indigenous Australians and many families from migrant communities. So why were most of the experts so down on grandparents, and other relatives, for so much of the 20th century? Why were they so keen to cheer on those who’d ‘gone nuclear’?

My theory: they saw the grandparents as a threat to their own authority as advisors. The promotion of ‘scientific mothering’ required a ceding of maternal power to the authors of guidebooks, to the officials at the Department of Health, and to the nurses employed at local baby health centres. It involved a challenge to the traditional way of doing things. And that might be subverted if the grandparents shared the house, or lived nearby, and were allowed to have a voice.

The anti-grandparent argument was relentlessly put. Here, with quite a mean tone, is Melbourne child psychologist Irma Schnierer in her 1941 book *Making Childhood Happier*:

Children are often spoiled by their grandparents. The old people want to be important in the grandchild’s eyes and they deny them nothing. So it happens that children sometimes refuse to go home when they have spent a while with their grandparents. Such influence has to be eliminated, of course, and the old people have to

be told that on behalf of the sound development of their darlings they should not interfere with the educational principles of father and mother.

Hey Irma! Enough with the 'old people'!

Schnierer was particularly worried about families who, for reasons of poverty, were forced to live with the grandparents. 'These days three generations are frequently compelled to live under one roof,' Schnierer wrote in the *Melbourne Herald* in October 1949. 'Many child behaviour problems can be directly traced back to these most unfortunate conditions.' In particular, grandparents undermined the authority of a mother who was using the new, scientific methods: 'Nothing is more harmful to the child's emotional balance than to be punished by mother and appeased by Granny.'



The anti-grandparent argument was relentlessly put. Mind you, this bloke – pictured with his granddaughter Margaret – appears unconvinced as to his own suitability. Photo by Carl Hartmann, c. 1920s, Victoria.

*Carl Hartmann, c. 1920s, courtesy of State Library of Victoria / H2009.143/35*

Sydney's Zoe Benjamin was also wary of the live-in grandparent in her 1948 book *The Emotional Problems of Childhood*. Relatives who visit the

household, such as grandparents and aunts, are a problem, she wrote:

but it is infinitely worse if the parents and the children are living in the house of the relatives . . . the mother, perhaps, tries to bring the child up according to modern methods; the relatives, especially grandparents, may think this is all nonsense and that it is right for the child to be indulged because ‘he is so little and can only be young once’.

Such an attitude, she concluded, is just not good enough.

Benjamin also criticised grandparents who were ‘constantly disturbing and playing with the children’ – a cuttingly accurate definition of what I do whenever possible. The result of such playfulness, wrote Benjamin, would be dire: ‘In his school life he will suffer from an inability to concentrate on his work, and this may lead him to become one of the failures and misfits of adult life.’

Well, at least my grandchildren know who to blame for their future misery.

Zoe Benjamin’s friend Ralph A. Levy, later an executor of her will, contributed a chapter to her 1948 book. His subject was the father’s job. An important part of the father’s role was running interference with his own mother, he said, thus protecting his wife from her destructive meddling. As he put it: ‘A man can handle his mother with a much surer touch than a woman her mother-in-law.’

The anti-grandparent view was expressed across the country. Perth’s *Sunday Times*, with its regular column from the ‘Times Doctor’ was particularly concerned about ‘the shy child . . . often brought up by doting grandparents’. It was a message repeated in official guidebooks, such as *Our Babies*:

There are probably few greater causes of unhappiness than interference on the part of grandmothers and others in the movement and handling of babies. With the best intentions in the world, such kind-hearted folk will persist in picking up the baby when he cries, despite the protest of the mother who may have spent much time and labour in training the baby, only to have all her good work undone.

The poor young mothers, the booklet says, will so dislike enduring a disagreement with their own mothers, that ‘many will submit to having their babies spoilt’.

*Our Babies* even addresses a special section to ‘the grandmothers themselves’, hoping to improve their bad behaviour. Do not ‘sway about nursing a baby and jig him up and down . . . it teaches the infant to expect such movements’. The grandmother should not press her beliefs on the young mother. Instead, she should permit herself to delight in the fact that her daughter has had access to the latest scientific methods: ‘Such knowledge was not available in her day and she should be glad that her daughter has advantages which were denied to her.’

A few writers, most noticeably Sydney paediatrician Clair Isbister, sang the praises of involved grandparents, but hers was a rare voice. Most of the time parents were warned of the peril they faced. As the *Australian Women’s Weekly* put it in July 1965: ‘Superb grandparents are those who arrive ecstatic, stay a week, [then] go away . . . we don’t need anybody but us.’

G.M. Collins, who worked as a counsellor at the Child Health Centre in Sydney’s Parramatta, offered similar advice in his 1968 book *The Secure Child*, instructing young couples ‘to put a comfortable distance between themselves and their parents, even if it means living in a gunyah’.

A ‘gunyah’? I had to look it up. ‘Gunyah’ is an Aboriginal Australian word meaning a hut or shelter, typically a temporary structure made from bark. Presumably, Collins was trying to reach for the most ridiculous accommodation he could imagine and came up with the traditional shelter built by Indigenous Australians.

Collins, like many child-rearing experts, had studied psychology – including, presumably, giants such as Freud and Adler. I’m not sure it helped. For example, there’s this bit, in which he claims the grandmother is involved in a psychosexual battle against the realities of aging:

It depends . . . as to how well she can adapt herself to the reality of life passing onto the next generation, to the sense of no longer being needed as a parent and protectress, and to the sign that her best years as a woman are over. The grandmother has to contend with her feelings of jealousy towards her daughter for being in the flush of

womanhood and young motherhood or towards her daughter in-law for having gained the love of a previously fond son.

‘Her best years over?’ Her ‘previously fond son’?

So, what about grandparents on the father’s side? They, according to Collins, were not so bad, especially if contact was intermittent. In such cases, he writes, ‘no great harm beyond some emotional bruising usually ensues’. He doesn’t mention whether the grandfather should be similarly aware that his ‘best years as a man are over’. Mine, I’m sure, are still ahead of me. Besides, he clearly doesn’t know about the glory of having a Seniors Card, and the way it allows you to travel on the bus for almost nothing.

By 1974, the picture had shifted, but only when it came to the nature of the grandparents’ crimes. According to the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, young mothers should still ignore the grandmother, but – this time around – the grandmothers were depicted as unnecessarily harsh rather than unhelpfully loving. The 1970s grandmother, apparently, would advocate for limited physical affection between mother and child. Unaware of the latest views, she’d tell her daughter that the baby ‘has to get used to not being picked up all the time’.

Grandmothers were also depicted as getting in the way of a mother who wished to breastfeed. Sue Cox in her 1997 book *Breastfeeding: I Can Do That* is sympathetic to the grandmother who advocates for bottle-feeding due to the way she ‘was given poor advice by her health professionals’. But she must still be resisted. Otherwise, she will ‘likely suggest bottle-feeding if [the mother] has even the slightest problem with breastfeeding’. Cox recommends leaving pro-breastfeeding leaflets ‘out on the kitchen bench’ for the grandmother to stumble across.

What seems particularly cruel is the way the criticism of grandparents shifted. From the 1920s to the 1950s they were depicted as crazy libertarians who would insist on hugging their grandchildren, dishing out unearned praise and even trying to rock the poor things to sleep. What a pack of soft-hearted nutters! Some decades later, the expert view on cuddling changed. By the late 1970s, the young mother was told she was doing the right thing by responding to her child’s needs – hugging, rocking and feeding on demand. The grandparent, though, was still to be held at arm’s length, this time depicted as a finger-wagging rule setter, criticising

the young parents for their child-centred, breast-is-best, give-them-lots-of-love methods.

The only common note: grandparents were bad, always bad, and the experts knew best.

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Of course, in the real world of now, my children – like most young parents – are keen for whatever assistance might be available. They seem unconcerned that we might ‘ruin’ their child, despite the various warnings. And this particular Nana and Pa are keen to help. After all, we’ve supervised children before, with (I believe) acceptable results. We can do it again.

Helpful grandparents are seen as a boon, in my experience, by most young parents. That might be partly because the high cost of housing, as well as of childcare and after-school care, have made life such a stretch for most young families. If help is available, they say ‘yes, please’. It may also be because grandparents, the sensible ones anyway, are better at knowing their role. Be helpful, fill gaps, pitch in, but always on the understanding that the parents decide the rules. You’ve had your turn to decide how to parent and, unless something dangerous is happening, it’s now the turn of the next generation.

It is, of course, a privilege to spend time with small children. One young chap, to whom I’m closely related, believes my iPad has only one thing on it: a video of an opera singer performing the *Queen of the Night* aria, which I played to him once. He doesn’t quite understand that my iPad is connected to the internet, and thus to everything. When he sees the device in my hand, he requests *Queen of the Night*. I duly comply. His parents are OK with me showing him an opera video, but what happens when he discovers you can also watch *Bluey* on the thing or the even-more-addictive Ms Rachel?

Speaking of *Bluey*, another grandchild is surprised that *Bluey* is available on the TV set at our place. He assumes, it seems, that the characters are imprisoned in the TV in his living room, just waiting to be summoned to perform their tricks. How they can be inside his TV and yet also inside ours, three suburbs away, is something he finds impossible to understand.

I try to explain the basics of film and television, in both broadcast and streaming modes, but discover after two sentences that I don't understand it myself. 'It's, um, radio waves, which are all around us, and digital data. Yes, digital data.' I wave my arm airily, as if that explains it. He is unconvinced by my explanation and, frankly, so am I. Maybe he's right, and the characters do just live inside his TV, before catching a quick taxi to our place.

Children – in this case, grandchildren – are keen to understand the world. It's a lovely thing. The problem is that each 'why' question reveals your own ignorance. 'Why is the sky blue?' 'What do ants eat?' 'Why do dogs wag their tails?' I find I don't know the answer to any of these questions. And more questions fly in by the minute. 'Why do stars twinkle?' 'Why can't my pet lizard talk?' 'Why are giraffes so tall?'

Oh, bliss. I know the answer to that last one. 'Giraffes are tall so they can eat the new leaves off the top of tall trees. It's an example of evolution!' I lean back beaming, as if I'm David Bloody Attenborough.

It's not a good score, though, one right from six questions. If this were a newspaper quiz, I'd be morose for a week. I also assume this same child, in a year or two, will work himself up to the doozy: 'If the planet really is spinning, then why don't we all fall off?' Oh, I know the answer is gravity, but how does *that* work? 'Well, it's like we've got magnets in our shoes. And the cars too, they have magnets in the tyres. And all the giraffes. Plus, of course, all the sandwiches, they have magnets in them too, otherwise they'd just spin off into space . . .'

God knows what I studied at school for all those years because this is the best I can do.

\*

Sometimes the questions are even tougher. I take my oldest grandson to the mummy museum at the University of Sydney. I'll call him Pip because he's the apple of my eye. Like many in his age group, Pip has a fascination for Ancient Egypt. One problem: one of the mummies in the museum's collection is a child. The label describes him as: 'A five- or six-year-old boy, most probably from Thebes'.

Pip looks at the mummified child and then looks up at me. 'But kids don't die.'

I blather on unconvincingly about the improvements in medicine since the time of the ancient Egyptians and then fall into an awkward silence. ‘Well, how about a lovely ice cream at the cafe?’ I finally say. Then, in the cafe, there’s a long discussion about things that are real (mummies and dinosaurs) and things that are not real (dragons and cartoon characters). But he’s also recently seen a poster for a film in which there are dinosaurs but also real humans, so why do people say they were never on Earth at the same time? Yeah, well, thanks for nothing, *Jurassic Park*. Could the director please pop over and help explain?

