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Support for parents and families: A
retrospective look at family life articles in
Broome County Living magazine 1986 – 1988

Local and Regional Projects

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Advice to parents changes over the years parts I-II

V. Sue Atkinson

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Living

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Information Center Tip

Our Information Center now has available a second catalog of publications. The home economics catalog, which lists over 800 fact sheets, covers the following topics: food and nutrition, energy, housing, home care and management, appliances, child care and development, finance, and sewing. You can receive this free cata-

log by calling 772-8953 or by stopping at our Information Center, 840 Front Street, Binghamton from 8:30 am to 5 pm. We also have available a catalog on horticulture publications.

Cover: 4-H "bowl" participants, from left, Marc Rosenberg, Mara Tornielo, Jim Cummings, Amanda Jacobs and Gretchen Johnson work with their coach, Mary Cummings.

Advice to Parents Changes Over the Years - Part I

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A look at the child care section of any bookstore will reveal titles such as Raise Your Kids Right, Your Baby and Child, Infants and Mothers, the Magic Years, Good Things for Babies, Your Child's First Five Years, and How to Raise a Brighter Child, as well as a brand new edition of Dr. Benjamin Spock's classic, Baby and Child Care.

While Dr. Spock has held his own for many years, the recent publishing boom in this field reflects today's parents' increasing interest in information and advice to help with rearing children.

Past generations may have depended on advice from friends and extended family members, but that support may be less available to today's new parents. However, the business of giving advice to parents is not new. If you were a parent in colonial America, your "baby book" would have been written by a doctor in England, who would have advised you, among other things, to avoid the apparently not uncommon practice of nursing your four year old. After 1800, your child care advice book would have been written by an American doctor and published in the United States. It might have described teething as a dangerous disease for an infant, or advised a cold bath for your young child.

Some of what we think of as

recent trends in child rearing - the increase in mothers choosing to breastfeed their infants, mothers in the workforce, and relaxed approaches to infant care, toilet training, and discipline - are interesting to look at over the years.

FEEDING BABIES AND SMALL CHILDREN

Prior to the nineteenth century, breastfeeding was not a choice, but a necessity for healthy infant development. If a mother was unable to breastfeed or had died in childbirth, it was recommended that a wet-nurse be employed. During the nineteenth century, baby bottles were developed and their use was recommended in such instances.

Before the eighteenth century, babies were to be nursed for two years and then gradually weaned. Babies were to be fed when they were hungry rather than according to a schedule. Mention of feeding schedules first appeared in 1725, and by the mid-nineteenth century schedules were universally recommended. The prescribed breastfeeding period gradually shortened to

11 months, and pacifiers and thumbsucking were forbidden. By this time, nursing two-year-olds was mentioned with the same disapproval that the practice with four-year-olds had received a century or so earlier.

The twentieth century brought the refinement of infant "formula," altering cow's milk to approximate breast milk as closely as possible. The appeal of modern technology, along with refrigeration and sterilization, made bottle feeding an increasingly popular



option. Baby books still often recommended breastfeeding, usually on a four-hour schedule, but also listed a number of reasons that mothers might not be able to breastfeed. The 1975 edition of Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care devotes 16 pages to breastfeeding, 13 to breastfeeding problems, and 21 pages to bottle feeding.

Feeding schedules became common in response to medical concerns about intestinal infections that were believed to result from irregular feeding. Since the 1960s and 70s, breastfeeding has grown in popularity and in 1976, the American Academy of Pediatrics officially endorsed the practice as the preferred feeding method for healthy, full-term infants. "Demand feeding" has largely replaced strict feeding schedules during the early months.

Until recently, approaches to weaning from breast or bottle recommended more leniency for bottle-fed babies. In the mid-50s, Dr. Spock urged mothers to wean a child from a bottle gradually and sensitively. Speaking of a child who wants a bottle at supper and bedtime, he said, "That's the time of day when most babies and children want their old-fashioned comforts. Many late-weaners insist on a bedtime bottle till about two years of age, and I don't think there is any harm in this." But of weaning a breastfed baby, he said, "I think it is preferable to have a baby weaned from the breast by a year . . . When breast feeding is continued beyond the age that a child really needs it, it may become a habit that makes him unnaturally dependent on his mother."

