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Part III

THE MOMMY BRIGADE

BABY LIT

Feminist Response to the Cult of True Motherhood

Melissa Buis Michaux and Leslie Dunlap

In her assessment of the impact of feminism, historian Linda Gordon wrote, “The greatest accomplishments are the least tangible. They are in the way women speak, walk, dress—in the way so many men now change diapers with aplomb. . . . It would be difficult to find any area of life unchanged by the women’s movement.”¹ But has feminism changed the way we mother or talk about motherhood, given the rise of “New Momism” and reports of an opt-out revolution?² Fathers change more diapers, yes, but women still do a disproportionate share of caregiving, even as they pursue their own careers. Despite a dramatic shift into the paid labor force, American women perform upward of 80 percent of child care. As legal scholar Joan Williams persuasively argues, an entrenched gender system of domesticity remains stubbornly rooted in American culture.³

Consequently, the self-help aisles are full of parenting advice directed almost exclusively to white women.⁴ Do these manuals reflect more than a generation of feminist scholarship on motherhood? What happened to the feminist calls for reconceiving domestic gender roles and for recognizing the multiplicity of family forms? What happened to feminist analyses of the impact of racism and sexism on families? Where is the recognition of the social construction of motherhood? If feminism’s impact runs so deeply, surely we should find evidence in child-rearing manuals.

Pregnancy and infant-care manuals touch a mass audience yet are often ignored in scholarly assessments of popular culture. This chapter examines popular parenting advice books, or “mommy manuals,” from Dr. Benjamin

Spock to the present day. We refer to them colloquially as mommy manuals, even though they are marketed to parents in general, because they usually assume the reader is female.⁵ Our focus is on the nature of the advice given to mothers rather than on gender socialization of boys and girls. In addition to the multiple editions of Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1945) and the feminist alternative *Ourselves and Our Children* (1978), we highlight the rise and revision of the *What to Expect* series (1984) as well as the proliferation of attachment theory and parent-centered manuals. Finally, we analyze a modern, third-wave feminist alternative to the dominant mommy manuals of today by Odes and Morris entitled *From the Hips* (2007).⁶ Because new advice manuals are continually being produced, an exhaustive examination is not possible here. Instead, we select representatives of the most popular books (by sales and overall exposure) and ask, what is the impact of feminism on parenting manuals?

We find that mainstream manuals have adjusted to feminism without capturing the full import of its insights or critiques. We argue that the manuals have lost some of the lessons of feminism—namely, that consciousness-raising is not just therapy or girlfriend talk, that empowerment is not merely consumer power, and that individual mothers make choices within an arena constrained by broad socioeconomic forces. In short, the manuals seem to turn the personal into the apolitical. They incorporate much of the language of feminism (freedom, autonomy, choice) but omit the substance of feminist analysis of motherhood as a social institution that burdens women with a disproportionate share of unpaid labor. Indeed, even as they appropriate the language of feminism, many promote antifeminist (or traditionalist) prescriptions, addressing individual expectations and anxieties but not the larger social, economic, and cultural sources of both.

Spock: Trust Yourself and Follow Your Doctor's Directions

For nearly four decades, the authoritative and dominant voice on parenting was Dr. Benjamin Spock. Beginning with Spock is not just an exercise in retelling history. Contemporary manuals reveal the enduring and contradictory influences of both Spock, the postwar “father” of baby books, and his feminist critics. The multiple editions of Spock's book, beginning in 1945, reveal an engaged interaction with his feminist critics as his advice evolved over the years.

Although Spock helped create the postwar “feminine mystique” later

identified by Betty Friedan in 1963 and would come under criticism by feminists in the 1970s, in the postwar period he laid the groundwork for many of the changes feminists later sought. Compared to the dire warnings of older advice books that were harsh to both mothers and children, Spock adopted a friendly tone and optimistic message. He addressed his book at the outset to mothers and fathers, celebrating parenthood and parental “instincts,” not just maternal ones.⁷ He called for fathers’ increased involvement in child care and family life, arguing, “You can be a warm father and a real man at the same time.”⁸ He objected that new fathers were kept at a distance at the hospital, for example, a point later developed by feminists. Indeed, in his calls for baby-care classes for both parents, improved arrangements at maternity hospitals, and recognition of the merits of home birth, he predicted changes later demanded by the women’s health movement.⁹ Spock’s celebration of “healthy” and “natural” drives anticipated the themes of the 1960s. At the time, many viewed his book as revolutionary. Later editions of the ubiquitous *Book of Baby and Child Care* incorporated key feminist insights in recognition of the principle of gender equality and the changing nature of family life.

Still, for three decades, Spock’s “common sense” included the assumption that, as he put it in 1969, “Biologically and temperamentally, I believe, women were made to be concerned first and foremost with child care, husband care, and home care.”¹⁰ Spock intensified what that care constituted, increasing the emotional demands on mothers, who were now charged not only with providing nutritious meals, changing diapers, and cleaning the house and the children but also with “enjoying” these tasks.¹¹ Spock acknowledged that this intensive mothering left little time for community or political involvement but suggested time off for recreational activities—arts and crafts, bridge, bowling, fashion shows, “chats” with friends, or reading after the children’s bedtime.¹² “I agree that we all have a serious obligation to the community,” Spock advised (he himself was a political activist, running for president in 1972). “But the most important way for a mother to carry this out is to bring up children who will be fine citizens.”¹³

