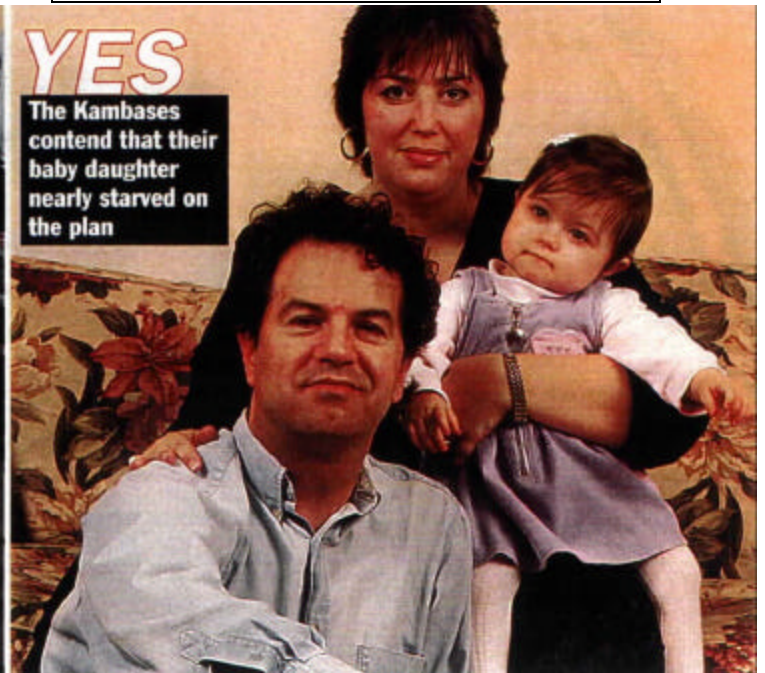
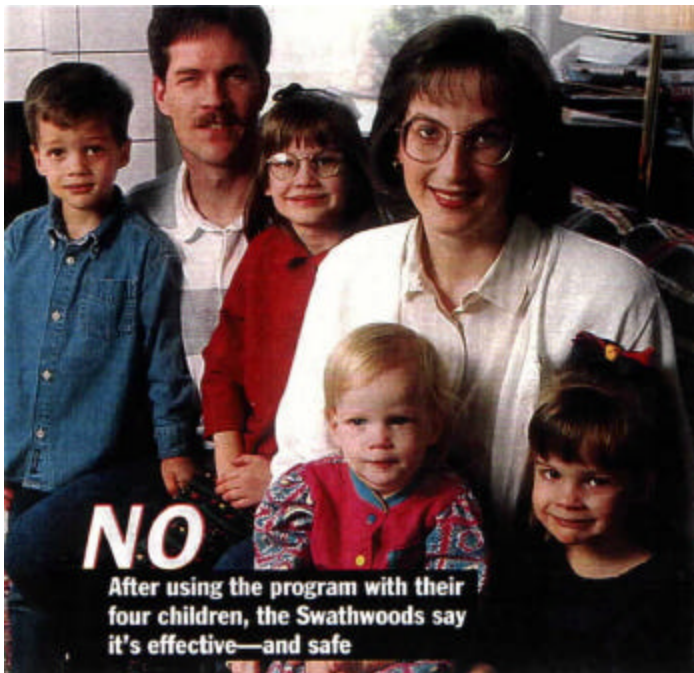


Babies in **Danger?**



These two families followed a popular but controversial **child-rearing program**. One says their children thrived; the other says their baby's health suffered. Does this parenting method **go too far?** **By Jenny Deam**

Jennifer Kambas didn't know what to do. Her newborn daughter, Elizabeth, wouldn't stop crying. Kambas, thirty-six, longed to comfort her, but in the parenting class she and her husband had taken they had been warned that picking up the baby every time she cried would encourage her to cry more.

The Kambases were well-educated professionals, but when it came to babies, they were lost. Their friend and their faith pointed them to one man: Gary Ezzo, a conservative Christian minister who has created a controversial child-rearing plan designed to mold infants into well-behaved, respectful children. His program has become increasingly popular—almost two million parents across the country have now tried it.