On the same subject, The Better Homes and Gardens New Baby Book, published in 1979 and still popular, says, "Nine

months is about the outside limit for breastfeeding . . . Bottle babies, too, now may take most milk from a cup, although most will continue to cling to a nightly feeding."

Virtually all advice books printed in the 1980s suggest that breastfeeding may continue as long as it is enjoyed by mother and baby, whether that is months or years. It is now the bottle-fed babies who are to be weaned by 12 or 15 months, largely because of dental concerns.

Prior to this century, solid foods were first given to children around 12 months of age. Before the mid-eighteenth century, there was concern about preventing overeating. Gradually, this was replaced by advice about making sure children ate all the food they were offered. During the first half of the twentieth century, doctors experimented with giving pureed solid food earlier and earlier. Competition among parents and aggressive advertising by the baby food industry pushed the age earlier and earlier. In the 1950s, Dr. Spock advised giving orange juice at six weeks and solids at two or three months, and definitely before six months, the baby was to be eating regular meals of fruit, vegetables, meat, cereal, and eggs. Today, pediatricians advise waiting until at least four months, and often six, before feeding the baby anything but breast milk or formula.

BEDTIME

Until the mid-eighteenth century, bedtime for a child meant in the parents' bed until age two or older, at which time, he or she would share a bed with brothers or sisters. During the nineteenth century, separate beds became common.

Newborn babies slept with their parents but were to be moved to their own beds before age one. Dr. Pye Henry Chavasse, whose 1883 book, Advice to a Mother on the Management of her Children, was popular in England and the United States, wrote, "Ought a babe to lie alone from the first? Certainly not . . . he requires the warmth of another person's body."

By the twentieth century, central heating was more common and parents were told, "Better not let the child in your bed . . . I think it's a sensible rule not to take a child into the parents' bed for any reason." (Spock, 1957).

While most current publications echo these sentiments, recent interest in the "family bed" has promoted publications such as Parents Magazine to include articles on this subject which, while cautioning parents about the potential disadvantages of the practice, generally tell parents that if they are comfortable with the practice, it is certainly not harmful. This is in contrast to earlier cautions about psychosexual implications of bed sharing.

In the 1950s, bedtimes were to be strictly enforced, with the baby being left to cry for up to 30 minutes. Interestingly, in the same book, Dr. Spock advises mothers of two-year-olds who are reluctant to sleep alone to sit by the bed until the child is soundly asleep. Current child care books contain a variety of advice about bedtime, ranging from "crying it out" to visiting the child every five minutes but not allowing the child out of the crib or bed, to rocking and nursing the baby to sleep and sitting or lying down with the young child.

Next month: Part II will cover discipline, toilet training and working mothers.

Advice to Parents Changes Over the Years - Part II

Editor's Note: Last month in Part I, feeding and bedtime were discussed, with examples of how professional advice to parents has changed over the years.

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DISCIPLINE

Before the mid-eighteenth century, babies were expected to be quite dependent. Infants were swaddled and so needed constant attention and care. Rocking and singing were recommended for getting the baby to sleep. Adults in the household were encouraged to handle the baby frequently and to respond promptly to his cries. During the latter part of the eighteenth century, parent advisors began to discourage swaddling, rocking, cuddling, and prompt responses to babies' cries. Independence became a trait to be valued in an infant. Parents were encouraged to let the baby kick, crawl, and walk as he pleased. The first mention of temper tantrums appears at this time.

Dr. Emmett Holt, author of the 1905 book, The Care and Feeding of Children, and sometimes described as the "Dr. Spock" of his day, advised parents against rocking, cuddling, or kissing babies too much in order to help them develop independence. Babies must

never be picked up in response to their crying. Loud, strong cries, parents were told, were healthy for the child.