By 1969 such advice galvanized protest, from the columns of *Redbook* to the halls of Notre Dame University.¹⁴ Feminists found Spock’s view of motherhood “insulting, antiwoman and scientifically false”—especially his view of housework. “Making beds, doing dishes and chauffeuring children” has as “little to do with mothering” as with fathering, one early letter of protest read.¹⁵ Like those who staged a takeover of *Ladies’ Home Journal*

in 1970, feminists who wrote to *Redbook* understood the combined power of popular magazines and expert authority in shaping women's expectations about motherhood. Although Spock acknowledged the "anxiety" and "guilt" women felt about not living up to impossible ideals of motherhood, he did not admit his own considerable role in shaping those ideals. As one critic noted, Spock advised women to "change your feelings instead of the conditions which caused them."¹⁶ But it was Spock's view of sex differences in "temperament and capability" that earned him the most criticism—for instance, his claims that boys' "inborn" aggressiveness and competitiveness poised them to "build things, pioneer in the arts, [and] construct theories," while girls' "patience" and interpersonal orientation primed them to be caregivers.¹⁷ Feminists challenged, especially, Spock's popularization of Freudian ideas about psychosexual development; this abiding emphasis led Gloria Steinem to name Spock "a symbol of male oppression—just like Freud."¹⁸ By 1971, even Miss Manners found Spock's exclusive use of "he" for the baby antiquated. But as Spock had explained, "it's clumsy to say him or her every time, and I need her to refer to the mother."¹⁹

The revisions made to the 1976 edition testify to the impact such criticism had on Spock. "The main reason" for the revisions, he acknowledged, was "to eliminate the sexist biases of the sort that help to create and perpetuate discrimination against girls and women." To begin with, Spock changed his pronouns, recognizing that the old "literary tradition implies that the masculine sex has some kind of priority." Even more importantly, Spock completely revised his approach to raising boys and girls, now acknowledging that "early-childhood differentiation begins in a small way the discriminatory sex stereotyping that ends up in women so often getting the humdrum, subordinate, poorly paid jobs in most industries and professions, and being treated as the second-class sex." Finally, he abandoned his assumptions about parenthood itself: "I always assumed that the parent taking the greater share of the care of young children (and of the home) would be the mother, whether or not she wanted an outside career. . . . Now I recognize that the father's responsibility is as great as the mother's."²⁰

Spock's fundamental realization was that, as he put it, "The family is changing."²¹ The new edition explained that the decline of family wages and women's need to work, together with the "efforts of the women's liberation movement to secure justice for their sex," had altered gender roles, the meaning of work, and the understanding of how children can and should be raised. Situating himself as an ally in that movement, Spock explained how

“the subordination of women” resulted from the child-rearing practices he had once promoted, from complimenting girls’ appearance to giving boys doctor kits and construction sets.²² However, Spock called less for change in work or family policy than for change within families. Although he promoted expanded pay and professional opportunities for women, he also counseled less work and a renewed emphasis on family and community for both sexes. By 1982, *Ms.* magazine named him one of the “heroes” of the women’s movement.²³

Despite Spock’s evolution on gender matters, he never resolved a fundamental contradiction in his advice manuals between the emphasis on “common sense” and the reliance on expert authority. Both the 1946 and 1976 editions contain the same language, telling parents: “Don’t take too seriously all that the neighbors say. Don’t be overawed by what the experts say. Don’t be afraid to trust your own common sense. Bringing up your child won’t be a complicated job if you take it easy, trust your own instincts, and follow the directions that your doctor gives you.”²⁴ This tension between expert authority and the authority of (women’s) experience played itself out in Spock’s own family and work. In 1976 Spock finally acknowledged Jane Spock’s “painstaking contributions” to *Baby and Child Care*—typing, editing, formula testing, and doing medical research—but not crediting her with what she called “co-authorship.”²⁵ In fact, the Spocks divorced later that year. Jane Spock attributed the divorce in large part to her husband’s failure to acknowledge her work publicly or privately: “he saw me only as a wife and mother”—without seeing the work that went into that role.²⁶

It took feminists to make that work visible and to challenge the hold of expert authority. Like Spock, feminists and the women’s health movement encouraged women to trust themselves, but in contrast to Spock, they actively rejected expert authority and encouraged female empowerment through expanded knowledge, consciousness-raising, networks of midwives, and community support.

Feminist Alternatives: Consider Yourself

Feminists did not confine themselves to criticizing Spock; they generated their own parenting manuals, including *Ourselves and Our Children*, written by activists in the women’s health movement (discussed here), and *Growing Up Free: Raising Your Child in the 80s*, written by a contributor to the 1970s *Free to Be You and Me* series. *Ourselves and Our Children* was an offshoot of

Our Bodies Ourselves, the best-selling “bible” of the feminist health movement produced by the Boston Women’s Health Collective.²⁷ Following *Our Bodies Ourselves* (which opened with the observation that there are no “good” doctors),²⁸ *Ourselves and Our Children* positioned parents, not doctors or experts, as the appropriate authorities on parenthood. This “book by and for parents” presented itself not as an advice manual but, following the practice of consciousness-raising, as a place to share and analyze experiences; it was “about *being parents*—not about how to do it, but about what it’s like.”²⁹ The collective of authors emphasized the collective experience of parenthood: “what parents can do for themselves and each other,” declaring that the one essential skill for parenting is “the ability to ask others for help.”³⁰ The concluding (and longest) chapter, “Helping Ourselves and Finding Help,” captures this collective, community-oriented perspective, encouraging parents to “step out of our private worlds, to reach out to other people.”³¹ The authors explained their departure from other advice literature: “Many books, especially ‘how-to-parent’ books, assume that what happens to our children is a result of what goes on between us and our children and depends almost entirely on life within the family. Our view is that it is impossible to parent alone. We parent in a context of relationships with other people; our families exist within communities, and are part of a complex web of social institutions, each of which has an impact on our parenting experience.”³²