I remember these conversations from when my own children were this age. We’d be watching a video at home:

**Three-year-old:** Who’s that man?

**Me:** It’s Robin Hood.

**Three-year-old:** But it’s a lady.

**Me:** Well, it’s a lady there now. But it was Robin Hood just a second ago.

**Three-year-old:** Why can’t I see him?

**Me:** Because the camera isn’t pointing at him, that’s why.

**Three-year-old:** Where’s the camera?

**Me:** Well, you can’t see that, either.

**Three-year-old:** But I want to see the camera!

**Me:** Well, you can’t. But he’ll be back soon.

**Three-year-old:** Who will be?

**Me:** Robin Hood.

**Three-year-old:** Where’s he gone?

Now, at least, the same child is being asked similar questions by his own offspring.

**Dad:** We’re going to the shops.

**Child:** But why?

**Dad:** To buy milk.

**Child:** But why?

**Dad:** Because you like milk.

**Child:** But why?

I could just enjoy this moment of delicious karma, but I decide to be kind. Later, I'll offer them a turn on my iPad. It's got *Queen of the Night* on it.



Me and my eldest grandson, Pip. Joy, for him, is so close to the surface.

\*

Parenting is only possible with help, that's the truth. Some of that help needs to come from government sources – better subsidised childcare is one example. Some of it needs to come from the corporate world, which might one day recognise that workers are also parents. And parenting also requires help from the village – the 'village that raises a child', to quote the cliché: aunts, uncles, grandparents, the early childhood educators, the kindly fruit shop owner that gives your child a free banana, and the older lady who

says, 'Mine was like that, let me help,' when your child is having a meltdown in Colesworth.

So, perhaps, there's a new rapprochement between parents and grandparents, driven by some mixture of parental necessity and of grandparents who better understand their role. Hurrah, if true. And what a glorious victory over those generations of experts who said it was not possible.

But has a truce been called in the wider parenting wars? A new chapter beckons.

## CHAPTER 12

# Examining the Experts

How much notice do people take of the expert view? This book, I suppose, is predicated on the idea that all the books and magazine articles, the radio shows and baby health centres had an influence, or at least *reflect* the attitudes of their time. But did parents really listen to the advice? It turns out to be a complex question.

Parenting guides have always sold well, even a century ago. One American survey in 1930 found that 70 per cent of parents had read at least one book on parenting within the previous year. Another American study, this time in 1981, found that 97 per cent of mothers read at least one child-rearing manual. In Australia, *Our Babies* – much quoted here – was given to well over a million new parents in New South Wales alone from the 1930s to the 1980s, with Victoria and Western Australia also offering versions, mostly with the same May Gibbs cartoon on the cover, decrying the hopeless Australian parent. In evidence to Australia's Royal Commission on Health in 1925, Victoria's Vera Scantlebury Brown reported that her department answered 800 letters a year from mothers in country areas seeking advice. Two thousand women, she said, had visited an outreach service operating from a train carriage: 'They stood in rows 25 deep waiting to get information.' Some, she said, had travelled for 40 to 50 miles.

A century on, the parenting section is crowded with titles. According to the book industry's data collector, NielsenIQ Bookscan, Australian parents buy 275,000 child-rearing guidebooks each year. That's about \$7 million in sales. Other parents borrow from their local library. A dog-eared copy of one of Clair Isbister's books from the 1970s, held in the State Library of New South Wales, still contains the checkout card from when it was part of

the ‘circulation department’ serving rural districts. It was marked out to parents in Glen Innes, Inverell, Scone, Tumut and the Upper Murray. Seeing the scribbled ‘due dates’, I wonder about the challenges those young, rural parents were trying to navigate.

The views of the guidebooks have also, since the 1920s, been reinforced by nurses at local baby health centres, which have long been attended by almost all Australian children, at least during their first year or two of life. In Victoria, for example, the proportion of infants attending baby health centres was already close to 50 per cent in the late 1920s. By the end of World War II, it had risen to 96 per cent. And the advice delivered, at least in the past, was bossy. Clair Isbister, in one book, recalled visiting a Sydney centre with her first child, sometime in the early 1940s, and being sent home with a card stamped with large capital letters: ‘NO NIGHT FEEDS AND NO CASTOR OIL’.

We’ve heard already about the guilt and pressure created by the insistence that babies should be fed ‘by the clock’. Perhaps, from earlier in this book, you’ll remember Vera Scantlebury Brown’s letter to her parents, mortified that she’d given in and cuddled her child when he couldn’t sleep. Then, heartbreakingly, defending her lack of fortitude by listing the mitigating circumstances: ‘He is getting four teeth through and it is very hot. He was so good all day.’ Perhaps you also remember Clair Isbister breastfeeding her crying child and then feeling guilty about ignoring the rules she’d been taught. She called it ‘a devastating experience’. Or Phyllis Cilento talking about the pain of hearing her child crying with hunger while restraining herself from feeding him: ‘He yelled with hunger and rage, and the tears poured down my cheeks in sympathy.’

It wasn’t only the experts. One mother, Mrs Best, was among those interviewed by historian Kerreen Reiger about their experiences attending an Infant Welfare Centre in Victoria in the 1940s. The mother believed she had no choice but to obey the nurse’s instructions: ‘She was educated for that so she must have known what she was talking about.’

Yet it’s also easy to overplay the impact of the experts. Dr Spock, in the early 1960s, was confronted by the findings of his own Child-Rearing Study, in which 22 mothers were studied over five years. Spock wanted to understand the impact of his advice. The conclusion, to quote author Ann Hulbert who interviewed Spock for her book *Raising America*: ‘The

Spockled investigators were taken aback to discover how often expert counsel was blithely ignored.'

There's also evidence that the advisors were believed by parents on some topics but ignored on others. Here's one example: from 1900 onwards, most Australian guidebooks caution against trying to 'correct' left-handedness. Some experts advocated intervention in 'mild' cases, but the common view was that any attempt to solve the 'problem' would produce verbal difficulties such as stuttering. That opinion, however, was routinely ignored by parents and, in particular, teachers who, right up to the 1960s, would routinely tie down the left arm to force children to write with their 'proper' hand. If you have a left-handed friend over, say, 70 years of age they may have a horrific story to share.



Despite all the contradictory advice, most children cope – like this defiant pair, pictured on the South Coast of NSW, c. 1890–1920.

*Amelia Eve Wong or Henry Hackney Wong, c. 1890–1920, Powerhouse Collection, purchased 1997.*

Sometimes, too, parents were openly hostile to the advice being given. In 1925, Margaret Hannah, a nurse employed by the baby health centre in

the working-class South Australian town of Port Pirie gave evidence to the Royal Commission on Health. Sister Hannah would visit the local court house every Saturday morning, check the register of births, then visit every new baby on the list. She'd encourage the mother to attend the clinic, and, if they presented only once, follow up with a second home visit. Despite all this effort, the nurse had doubts about her influence: 'It is very hard to get the mothers to follow instructions; they are more inclined to listen to their neighbours than to the nurse; that is the great trouble here . . . it is very hard at present to get expectant mothers to listen to advice; they seem to resent anybody speaking to them.'

Much of the defiance shown by these local mothers was about breastfeeding, which the nurses were trying to encourage. 'It is a very difficult matter to get mothers to breastfeed their babies,' Sister Hannah said, 'they all want to put them on the bottle.' When the chair of the royal commission suggested that the newly introduced maternity allowance, designed to help with the costs of birth, could be made conditional on mothers attending the clinic, Sister Hannah readily agreed.

You can understand Sister Hannah's frustration, especially at a time before widespread refrigeration when the dangers of bottle-feeding were so clear. All the same, there's something pleasing about these working-class women who refused to do as they were told.

Sometimes, the advice was acted on, but only partially. In the 1990s, women in the Victorian town of Wonthaggi were interviewed by Philippa Mein Smith about their experience attending the local infant health clinic back in the 1930s. They recalled hearing the rigid advice but then moderating it with 'commonsense' and the advice of their mothers. Sometimes, a little subterfuge was involved. One woman gave her baby a dummy but then hid it in the pram during every visit to the nurse. Oh, what sweet rebellion.

Others obeyed the rules, then lived with guilt. Dame Enid Lyons, wife of Australian prime minister Joseph Lyons and the first woman to be elected to Australia's House of Representatives, wrote about her distress after having obeyed the decree to ignore a crying child. She believed, she said in an article in the *Adelaide Advertiser* in November 1954, that by following the rules she had 'contributed largely to the later development of a nervous tic in one of my children'. It was, she said, due to 'my then devotion to the dictum that . . . a baby should be allowed to cry'.

So, the rules were sometimes followed and sometimes ignored, but whatever a parent's choice, the whole thing was often freighted with emotional pain – a pain that stayed for decades, particularly for mothers. Dame Enid, by the way, was an inspiring figure, the first woman in federal Cabinet, and the mother of twelve children.



Dame Enid Lyons with her husband, Joseph, and 11 of her 12 children.

Which is a lot of crying to ignore.

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Another caution: the books and magazines were always aimed at the Australian mainstream. They were filled with pictures of white babies, complete with traditional English first names – a sea of Davids, Kates and Susans. How would a Greek or Italian mother respond to the mainstream advice handed out by publications like the *Weekly*? Or, in more recent times, a mother from India, China or Syria? Or an Indigenous Australian, whose fierce aunties would have such rich contempt for Zoe Benjamin and her beloved nuclear family.

Some communities were untouched by the experts. In the late 1960s, the Anbarra people of north-central Arnhem Land were the subject of a study focused on parenting: *Nature and Nurture: Aboriginal Child-rearing in*

*North-central Arnhem Land*. The findings? ‘Babies are fed at any time. They are fed whenever they cry, but not only then. Mothers sometimes go into ecstasies of affection with their babies, cuddling them, kissing them on the mouth and body, and finally feeding them.’

Breastfeeding occurred often: once every 35 minutes for babies under two months of age; once every 90 minutes for those between two and six months. Toilet training was left to the child. It was achieved by copying older children, the parents not being particularly involved. ‘Authoritarian practices are entirely absent.’ And ‘a child’s cry is always a signal that the child needs something.’ The anthropologist who conducted the study, Annette Hamilton, lived in the community for the best part of a year, accompanied by her first child. In the introduction to her study, she says the experience had ‘altered my own behaviour’ as a mother.

I love that phrase used by Hamilton when describing the Anbarra mothers: those ‘ecstasies of affection’. It’s a great description for that feeling that often grips the heart of nearly every parent, of whatever background.



‘Ecstasies of affection’: a portrait of an Aboriginal mother and baby, taken by Axel Poignant on the Canning Stock Route, Western Australia, 1942.

*nla.obj-147829356-1 / Axel Poignant / AGNSW*

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The experts, of course, have never been shy about their own importance. A 1951 collection of Truby King’s writing, published by the Truby King

Booklet Committee, says that up to his time women had no teaching or understanding of ‘their most sacred and exclusive of all professions – motherhood’. I guess those Arnhem Land mothers, part of the world’s oldest continuing civilisation, just had to make do as best they could.

Others pushed the idea that parenting required education. It was a view, of course, that emphasised their own importance. ‘Parenthood,’ wrote Zoe Benjamin in her 1944 book *You and Your Children*, ‘must be regarded as a profession that needs study, rather than a function for which we are instinctively equipped.’ It was another way of saying ‘buy my book’. In fact, Dr Christopher Green recommended parents purchase several copies of his book *Toddler Taming*. Parents with a difficult child, he advised, ‘will need to keep a copy of this book within reach at all times, with a spare in the car and in their bag’.

Giving advice on parenting seemed to attract people keen to make a splash, noted the insightful Vera Scantlebury Brown. Annoyed by Truby King and his supporters, she wrote home to her parents in December 1929:

[The problem] is that people with a wish for notoriety push into it because it is such a popular subject and such an easy way to make a name – good or bad. Hence cheap natures are attracted, perhaps bluffing themselves that they are working for the mothers and babies but in point of fact acting only for their own glorification and entirely neglecting the actual cause.

