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Controversy rages over the parenting book *On Becoming BabyWise*, and its Christian counterpart *Preparation for Parenting*. Many churches offer these programs—parents assume the programs are biblical, safe, and based on extensive research. This article summarizes the alarming results of several investigations conducted by parenting experts, religious organizations, and journalists.



What's the Fuss over *Babywise* and *Preparation for Parenting*?

by Tyler Homer, Ph.D.

Christian publisher [Multnomah](#) is currently investigating [claims made against](#) one of its clients, Gary Ezzo, author of *On Becoming BabyWise*, an extremely popular secular book and educational program intended for parents of infants.

The Christian version of *On Becoming BabyWise* is *Preparation for Parenting*. These programs are administered by Ezzo's organization, Growing Families International (GFI). Ezzo's curricula are intended to equip churches and parents with information and skills to enhance children's physical, emotional, and mental development. These curricula have become enormously popular, due in large part to the claim that most infants on the program are able to sleep through the night by eight weeks. So what's the fuss?

Flashback: A Case Study (PDF, 20Kb, [Adobe Acrobat Reader required](#)). A day care provider who cared for seven babies parented according to *Babywise* principles reported that all seven children suffered because their moms had milk production problems. Wondering what caused the problems, the day care provider posted an inquiry on a *Babywise* Internet forum—119 concerned parents responded to her query, stating that they quit the program because of milk production problems. When she reported this to the babies' parents, she was amazed that they'd not shared their problems with GFI teachers—seemingly because they were intimidated.

OK, you might think, this is just one unusual case. Or is it? This day care provider's experience is only one of the [32 most serious case study reports](#) (PDF, 20Kb)—not to mention hundreds (if not thousands) of other less severe, but still significant, cases up to Feb. 1997. Since 1997, there have been many other cases, including two babies that required feeding tubes (e.g., [Matthew Hsieh](#) [PDF, 28Kb]) Experts believe that there are countless other problems that have gone unreported because parents were intimidated or didn't know where to turn.

One expert reports that after some parents reported problems to GFI, the organization did nothing to investigate the issues. In other cases, GFI representatives have offered inadequate justification or explanation of their claims. For example, when one GFI representative was asked about an apparent contradiction between information found in a recent medical journal and claims in the GFI curriculum, the representative justified the GFI position by referring to "[... a 1970s edition of the World Book Encyclopedia](#)" (PDF, 20Kb)

At this point, your church may be as curious as Multnomah is to find out the whole story concerning *Babywise*, Ezzo, and GFI. This article summarizes several areas of concern regarding the *Babywise* and *Preparation for Parenting* programs. These concerns pertain to Ezzo's lack of legitimate credentials, the numerous contradictions between Ezzo's parenting principles and current scientific and medical research, theological problems with Ezzo's programs, and serious questions about Ezzo's character.

Expertise and Credentials

According to one [Christian pediatrician](#) (PDF, 51Kb), as well as Christian organizations (e.g., [Christian Research Institute](#)) and non-religious organizations (e.g., [Tulsa Kids—Part I](#) [PDF, 271Kb], and [Tulsa Kids—Part II](#) [PDF, 174Kb]), Ezzo is not an expert in medicine, lactation, or child development. Although the most recent edition of *On Becoming BabyWise* (hereafter referred to as *Babywise*) is co-authored by pediatrician Robert Bucknam, nothing substantial was added or changed when Bucknam signed on as co-author, making some wonder if his name was added simply to placate critics and increase profits.

According to [Christianity Today Online Edition, 10/27/00](#), (PDF, 19Kb) Ezzo and GFI have claimed that Ezzo holds three academic degrees. Ezzo stated that he earned an associate's degree in business from Mohawk Community College in Utica, NY—school officials say he does not hold this degree. Second, GFI has stated that Ezzo holds a master's degree in Christian education, but this is apparently untrue. Third, critics also find it noteworthy that the Master of Arts in ministry earned by Ezzo gives significant academic credit for "life experience" and is a program intended for non-college graduates.

What is more, in two separate instances (in public forums), Ezzo remained silent when incorrectly referred to as "Dr. Gary Ezzo."

Scientific Evidence

How did the controversy surrounding *Babywise* begin? About four years ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the

premiere 53,000-member professional organization for pediatricians, received numerous complaints about Ezzo's curriculum from various health professionals. Reports from health care providers revealed a variety of health problems in infants parented according to *Babywise* principles, including poor weight gain, failure to thrive, and dehydration.

After over 100 healthcare professionals signed a letter of concern, the AAP asked its membership if one of its pediatricians would write a review article on *Babywise*. Matthew Aney, an AAP member and Christian pediatrician, volunteered to conduct a formal and thorough review of Ezzo's programs. What he uncovered was startling. The 1995 version of *Babywise* contained [35 unsubstantiated medical claims](#)—claims that stand in direct contradiction to scientific research.

Even the most recent (1998) version of the *Babywise* program contains numerous [unsubstantiated medical claims](#) (PDF, 51Kb). Particularly concerned about the contradictory advice for infant feedings, the AAP has declared a [Media Alert](#) (PDF, 11Kb).