Again following the ultimate goal of consciousness-raising—to bring about change—*Ourselves and Our Children* offered suggestions for challenging and *changing* institutions and expectations, rather than assuming that these expectations (or the attendant guilt and anxiety) were timeless or natural. Unlike Spock, who saw motherhood as an essential identity and celebrated the nuclear family as a “haven” from a “heartless world,” *Ourselves and Our Children* considered parenthood, above all, in the context of other relationships, opening with the question: “How does being a parent interweave with your overall life, your work, your relationships, your social and political concerns, your own childhood, your own sense of yourself?”³³ The book put the feminist principle that the “personal is political” into practice by analyzing the social causes that shape the experience and expectations of parenthood, such as “the structures of work and profit, the condition of our neighborhoods, inadequacies of the health care system, sexist and racist attitudes, the isolation of the nuclear family. The changes we work for will be both within our four walls and beyond,” the authors announced.³⁴

Finally, unlike Spock, who presented the white nuclear family as the

ideal norm, *Ourselves and Our Children* emphasized the diversity and variety of families, from single and same-sex parents to communal households. Spock considered the family primarily as a private, emotional unit; these authors devoted two-thirds of their book to discussing “society’s impact on families,” analyzing such things as “the economics of work and parenting,” including discussions of poverty and unemployment and sex and race discrimination in employment.³⁵ Although *Our Bodies Ourselves* enjoyed multiple reprints and editions, ultimately reaching millions of people, *Ourselves and Our Children* did not enjoy a wide distribution. Indeed, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* soon eclipsed both Spock and the feminist alternatives.

Managing Expectations

First published in 1984 by Heidi Murkoff, her mother (a nurse), and her sister, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* was written by nonexperts in an Everywoman format of questions and answers. It became hugely popular and continues to be the best-selling parenting manual.³⁶ The rejection of expert authority was deliberate, rising out of the conviction, in Murkoff’s words (borrowed from Betty Friedan), that doctors are not God.³⁷ Murkoff said in interviews that the “parenting expert . . . is YOU!”³⁸ However, Murkoff did not treat family as embedded in other institutions and other sets of expectations. Curiously, *What to Expect* offered little to no discussion of how women’s expectations are shaped by cultural and political institutions and social change. Indeed, Murkoff did not treat working women until the 2002 edition, and even then, they were presented as an exception framed by personal choice; by 2008 Murkoff had expanded the section on pregnancy and work to ten pages—filled primarily with warnings about the physical and emotional stresses of work and none of the rewards.³⁹ Although her goal might have been to empower women with her peer-to-peer discussions of childbirth and child rearing, the effect was to emphasize individual control over one’s expectations and actions. The following discussion is based on the third (2002) and fourth (2008) editions, the latter “completely rewritten from start to finish—a new book for a new generation of parents.”⁴⁰ What is remarkable about the latest edition, however, is that the assumptions about women and families have remained the same. The changes to the latest edition are largely cosmetic—literally—with a new section on “expectant beauty” and a “makeover” for the new “Cover Mom,” who is “out of her

rocking chair, finally,” and celebrating “the fact that pregnant women now get to wear cute clothes.”⁴¹

By 2002, Murkoff and her coauthors were aware of changes in the American family, but they consciously chose to keep all references to traditional nuclear family relationships. “These references,” they write, sounding much like Spock in 1946, “are not meant to exclude expectant mothers (and their families) who may be somewhat ‘untraditional’—for example, those who are single, who have same-sex partners, or who have chosen not to marry their live-in partners. These terms are, rather, a way of avoiding phrases . . . that are more inclusive, but also a mouthful to read.”⁴² Never mind that at the writing of this “updated” edition, the traditional family arrangement was already on a steep decline. Using 2001 data, the U.S. Census Bureau found that 25 percent of all children younger than eighteen lived in one-parent families, 4 percent lived with no parents, and of those who lived in two-parent families, 11 percent lived with a stepparent.⁴³

On the issue of women combining motherhood with paid employment, Murkoff warned in 2002 against trying to do too much: “Many a new mother has tried to be ‘superwoman’—handling a full workload at work; keeping the house in order, the refrigerator stocked, and food on the table; being a doting (read: sexy) partner and an exemplary mother; and leaping the occasional building in a single bound—but few have succeeded without sacrificing health and sanity, sometimes even their marriage.” This sympathetic advice to avoid trying to be all things to all people ends with this observation: “How well you manage will depend on the decisions you make and the attitudes you develop.”⁴⁴ The mother, then, is responsible for rejecting a whole host of cultural expectations simply by prioritizing baby over cleanliness or baby over career. In a section entitled “To Work or Not to Work,” Murkoff suggests making this decision after the baby comes, because sometimes holding a baby is all it takes to turn “previous thinking about returning to work upside-down.”⁴⁵ It is not explained why this same phenomenon does not happen to fathers. Overall, the discussion of work is highly truncated, considering that this manual offers incredibly detailed advice on diet (with recipes), whether to stand in front of microwaves, drink herbal teas, or get a monthly waxing, and even suggests putting antislip pads under the carpets.