Certainly, throughout more than a century of advice, the experts holler for attention: ‘Read this book and all your problems will be solved’ is often the message. Titles with numbers in them have been particularly popular: *7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*, *9 Ways to a Resilient Child*, *10 Things Every Parent Needs to Know*, *12 Things I Want My Kids to Remember*, *20 Tips for Parents*, *21 Days to a Happier Family*, *887 Ideas for Busy Families* and *7000 Days: The Creation of a Happy Family from Day One*.

It’s also been common to claim the virtue of practicality, with endless variations on ‘a practical guide’, ‘a commonsense guide’, ‘a survival guide’, as well as endless variations on ‘parenting made simple’ or ‘easy’ or ‘foolproof’.

The guidebooks tend to share other characteristics:

## The family is always middle class

If an example is given of a father's workplace, it is 'in the city' or 'at the office'. Never 'in the factory'. Or even 'on the farm'. In the Catholic guidebook *The Choice of a Husband*, published in 1964, the father returns home each day exhausted from a day spent with 'professional contacts in a harsh and austere business world'. That's why he needs his wife to be soft and loving as he walks in the door. Sydney's Muriel Danvers Power in her 1913 guidebook *Mother and Child* assumes the household has a cook and a maid, and at one point even mentions the 'servant's bell' and the need to hang onto staff. As mentioned earlier, she says masturbation may be due to the child enjoying 'the sensation caused by sliding down bannisters', perhaps not a hobby available in every home.

Most writers assume there will be a separate bedroom for each child, and some insist on a playroom as well. 'A playroom can be regarded as a necessity,' according to Miss Mary Lush in her 1932 booklet for the Victorian Council for Mental Hygiene. It's also anticipated that every house will have running water, electricity and refrigeration, before such things were commonplace. Truby King, in 1913, adds a resident nurse: 'For the first few weeks of life the baby is generally in the care of a registered nurse.' Meanwhile, others blamed the decline in table manners on the practice of allowing one's maid to supervise the children's mealtimes. Again, not a problem faced by every household.

Rarely are things seen from the viewpoint of the ordinary person, but it did occasionally happen. Vera Scantlebury Brown and Kate Campbell in their 1947 guide for Victoria's nurses gave various formulas for modifying cow's milk when breastfeeding had proved impossible. They recommend adding lactose, a form of sugar derived from milk, but noted that cane sugar is not so bad – and 'has the advantage of cheapness where this factor must be considered'. They also gave details of how to construct a Coolgardie safe, a low-tech way of keeping milk cold in households that lacked electricity. Vera Scantlebury Brown had a nice house in Melbourne's Hawthorn with a maid and a nanny, but she also had sufficient empathy to understand that not everyone lived that way. It was a rare gift.

## The child, for a long time, was always a 'he'

In the official guidebook *Our Babies*, the child was a ‘he’ until 1980, when he suddenly became a ‘she’, at least some of the time. When Australia’s Robin Barker published her first edition of the bestseller *Baby Love* in 1994, ‘she’ was used for all babies, male and female, which caused quite a flurry.

## The baby, for decades, was always white

In any photo of a baby, the baby was nearly always white, again up to about 1980. Also, the parents were always heterosexual. And rarely divorced.

## If you ignored the expert’s advice, all sorts of calamities would occur

This view is expressed by nearly all the experts, at least during the earlier period. The truth: parents – historically and around the world right now – bring up children using all sorts of different methods, and nearly always the result is a reasonable human being.

## If you followed the expert’s advice, everything would be easy

It is never easy.

Oh, and one last thing . . .

## When it came to sex, the experts loved a euphemism

The British eugenicist Norah March gave advice about sex education which was widely quoted in Australia. In her 1915 book, *Towards Racial Health*, March called the penis and testicles ‘the racial organs’, and offered an example of the sort of discussion you might have with a young son:

Your racial organs are practically asleep at present, but when you are about 13 or perhaps 14 they will begin to waken up. You will

probably come to know this. The tube through which the waste water comes away from the body is, as you know, the tube through which the sperms pass also. When the racial organs wake up and begin to produce sperms, this tube swells and projects. It will do this quite suddenly . . .

The sperms, one should explain to the child, should not be wasted, but usefully employed – once married – to propagate the ‘race’.

Australian writer Marion Piddington had similar views, even if her preferred euphemism for the penis was ‘the life organ’, rather than ‘the racial organ’. She shared, however, March’s view that a discussion of sex could lead to useful explanations of the child’s responsibility to the ‘race’. In her 1926 book *Tell Them*, she imagines a boy being told about sex, while his younger sister is busy playing with her dolls. The boy asks whether his sister should be included in the discussion:

**Mother:** No; Betty is busy with her dolls at present, answering all the questions they can’t ask. This morning I heard her say to her black doll, ‘Oughtn’t you to be segregated?’

**Son:** What did she mean?

**Mother:** Last night, when Daddy was talking to me about the ‘Segregation of the unfit’ and told you he would tell you all about it one of these days, Betty must have heard enough to show off her baby mothercraft today.

She goes on to call the womb ‘a little house’, and warn about ‘racially inferior’ partners – presumably in need of rapid ‘segregation’, much like Betty’s beleaguered black doll.

Piddington, by the way, was hardly a minor figure. She was Australia’s most prominent promoter of eugenics, and a correspondent with many famous people including Marie Stopes and Sigmund Freud. The book from which I’ve quoted has an enthusiastic forward written by Emanuel Sydney Morris, Director of Maternal and Baby Welfare for the New South Wales government.

Others offered different euphemisms. The womb was ‘a wonderful room’ (Muriel Danvers Power in 1913); the vagina was the ‘hallway of life’ (Arthur Spalding in 1941); while sex, according to a 1968 pamphlet from

Australia's Father and Son Welfare Movement, was 'the means whereby a man and a woman can get together with God in His ongoing work of creation'. Which, I must say, is what I've always called it.

Only occasionally was a spade called a spade. Sydney doctor Gertrude Buzzard Dunlop uses all the correct, scientific terms in her 1928 child-rearing guidebook, right up to the clitoris which she describes as 'the seat of erotic sensation'. In a book mainly about breastfeeding, weaning and childhood ailments, she also says women should be more active participants when it comes to sex, with the aim of always achieving orgasm. Good for her.

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Are things better now? Are the guidebooks more inclusive? Are they more understanding of people's circumstances – the stresses of poverty, of over-work, of single-parenthood, of medical problems that might make breastfeeding impossible, of having a child with a disability? Do they make an effort to avoid the demonising of the past – the 'bad mother' who needed educating; the 'idiot father' who needed placating; the 'evil toddler' who needed discipline?

I don't mean to be too optimistic, but in Australia at least the bestselling books of recent years have tended to be positive and relatively non-prescriptive. They demonise neither the parent nor the child, and never suggest the whole thing is easy or obvious. And they all advocate for the importance, when possible, of an engaged father, a view largely missing in earlier decades. To summarise the current Australian orthodoxy: children need love and positive attention, from two parents if available, and they also need and enjoy boundaries. And, perhaps most important of all, they argue that parenting doesn't need to be perfect. Good-enough parenting, when supplied with lots of love, will not 'ruin a child', despite a century of warnings.

At my request, NielsenIQ Bookscan generated a list of the bestselling pregnancy and parenting books in the Australian book market since 2002, when the company began collecting data. The top three authors in the Australian market are all locals. The most successful is Kaz Cooke, whose humane, humorous and fact-based books have sold 461,000 copies. Not far behind is the compelling voice of Steve Biddulph, who has particularly

pressed the role available to fathers, as well as the virtues of both limits and love (429,000 copies); followed by Robin Barker, whose balanced and practical advice is delivered in straightforward and loving language (367,000 books).

Some Australian authors, most notably Steve Biddulph, have also gathered a big international audience. Biddulph's books have now sold six million copies worldwide, including bestselling titles in China, Germany and the UK. Unlike the earlier generation of experts, he doesn't think parenting is easy. He calls it: 'The hardest, most unsupported and bewildering thing a person will probably tackle in their whole life.'

In 2024, the most recent year for which I have data, four of the five bestselling books were from Australian authors – all with sensible, positive information. There's Dr Billy Garvey's *Ten Things I Wish You Knew About Your Child's Mental Health*; *The Complete Australian Guide to Pregnancy and Birth* by Sophie Walker and Jodi Wilson (Walker also hosts the podcast Australian Birth Stories); Dr Norman Swan's *So You Want to Know What's Good for Your Kids?* and Maggie Dent's *Help Me Help My Teen*. The only overseas authors on the top five list are the American medical researchers Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson with *The Whole-Brain Child* – a trip into the latest science about children's minds. (Spoiler alert: tiny babies are not capable of being manipulative little tyrants.)

And then there are the local podcasts, the most popular of which include Maggie Dent's Parental as Anything, Mamamia's Parenting Out Loud, and Justin and Kylie Coulson's Happy Families. They all avoid the catastrophising and the mother-blaming of an earlier era. Add to them a new breed of podcasts aimed at Australian fathers, most notably Hamish Blake's How Other Dads Dad, along with Two Doting Dads with Matty J. and Ash. The popularity and heartfelt nature of both podcasts would raise anyone's optimism about how things can sometimes change for the better.

Another difference with the past: the current crew of Australian experts all have children of their own. Kylie and Justin Coulson, for instance, have six daughters – six! – which may be overdoing the need for time at the coalface. It's quite a difference to the child-free experts who still dominate the debate in the UK. I don't mean to criticise child experts who don't have children, but it does seem that hands-on experience is more likely to produce advice that is loving and realistic, with less insistence on the one formula that will suit all children.

So, can we declare peace in the parenting wars? Perhaps not. There are plenty of battles still being waged. When is the right age to send your offspring to childcare? Is controlled crying OK, or is it damaging? How much freedom is too much, or too little? Parents, also, are not only seeking advice from sensible guidebooks and podcasts. Let's not forget the myriad websites, YouTubers and social media influencers. On Instagram alone the hashtag #parenting has, on last count, appeared over 10.5 million times. The hashtag #parentingtips has been used 1.5 million times. Some of the people posting are admirable, but many push fringe opinions, from the antivaxxers to those promoting unproven, often expensive health advice. Some, for instance, recommend that infants should be sprayed with baby perfume – just to make sure they smell nice. Among the products on offer is one that gives ‘a chic and trendy touch to toddlers’, while another will ‘bring delicacy and refinement to baby’.

A backlash to ‘gentle parenting’ is also gathering steam, particularly in the US, with the vulgar hashtag #FAFO – ‘fuck around and find out’ – with parents responding to bad behaviour by, say, smashing a child's iPad, or locking a small child outside the front door. One such video has been watched five million times with, mostly, approving comments.

Like every period, ours has its own missteps and nutters. What about the parents who believe their role is to stick up for their child, whatever the evidence: a mirror image of the previous generation of parents who believed their child was always in the wrong, whatever the evidence. Has the madness just shifted to new locations and new topics? Will we look back at our own time and recognise the same moments of idiocy that we see in the past?

Maybe the best answer is the notion floated by abolitionist Theodore Parker and then sharpened into a compelling quote by Martin Luther King Jr: ‘The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.’ Parenting may be tougher than ever, but at least we're no longer telling ourselves that it's wrong to cuddle a child.

## CHAPTER 13

# Love Matters

Here's a final, crucial difference to the parenting of the past: most parents these days speak more charitably to their children. Not always. But mostly.