When Kambas became pregnant, she and her husband took one of Ezzo's "Preparation for Parenting" classes near their home in Laguna Beach, California. A cornerstone of the minister's teachings is that new parents must instill order in their homes to stave off exhaustion. Kambas liked Ezzo's idea of feeding her baby every two and a half hours to three hours—rather than on demand, as other experts advised—so that the infant would sleep through the night by eight weeks.

But when Kambas mentioned the program in her Lamaze class, the instructor advised her not to follow the Ezzo schedule. There had been problems, she said, of babies not gaining enough weight, or failing to thrive from not being fed often enough. After Elizabeth was

born, three pediatric nurses at the hospital also told her to feed the baby on demand.

"I ignored them all," Kambas admits. "The woman who taught our [Ezzo parenting] class said, 'They're going to tell you in the hospital to feed the when the baby is hungry...Just smile at them.'"

But once Elizabeth came home, "She would cry and cry, but we wouldn't feed her because it wasn't time" Kambas says. "I called the person who taught the class. She said, [Elizabeth] was probably just getting used to the schedule."

"We were so stupid," Kambas says. "But I really believed that this program was the most biblically based."

When Elizabeth was five weeks old, she cried so long and hard one night that Kambas became frightened and rushed

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her to an all-night clinic. The doctor there weighed the baby and discovered that she had gained less than a pound and a half since birth. (Typically, a baby has gained more than two pounds by this time.) The doctor turned to Kambas and asked, "What's going on here?" She broke down and told the clinic staff about the feeding schedule she had Elizabeth on.

The doctor was adamant: Kambas had to start feeding Elizabeth more often. That night, she began to feed Elizabeth on demand. In seventeen days, the baby gained nearly five pounds.

Looking back, Kambas is tormented by the thought of what she did to her baby. "[She] was so little," Kambas says. "We were starving her."

Parents in Charge

Gary Ezzo is skeptical. He's heard these kind of stories before, and dismisses them as either made up or extremely rare. "We don't teach hunger," he says.

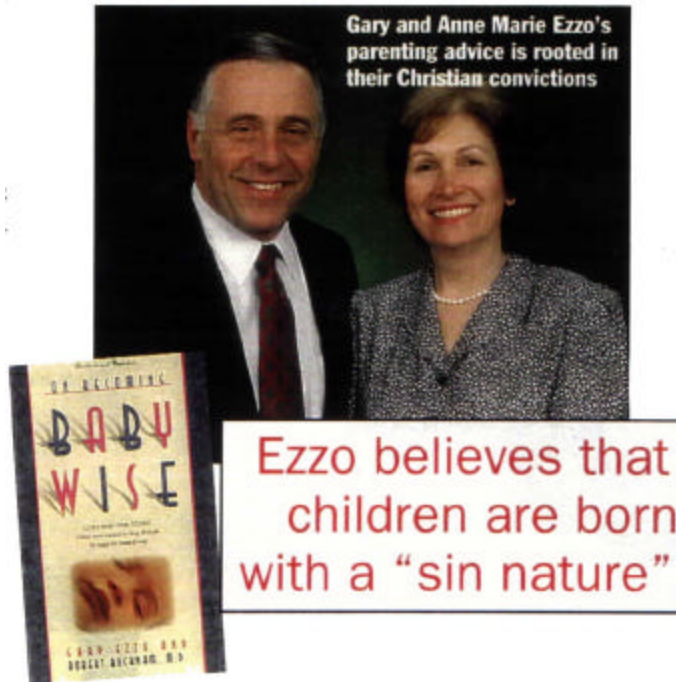
Ezzo, fifty, has touched off a firestorm within the world of child rearing by serving up counsel counter to the prevailing wisdom. With no medical training or pediatric background other than being a father to two grown daughters and grandfather of six, Ezzo contends that his message is the one that weary and frustrated parents crave.

"We're an alternative to the last twenty-five to thirty years of runaway permissiveness," he insists. "It is not just the popular parenting advice that is being rejected, but the value of the last forty years."