Chapter 19 addresses fatherhood and declares: “Fathers are expectant, too.”⁴⁶ In this special section devoted to fatherhood, six of the twenty-one questions and two sidebars are about sex, including being “turned off”

by seeing the baby emerge from the wife's vagina and by breasts that are suddenly "too functional to be sexy."⁴⁷ On the latter, Murkoff advises: "Be careful, also, not to harbor any resentment against the baby for using 'your' breasts; try to think of nursing as a temporary 'loan' instead."⁴⁸ Hopefully, women who read this section will not be alarmed by the implication that their body parts are so easily detachable from personal ownership. Other issues of concern to expectant fathers include feeling left out, hormones—his and hers, "falling apart" during delivery, and the financial burdens of a new child.⁴⁹ Murkoff encourages fathers to be supportive by bringing home flowers, getting takeout food, making phone calls, and generally "pampering" the expectant mother.⁵⁰ In 2002 tips for fathers did not include housework, laundry, cooking, grocery shopping, or caring for other children. In 2008 there is a brief discussion of the importance of dividing child care and other labor, as well as a suggestion to "consider taking paternity leave in the early weeks of the baby's life" if possible, and a discussion of the Family and Medical Leave Act.⁵¹ Despite these nods to the economic reality of two-earner households, *What to Expect* implies that men are the primary wage earners and that women's anxieties during pregnancy reflect the physical and psychological dynamics of parenthood, not economic concerns.

The Self-Help Explosion: Child-Centered and Parent-Led Models

Although *What to Expect* dominates among trade publications, selling more than 600,000 copies in 2006 alone,⁵² the self-help aisles are full of alternatives promising *Toilet Training in Less than a Day* or *The No-Cry Sleep Solution*.⁵³ Writer Ann Hulbert argues that although the various experts wax and wane in popularity, the advice can be roughly grouped into two schools of thought focused on child-centered or parent-led (discipline-based) methods.⁵⁴ Here we briefly examine popular, best-selling representatives from each school: Gary Ezzo's *On Becoming Baby Wise*, which argues for parent-directed child-rearing practices, and the books by William Sears and Martha Sears, which advocate attachment parenting.⁵⁵

Searching for a feminist impact in the parent-led advice books is something of a dubious enterprise. The general thrust of these books is to reassert parental authority in the face of a seemingly overpermissive society. Christian parental authority James Dobson (author of *Dare to Discipline* and founder of Focus on the Family) makes clear his belief that feminism has damaged the family and attacked masculinity. In an explanation of his 2005 book *Bring-*

ing Up Boys, Dobson explains that “radical feminism shortchanges boys” through the perpetuation of stereotypes of men as immature and selfish and by constant male bashing.⁵⁶ The link between Dobson’s politics and parenting advice may not be so unusual. Cognitive scientist George Lakoff notes a pervasive connection between political attitudes or worldviews and models of the family. Lakoff finds that conservatism “is based on a Strict Father model, while liberalism is centered around a Nurturant Parent model.”⁵⁷ In the case of Ezzo’s child-care philosophy, because mothers spend more time with infants and are most subject to advice and models of the nurturing parent, they need to be educated on the discipline method.

Ezzo’s *On Becoming Baby Wise* is ostensibly about infant sleep solutions and promises that instituting a routine for feeding, napping, and playing with your child will produce better outcomes for baby and mother. Yet the first chapter reveals Ezzo’s key insight that “*great marriages produce great parents.*”⁵⁸ The real threat to child rearing, then, is overresponsiveness to demanding infants and children, particularly by mothers, which then threatens the primacy of the marriage relationship. A feeding philosophy, Ezzo explains, “represents a complex value system” with expectations about what is best for a child: “Mothering expectations direct mothering responses and those responses produce cause-and-effect behaviors.”⁵⁹ Mothers, therefore, must be vigilant in avoiding “child-centered pitfalls” such as responding to the baby’s every cry.⁶⁰ Good parenting strategies include close attention to one’s spouse; Ezzo encourages spouses to date each other and to invite friends over so the child is not at the center of all activity. Of course, this model of good parenting is difficult for single parents, but for intact marriages, “to be a good mom or dad, all you need is to continue as before” you had children and make the marriage a priority.⁶¹

Closer attention to *On Becoming Baby Wise* reveals that the best seller and its follow-up for toddlers are produced by a Christian publishing house. Parenting expert Gary Ezzo is, in fact, a Christian minister who heads a for-profit “parenting ministry” called Growing Families International. Although *On Becoming Baby Wise* is pitched to a mainstream audience without Christian references, Ezzo believes that “raising good children is not a matter of chance but a matter of rightly applying God’s principles in parenting.”⁶²

What is most interesting about *On Becoming Baby Wise* is not necessarily that it is a Christian (or even hidden Christian) alternative to more permissive parenting advice but that the language of feminism is actually employed for these conservative ends. Ezzo does not posit an ordered hier-

archy of paternal authority or use biblical references to justify the focus on marriage. Rather, Ezzo promises: “This plan will not leave mom ragged at the end of the day nor in bondage to her child. Nor will dad be excluded from his duties.”⁶³ Mothers are enticed to follow this plan because of the freedom and autonomy it provides and the space it creates for fatherly involvement. A testimonial in the opening pages enthuses, “The freedom *Babywise* provides a new mother is so refreshing.”⁶⁴ Keeping baby on a routine allows mother more personal time to pursue what is “best” for her.⁶⁵ The supportive words of one “certified lactation educator” perfectly illustrate the irony of employing feminist claims to autonomy and freedom for conservative ends: “Instead of being in baby bondage, I was *liberated* to be the mother *God wanted me to be*.”⁶⁶

In contrast to his plan, which grants mothers freedom and autonomy to preserve their marriages and thereby be good parents, attachment or child-centered parenting, according to Ezzo and many within the discipline school, results in burnt-out parents and needy children. Although a number of volumes have been produced on attachment parenting, Dr. William Sears (a pediatrician), his wife Martha (a registered nurse), and now two of their doctor sons have created a virtual industry of attachment parenting advice. Sears is author or coauthor of more than forty pediatric books, a regular commentator on popular television outlets such as *Good Morning America*, and an expert columnist for *Parenting* magazine. *The Baby Book*, marketed as “the ‘baby bible’ of the post–Dr. Spock generation,”⁶⁷ regularly appears on Amazon.com’s and other booksellers’ top-ten lists of parenting books, and though it has not matched sales of the *What to Expect* series, has sold more than a million copies.