In his book *The Secret of Happy Children*, Steve Biddulph recounts addressing a group of parents. It was in the early 1980s, so these people had been children in the 1950s. Steve talked about the caustic impact on children of negative, critical language, and then, whiteboard marker poised, asked his audience to recall the phrases that their own parents had used about them. Quickly the whiteboard filled with hostile words, Steve racing to keep up:

- 'You're lazy'
- 'Clumsy'
- 'Stupid'
- 'A nuisance'
- 'Just a girl'
- 'Selfish'
- 'Dumb'
- 'Greedy'
- 'Gutless'
- 'Brainless'
- 'Just like your father'
- 'Making your mother sick'
- And so – grimly – on.

You can still, of course, hear variants of these phrases at the local supermarket. Nowadays, though, they're mostly seen as a sign that a frazzled parent has lost their temper. We don't think: 'Ah, there's a good parent, cutting his kids down to size.' If in a charitable frame of mind, we

might think: 'Poor bastard has lost it.' Or even: 'There but for the grace of God go I.' But we are hardly, most of us, going to cheer them on.

That's a big shift from the era in which I grew up, the same era as Steve Biddulph's respondents. Back then, telling your kids they were 'no good' or 'lazy' was often seen as part of a parent's job. It was a way of ensuring your child didn't end up with 'tickets on themselves'. Yes, some people in the 1950s and 1960s had parents who offered praise and, if that was you, half your luck. But most parents believed it part of their job to keep children in their place, as instructed by the experts. After all, they didn't want to ruin a child.

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My own mother was certainly wary of giving praise. I'm sure that, at some points, she took secret pride in me, but – like most of her generation – she would have thought it a mistake to pass on any positive thoughts. This desire to put me in my place continued until the end. And I mean the very end. Not quite beyond the grave, but as she was about to be lowered into that grave. Let me tell you the story.

Not that long ago, I was reading a book called *Ex Libris* by Anne Fadiman. It was full of elegant essays about the world of literature. Included was the story of George Bernard Shaw, who gave one of his own books to a friend. He signed it with a flourish: 'To ---- with esteem, George Bernard Shaw.'

Some months later, trawling a second-hand bookshop, G.B.S. came across the inscribed copy, which his friend had clearly sold for a few shillings. G.B.S. bought the copy and posted it afresh to his friend, inserting an extra word.

'To ----, with *renewed* esteem.'

I was chortling away, enjoying the anecdote, with its mix of humiliation and defiance, right up to the moment I remembered the same thing had happened to me. In my case, the emotional freight was somewhat heavier.

It took place at my mother's funeral. A lively nurse from her aged care home approached me with a copy of one of my own books. It was a pristine copy of *The Mud House*, a memoir of my experiences building a mud brick house in the bush with friends and family. The uncreased spine suggested it

had never been read. The nurse handed it over. I looked inside. It was inscribed, 'To Mum, with lots of love from your son, Richard.'

The staff member had purchased the book at the local second-hand book exchange, whose stamp it still bore. The nurse thought I might as well have it. Beat that, G.B.S.! My mother had swapped her own son's book for something better. I recall she quite liked P.D. James, so I hope she was able to achieve a good trade.

The staff member, as she handed over the volume, had a twinkle in her eye, her lips pursed in a mischievous half-smile. Perhaps she was in it for the laugh. More charitably, she may have felt she was dutifully communicating a final message from my mother: 'Now, son, don't get too big for your boots. You're not a patch on P.D. James.'

I still have the inscribed book and wonder what to do with it. Unlike George Bernard Shaw, I can't reinscribe with 'renewed esteem' and present it, for a second time, to my mother, lying in her grave. But here's an idea: the book is stamped with a message from the book exchange, noting that I have the right, at a small cost, to swap it once more at their establishment.

Maybe they have a copy of *Mommie Dearest*. Or, at very least, something by Sigmund Freud.

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At Australia's baby health centres, the tone has changed from that of the distant, critical past. No-one is interested in telling children they are too big for their boots, nor in telling parents they are hopeless. Patsy Burnett and Lucinda Daley are both nurses working at the Bondi Beach Baby Health Centre, in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs. It's been around for a while, built of red brick with the small windows of the 1940s. The famous Robin Barker, who went on to write the bestselling guidebook mentioned a few pages ago, was once a hugely popular nurse at the centre. Patsy and Lucinda have both been nurses for over 30 years.

I meet them in their tiny tearoom. I ask: 'What advice do you give mothers these days?' 'Well, none,' comes the answer. Not first up. They ask questions, says Patsy. What does the mother want to know? What are her concerns?

They still measure and weigh the child: they have big scales in the corner and a measuring tape screwed to the wall. But the first task is to

work out what's needed by this particular family. Most parents come regularly until the child is four, their child's milestones written during each visit in the child's personalised copy of 'The Blue Book'. Other Australian states have the same system, but with different coloured books. Maybe one day, as with our rail gauges, we'll standardise.

The two nurses radiate empathy and, well, love. Parenting is hard, they both say. They are there to listen, not to list rules. Lucinda says she tries to remind parents: 'Your child has not read the book.' Parenting, she says, has been made harder by social media: 'Everyone sees pictures of these perfect children, with no problems.'

Both nurses have their own kids – two grown-up kids in the case of Patsy, three for Lucinda. Having children, they both say, has influenced their advice, making them more aware of the stresses and strains of parenting. Lucinda believes nurses can do a good job without having kids themselves, but she's also seen nurses whose expertise has been deepened by the experience of parenthood.

Patsy says – when desperate – she used a version of 'controlled crying' on her firstborn. It worked, she says. And the child 'still speaks to me'. She still recommends a gentle version to parents when needed. Lucinda admits she was overly committed to breastfeeding in an era where extra 'comp feeds' were condemned. She fears her oldest was sometimes crying because he was hungry. He, too, still talks to her.

The two nurses press the need for the child to form an 'attachment' to a loving caregiver, often the mother, but not necessarily the mother. It makes parenting easier, they say, not harder, and creates a child happy to go out into the world.

It's hard to imagine two experts so different to those of the past. They understand how hard it is. They see the errors they made themselves. They keep saying to me: 'No two children are the same.' Their advice, they say, is tailored to the particular mother and particular father, and also to the same-sex couple, the single parent, or the family from a different culture that might have its own traditions about, say, the timing of toilet training.

I don't mean to go on but meeting Patsy and Lucinda is great! They are inspiring, full of wit and warmth. What did I say earlier about the 'arc of the moral universe'?

If the guidebooks and the nurses have become less alarmist, the slack has been taken up by films, novels and memoirs. Some have called it the ‘Motherhood is Hell’ genre. Much of it is American, often with supernatural themes – and, to be fair, it may be a useful corrective to decades in which motherhood was presented as blissful and easy; a sort of *Brady Bunch* world in which all problems could be solved with a serve of Alice’s chocolate chip cookies. In Marielle Heller’s film *Nightbitch* (2024), based on Rachel Yoder’s novel, the mother is so defeated she becomes a feral canine each night. In Mary Bronstein’s film *If I Had Legs I’d Kick You* (2025), a mother descends into a harrowing hell with a mysteriously sick child and a house that is literally collapsing. There are also memoirs like Jancee Dunn’s *How Not to Hate Your Husband After Kids* (2017) and novels such as Julia Fine’s *The Upstairs House* (2024), which blends horror-genre plotting with scenes of postpartum psychosis. They are compelling – but dark.

One of the problems of writing about parenting – in a guidebook, novel or even a book like this – is how to reflect the varied experiences. Some mothers have a partner who refuses to do their share, or anything like their share. In other families, the father is involved in child-rearing but not in other domestic labour. Worse: there’s the father (and more rarely the mother) who might be violent. The family might live in poverty. Or have a child who is unusually unsettled. Or with a disability. Or just doesn’t sleep much. Or has colic. Such parents, too, are going through a lot. Or there’s the single-parent family. Or the gay parents dealing with prejudice. Or the couple who live in a city so expensive that both must work fulltime – and then lose most of the extra they earn paying for childcare. Or there are the foster parents, trying to find a path with children who have already been traumatised by their unsatisfactory early years.

How to write about the mixture of joy and exhaustion involved in bringing up a child? How to record the I’m-about-to-snap stress, without forgetting the fun? Maybe we need both *The Brady Bunch* and *Nightbitch* to capture it all.



How to write about the mixture of joy and exhaustion involved in bringing up a child? Melbourne photographer Ruth Hollick, active in the 1920s, had an eye for spotting the spirit of a child.

*Ruth Hollick, courtesy of State Library of Victoria  
/ H93.500/140*

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During the writing of this book, I've had dozens of conversations with people of varying ages, including some young parents. One common view was that children were now allowed to rule the roost in a ridiculous manner – and this even from people who say they are parenting in exactly this way. 'It's the first generation who have never heard the word "no",' one young father told me, rather cheerfully, as his little boy ran amok around his legs. Or from older people: 'There's no such thing as bedtime these days.' 'The parents give in to every demand.' 'The children lack boundaries.'

So-called gentle parenting is satirised in hundreds of YouTube videos and parenting blogs. There's even an episode of the cartoon series *Bluey*, 'Burger Shop', in which Bandit tries to follow the advice of his new parenting book – 'let the children make all their own decisions' – before concluding, after a chaotic bathtime, the advice is insane. The bathtime goes on so long that the water grows cold and the puppies turn blue, which

at least gives Bandit the chance to offer a joke to Chilli, the mother of the puppies: ‘They’re *blue* heelers.’

I suppose some ‘gentle parenting’ advice does have its ridiculous side. The urge to say ‘good girl’ is to be resisted, according to devotees. You are instead meant to say something like: ‘You showed effort in completing that task, the outcome of which, whether a failure or a success, does not reflect on your essential worth as a person.’ ‘No means no’ is replaced by something like: ‘I’m deciding to say “no” right now, but you are in charge of your own feelings and you are allowed to be upset by my decision.’ Or, if they are in danger, close to a busy road: ‘So, what strategy do you have to keep safe?’

Maybe I should spend a few more paragraphs mocking the excesses of gentle parenting. In truth my heart isn’t in it. The mockery is based on yet another ‘straw man’. Most ‘gentle parents’ attempt a modified, practical version of the philosophy. They allow themselves, I’m sure, the odd ‘good girl/good boy’ and perhaps even an occasional ‘because I said so’. Parents – nearly all of them, whatever their philosophy – know that children like structure, consistently applied rules, and lots of love and attention.

Even the guru of the ‘gentle parenting’ movement, the British writer Sarah Ockwell-Smith, is more practical and nuanced than her detractors suggest. Here she is, for instance, explaining the rationale for going further than ‘good girl’ or ‘well done’:

Praise should be specific. Instead of ‘well done’ say ‘I noticed that you’ve been building that tower for ages. It took you a long time to finally be able to make the blocks stay upright didn’t it?’ Praise needs to show your child that you’re interested in what they do. ‘Tell me about the picture that you’ve just painted. What made you paint the cat orange?’ instead of ‘That’s a lovely picture darling’. Praise needs to be effort, not outcome focussed.

Put that way, it doesn’t seem so ridiculous. I don’t know about you, but if someone were to give me a little praise, I’d rather it be specific. Not just ‘handsome’, but ‘I rather like the way your thin lips set off your rather prominent nose.’ My point is that Ockwell-Smith’s advice is a long way from the child-centred anarchy portrayed in all the send-ups. Most human

beings want to be praised and are uncomfortable when it's a lot of generalised gush. Why should children be different?

My reluctance to mock gentle parenting may be also a product of researching this book. Validating your child's feelings, allowing them time to argue their case, and generally giving them lots of love doesn't seem such a bad idea – not once it has been viewed through the lens of decades in which children were ignored, mistreated and left to cry, often with their mothers also left in tears.