By the mid-twentieth century, the tide had turned from such advice, though we all know it still lingers today. In fact, Dr. Holt's book, revised by his son, was still in print in the 1960s. Dr. Spock, whose advice today seems merely sensible, was seen as quite permissive in the 1940s and 50s. His advice on spoiling infants: "If a baby

is comforted when he is miserable, he usually doesn't go on demanding comfort when he isn't miserable." On discipline: "Punishment . . . is never the main element in discipline."

Today parents are urged to respond promptly to babies' cries, not just out of compassion, but because it is now thought that these babies cry less as time goes on than those left to "cry it out." Cuddling, rocking, and carrying babies are increasingly recommended.



Use of pouch-type baby carriers are recommended for fussy or colicky babies. Pacifiers are frequently recommended, and the baby's need to suck for comfort as well as food is recognized.

TOILET TRAINING

Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, parents were advised to begin toilet training at age one. The child was expected to be dry at night by age five, and punishment for accidents before that age was discouraged. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, parents were advised to begin toilet training between three weeks and six months. Children were expected to be dry at night by age three, and punishment for accidents was sometimes recommended.

Early in the twentieth century, Freudian psychology began to influence the advice given regarding toilet training, and parents were urged against excessively early and severe training. In the mid 1950s, Dr. Spock advised parents to begin toilet training between 12 and 24 months, depending on the child and the degree to which parents wanted to be involved in the training process. Today parents are urged to wait until at least 18 months, and often two years, to begin toilet training. Disposable diapers and automatic washers and dryers make this advice easier to follow. As one doctor wrote in a newspaper advice column, "If mothers still had to wash diapers by hand and hang them out to dry, toilet training would still begin at 12 months."

WORKING MOTHERS

Prior to the industrial revolution, the issue of working moth-

ers did not exist. Everyone worked hard and children were cared for at the same time by their mother or another extended family member. I found no reference to employment of mothers in child care advice books until the 1950s. Dr. Spock wrote, "If a mother realizes how vital this kind of care (at home by the mother) is to a small child, it may be easier for her to decide that the extra money she might earn, or the satisfaction she might receive from an outside job, is not so important after all." In fact, he advocated a government allowance to mothers to enable them to stay home with their children. He went on to give advice about child care arrangements, discouraging the use of day care centers for children under three, and referring to family day care as leaving the child in a "foster home." Most authors of this period echoed Spock's opinions and research studies were quoted to prove the ill effects of substitute care.

Today, Dr. Spock says, "The mother can go back to work as soon as she needs to, but . . . it should be done gradually, and she ought to try to return to part-time work."

Most experts today advise mothers to seek employment as they need and want to, with the qualification that good and stable care is provided for the children in her absence. But when to return to work? The experts disagree. T. Berry Brazleton, noted author and pediatrician, says not before the child is four months old. Burton White of the Center for Parent Education says not before a year, unless the work is part-time, not to exceed four hours a day. Penelope Leach, author of *Your Baby and Child* and other baby books that are

second only in sales to Dr. Spock's, advocates that mothers remain home with their children for two years. Leach strongly disapproves of group care for infants and toddlers.

LESSONS FOR PARENTS

What can we learn from this? For me, the most valuable lesson is that even the supposedly sacred ideas about raising children have not always stood the test of time. Experts change their minds. Sometimes these changes accommodate social trends - the industrial revolution, the emergence of the nuclear family, the lessening need for women in the workforce that came with the end of World War II, and the economic necessity for most families in the 1980s for women to return to work.

Rather than feeling less sure of ourselves because the experts haven't always agreed (and even now don't agree with each other), perhaps we can gain confidence to "break the rules" (whatever they happen to be at this time) if doing so makes sense for us. We can follow "the rules" if that approach makes more sense for us.

Professional advice is helpful, but it is most helpful when we see it as Penelope Leach describes her work:

"I am not laying down rules. I am not telling you what to do. I am passing on to you a complex and, to me, entrancing folklore of childcare which, once upon a time, you might have received through your own extended family . . . if it can play a part in helping you make your child happy . . . it will have done its job."