Reflecting the feminist emphasis on personal experience, the Searses’ texts are interspersed with firsthand accounts of childbirth, breastfeeding, and other issues. Their approach to pregnancy and childbirth reflects the developments and insights of the feminist health movement. In fact, *The Pregnancy Book* provides a fairly detailed historical account of how birthing used to be considered a surgical event, with the woman treated as a “medicated patient,” until “reform-minded women” demanded changes to the system.⁶⁸ Sears and Sears counsel women and their partners to interview and seek out birth attendants they trust and who can provide an “emotionally satisfying” experience.⁶⁹ *The Pregnancy Book* is adamant that birth is not an operation and that the doctor does not deliver the baby; as a result of the (feminist) reform movement, “the birthing mother [now takes] centerstage.”⁷⁰

According to Sears and Sears, their philosophy of attachment parenting builds on natural instincts and hormones; they advocate connected child care through “bonding, breastfeeding and babywearing.” The natural instinct to respond to a crying baby is more pronounced in mothers who experience changes in body chemistry. Sears and Sears explain that crying produces increased blood flow to the mother’s breasts and an instinctual urge to comfort the baby. Greater bonding (through early response and sleeping close to the baby), breastfeeding on demand, and carrying the baby produce better communication between the baby and mother. Better communication between mother and baby results in more joyful parenting and mutual sensitivity.⁷¹

Attachment parenting and *The Baby Book* counsel mothers to listen to their instincts, trust themselves, and reject “baby-training” advice that contradicts mothers’ “basic drive to respond to the cues of their baby.”⁷² The Seares warn mothers: “Before trying any of these baby-training methods, compare them with your intuitive feelings.”⁷³ The basic philosophy of being responsive to the baby’s signals finds concrete expression in advice on extended breastfeeding and baby wearing. Breastfeeding should continue until “the sucking need dissipates—sometime between nine months and three and a half years.”⁷⁴ Parents should “carry their babies as much as possible.”⁷⁵ Even toddlers may desire to be “worn,” the Sears team advises, so choose a baby carrier that can adjust from a newborn to a two-year-old.⁷⁶

The Baby Book insists that what is good for baby is also good for mother. Babies who are worn and breastfed on demand are less fussy, less colicky, and even better disciplined as older children. “Mothers do need breaks,” they admit, “but with attachment parenting, instead of feeling tied down, mothers feel tied together with their babies.”⁷⁷ “Babywearing,” they insist, “fits in beautifully with complex life-styles.”⁷⁸ Since babies can be taken nearly everywhere, the mother need not become housebound. Rather, baby can be taken to work, shopping, and even out to eat.

The Sears and Sears books and the dictates of attachment parenting create a conundrum for feminist mothers and feminist analysis. Clearly, the Sears approach seeks to empower the experiences and feelings of mothers. However, elevation of the woman’s experience presupposes a single experience of motherhood that quickly turns prescriptive. An insistence on what is “natural” for women and best for babies suggests that alternative formulations or feelings may be unnatural or deficient. In this natural formulation

of the maternal instinct, caring for babies seems less like work and more like self-expression, so that even as they seek to value mothers, the Searses reinforce the idea that caregiving is not real work. Furthermore, they concede that attachment parenting is easier for “full-time” mothers as opposed to full-time workers. “Part-time” mothers may be able to enjoy “work and wear” practices: “Such jobs as selling real estate, shopkeeping, demonstrating products, and housecleaning lend themselves well to babywearing.”⁷⁹ Of course, part-time work does not lend itself well to generating a supporting income. Although *The Baby Book* spends considerable time on how to use a mechanical pump and continue breastfeeding while working, it is clear that working is a second-best position for them. The Searses explain that Martha was forced to work when her firstborn arrived because Bill was just an intern. They “juggled” the baby and used substitute caregivers, commenting, “at the time we could not achieve the ideal. We did the best we could under less-than-perfect circumstances.”⁸⁰ If working women create imperfect child care, then the majority of mothers are unable to live up to the attachment parenting ideal.

In her analysis of the ideology of the La Leche League, which advocates extended breastfeeding and baby wearing along with the attachment parenting model, Christina Bobel argues that such maternalism promotes a contradictory “bounded liberation.” This philosophy “may *pull* women to reclaim themselves and value their life choices, [but] at the same time, it *pushes* women back into socially prescribed roles rooted in biological determinism.” As Bobel also notes, although extended breastfeeding may be seen as a form of feminist rebellion against mainstream culture, such models for intensive mothering rely on a gendered division of labor with a male breadwinner and a female caregiver.⁸¹ Martha Sears herself seems to be trying to negotiate this issue by characterizing herself as a “professional mother,” despite the fact that she is a coauthor of nine books, a registered nurse, a La Leche League leader, and a lactation consultant.⁸²

Other feminist critics see a more deeply regressive and sinister development in attachment parenting. Sharon Hays traces “intensive mothering” beliefs to the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres and to women’s subordinate status in contemporary society.⁸³ In *The Mommy Myth*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels mock the premise of attachment parenting, likening it to other fads such as the Zone Diet and pointing out its insidious demands on women. As they write: “The Sears philosophy is as simple as it is impossible: Reattach your baby to

your body the moment she is born and keep her there pretty much until she goes to college.”⁸⁴ Wholesale rejection of the Searses as the epitome of the “New Momism,” however, fails to acknowledge its attraction for some feminist moms, especially those who see this more intensive ideology of motherhood as a countervailing force in a world gone awry in its pursuit of selfish materialism.