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What does the latest science say? I visited Dr Elisabeth Murphy, a spirited speaker with a long and passionate history in paediatrics and child health. She's now Senior Clinical Advisor, Child and Family Health for the NSW Ministry of Health, specialising in the first 2000 days of life. She's a great enthusiast for listening to parents – 'they are the experts on their child' – but also for listening to science, in particular the wealth of longitudinal studies that are now available. They tell us, she says, what works, and what doesn't.

On 'attachment parenting', she says, the findings are in. 'There's enormous evidence about its importance – the child forming a bond with one loving adult person. This could be with their parents, grandparents or carer and, not necessarily the mother, but more commonly the mother. Successful attachment can be seen in the research to have a lasting and positive impact.'

It's a similar story with breastfeeding: 'If a drug could do everything that breastmilk does, it would have an extraordinary patent.'

Dummies are still discouraged in the very early days, especially when breastfeeding is being established, but thumb sucking is not usually a matter of concern: 'Sucking thumbs or fingers is a natural reflex in babies and young children. Most children grow out of it at around two to four years of age.'

In terms of feeding, you should be flexible, she says, 'responding to your newborn's need for sleep and feeds'. Toilet training normally happens after about two years of age. 'Crying babies and toddlers should not be left alone for long periods.' Oh, and grandparents, if available, are a great source of support for young families.

Well, hurrah for that. And for her. And for science.

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One of the curiosities of being human is that your personality is largely formed in a period before your memory kicks in. I'm fascinated with this idea, partly because of my own history. My first memory is from when I'm five. I'm at kindergarten and they have Cuisenaire rods, with a jellybean reward system if you succeed in a counting game. They also have a large boat in the playground, just sitting there in the dirt, as if abandoned by Sturt on his trip to locate the inland sea. We kids love playing in it. These are not even important moments. They are just first in the queue of my memory.

Most people can recall a few things from when they were four or five. Rarely earlier. This, it seems to me, is a design fault. The first few years determine so much of who we are, yet we remember none of it. These early years are also, generally, so full of fun. Why do we remember the often-miserable years of adolescence in such forensic detail, but recall nothing of the joy of being a little kid?

I think about the rich life led by Pip, my oldest grandson. He is adored, and adorable. Strawberries, his favourite, are widely available, and at a good price. He lives in the era of *Bluey*. He's enjoyed share rights in a good dog. He has a nana who makes a fine banana pancake, and who is inventive when it comes to games. He has spectacular parents. In truth, I'm a little envious. Why can't we all live like a happy four-year-old? Joy, for him, is so close to the surface. I wish it was still like that for me.

Why do we not remember these first years? Is there a way we could summon them up, through photos, anecdotes, or – here's a better idea – by assessing our own psychology and figuring out the role those years must have played? In my case, I spent most of it in Port Moresby with Danota, the young Papua New Guinean woman who looked after me. My parents were a little indifferent, but, from the evidence of my father's photos, Danota showered me with love in a way that my parents couldn't quite achieve. Danota and I had fun together, I am sure. I know she saved me. She gave me the life I have. The sense of being worthy of love. I'd just like to remember how she did it.

Meanwhile, Pip suggests another game of Paperclips on Pa's desk, a game of his own invention. We've played it a million times, but that only

increases its allure. Pip pours the paperclips from my jar, we compete to put them back in the jar, and I say, for some reason using a strange middle-European accent: 'That's good, all good, they are back in the jar,' at which point he upends the jar, and it all starts again.

It's true he may not remember the game, or the delight I take in seeing his joy as we play. Science says he probably won't. But I think about my experience with Danota. She made me, even if I can't recall the details. Adult Pip will know nothing of this activity, or our laughter as we battle for the paperclips, but I hope it will somehow become part of him, and his sense of how lovely he is.

I'm only a small part of the building of this boy. His parents are the chief architects. But my own story tells me that love matters, at whatever age it's delivered, and whatever the source. So, here's to those 'ecstasies of affection', perfected by the Anbarra mothers of Arnhem Land. May those ecstasies continue, for anyone lucky enough to care for children.

With love in abundance, it's hard to ruin a child. Whatever the experts say.



Danota and me. I know she saved me; I'd just like to remember how she did it.

## AFTERWORD

# My Top 20 Parenting Tips

Having read the experts, as well as conducting my own experiments as a parent and grandparent, do I have some tips of my own? Of course. If everyone else reckons they are an expert, why not me?

1. Say 'yes' whenever possible, but when you say 'no', stick to it.
2. Remember, the baby will soon sleep through the night. But only if you define 'night' as starting at 11 pm, and ending at about 2 am.
3. Time behaves strangely: when standing in a corridor at three in the morning, rocking a child to sleep, an hour seems to last a decade. But then a real decade races by in what seems like an hour. That child who needed rocking is now 12, and that time in the hallway glows in the memory like golden treasure.
4. Buy five hats for each child because four hats will always be missing in action.
5. Don't tell the child they are stupid or bad, because they might try to prove you right.
6. Use big words. If they don't understand, they'll ask. It shows the child that you respect them. And it will give you both a better vocabulary.
7. Try to see things from their point of view.
8. Take as many pictures of the subsequent children as you did of the first, or else there will be aggrieved questions later on. (Learnt the hard way.)
9. There is no dog as lucky as one sitting under a highchair when lunch is being eaten.
10. Forget the self-justifying phrase 'quality time'. Children need 'quantity time', even if they're just getting on with their own thing while you

hang about.

11. Beware of guidebooks or interfering relatives who offer judgemental advice. Every child is different, and most good parenting happens in a wide, forgiving zone between the extremes.
12. When exasperated, admit you are exasperated. It's how your children realise you are an ordinary, flawed person.
13. Walls are meant to be drawn on, and couches are meant to soak up spills. You can redecorate when they are 25 and have left home.
14. A surprising amount of fun is available through the purchase of a toy tea set.
15. Observe how their minds work and be amazed.
16. Don't expect them to get off their devices if you never get off yours.
17. A Band-Aid, deftly applied, can cure all but the most serious of injuries.
18. Praise them, but more for the effort than the result.
19. Make them laugh. A sense of humour is a superpower in a world that's sometimes tough.
20. Oh, and love them. Love them heaps.



The toy tea set in action. Brilliant. Photo taken by Ray Wolfe at a Tresillian mother and baby home in 1939.

*Ray Wolfe, Tresillian Baby Home, 22 March 1939, courtesy of State Library of NSW*

## APPENDIX

# The Cast of Characters

Who were the authors? It turns out their own stories were often full of drama and derring-do. As you'll have noticed, the majority of Australian experts were women, a contrast to the United States where from the 1880s onwards nearly all the parenting guidebooks were written by men. Of the ten experts studied by Ann Hulbert in her authoritative history of American parenting gurus, *Raising America*, all ten were male: Luther Emmett Holt, Granville Stanley Hall, John Watson, Erik Erikson, Arnold Gesell, Benjamin Spock, Bruno Bettelheim, Thomas Berry Brazelton, Gary Ezzo (who occasionally co-wrote with his wife, Anne Marie) and James Dobson. Why was Australia so different? Please put your theory on a postcard and send it in.

It also seems that many of our female experts were gay. It's something difficult to judge at this distance, reading the coded language in old biographies of 'devoted companions' and 'lifelong friends'. All the same, it seems wrong not to celebrate these significant partners, even if their exact relationship to the expert sometimes remains unclear.

So, here are some of our experts, in alphabetical order.

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**Zoe Benjamin** was born in 1882 into an Orthodox Jewish family in Adelaide but died an Anglican in Sydney. She was extremely short – ‘little and dainty’ as Adelaide’s *Register* newspaper put it in 1924 – and her house, in Sydney’s Hunters Hill, was said to be fitted out with specially made furniture to suit her tiny frame. She had bright brown eyes and was a compelling speaker: ‘A personality and a driving force that bear no relation to the cubits of her stature,’ to quote the *Register*.

Moving to Sydney with her parents at the age of three, she graduated from the Sydney Kindergarten Training College in 1905, joining the staff as a lecturer in 1912. In one of those tiny miracles of librarianship, we know the contents of the lectures she gave in history and literature: in 1916, a student, Beth Dixon, took copious notes during each lecture, her neatly written summaries held by the State Library of New South Wales. The lectures detail humanity’s triumphant ascent – through various stages of evolution from the ‘primitive’ to ‘civilised’. It’s pure social Darwinism, of course, but the lectures do include elegant summaries of subjects from the Punic Wars to the plays of Shakespeare. Reading Beth Dixon’s notes, I can imagine Zoe Benjamin was an inspiring teacher.

By 1917, while still training teachers, Benjamin began running classes for parents, hosted by the University of Sydney, inspired by her rather stern view that the problems faced by parents were ‘largely due to defects in their own characters’.

After 25 years at the college, she left in late 1937. Among her private letters, a handful of which survive, she confides to her friend Isobel Bowden that she ‘couldn’t work any longer with Miss Slack’ – a reference to Miss E.M. Slack who’d taken over as principal four years before. Benjamin told her friend she would instead focus on giving public lectures, radio talks and writing. In the two decades that followed, Zoe Benjamin wrote widely and spoke often, in towns big and small. ‘I haven’t the courage to refuse when asked,’ she told Bowden in a letter of July 1955.

Benjamin was an early pioneer of unstructured play, influenced by the Froebel system – a nineteenth-century method developed by the German writer Friedrich Froebel that emphasised the virtues of play. She was also a critic of rote learning in the education system, or as she called it ‘the educational machine’. Adolescents, in particular, ‘want opportunities for self-expression but have not been given them’. And while warning of the dangers of spoilt children, she did recommend a measure of affection.

Despite her long-lasting embrace of social Darwinist ideas, and her harshness when it came to the abilities of parents, it's hard to ignore her dedication to children and their creativity. She also moderated some of her views over time. By 1944, masturbation, for which she'd once recommended genital surgery for girls, was one of those habits which 'are unimportant in themselves' – although she still recommended circumcision as a possible cure for boys. On other subjects, she continued to advocate a tough line, always insisting you should never feed a baby on demand. Doing so, she said in *You and Your Children*, meant that 'habits of impatience, wilfulness and greed will probably be established as well as a strong desire for dominating his mother'.

Her will, preserved after her death in 1962, described her as 'Sophia Benjamin (otherwise known as Zoe Benjamin), spinster, deceased.' There is no indication she ever had a romantic partner, although her will gives 'all my personal effects to my friend Grace Wilson'.

\*



*Medical  
History  
Museum,  
University of  
Melbourne*

**Dr Kate Campbell** was a pioneer of paediatrics in Victoria, and co-author of what was, for many decades, that state's official training manual for doctors and nurses working with children: *A Guide to the Care of the Young Child*. Campbell graduated in medicine at the University of Melbourne in 1924, one of a dozen top students that included Australia's great polio pioneer Jean Macnamara. Campbell and Macnamara were grudgingly given positions at Melbourne Hospital, but – as women – were restricted in their hours and their work. After some pressure, the Children's Hospital agreed

to take them on, having previously argued it lacked the facilities to admit female doctors. Again, they faced discrimination. In 1924, Campbell transferred to the (Royal) Women's Hospital, and began her lifelong association with Dr Vera Scantlebury Brown, both women becoming involved in the Victorian Baby Health Centres Association.

In 1929, Campbell began teaching neonatal paediatrics at the University of Melbourne, an appointment that lasted until 1965, and saw generations of doctors trained to understand the squeaks and cries of a baby's vocabulary. She contributed to medical research, discovering a link between infant blindness and the use of excessive oxygen in neonatal wards – a discovery that changed hospital procedures around the world.

Her biography in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* talks of her sense of fun, but also her impeccable dress sense. She was 'rarely seen without a hat'. She never married and for 37 years lived with Winifred Crick, described as 'a devoted housekeeper– companion'. She was appointed OBE in 1954, raised to DBE in 1971, and died in 1986.

