

Modern Parenting: Is 'Bringing Up Bébé' Still Relevant?



By Alex Berezow — June 29, 2019

For the uninitiated, "Bringing Up Bébé" was an international bestseller written by Pamela Druckerman, an American living in Paris. She quickly noticed how French children behaved very differently from her own. So, she started researching French culture and discovered an entirely different parenting philosophy. Unlike parenting fads that come and go, this book will always be relevant.



I'm the proud new father of a baby girl. And as Alexandre Dumas once said, "It is rare that one can see in a little boy the promise of a man, but one can almost always see in a little girl the threat of a woman." He's absolutely right.

So, how are my wife and I to raise this precious, little emerging threat? We saw how other people raised their kids and were horrified. Parents helicoptered over their kids, refused to let them go outside (as I did every single day as a child), and treated them like fragile snowflakes that could melt at any moment. And the kids? Well, they are whiny little brats. We figured there had to be a better way.

That's when we came across the book *Bringing Up Bébé*, an international bestseller that also goes by the title *French Children Don't Throw Food*. We were intrigued. The book seemed to confirm all of our basic instincts about child rearing, and we decided this would be the one and only parenting

book we would read. It was a good decision.

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A Lesson from France: The Universe Does Not Revolve Around You

The overriding principle of French parenting is that the baby fits into your life, not the other way around. Your tiny little human needs to slowly realize that the universe does not revolve around him or her, and the French have various ways of introducing this concept to kids.

For example, French kids are taught patience from an extremely early age. If a child is crying or fussing, parents pause a moment before responding. If there's nothing really wrong, doing "the pause" gives the baby a moment to self-soothe, a very important life skill. However, if she keeps crying, then the parents pick her up.

This subtle but crucial tactic is also deployed during the night when the baby should be sleeping. My little one lets out a bloodcurdling scream between 2 am and 3 am every night for absolutely no reason whatsoever. A typical American parent might pick her up immediately. But the French, according to Ms. Druckerman, say to wait. So, that's what I do. And guess what? She goes right back to sleep within mere moments.

On the other hand, if I would pick her up, it would likely awaken her. Then she would "learn" that it's normal to wake up at 3 am. I don't want her to learn that lesson. So far, this strategy appears to be paying off. At only two months old, she's already learned to sleep through the night. She falls asleep for good between 10 pm and 11 pm and sleeps (almost completely) soundly until 5 am. After a brief feeding, she often falls back to sleep around 7 am and wakes up between 9 am and 10 am.

The French have other strategies that make kids realize that the universe does not revolve solely around them. They are taught as soon as they are able to speak to politely greet people, reinforcing the fact that there are other humans who have a right to be acknowledged. Kids are not entitled to eat whatever and whenever they want. Instead, they stick to the family's routine eating times, and they eat whatever the parents are serving. There are no special kids' foods.

There are plenty of other excellent lessons in the book (such as the notion that children should have firm boundaries but a lot of freedom within those boundaries). But to me, many of them seem to revolve around the general philosophy that kids must learn that they are not allowed to inconvenience other people, including their parents. That's not just because it's annoying; it's because it's disrespectful. This disciplined approach to life is taught before the baby even has much of a clue as to what's going on.

Children Aren't Science Experiments

I know that many of you are likely thinking, "You just got lucky with a peaceful baby. Parenting has nothing to do with it." That absolutely may be the case. Kids aren't science experiments, and we only have a sample size of $n = 1$.

But I do know that, like puppies, babies learn to respond to incentives. If a dog begs when you're eating dinner and you throw him a piece of meat, he'll continue begging every time you eat dinner. If a baby cries at 3 am for no reason and you pick her up, she'll continue crying at 3 am for no reason. Parents must incentivize behavior they want and disincentivize behavior they don't want. This makes life better for everybody because the baby learns self-control and the parents get a little rest.

On the radio the other day, I heard an ad from Seattle Children's Hospital encouraging parents to "narrate" activities to their children, like a play-by-play announcer. If your kid picks up a block, you're supposed to say, "Wow! Look at the block! Isn't that amazing?!"

How silly. (Ms. Druckerman ridicules this behavior too.) My parents didn't do that with me, and I turned out halfway normal. This is one of many parenting fads that will come and go.

However, like the Book of Proverbs, *Bringing Up B  b  * speaks timeless truths. It will always be relevant.

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