

PARENTING BOOKS

There certainly is no shortage of parenting books out there. These books show you the latest and greatest tips for everything from discipline, to feeding your baby, to getting your baby to sleep through the night. Bookstores have huge sections dedicated to parenting strategies, sleep strategies, and feeding strategies. There are literally tens of thousands of books on these subjects, many of which are written by “experts” with credentials that are no grander than any other parent’s. I have no idea how many of these I have read – probably a hundred or so – but I certainly have not read them all. I liked some of them and did not care for others. Most of them bored me to tears, but not one of them contained a plan that was perfect for everyone.

The hardest part about comprehending normal childhood development is the fact that there are many, many different ways of being normal. In the spectrum of normal development, children may achieve the same developmental milestones at different ages and still be considered normal. Similarly, there are many different “normal” feeding patterns and several different “normal” sleeping patterns. Sometimes, you don’t get what you had hoped for, but that does not make it less normal.

To complicate things further, different families have vastly different expectations for their children. What is the expected norm for one family might be considered intolerable for another. I’ll give you a concrete example. Many authors have gotten rich trying to tell you how to get your baby to sleep through the night (which means, of course, sleeping through the night without you being present or nursing all night long). For many, the sleep-deprivation of parenthood is the hardest part, especially when they have to get up the next morning and either go to work or take care of older children in addition to an infant. However, some families do not care the slightest bit about this sort of thing. Some families have a “family bed” and actually expect their infant to nurse all night long for a couple of years. It works for them, so why change it?

Parenting strategies depend upon so many factors: what your expectations are about your child’s behavior, what your expectations are about your child’s sleep, other commitments that you have (like whether or not you have to be somewhere the next day), how many other children you have, what your state of mind is (are you depressed?), what your child’s personality is like, and what your own personality is like.

What has personality got to do with anything? More than you might think. Some books, for instance, are geared toward parents who are natural schedulers. These parents do the same thing every day at the same time, and so do their children. It works well for them, but it could never work for someone whose life cannot fit into a tight schedule.

Parenting books tend to show you one person’s plan or theory, but that is not necessarily the best plan for everyone. That does not mean that parenting books are utterly useless. I

Edward M. Pickens, M.D.

think that they are often filled with good advice, but they should not be considered manuals, plans, or methods. Every family has to come up with its own plan – something that works for the adults and for the children. It doesn't matter if your plan is not like everyone else's. The books give advice, your friends and family will give you advice, and it is up to you to put it all together and determine what works best for you. As a pediatrician, I see my role as a facilitator in this process, but I do not have one plan for everyone.

I remember a few years ago when a mother asked me about sleeping strategies. It turned into a thirty-minute discussion, which is not unusual, but I could tell that she was frustrated because I had told her friend something totally different. Half-jokingly, she said I was a chameleon, changing my colors for different situations. That's right! I explained to her that her expectations, her lifestyle, her child's personality and her own personality were different from those of her friend, so it is not surprising that they might have dissimilar strategies. After all, successful parenting includes a lot of instances in which you cope with the issues rather than solve them. Weeks later, both she and her friend were coping well with their vastly different approaches to parenthood.

The same can be said about discipline strategies. Expectations, family values, personality (both parent and child), social situation, and family structure all play a part in devising successful discipline strategies. One can devise a general outline of a strategy, using words like "consistency", but the specifics of the plan tend to depend upon these other factors. Again, the books can be helpful as sources of ideas for forming your own plans, but there is not one strategy that works for everyone.

Parenting is a full time job – as time consuming as two or three full time jobs – and being a parent is the hardest job you will ever have. We put an amazing amount of pressure on ourselves to fulfill our goals of having well-adjusted, successful children. It is so easy to get so caught up in the identity of being a parent that you can lose sight of your own identity. It can really wear you down. Do something for yourself for a change. A few minutes of relaxation will make you a better-equipped parent than any parenting book. If you actually have time to read, then I suggest that you read a novel; I have plenty of good suggestions for you.