But where does the modern, diaper-changing dad fit into attachment parenting? Sears and Sears report: “It’s the father’s job to nurture the mother so that she can nurture the baby.”⁸⁵ Fathers can help with breastfeeding by providing a supportive environment and guarding against unwanted intruders during family bonding time. In a section on “postpartum family adjustments,” Sears and Sears warn mothers that fathers need time to learn the skills necessary for baby care, since it “may not come as easily for some fathers.”⁸⁶ Although the Searses encourage the involvement of fathers and recognize that fathers can be nurturers too, attachment parenting’s focus on the mother-infant relationship ultimately supports a very traditional understanding of family structure and gender roles. The assumption throughout is of a nuclear family; very little attention is given to alternative familial arrangements—neither extended families nor same-sex couples.

The Searses celebrate the expanded childbirth choices now available to women and encourage pregnant women to assemble a birth team designed to meet their needs and personalities to ensure a more satisfying and healthy birth experience. However, their style of empowerment also reinforces the role of the mother as consumer. They remind parents that hospitals have an interest in satisfying consumer demands so that “birth-savvy consumers” can expect more comfortable birthing beds and labor tubs at their new neighborhood family birth centers.⁸⁷ Unlike Spock, who worried openly about the rise of consumerism, the AskDrSears.com store advertises a variety of endorsed goods and features a line of baby products, including the recommended baby sling as well as infant apparel, children’s books, music, and, for a mere \$294.95, a motion bed for colicky babies.⁸⁸

The rise of the *What to Expect* series in the 1980s and attachment parenting in the 1990s presented mothers with few feminist alternatives in mainstream popular advice books. The dominant advice books leave American mothers largely anxious as they navigate a range of decisions on pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing while focusing on individual choices or styles. Where is the feminist response today?

The Third Wave and the Age of Choice

Self-described third-wave feminists have written more about their mothers or about their perspectives as daughters of the feminist movement than about motherhood itself.⁸⁹ In their third-wave treatise *Manifesta*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards liken intergenerational strife within the feminist movement to the “squeamishness and stress between mothers and daughters,” assuring young women that they can and should define feminism for themselves.⁹⁰ Rebecca Walker writes openly of the fraught relationship with her feminist mother, writer and activist Alice Walker, and ultimately embraces the joy of biological parenthood in her memoir *Baby Love*.⁹¹ In the 1995 anthology *To Be Real*, the one chapter on motherhood dismisses feminist Adrienne Rich as alienating; Allison Abner hides Rich’s classic *Of Woman Born* in a drawer because it provokes as much anger “as when I attempt to read books by many white male writers.”⁹² Although Abner appreciates her “feminist foremothers” who shared their misery with the world, she is relieved to note: “we’ve moved into the Age of Choice.”⁹³ Choice seems to be a mantra of third-wave writings—the choice to have children or abort, the choice of how to express one’s sexuality, the choice to look feminine or not, and ultimately, the choice to rebel not just against patriarchy but against feminism itself. The demand from younger women is for a feminism that is not one size fits all but that reflects the diversity of women and the attitudes they bring to any quest for equality. Still, despite their claim that, “for our generation, feminism is like fluoride . . . it’s simply in the water,” Baumgardner and Richards remark that “the state of mothering, incredible as it may be, is still the opposite of liberation. You are bound to your body, to your baby, and to societal expectations.”⁹⁴ The authors leave for the reader to determine what liberation in motherhood would mean, but they condemn society’s reliance on mothers’ unpaid work.

Given the continuing critique of motherhood by a younger generation of feminists, we were frustrated to find a lack of alternatives to the dominant mommy manuals. One possibility is that we examined the wrong media. Spock could dominate in 1960 in part because there were few inexpensive paths for reaching a mass audience. In theory, the Internet and the explosion of blogging undercut expert authority and provide an inexpensive outlet for alternative voices, from Salon.com’s “mothers who think” to the discussion board for “feminist mothers at home.”⁹⁵ Yet, in her ethnographic work on mothers’ “understanding of mothering,” Hays finds that although

women get advice from a variety of sources, manuals represent their primary source.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the experts themselves have a strong presence on the Internet.

From the Hips by Rebecca Odes and Ceridwen Morris provides a welcome alternative (and feminist) voice on pregnancy, childbirth, and infant care. Odes is cofounder of the Web site gURL.com and a coauthor of *Deal with It*, a hip book on sex and life for teens.⁹⁷ Odes and Morris present themselves as two moms (nonexperts) with diverse styles who searched in vain for a nonprescriptive parenting manual. In place of a coherent philosophy of child rearing, the authors present different approaches and insist that the reader is the authority on herself and her baby. One of the few prescriptions they do offer is to strive for imperfection, arguing that “‘good enough’ parenting is not only good enough, it’s better.”⁹⁸

