

By Brian Donnelly, M.D.

RAISING CHILDREN GOD'S WAY"? OH BABY!

Move over Stephen King. A new team of horror writers has arrived to challenge our hegemony. Their names are Gary Ezzo and Robert Bucknam, M.D., the authors of "On Becoming Babywise," a popular book purportedly about raising children "God's way."

Their writing belongs in the horror section because its primary intent is to strike fear into the hearts of readers. Its secondary intent is to "teach" the reader an allegedly new method of child-rearing.

The Ezzo method imposes a regimented schedule of feeding babies and employs a domineering, authoritarian style of parenting, complete with corporal punishment. The over-riding goals are for the parents to get at least eight hours of uninterrupted sleep and for the child to become obedient.

The authors work hard at attacking the style of parenting that has been called "attachment parenting." Attachment parenting is based on the premise that a human infant is a fairly needy creature and depends on his mother and father for many basic needs, not the least of which is nurturing love. It recognizes that some babies, to be content, may require more physical contact—that is, need to be held—more often.

Personally, as a pediatrician, I help take care of hundreds of babies whose parents employ the attachment-parenting method. Their children (and my very own, for that matter!) are not doomed to become the horrible beasts that the Ezzo method claims. The authors blast this accommodation and, instead, try to convince the reader that crying "is what normal, healthy babies do." Do they know of the medical data that shows prolonged crying is physiologically detrimental to infants?

True, disconsolate crying of a baby is hard on parents. Crying can even drive some frustrated parents to hurt their infants. Yet Ezzo and Bucknam claim three hours a day of crying is perfectly normal. Crying is just something parents must endure for the sake of clinging to the schedule.

But Ezzo and Bucknam become more dangerous in their advice about sleep.

In 1992, the American Academy of Pediatrics embarked on a public-relations campaign designed to let people know that having baby sleep on its back was safer than having it sleep on its belly. Since this campaign began, the incidence of SIDS in this country has dropped by 30 percent. Nevertheless, back sleeping is NOT endorsed by the Ezzo method.

The relationship between SIDS and co-sleeping (where an infant sleeps in the same bed as its mother) is controversial. Anecdotes of a parent accidentally suffocating their infant during sleep are enough to make prudent parents think hard

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about this situation. And it should, particularly if either parent is intoxicated. However, there is a compelling body of recent research, ignored by these authors, demonstrating that co-sleeping may actually protect infants against the occurrence of SIDS. In addition, epidemiological data show that co-sleeping is the norm in some countries that consistently have lower rates of SIDS than the United States. Further, it has been shown that prolonged periods of lone sleep increase the baby's risk of SIDS. Nevertheless, co-sleeping is condemned.

It is not controversial, however, that co-sleeping promotes breast-feeding. It is common knowledge that breast-feeding is the most healthful thing for baby and mother. And, indeed, it is given praise by these authors. Faint praise. They make it quite clear that the ability of the parents to sleep for eight uninterrupted hours is sacrosanct, and that the baby can be entrained to dummy up and go hungry during the night.

Physiology tells us that breast-feeding through the night is important for two reasons. First, the continuous hormonal surges of prolactin (the "nursing" hormone) through the night serve to prevent ovulation from occurring. This is nature's own way of spacing babies. In fact, it is the most widely employed method of baby-spacing around the world. Second, breast-feeding through the night makes it much more likely that breast-feeding will be successful. Women who breast-feed while restricted to a schedule are more likely to fail to produce as much milk as the baby needs.

Sadly, this physiologic fact was demonstrated all too clearly with the reports of several babies who suffered dehydration, poor weight gain and failure to thrive while using the Ezzo method. What could be more horrible for parents than watching their baby starve almost to death while they are pursuing "God's way" of raising them?

Theologically, the horrors continue. To support their teaching that mothers need to ignore their baby's cries of hunger they cite Matthew 27:46, where a thirsty Jesus enjoins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" "Praise God," writes Ezzo in "Preparation for Parenting," "that the Father did not intervene when His Son cried out on the cross." And Ezzo, to encapsulate his philosophical approach, writes in: "Your baby's routine is to serve you, you aren't to serve your baby's routine." What, indeed, would Jesus say about this?

So be afraid of this new team of horror writers. Be very afraid, for sometimes the truth is more horrifying than fiction. ■

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