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*Courtesy of  
State Library  
of Queensland*

**Dr Phyllis Cilento**, writing under pseudonyms such as 'Mother M.D.' and 'Medical Mother', regularly appeared in Queensland publications such as *The Courier-Mail*, as well as national magazines like *Woman's Day*. Her career as a medical columnist lasted from the late 1920s to the mid-1980s, alongside regular appearances on radio. She was also author of 24 books and monographs, including the 1964 guidebook *Enjoy Your Family: A Guide to Parenthood*. All this was achieved alongside a busy life as an obstetrician, general practitioner and mother of six – one of whom, as mentioned earlier, was the actor and Oscar nominee Diane Cilento.

In 1931, Cilento founded the Mothercraft Association of Queensland, and, between 1939 and 1962, lectured in mothercraft at the University of Queensland. In 1935, she became Lady Cilento after her husband Raphael Cilento was knighted for services to medicine. (As Queensland's Director-General of Health, he wrote the foreword to Queensland's official guidebook for mothers, *Care of Mother and Child*.) She died in 1987.

Some of Cilento's views became more widely accepted over time, such as her preference for natural childbirth, for family planning and for allowing fathers to be present at the birth. Other views did not age so well. In 2018, staff at Brisbane's Lady Cilento Children's hospital – a new public hospital named in her honour five years before – demanded her name be dropped, some citing Cilento's history of racist and homophobic commentary. She was also accused of having dangerous beliefs about the efficacy of vitamins, having suggested, for example, that large doses of vitamin C could protect children from snakebite.

Eventually, the hospital's name was changed, amid some controversy, the facility becoming the Queensland Children's Hospital – although the government cited confusion over whether the hospital was private or public, rather than anxiety over Cilento's views.

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**Dr Margaret Harper**, that great promoter of tough parenting and rigid routine, graduated from the University of Sydney's medical school in 1906. She was not the first woman to graduate from Sydney University as a doctor – that milestone occurred 13 years previously – but she was, by any reckoning, a pioneer. Her biographer Lysbeth Cohen described the young graduate as 'a tall, beautiful young woman with long thick brown hair' and 'a deep musical voice'. She apparently 'carried herself very regally' and 'didn't suffer fools gladly'. Certainly, she made mincemeat of those who crossed her, in particular the first two matrons at the Tresillian training school in Sydney. Both were Truby King supporters, and neither of them – with Harper as their medical director – were in the job for long.

Harper had an impactful career. In 1907 she was appointed resident at the Royal Hospital for Women in Paddington, where she served in various roles for most of her life. Aside from her work as the long-reigning medical director of Tresillian, she was a founder of the Rachel Forster Hospital in

Surry Hills, an institution staffed by women, and serving women and children. With the establishment of baby health centres in New South Wales from 1914 onwards, she was appointed as the service's honorary medical officer.

Her *Parents Book* was first published in 1926, with a further 19 editions following, the last in 1955. She also ran a regular weekly 'mothercraft' session on ABC Radio from 1933 to 1936. Introduced as 'The Lady Doctor', she would dart to the station each week from her busy medical practice in the city. As mentioned earlier in this book, she shared a house for over 50 years with her friend Helen Wark, a lecturer in art at Sydney Teachers College, the two dying within a fortnight of each other. The probate papers of both women are held in the NSW State Archives. They detail – as was necessary at the time for tax reasons – all their household goods, down to cutlery, crockery and worn rugs. The list indicates a cultured, intellectual life, with a bookshelf filled with artbooks, a monograph by Sigmund Freud, and novels by writers such as Thackeray (Harper had seven of his novels). There were also artworks by Australian painters Lionel Lindsay and Hans Heysen.

Helen Wark had, in her will, given ownership of the house to 'her friend Margaret' but – as it happened – Margaret died first, and the house went to Helen's sister and brother-in-law. Harper was 84. It surprises me that, despite her achievements, she was never awarded an imperial honour, as were so many of her peers.

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**Dr Clair Isbister** was consultant paediatrician at Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital for over 30 years, from 1948 to 1980. She was considered the most prominent Australian child-rearing expert of her time. She was author of nine books, beginning in 1958 with *What is Your Problem*

*Mother?*, with later titles including *Preparing for Motherhood* (1963), *Mummy I Feel Sick* (1969), *Birth of a Family* (1976) and *Should I Call the Doctor?* (1979). Four editions of her *Birth, Infancy and Childhood* were published between 1965 and 1980. Two of her books were also published in the United States. For 14 years (from 1954 to 1968), she gave regular weekly advice on ABC radio, appearing as ‘a woman doctor’.

A social conservative, Isbister was troubled by abortion, homosexuality and feminism – writing that she believed many feminists were ‘hormonally castrated’. In both 1983 and 1984, she stood unsuccessfully for the Senate, as part of Fred Nile’s Christian-conservative ‘Call to Australia’ team. On a less controversial note, she was the first neonatal paediatrician in New South Wales and carried out groundbreaking research in hospital infections. She was also ahead of her time in arguing that ‘feeding by the clock’ was an impediment to successful breastfeeding – by not responding to her baby’s cries, she said, a mother’s milk supply would begin to falter.

She met her husband, James Isbister, at Sydney University, where they were both members of the Student Christian Movement. They graduated together in 1938 and married in 1940. They had four children. Clair Isbister was awarded an OBE in 1969, with an upgrade to a CBE in 1976. She died in 2008.

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**Dr William Howard James** was medical superintendent of the Warburton Sanitarium in Victoria, a health facility established by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1910 and run according to the theories of the US cornflake king and anti-masturbation obsessive Dr John Harvey Kellogg. James ran the Sanitarium until his retirement in 1932. His 1923 book *Home Nursing and the Ailments of Children* may not be the best parenting guide published in this era, but – at 507 pages – it’s certainly the longest.

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**Dr Frederick Truby King** attracted devotees and detractors by the score. He was never happier than when denouncing those who failed to acknowledge the superiority of his methods. Critics replied that nurses trained under his system became rigid and dogmatic, treating their leader as a messiah: his ‘devotees . . . tend to aggrandise certain methods of infant

feeding almost into religious convictions’, to quote one Australian health official.

After studying medicine in Scotland, King returned to his native New Zealand and, in 1889, was appointed medical superintendent at the Seacliff Lunatic Asylum, New Zealand’s largest psychiatric facility. A trip to Japan in 1904, described earlier in this book, led to an interest in breastfeeding and child nutrition, something that fast became his life’s work. With the support of the aristocratic Lady Victoria Plunket – goddaughter of Queen Victoria and wife of the then New Zealand governor – he established the Plunket Society in 1907 to ‘help the mothers and save the babies’, alongside a network of Karitane centres, named after the seaside town in which he first began to offer care for undernourished babies.

King quickly formed the ambition to expand, establishing training schools in Dunedin and London. As early as the 1920s there were Karitane centres throughout Australia. A pamphlet from the time lists twelve centres in New South Wales, nine in Victoria, six in South Australia, and two each in Queensland and Tasmania. In Melbourne, the Tweddle Hospital for Babies and School of Mothercraft, opened in 1924, trained nurses in his methods.

His impact was even greater in New Zealand, where a partnership between King and the government provided home visits by Plunket nurses to up to 85 per cent of white mothers. Māori mothers, meanwhile, were assisted by District nurses, using an adapted version of Plunket’s methods, the nurses equipped, it was noted at the time, with fewer resources. King’s 1925 booklet *The Expectant Mother* was given free to every applicant for a marriage licence. Issued by the New Zealand Department of Health, it was addressed: ‘To Husband and Wife’, with the advice, printed in bold, that ‘Perfect motherhood is perfect patriotism.’ In Sydney, King’s adopted daughter Mary – according to one of her letters home – sent a free copy of the booklet ‘to every birth notified in the [*Sydney Morning*] *Herald*’.

King also had an entrepreneurial side, producing infant formulas under the brand names Kariol and Karilac. They were much recommended in Karitane’s books and pamphlets – with the warning, in block capitals, ‘DO NOT ACCEPT A SUBSTITUTE’. Australian authorities, as we’ve heard, tended to view them as overpriced and unnecessary, and even questioned who was pocketing the profits: ‘Where its dividends – if any – go, I am not in a position to know,’ wrote one NSW health official in 1932. To be fair to

King, he always claimed the factories were run on ‘altruistic lines’ and certainly, on his death, his estate was declared bankrupt.

All the same, many Australian authorities took a set against King. In NSW, the director of infant health was Dr Emanuel Sydney Morris. As a medical official in Tasmania, he’d already formed a bleak view of Truby King. Appointed to the Sydney position in 1924, his opposition only deepened. One thick file of correspondence within the local Department of Health, held in the State Archives, bristles with Morris’s antagonism towards King’s local organisation, the Australian Mothercraft Society. Morris calls it ‘a hostile body . . . antagonistic to the efforts of the State in connection with infant welfare’. The back-and-forth correspondence includes constant letters from the society, addressed to the minister for health, demanding funding and recognition of King-trained nurses. The applications were routinely rejected, following advice from Morris. The society, said one of Morris’s internal memos, dated in July 1932, ‘poses as the injured innocent whilst The Department, apparently, is to be regarded as the villain of the tragedy’. The minister for health at the time, Reginald Weaver, agreed, denying the society both funding and recognition, telling the society that King and his followers ‘have always tended to deprecate, if not despise, our methods’. This continued to be the view of the New South Wales government for the next 30 years.

King’s own health was not great. He was sickly as a child, and as an adult was plagued by tuberculosis. He eventually became blind in one eye. He was made a C.M.G. in 1917 and knighted in 1925. The death of his wife, Isabella, in 1927 appeared to kick-start a decade of deterioration. He died at home in Wellington in February 1938, becoming the first New Zealand private citizen to be honoured with a state funeral.

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**Mary Truby King** was adopted by King and his wife while still a baby. As detailed earlier, there's evidence that Mary's mother, a staff member, was pressured into giving up her baby to the childless couple. The offer was made when Mary was about six months old, but the adoption papers were not signed until she was 13 months old, the Kings having meanwhile embarked on a long overseas trip. Once the adoption papers were signed, the child's birth name of Esther was changed to Mary.

Mary showed some independence of thought: as a young woman she secretly ignored King's orders that she should not see her biological mother or older sister. She also left New Zealand for a new life in Australia in 1930, at the age of 26. Mary did not attend Truby King's funeral in Wellington on 12 February 1938 – it was said 'due to illness'. However, along with her sister, she was at the side of her birth mother, Leilah Gordon, when Leilah died in Dunedin, four months later, on 15 June 1938.

For all of that, Mary was still a Truby King loyalist, promoting her adoptive father's work through articles in newspapers and magazines, most prominently the *Australian Women's Weekly*. She published her own book *Mothercraft* in 1934, which was reprinted many times, as well as a positive biography of her adoptive father, *Truby King: The Man*, published in 1948. In 1945, in her early forties, she married Anthony White, an RAAF gunner, becoming Mary Truby White, and moved to Adelaide. They quickly had two sons, Michael and Stephen. Ten years before her death, when she was in her late 80s, she participated in an oral history project about the early years of Karitane, reflecting on her 'mixed feelings' about her adoption and how having her own boys had affected her thinking about Truby King's tough methods. She died in Adelaide in 2002, at the age of 98.