Odes and Morris reject biological essentialism and encourage coparenting, arguing that there is “no natural mother” and “no inherent reason for a mom to be the maestro of all the little details of [a] child’s life.”⁹⁹ Throughout the text, they recognize the diversity of family arrangements and partnerships, making frequent reference to single parenthood, gay couples, and a range of cultural practices. They even acknowledge that not all families are good and include an illuminating section on domestic violence and pregnancy, noting that abuse (completely unmentioned in other manuals) is more prevalent than gestational diabetes or preeclampsia (which are treated in detail, for example, in *What to Expect*).¹⁰⁰ Most important, the authors continually reinforce the message that the reader is more than a parent. They warn mothers to resist advice and assert their autonomy, and there are extensive discussions of mothers’ sexual needs and attitudes as well as their relationship to other people outside the family unit.¹⁰¹

Odes and Morris also recognize that choices are not always freely made. In a section devoted to the decisions one must make throughout pregnancy, they write: “Though these questions are often pitched as choices, some parents feel they have less say in the matter than they would like” for cultural, economic, and physical reasons.¹⁰² The discussion of work includes the observation that women are often forced out of work instead of merely opting out, as the popular media so often suggest, and they explain that inequality in parenthood is often a by-product of women being forced out.¹⁰³ Unlike Murkoff and the Seares, who only superficially treat the issues of mothering and work, *From the Hips* presents sixteen pages on work and day-care options. Like Murkoff, Odes and Morris title their section “To Work or

Not to Work” but include the subtitle “And Why This Isn’t Really the Question.”¹⁰⁴ Further, their conception of “balance” is not a dichotomous work versus home; they recognize that women also need to nurture “the creative expression that keeps you from losing your mind” and “the ambition that gets your heart pumping.”¹⁰⁵ Note that in their conception, ambition is not limited to child rearing.

As refreshing as it is to read *From the Hips*, two concerns remain. First, despite their attempts to dethrone the idea of a “natural” mother, Odes and Morris ultimately fall back on the primacy of the mother. They treat single motherhood, throughout, as if the father or other partner is nonexistent. Although it is clearly not their intention, their frequent references to a “partner, if you have one” effectively marginalizes the father’s role and his responsibilities. Second, although Odes and Morris include a variety of caveats about choice, time and again they insist that decisions are a matter of personal choice. For example, in the discussion of whether to breastfeed or bottle feed, they insist on using the choice language, failing to point out that women’s “choice” in this regard can largely be predicted by a host of outside factors, including support of a partner, work conditions, lactation resources, education, and extent of parental leave.¹⁰⁶ They urge mothers to give up control of the details of child care and share them with a partner (if they have one), but there is little overall analysis of why shared parenting seems to be such an elusive ideal. Although their recognition of constraints on choice is laudable, in the end, they inconsistently insist: “Parenting is all about making choices.”¹⁰⁷

Ourselves and Our Children discussed choices too—namely, the fundamental choice to have children at all—but that understanding of choice was the assertion of women’s control over a phenomenon that others assumed for women. In *From the Hips*, the same choice language is used for marriage or partnering, working, and “post-partum fashion solutions”—one can be “earth mama,” “chic mama,” or the “practical slob.”¹⁰⁸ Choice language individualizes what is really more of a collective experience, even if that experience is far from uniform. In the mommy manuals, choice language is reinforced by a language about expectations. Why are women so anxious? Even Odes and Morris answer: “Often the problem is unrealistic expectations.”¹⁰⁹ The language of choice and expectations makes solving the anxiety of childbirth and child rearing a matter of individual initiative.

Contemporary mommy manuals contain a confusing, even deceptive, blend of feminist language and traditional prescriptions about motherhood. Above all, the manuals’ emphasis on individual experience and “choice,” in

place of an earlier feminist analysis of the impersonal forces conditioning and constraining those personal choices, leaves women prone to self-blame in the guise of self-help. Second-wave feminists did not assume that anxiety and guilt were an essential, timeless part of motherhood and then try to allay or manage those emotions; rather, feminists analyzed the multiple sources of those *shared* anxieties—from economic changes to expert advice itself. Third-wave feminists have done a notable job reaching a mass audience, primarily because they understand the contradictory appeal of popular consumer culture to women—even feminist women. But in their own emphasis on individual expression, they have not consistently challenged that same orientation in the manuals. Third-wave feminists must build on the work of the past, even as they transform our understanding of feminism and popular culture.

Notes

1. Linda Gordon, “Social Movements, Leadership, and Democracy,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 2 (summer 2002): 116.

2. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Lisa Belkin, “The Opt Out Revolution,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2003.

3. Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do about It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2. See also Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York: Avon Books, 1989).

4. The manuals largely ignore race, ethnicity, and even class and assume a white universality. See Joanne Dann, “Wanted: A Dr. Spock for Black Mothers,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 18, 1971.

5. Laurie Kramer and Dawn Ramsburg, “Advice Given to Parents on Welcoming a Second Child: A Critical Review,” *Family Relations* 51, no. 1 (January 2002): 11–12.

6. Benjamin Spock, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1945, 1946); Boston Women’s Health Book Collective [BWHBC], *Ourselves and Our Children: A Book by and for Parents* (New York: Random House, 1978); Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi Murkoff, and Sandee Hathaway, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* (New York: Workmen Publishing, 1984); Rebecca Odes and Ceridwen Morris, *From the Hips: A Comprehensive, Open-Minded, Uncensored, Totally Honest Guide to Pregnancy, Birth and Becoming a Parent* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007).

7. For example, “what good mothers and fathers instinctively feel like doing for their babies is usually best” (Spock, *Baby and Child Care* [1945, 1946], 4).