In the face of criticism from the AAP and other organizations, Ezzo has asserted that his curricula are supported by GFI's own research. Unfortunately GFI refuses to release details related to these studies. What little information has been revealed suggests that the studies were not conducted according to widely accepted scientific standards, are riddled with incomplete arguments and internal contradictions, and were not subject to peer review.

In contrast, the AAP can back up its stance with hundreds of research studies, conducted by medical doctors, professors, and other university researchers, and published in top scientific and professional journals that have an objective peer review.

Against this seemingly overwhelming opposition—from Christian and secular researchers alike—Ezzo has only claimed to have an advisory board of hundreds of pediatricians. Unfortunately, Ezzo is unwilling to release this list.

So, what are some of the numerous claims that fly in the face of conventional research and practice? GFI has posted a [comparison chart](#) of GFI's curricula and AAP's research stance. GFI's chart would lead the reader to believe that the two perspectives (GFI and AAP) are quite congruent. However, quotes from both sources are not appropriately contextualized. In an [analysis of this misleading chart](#) (PDF, 51Kb), Dr. Aney points out the inaccuracies of GFI when compared to the research-based stance of the AAP.

Further, experts in child development disagree with Ezzo's claims that:

- breast- and bottle-fed infants should be fed according to a schedule;
- babies should be left to "cry it out" in their cribs;
- the hands of a 9-month-old infant should be swatted when the infant is unruly in the highchair or throws food;
- children should be parented according to a schedule that doesn't allow for individual differences in temperament and growth patterns; and
- a newborn is able to understand that his mother is available in the next room and will attend to his needs according to a schedule, even though she won't come when he cries.

Medical experts have also pointed out that Ezzo's programs have been linked to:

- dehydration,
- failure to thrive,
- poor weight gain, and
- milk production problems for moms.

Despite the scientific evidence against *Babywise*, there are a number of churches and parents out there who have seen the program "work" for their children or the children of friends or family members. When churches or parents say that *Babywise* "worked for them," they usually mean that their baby was successfully trained to sleep through the night at a very early age. At first, this may seem to be persuasive evidence for new parents considering the program.

But just because something "works" does not mean it is the best option, or that it worked for the right reason. Many experts believe that babies on the *Babywise* program stop crying and start sleeping through the night because they have lost hope that their parents will respond appropriately to their attempts to communicate (by crying).

Child development experts agree that the development of trust with primary caregivers is the primary task to be accomplished in the first year of life. Experts also agree that children under a year of age learn to trust when their cues are respected and attended to promptly. For instance, as stated in *Pediatrics*, vol. 100, no. 6, (Dec 1997) "Newborns should be nursed whenever they show signs of hunger, such as increased alertness or activity, mouthing, or rooting. Crying is a late indicator of hunger."

Parents need to consider, *Is the short term gain of a full night's sleep worth the potential damage to my child's ability to trust me and others?* (Not to mention the numerous potential physical problems mentioned above.)

Further, there is no research that has examined the long-term effects of the *Babywise* program, whereas there are a number of studies which show that children whose cries are attended to are securely attached and have normal relationships as adults.

In the face of the above-mentioned arguments raised by experts, some may think *I'll just use what works in Babywise, and discard the rest*. The only problem with this line of thinking is that all that's left is maternal intuition and common sense—so why even bother with the program or book? Moreover, churches and parents do have alternatives, as other child-rearing styles are much better researched—a few examples are provided in the concluding section of this article.

Theological Critique

Some Christians have been hesitant to discount Ezzo's claims solely on scientific grounds, believing that the books and programs are based on sound biblical principles. In fact, Ezzo has been the subject of serious theological criticism as well. Unfavorable theological commentary on Ezzo's curricula has been issued by [Focus on the Family](#) (PDF, 13Kb) and the [Child Abuse Prevention Council of Orange County](#) (PDF, 56Kb)—although not a Christian organization, this Council included some Christian members. It is noteworthy that a [majority of Ezzo's critics are Christians](#). (PDF, 41Kb)

Ezzo seems to claim that his curricula is *the* only way to raise children in a biblical way—in fact one series of classes offered by GFI is titled *Growing Kids God's Way*. Many organizations, including Focus on the Family, have found this claim to be

exclusivistic. Dr. James Dobson has even commented that there are several healthy parenting approaches, all of which are congruent with the Bible.

Another point of concern cited by Focus on the Family is that "in support of their [GFI] teaching that mothers should refuse to attend to crying infants who have already been fed, changed, and had their basic needs met" Ezzo referred to Matthew 27:46: "... My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." In *Preparation for Parenting*, Ezzo stated "Praise God that the Father did not intervene when his Son cried out on the cross."

The Child Abuse Prevention Council of Orange County, who explored the earlier 1995 edition of the curricula, pointed out that Ezzo's programs one-sidedly focus on God's justice, discipline, and order, without taking into account God's compassion, love, or His design for unique human personalities.