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**Elizabeth McMillan** was one of Truby King's most fervent Australian disciples – at one point sacked because of her devotion to the Kiwi messiah. Even before that event, McMillan had experienced a dramatic life. She was born into politics, the daughter of a local politician, William McMillan, and with a well-connected stepmother, Helen McMillan, president of many local charities and associations. Elizabeth went to school in Randwick, then later studied art in Paris. As a young woman she travelled extensively in America, Ireland and South Africa, before returning to Australia to train as

a nurse. She then became one the first Australian women to serve during World War I – sailing from Sydney Harbour in August 1914 aboard a hospital ship sent to support the Australian troops in German New Guinea. A year later, she was deployed to the Greek island of Lemnos, 50 miles from Gallipoli, where a new field hospital was being established on what was a barren windswept island. Her accounts of that time, nursing the injured of the Gallipoli campaign without shelter or facilities, still make for gripping reading. In one letter home she described her first weeks on the island:

The lack of any food but bully beef and hard ration biscuits; badly made tea; condensed milk; no kerosene for Primus stove or methylated spirits. Bread sour, made at the Ration bake house but which gives diarrhoea if eaten; swarms of slow persistent flies; boiling sun though cool by night. All patients on mattresses on the earth; the constant kneeling and lifting from that position; no clean clothing; nursing them in their gore-soaked clothes; add up a few of the difficulties against which we have been fighting.

It was a terrible experience – ‘I could weep hysterically now it is over,’ she wrote home – but one she also found inspiring. ‘I didn’t know we [Australians] were a race till I came here. I didn’t know our men had such straight backs and fine figures and bearing.’

After the war, she enrolled in a Truby King college in London’s Earl’s Court: the Babies of the Empire Home and Training School. That was in 1919, and by 1920 she was asked by King to take charge of his main training school in New Zealand’s Dunedin. By 1922 she was in Sydney, as the founding matron of the Tresillian Mothercraft Home and Training Hospital in Petersham, educating nurses for the newly established baby health clinics. She soon fell out with the medical director, Dr Margaret Harper, as well as with the influential local politician Sidney Innes-Noad. The complaints against her appear twofold: she was accused of secretly using Truby King’s patented milk products – ‘emulsions’ that Innes-Noad believed were expensive and unnecessary – and of downplaying the role of doctors, in favour of her own authority as matron. When she refused to resign, she was sacked amid much hullabaloo. Within a month, with support from her father and stepmother, she launched the Australian

Mothercraft Society – dedicated to the ideas of Truby King. Soon after, she started a local branch of King's own organisation, Karitane, serving as director of nursing from 1923 to 1926. As with her time at Tresillian, McMillan was combative in the role. The NSW director general of public health wrote about visiting Karitane in May 1926. According to his memo, preserved in the State Archives of New South Wales, McMillan used his visit to launch an attack on the nurses trained at Tresillian: 'She stated to us that she considered Tresillian nurses were not adequately trained and they needed further instruction at a Karitane centre.' The bureaucrat said he thought any further cooperation with the group was 'impossible'.

In 1929, McMillan married Lieutenant Dudley Percy Davidson, a dashing RAAF pilot fifteen years her junior. Upon marriage she resigned as director of the Australian Mothercraft Society, and the couple moved to Queensland, where her new husband took a job as a commercial pilot. Tragically he died just over a year later, killed in an air crash at Maryborough. After her husband's death, McMillan returned to Sydney and wrote a child advice column for the *Sun* newspaper, under the byline Elizabeth McMillan Davidson, still advocating for the views of Truby King. She died in February 1943. Her Gallipoli nurse's uniform of red woollen cape and leather belt is held in the collection of the Anzac Memorial in Sydney's Hyde Park. The belt is marked with her own handwritten record of the places she served: 'Lemnos 1915, Cairo 1916, France 1917–1919.'

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*Courtesy of  
State Library  
of South  
Australia*

**Dr Helen Mayo** was the great mover and shaker in the early years of South Australia's infant welfare movement, and a persistent critic of Truby King,

whose nurses – she said – behaved fanatically, like members of a cult. Mayo graduated in medicine from the University of Adelaide in 1902, the second woman to do so. She was the top medical student of her year. She worked for a year as house surgeon at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, before leaving for London where she worked at the Hospital for Sick Children in Great Ormond Street. After studying tropical medicine, and then working in Dublin, she moved to St Stephen's Hospital for Women and Children in Delhi – India's first hospital specialising in women and children. She stayed there a year, according to a family friend, 'not always in good health'. A fellow female doctor, Marie Elizabeth Hayes, wrote back to her own mother in Ireland, describing Mayo's hard work, medical skill and rapid ability to speak Hindi to the patients: 'It amazes me the way Dr M talks to them, like a native, with apparently no difficulty.' By then, Mayo had been in India for a little over eight months, a measure of her intelligence and dedication.

Mayo returned to Adelaide in 1906, specialising in the health of women and children. In 1909 she helped establish the first baby health centre in South Australia, which grew into the Adelaide School for Mothers. In 1917 she was instrumental in the opening of the Mareeba Hospital, and in 1927 helped form South Australia's Mothers' and Babies' Health Association. She went on to cowrite the association's guidebook for parents, *The Australian Mothercraft Book*, which became the standard text in that state from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. Her entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* describes her 'as short and plump with curly hair, a round face and alert expression with a deep rich voice and infectious laugh'. She was unmarried, sharing a North Adelaide house with her partner Dr Constance Finlayson. She was awarded an OBE in 1935. When she died in November 1967 at the age of 89, the *Medical Journal of Australia* described her as 'the doyen of medical women in South Australia (and most probably Australia)'. The federal electorate of Mayo, once held by Alexander Downer, is named after her.

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**Muriel Peck** was a key figure in what became the Victorian Baby Health Centres Association. In 1917 she established the state's first baby health centre, operating in the inner-city suburb of Richmond, walking door to door to attract new mothers to the service. Peck's funding was supplied by

three women: the pioneering Melbourne medico Dr Isabella Younger Ross, and two personal friends, Mrs W. Ramsay and Dr Ethel Hemphill. It was easy to see why they chose Muriel Peck. She already knew some of the mothers who lived in the poorest parts of the city, having helped establish a scheme to supply mothers with both clean cow's milk and ice on which to store it. She'd trained at Melbourne's Children's Hospital and had studied child welfare in England and Scandinavia.

Similar centres followed, with Peck working in the centres, as well as training both paid nurses and volunteers. By 1923 she was overseeing 47 centres. She also worked on the Better Farming Train, a state government service that offered expert lessons, mainly in agriculture, to those outside the cities. The train made 27 tours in its first three years, visiting more than 200 towns – Peck giving talks in the infant carriage by day and advising new parents at night. Eventually, the workload proved too much. In its annual report for 1923–24, the council of the Victorian Baby Health Centres Association said it 'regrets to report that Miss M.A. Peck, the pioneer Sister of the movement, has had a complete breakdown'. They granted her a four-month leave of absence, noting her 'unselfish devotion'. In 1926 she joined Dr Vera Scantlebury Brown at the newly formed Infant Welfare section of the Department of Health, with the title 'Assistant to the Director'. She later became godmother to Vera Scantlebury Brown's second child.

In 1929 she wrote a book, *Your Baby – a Practical Guide for Mothers*, with a foreword by Scantlebury Brown. *Preparing for Motherhood* followed in 1935, as well as an updated edition of *Your Baby* in 1939. In the early 1940s ill health led to her resignation from the Health Department. She died in 1947.

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**Stella Pines**, another tenacious nurse and veteran of the Great War, trained at Truby King's Dunedin school, before returning home, where she replaced Elizabeth McMillan as matron at the Tresillian Hospital in Sydney. She, too, clashed with the Tresillian authorities, including Dr Margaret Harper. She left to become matron at the Queen Victoria Hospital, Launceston's maternity hospital, and then, in 1925, moved to Hobart, where she became foundation matron of the Child Welfare Association home, Flint House, established to promote Truby King's methods.

Tall and imposing, she was a self-starter. In 1926, she commenced a four-and-a-half-year, self-funded tour of study, visiting Canada, the United States of America, England and Europe, including stints at McGill University School for Graduate Nurses and then at the University of Toronto, both in Canada. Pines returned home an advocate for university-based nurse education, but her ideas were consistently rejected by those in authority, including politicians, public servants and university administrators. By the 1930s, she was writing columns for Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*, as an 'Expert on Child Guidance', and contributing to both newspapers and radio stations in Adelaide. She also enjoyed some success promoting occupational therapy for people with mental ill-health, especially in South Australia. In 1940, disillusioned, she left Australia to take up a medical career in South Africa. She died in Durban in 1968 at the age of 83.

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[www.tweddlecentenary.org.au/trailblazers/maud-primrose](http://www.tweddlecentenary.org.au/trailblazers/maud-primrose)

**Maud Primrose** was, according to Vera Scantlebury Brown, 'the primary cause of disturbance' in the world of infant welfare in Victoria. The reason was her unbridled enthusiasm for Truby King and his methods. She was another self-starter. After reading about King's work with mothers and babies, she travelled to New Zealand at her own expense in about 1913, training as a Plunket nurse at Dunedin's Karitane Hospital. At the end of World War I she published a slender book of poetry under the title *To the Women of our Empire: A Tribute*. It included the lines: 'In ages past, sweet mothers at the knee/Instilled the truth that made the British free'.

She opened the first Truby King centre in the Melbourne suburb of Coburg at the end of 1919, before helping establish the Tweddle Hospital in Melbourne, with King as its medical advisor. The idea was for Sister Primrose to teach King's methods to local nurses, who duly became known as 'Primrose' nurses, setting up a battle with those trained elsewhere.

Primrose also reached mothers through her radio broadcasts on Melbourne's 3UZ, presented under the title the 'Truby King Mother Craft Circle', as well as through columns for magazines such as *The Housewife*, published by the Housewives Association of Victoria, and the popular weekly *New Idea*. Nicknamed Sandy because of her reddish hair, she was one of the first women in Melbourne to hold a motorcar driver's licence. She lived with her close friend and companion Gertrude Millar at Camberwell. On Primrose's death in July 1954, Millar inserted a touching death notice in *The Age*: 'In memory of a true, faithful and loving friend.'

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**Frank Richards** was the author of the 1969 book *How to be Married . . . and Happy!*, which painstakingly advised new mothers on the beauty regime required if they wanted to hang on to their husband. He was, as mentioned earlier, a Catholic priest. He was a director of Melbourne's Catholic Family Planning Centre, and author of the 1982 book *Natural Birth Control*. Under his full name of the Reverend Father Francis Charles Richards, he was given an Order of Australia in 1989 'for service to the community'.

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*UMA-ITE-  
201300580000  
1, courtesy of  
University of  
Melbourne  
Archives*

**Dr Vera Scantlebury Brown** was clearly a very appealing figure, equipped with warmth, humour and a seriousness of purpose. The humour is evident in her letters and diaries, which have been preserved by the University of Melbourne. They include the moment in which she appears to first take an interest in mothercraft. On an ocean trip, returning home from Britain, she happened upon a group of mothers with their crying babies – a gathering she described cheerily as ‘a howling success’.

Scantlebury graduated from the University of Melbourne Medical School in 1914, one of the six top students of the year, and then worked at the Melbourne Children’s Hospital. Female doctors were forbidden entry to the Australian Army Medical Corps, so in 1917 she sailed for London and took up a job at London’s Endell Street Military Hospital, becoming a member of the Royal Army Medical Corps. She returned to Melbourne in 1919 and, as a female doctor, found it difficult to get work. In November 1919 she accepted a part-time role as medical officer at the Victorian Baby Health Centres Association on an annual salary of £150. There she worked with Sister Muriel Peck, who was to become her close colleague for life. Seven years later, in 1926 – having proved herself adept at holding the Truby King forces at bay – Scantlebury was appointed inaugural director of Victoria’s new Department of Infant Welfare, a position she held until her death. In the same year as her appointment as director, she married Dr Edward Brown, an engineering academic at Melbourne University, bringing a name change to Scantlebury Brown. The couple had two children: a son and a daughter.