Ezzo began advising parents in 1983, when young parents came to him because they were impressed by the behavior of his two teenage daughters. Soon Ezzo was meeting with other couples for a weekly class on Christian child rearing at his church. Today, he and his wife, Anne Marie—a registered nurse who has not practiced in more than a decade—run an organization that promotes family ministries called Growing Families International, based in Simi Valley, California.

The couple's religion-based program, called Preparation for Parenting, and the second in their series, Growing

Kids God's Way—along with the book, videotape and audiotape versions—is now distributed or taught in at least eight thousand churches across the country. To appeal to a secular audience, Ezzo removed all biblical references from his books, added Colorado pediatrician



Robert Bucknam, M.D., as a co-author and renamed the parenting manuals *On Becoming Babywise* and *On Becoming Babywise II*. Revised last year, *On Becoming Babywise* has sold more than a quarter of a million copies since it was first published in 1993.

Ezzo's advice is rooted in his fundamentalist Christian convictions. In his curriculum he tells parents that children are born with a "sin nature." In *On Becoming Babywise II* he writes: "A child is born with the propensity to defy parental leadership....The job of the parents is to transform the [child's] heart from what it is to what it should be."

In his books and tapes, Ezzo outlines a daily time line for infants: a feeding immediately after they get up, a specific period of time awake and then back to bed without the usual crutches of rocking or nursing the child to sleep.

He suggests that children who are not on his program may be at risk for learning disorders. "Some researchers believe there is a cause-and-effect relationship between poor sleep habits and the rate of attention-deficit hyperactive disorder," he writes.

By eight or nine months of age, he says, babies should learn "high-chair manners" so they won't fling their food, and sign language to communicate "please" and "thank you." If the child willfully misbehaves, Ezzo suggests disciplining him or her with stern words, isolation or a swat on the hand. "Pain gets the attention of children faster than anything else," he writes in *Growing Kids God's Way*.

By nineteen months, swatting can be replaced with spanking, says Ezzo, who advises parents to use a flexible tool that will sting, but that won't damage the child's bone or muscle. "If there is no pain, then the instrument is probably too light or too flexible," Ezzo counsels.

This advice clashes with that of most parenting experts. In fact, last year the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) cited the negative consequences of spanking and recommended other methods of discipline

instead.

Despite his Spartan methods, it's easy to see why Ezzo's program is popular. His books are slim, with easy instructions. His tapes are folksy and encouraging. He talks about the importance of a strong marriage, urging parents to carve out fifteen minutes for themselves each night with "couch time," when kids are excluded, so a couple can talk without interruption. "We empower parents," he says.

Shannon Swathwood, thirty-five, a mother of four in San Antonio, says Ezzo's philosophy "is the kind of commonsense parenting that has disappeared."

Swathwood turned to Ezzo in 1994. Her second child, then five months old, would wake from naps still sleepy and cranky, she explains. She read *Preparation for Parenting*, and began "helping him to learn to sleep longer." She would set a timer and let him cry first five, then ten minutes before comforting him. After five days, her son began taking longer naps and was more cheerful when he was awake.

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Today, she uses one of Ezzo's methods she calls "blanket time" with her youngest. The two-year-old has been taught to play on her blanket without leaving its edges, and will now do so for up to forty minutes.

Swathwood is convinced the training she does now will pay off later. "I want my children to have self-control," she explains. "I want them to think about others."

Dangerous Methods?

But some of Ezzo's advice alarms doctors. Perhaps most controversial is his "parent-directed feeding" plan, in which newborns are put on eating schedules so they will sleep through the night at an early age. This advice directly contradicts the recommendation of the American Academy of Pediatrics. "Scheduled feedings designed by parents may put babies at risk for poor weight gain and dehydration," the AAP said in a statement released in April.

One of Ezzo's most vocal critics is William Sears, M.D., a California pediatrician who has written more than twenty books on child rearing and is a strong advocate for early parent child attachment. He has called the Ezzo method "the most dangerous I have seen in my twenty-five years as a pediatrician."

Penelope Leach, Ph.D., a child psychologist and author of the best selling *Your baby and Child* (Knopf, 1997), also finds some of Ezzo's positions alarming. "This advice, if applied to all newborn babies, is bad advice," she says. "there may be some babies who can go three hours between feedings, but there are none who should."