The Council also investigated Ezzo's Parent Directed Feeding (PDF). PDF is controlled and scheduled, and is in opposition to "on-demand feeding" (feeding a baby when he gives hunger cues). The Council thought it odd that Ezzo's curricula contained 200+ pages on how PDF was God's plan, including numerous references to Scripture, only to seemingly contradict his own claims by stating: "When it comes to a method of feeding, the Bible is silent" (*Growing Kids God's Way*, p. 26).

The Council concluded their theological review with a list of criteria that a reputable program should meet, including:

- being involved with a larger, comprehensive program;
- developing a child's self-esteem and respect;
- equipping parental discernment;
- allowing for individual differences in temperament;
- allowing for age-appropriate development; and
- reflecting a balance of warmth (love) and authority (discipline).

While Ezzo's programs only met one out of these six categories (being connected to a comprehensive program), [there are other programs that meet all six criteria](#) (PDF, 56Kb).

Fiscal Abuse

According to [Christianity Today Online Edition, 10/27/00](#) (PDF, 19Kb), GFI's accounting firm severed ties with the organization when one of the partners stated that he felt Ezzo had personally misled him about fiscal misappropriations. After Ezzo himself ordered an "embezzlement investigation" he apparently changed his statement, saying he had lent \$500,000 of GFI's funds to Robert Garcia, his son-in-law.

However, Garcia himself said "... that he misappropriated funds from GFI" and that the money was (in Garcia's words) "embezzled." Ezzo said "if there was any offense," it occurred only toward his wife and he and that "It really doesn't matter, and it's not of any public interest."

Following the embezzlement stir, Ezzo sent out a "Community Perspective newsletter," targeting "every parent who is now experiencing a good night [sic] sleep" to contribute a tax-deductible gift to the Christian Family Heritage (CFH)—GFI's nonprofit affiliation—to address "the growing challenges across America and around the world." CFH has not released its annual report to the public, nor is CFH a member of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA).

Character

Given that Ezzo's name is well-known and that some of his materials are Christian-based, it seems reasonable to expect that he should be professional and Christ-like in response to opposition. Unfortunately, Ezzo has consistently conducted himself in an unprofessional manner in response to criticism. According to [Christianity Today Online Edition, 10/27/00](#) (PDF, 19Kb), Ezzo has called his critics "marsupial," "theologically naive," "primitivistic," and "prideful."

Further, Ezzo has also allegedly tried to intimidate those who speak out against him. For example, when a writer (Roy Maynard) wrote a story about GFI which included "... detailed criticism ..." Ezzo apparently fabricated a debasing interview transcript between Maynard and himself. Ezzo then sent letters to Maynard's supervisor asking for the magazine to "... consider asking for Maynard's resignation." Ezzo also encouraged the elders at Maynard's church "... to take disciplinary action against [Maynard]."

In another incident, GFI's editorial director, Frank York was asked to investigate the *Babywise* complaints. When York shared with Ezzo an objective summary of some of the medical problems associated with the program, Ezzo dismissed the problems, stating that parents were exaggerating. GFI eventually fired York, claiming that he was not performing up to the organization's expectations. However, York stated that GFI got rid of him because he revealed potential problems with the curricula, because "They realized I was not a Gary-worshiper," and because "... Gary does not like to be told that he's wrong."

Lastly, according to [Christianity Today Online Edition, 10/27/00](#) (PDF, 19Kb), over the past 20 years, one church [excommunicated Ezzo](#) (PDF, 8Kb) and ["Two other congregations have taken similar punitive measures against Ezzo ..."](#) (see also [MacArthur statement](#) (PDF, 6Kb)) because of a pattern of Scripture abuse, divisive conduct, and failure to repent.

What's a Church or Parent to Do?

While experts have identified numerous concerns with Ezzo, *Babywise*, and GFI, churches and parents should realize that this program is not representative of other Christian parenting books or programs. In fact, there are several excellent publications available.

Two such books that are held in high regard in the Christian community are *The Complete Book of Christian Parenting and Childcare* by pediatrician, Dr. William Sears, and *The Focus on the Family Complete Book of Baby and Child Care*. While there are numerous other excellent Christian parenting books/programs, these two books are chosen as example alternatives because they:

1. focus on infants/toddlers (an age group of chief concern with the *Babywise* materials),
2. they focus comprehensively on infant/toddler needs (mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual development),
3. they are extensively research-based (as opposed to being based on one or a handful of studies).

It should be noted that churches and parents shouldn't expect to find all the answers in one book or program. It is also important to remember that, while babies and young children have similar needs, they are all unique. Churches and parents should exercise caution when they are presented with simplistic answers to complex problems or when programs claim to work all the time for all children and all families.

As many have said over the years, "Kids don't come with instructions"—and most of us are not expected to be parenting experts. Therefore, church leaders and parents may want to seek out the opinions of reputable Christian organizations, and Christian child development experts (e.g., pediatricians). Lastly, while there are many concrete options for choosing appropriate parenting literature and programs, we must not forget to undergird our actions with Scripture and prayer.

*If you would like a copy of the articles referenced in this story, along with other articles on *Babywise*, the *Ezzos*, or *GFI*, please contact pediatrician Dr. Matthew Aney at ANEYBODY@aol.com.*

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