8. Spock, *Baby and Child Care* (1946), 15. See also pp. 489–92 on shared par-

enting. Note that Spock did not call for equal or even equivalent involvement: “Of course, I don’t mean that the father has to give just as many bottles or change just as many diapers as the mother. But it’s fine for him to do these things occasionally.” This advice persisted until 1976. Spock’s early call for involved fathers likely reflected wartime anxiety that fathers had been displaced in domestic life and that women were usurping the male role of home “expert” and “boss.” See Jessica Weiss, “Making Room for Fathers: Fatherhood and Family Life,” in *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), and Ralph La Rossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

9. Spock, *Baby and Child Care* (1946), 14–16.

10. Benjamin Spock, “Mothers Who Try to Be All Things,” *Redbook*, March 1969, 60; Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Nancy Weiss, “Mother, the Invention of Necessity: Dr. Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Child Care*,” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 5 (winter 1977): 519–46.

11. Spock, *Baby and Child Care* (1946), 19–22.

12. Spock, “Mothers Who Try,” 60.

13. *Ibid.*, 62.

14. Thomas Maier, *Dr. Spock: An American Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 354.

15. “Feminists Protest,” *Redbook*, October 1969, 202.

16. Jo Ann Hoit, “Speaking of Spock,” *Up from Under* 1, no. 2 (August 1970), in Linda Gordon and Rosalyn Baxandall, eds., *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 226–28.

17. See especially Benjamin Spock, *Decent and Indecent: Our Personal and Political Behavior* (New York: McCall, 1969); Benjamin Spock, “Male Chauvinist Spock Recants—Well, Almost,” *New York Times*, September 21, 1971.

18. For reports of Steinem’s public challenge to Spock, see Maier, *Dr. Spock*, 353. For an early feminist analysis of Spock, see Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women* (New York: Anchor, 1978).

19. Judith Martin, “Sexism and Dr. Spock,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 1971; Spock, *Baby and Child Care* (1946), 2.

20. Benjamin Spock, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), xix.

21. *Ibid.*, 31.

22. *Ibid.*, 32.

23. Ellen Sweet, “Ms. Heroes: Men Who Have Taken a Chance and Made a Difference,” *Ms.*, July–August 1982, 104.

24. Spock, *Baby and Child Care* (1946), 3 (emphasis added).

25. Spock, *Baby and Child Care* (1976), v; Judy Klemesrud, "The Spocks: Bittersweet Recognition in a Revised Classic," *New York Times*, March 19, 1976, 54.
26. Klemesrud, "Bittersweet Recognition," 54.
27. Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies Ourselves*, 2nd ed. (Boston: New England Free Press, 1971). For the history of this influential text, see Wendy Kline, "Please Include This in Your Book': Readers Respond to *Our Bodies Ourselves*," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 79 (2005): 81–110.
28. Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies Ourselves*, 1.
29. BWHBC, *Ourselves and Our Children*, 4.
30. *Ibid.*, 7.
31. *Ibid.*, 222.
32. *Ibid.*, 186.
33. Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Norton, 1995); BWHBC, *Ourselves and Our Children*, 3.
34. BWHBC, *Ourselves and Our Children*, 11.
35. *Ibid.*, 186–221.
36. As of June 1, 2008, *What to Expect* had spent 361 weeks on the *New York Times* advice/how-to best-seller list. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/01/books/bestseller/0601bestpaperadvice.html>. On the book's continued popularity, see, for example, letters to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 2007, pt. 1, p. 7.
37. Jodi Kantor, "Expecting Trouble: The Book They Love to Hate," *New York Times*, September 21, 2005, G1.
38. Heidi Murkoff, "The Real Parenting Expert Is . . . You," *Newsweek* 136, no. 17 (fall–winter 2000): 20–22.
39. Heidi Murkoff et al., *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, 3rd ed. (New York: Workman, 2002); Heidi Murkoff and Sharon Mazel, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, 4th ed. (New York: Workman, 2008), 187–97.
40. Murkoff and Mazel, *What to Expect* (2008), xxii.
41. *Ibid.*, v, xxiii.
42. *Ibid.*, 32.
43. U.S. Census Bureau, "Living Arrangements of Children, 2001," in Household Economic Studies: U.S. Commerce Department, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs> (accessed December 11, 2008).
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45. *Ibid.*
46. Murkoff and Mazel, *What to Expect* (2008), 472.
47. *Ibid.*, 489, 491.
48. *Ibid.*, 491.
49. Murkoff et al., *What to Expect* (2002), 436, 441; Murkoff and Mazel, *What to Expect* (2008), 475, 481, 485.
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52. Dermot McEvoy, "Paperback Bestsellers: Media Heavies," in *The Bowker Annual Library and Trade Almanac*, 52nd ed. (New York: R. R. Bowker, 2007).
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57. George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 12.
58. Ezzo, *On Becoming Baby Wise*, 20 (emphasis in original).
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63. Ezzo, *On Becoming Baby Wise*, 17.
64. Linda Meloy, M.D., in *ibid.*
65. Ezzo, *On Becoming Baby Wise*, 41–42.
66. Barbara Phillips, R.N., C.L.E., in *ibid.* (emphasis added).
67. See www.AskDrSears.com.
68. Sears, and Sears, *The Pregnancy Book*, 31.
69. *Ibid.*, 33.
70. *Ibid.*, 31.
71. Sears and Sears, *The Baby Book*, 6–9, 13.
72. *Ibid.*, 9.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*, 195.
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98. Odes and Morris, *From the Hips*, 13.
99. Ibid., 14, 209.
100. Ibid., 90.
101. Ibid., especially 222–25, 94–95, 213–17.
102. Ibid., 27.
103. Ibid., 227.
104. Ibid.
105. Ibid., 226.
106. Ibid., 274–81.
107. Ibid., 367.
108. Ibid., 187.
109. Ibid., 14.