As mentioned earlier in this book, her government position was deemed ‘part-time’ despite its more-than-fulltime responsibilities. The rules of the era forbade married women from fulltime jobs in the state’s public service – a rule that didn’t start to shift until 1956, when it was partly repealed to allow for fulltime female teachers. Her obituary in the *Medical Journal of Australia* was written by her great pal and co-author Dr Kate Campbell. Campbell described Scantlebury Brown as ‘an ideal friend, loyal, loving, gay, interested and understanding’. Elsewhere, she called her ‘an unforgettable figure, remembered for her vision, tact, charm and devotion’. She was appointed OBE in 1938, and died in 1946.

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*The Age, 7  
May 1954*

**Dr Irma Schnierer** was the author of four Australian parenting guides and several books in German. She was a regular on Australian radio, wrote widely for newspapers here and overseas, and ran parenting courses at the Melbourne Institute of Technology. Born in Vienna in 1892, her life story is gripping. After Nazi Germany’s annexation of Austria in March 1938, violence against Jewish citizens began immediately and many tried to flee. Irma, unlike many others, was successful, arriving in Australia in 1938 with her lawyer husband Friedrich and their 12-year-old daughter Herta. The visa application, made on 4 July 1938, is preserved in the Austrian government archives in Vienna. Under the question ‘Which relationships do you have abroad, especially in the country to which you wish to emigrate?’, her husband lists an Australian ‘uncle’, Theodore Lapin. This appears to be a well-meaning fiction: Lapin was from Białystok in Poland and, having made a success of himself in Melbourne, helped many who were fleeing the Nazis. The Schnierers arrived in Melbourne, from London, on the ship

R.M.S. *Otranto* on 20 December 1938. In the 'Incoming Passenger List', preserved in the National Archives of Australia, their intended address is listed as 110 Flinders Lane, a property owned by Lapin. Those archives also contain Friedrich's statement to the immigration official as they entered the country. Friedrich described his job in Vienna as: 'Judge, secretary of a court of arbitration' and then listed his intended occupation as 'solicitor's clerk', a reminder of the downward mobility faced by this refugee family, like so many others.

Those difficulties were, of course, the least of it. Schnierer's own parents appear to have died before the German invasion, but her in-laws were among Hitler's victims. They suicided, together, in Vienna in 1941.

Schnierer was already an established author by the time she emigrated, her work appearing under the byline Irma Hift-Schnierer. In 1914, as a 23-year-old, she'd received a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Vienna, with a dissertation on 'Historical Folk Songs and Leaflets from the Time of the Turkish Wars'. From 1922 to 1928 she wrote regularly for the monthly magazine *Social Work*, published by the Association Against Impoverishment in Vienna, often on topics of child protection and poverty. The website of the Austrian National Library lists twelve journal or newspaper articles from this period. She also formed an interest in the work of Alfred Adler, the Viennese doctor who was part of Freud's inner circle before developing theories of his own. In 1936, while still in Vienna, she published a playful book based on her daughter's younger years, *Liesel fragt: Warum? (Liesel Asks: Why?)*

Once she'd arrived in Melbourne, Schnierer detailed her family's escape in a letter to an Austrian friend, Karl Mautner, who was still stuck in Vienna, trying to escape. Schnierer's letter, held in the archives of the City of Vienna, is dated 12 November 1939, and gives a new address in Melbourne's Prahran. In the two-page, closely typed letter, Schnierer describes a short period in Paris where she and her husband tried, and failed, to get a visa for his parents, followed by another brief stint in England. Her English contacts, despite being wealthy, were unhelpful, she told Mautner. She contrasted this with the warm welcome the family received once it finally arrived in Melbourne, including a house provided free of charge for a month, and an offer of employment for Friedrich. She praised, in particular, the generosity of Theodore Lapin: 'the kindest person imaginable'.

‘In every relationship,’ she wrote, ‘we have been met with the greatest warmth and willingness to help – and we literally experience such wonders every single day.’ And – best of all – ‘No one knocks on your door, and drags you to prison or a concentration camp.’

Karl Mautner, the letter’s recipient, escaped to Budapest soon after, and then secured a visa to the US. His parents, who stayed in Europe, were murdered in 1944 in Auschwitz. Once in the US, Mautner became a citizen, joined the army and participated in the D-Day landings – part of a parachute regiment dropped into Normandy on 6 June 1944. He later became a leading American diplomat, and then a significant figure in NASA.



Schnierer, later in her life, described her difficulties picking up a new language after her arrival in Melbourne, saying her English was initially ‘hardly good enough for routine shopping needs’. Despite this, she quickly made friends with members of the local literary community, including the influential critic and essayist Nettie Palmer. Palmer soon offered to translate Schnierer’s book about her daughter’s childhood into English. It was published locally in 1940 under the title *Liesel Asks Why-y-y-y?*, meeting with positive reviews. Palmer refused payment for the translation, telling Schnierer: ‘Let it be my contribution to the fight against the Nazis.’ Meanwhile, Schnierer, despite her doubts about her English skills, began contributing to Australian newspapers, including Melbourne’s *Argus* and *Herald*. She continued this work while also writing in German for several publications, including New York’s Jewish newspaper *Aufbau*, and the progressive Liechtenstein newspaper *Liechtensteiner Volksblatt*. For the latter she wrote several articles in the late 1940s, describing life in Australia through the eyes of a new migrant. Some of her observations seem accurate: she wrote, for example, about the tendency of Australians to address their boss by his first name – ‘often Bill or Joe’. On the other hand, she appeared

overly alarmed about Australia's dangerous animals. Here she is in the *Liechtensteiner Volksblatt* in September 1948:

Encounters with venomous snakes are common. These encounters happen so frequently that schoolchildren carry sticks and stones with them on their way to the village school and often kill a few of these monsters in a single morning. [There are also] giant sharks that appear almost daily in close proximity to crowded beaches, where these monsters seek their victims from among the bathers. By the time the warning signal sounds from the observation tower of the famous Bondi Beach in Sydney, which is particularly frequented by such sharks, many a swimmer has already disappeared into the jaws of such a predator. Thus, the untamed wildness of nature in the Australian bush and ocean often reaches with a deadly hand to the heart of the young civilisation of the fifth continent.

It should be said that there have only ever been two fatal shark incidents at Bondi, and they both occurred in 1929. Schnierer, though, would not be the first or last writer to give overseas readers a thrill by over-egging the dangers faced by Australians whenever they venture out the front door. Yes, Bill Bryson, I'm talking about you.

By the mid-1940s, Schnierer was regularly writing in English, mostly about literature, politics and child psychology, with pieces in the literary journal *Meanjin* and parenting columns in Hobart's *Mercury*. She recorded radio talks for the ABC, on subjects including science and art history, some of which also appeared on Radio New Zealand. In 1952 her portrait, painted by Robert Hofmann, was a finalist for the Archibald Prize. Later that decade, she prepared a German translation of the Australian classic *I Can Jump Puddles* by Alan Marshall, which was duly published in Berlin in 1959.

As a psychologist she operated a private practice in Melbourne until the early 1970s, regularly offering her services through classified advertisements in Melbourne's *The Age*. She also offered a successful parenting course at Melbourne Technical College that ran from 1951 to 1957. By 1954, according to *The Age* newspaper, already 'more than 700 students have passed through this unique school'. *The Age*'s story, accompanied by a photo, describes her as 'a dark, forceful child

psychologist from Vienna'. The reporter also interviewed her at home in Prahran, her flat 'adorned with souvenirs of Vienna and the Orient'.

Disappointingly, Schnierer, despite being so prolific, doesn't appear to have written much about her escape from Europe, other than that one vivid letter to Karl Mautner. Irma Schnierer died in Melbourne in May 1972, five years after her husband. Her daughter, Herta, seems to have shared her mother's artistic flair. While a teenager, Herta illustrated her mother's book *Leisel Asks Why-y-y-y?*, co-translated a play from German into English, and designed costumes for an experimental play *The Lost Melody*, staged in Melbourne by a fellow refugee from Vienna, Neumann Jubal, also a fascinating figure. I'd have loved the chance to interview them all. In 1944, she married an Australian, St Kilda-born Lindsay Reece, but the couple do not appear to have had children. Herta died in October 1994, Lindsay ten years before. Oh, and in the late 1970s she was on the committee for the Australian branch of Mensa, the organisation for smart people.

Didn't I tell you that 'only children' were clever?



Love 'em heaps. A small child from the Bonwick family, photographed by Max Dupain in Sydney, c. 1944 ...

*Max Dupain, c. 1944, courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW*



... and a boy swimming in 1961, also photographed in Sydney by Max Dupain.

*Max Dupain, 1961, as part of a series for the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children. While the identity of the child is unknown, the Sydney Children's Hospitals Network (SCHN) acknowledges that some Aboriginal children, admitted as patients, were subjected to government policies and became part of the Stolen Generations. SCHN and NSW Health acknowledge and apologise for past practices that caused harm to Aboriginal children and their families and continue to work with Aboriginal people to ensure systems are culturally safe and responsive. The author acknowledges that SCHN holds the copyright to the photo reproduced herein, which has been used with written permission.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Heather Sheard's 2007 book *All the Little Children* is a terrific account of the early years of Victoria's Baby Health Centres. I also relied upon Philippa Mein Smith's *Mothers and King Baby*, published in 1997, and Kerreen Reiger's 1985 book *The Disenchantment of the Home: Modernizing the Australian Family*, both wonderful accounts. The 2025 publication *Fathering – An Australian History* is a team effort from five historians – Alistair Thomson, John Murphy, Kate Murphy, Johnny Bell and Jill Barnard. It is a moving example of the power of oral history to capture the lives of ordinary people. *The Oxford Book of Australian Schooldays* proved an excellent source of first-hand accounts of young Australian lives.

I also relied on Michelle Arrow's book *The Seventies*, with its portrait of the Royal Commission on Human Relationships, and Frank Bongiorno's *The Sex Lives of Australians*. And, of course, it's hard to imagine writing history without the benefit of the National Library's Trove database, nor the treasures on offer at the website of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

Thanks, too, to all my friends and acquaintances for putting up with my incessant questioning about their own childhoods and the parenting methods they chose to use. Shelley Eves and Dale Druhan helped me, from their perspective as the mothers of young children, by reading early versions. My publisher at ABC Books, Mary Rennie, has maintained her faith in me over ten books; she's a marvel. So are her brilliant editing accomplices Nicola Robinson and Madeleine James – I thank them for their inspiring combination of care and flair. Anthony Blair, from Cameron's, is the world's best agent, while Melanie Kembrey, boss of the Spectrum section of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, is the world's best editor.

Many of the images in the book come from two brilliant photographers – Melbourne's Ruth Hollick and Sydney's Max Dupain (both of whom relied on inspired collaborators – Dorothy Izard and Lucy Crosbie Morrison in the case of Hollick, and Jill White in the case of Dupain). If this book leaves you with a sense of the wonderful spirit of children, it will be more to do with their glorious images than any words I could manage.

As usual, my greatest thanks go to my partner, Debra Oswald, who read every draft. She always makes things better.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**RICHARD GLOVER** has written several bestselling books, including *The Land Before Avocado*, *Flesh Wounds* and *Love, Clancy*. He's been a regular columnist for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and the *Washington Post*, and for many years hosted the comedy program *Thank God It's Friday* on ABC Local Radio. To find out more, visit [www.richardglover.com.au](http://www.richardglover.com.au)

## PRAISE FOR RICHARD GLOVER

### *How to Ruin a Child*

‘Funny, intelligent and very useful – it will make you trust yourself more and relax into the moment with your kids, which is what they need most’ – Steve Biddulph

‘A parenting book where you get to laugh out loud. Every parent deserves to read it’ – Madonna King

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