Others have also voiced concern. In September 1998, the AAP passed a resolution to "continually evaluate infant-management programs such as *Preparation for Parenting* and *On Becoming Babywise*." This came after more than one hundred health professionals across the country asked the AAP to look into the programs, calling them potentially harmful. The 1999 revised edition of the textbook *Breastfeeding and Human Lactation* now contains a warning that problems

including poor weight gain and failure to thrive may be linked to Ezzo's program.

In January 1997, a medical committee at the Forsyth Medical Center, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, compiled a report outlining concerns they had with information dispensed by Ezzo. This came after the medical staff discovered the mother of a newborn in the neonatal intensive care unit was not feeding her baby often enough because she was using the Ezzo schedule.

David Carr, M.D., a pediatrician in Orlando, Florida, treated a patient who was on the Ezzo program. The six-month-old girl showed signs of starvation; her mother had been following a rigid feeding schedule.

Eventually, the child began refusing food and had to be placed on a feeding tube for at least a year. Carr diagnosed her condition as "failure to thrive due to unexplained anorexia." After tests ruled out other possible causes, he concluded there was a connection between the rigid scheduling and the girl's problems. "I think it was an awfully big coincidence if

Ezzo calls his approach old fashioned common sense. "We empower parents," he says

it wasn't related," he says.

Jan Barger, a registered nurse and past president of the International Lactation Consultant Association, in Raleigh, North Carolina, said she repeatedly hears stories from doctors, nurses and lactation consultants of infants who are left to cry. "I find this dangerous not only on a physical level but also on a psychological level," says Barger. "When the baby is ignored, he does not develop a trust relationship with his parents."

Ezzo insists his advice is sound and is backed up by a medical advisory board of twenty-five physicians involved in pediatric care. For every doctor who is critical of his program, he says, there are plenty who support him. "The vast majority of American Academy of Pediatric Fellows would be right where we are," he insists.

He also points out that his books and tapes advise parents to use flexibility and common sense, and caution against

following his schedules too rigidly. "We can't be blamed for people who are hyper-schedulists when we teach not to do it."

Ezzo's co-author, Robert Bucknam, a pediatrician in the Denver area, adds that *On Becoming Babywise* was revised last year to make the point about flexibility even stronger. The parent-directed feeding program has been modified, as well. Instead of telling parents to feed their infants an average of six to eight times per day as he did several years ago, Ezzo now instructs mothers to feed babies an average of eight to ten times per day. That is consistent with the eight to twelve times per day that the AAP recommends.

Despite the controversy, Kristen Ross, twenty-nine, from Bradenton, Florida, has nothing but praise for Ezzo's program. Before she tried it in 1993, every night was a grueling battle as she tried to put her two-year-old to bed. Then a local minister suggested that Ross and her husband say they try Ezzo's "couch time" method. He thought their daughter might be feeling insecure about her parent's relationship and that was causing her to misbehave. The Rosses say they were skeptical, but gave it a try.

After a few nights, the child began going to bed willingly. "She saw we had a relationship outside of her," says Ross.

She contends that she doesn't understand all the fuss about Ezzo's methods. "My parents raised me in a similar way

and they had never heard of Gary Ezzo," Ross says. His program is so popular, she adds, "because it works."

For his part, Ezzo believes some of his critics are threatened by his alternative view on parenting. "I'm like the guy who stumbles onto the gold nugget and brings it in, and then everyone tries to prove it [isn't gold]," he says.

A High Price to Pay

But some Christian groups have also raised concern with Ezzo's methods. Grace Community Church, the congregation in California where Ezzo launched his parenting programs, has now disavowed his materials. In a 1997 statement, the church said had misused Biblical references to further his parenting philosophy.

Focus on the Family, a Colorado-based conservative Christian group more than two million strong, also takes issue

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with Ezzo's methods. Paul Hetrick, vice president of media and public relations, said that while his organization finds merit in some of Ezzo's advice, it finds other parts "too rigid. The very title, *Growing Kids God's Way*, has an unnecessarily exclusive sound about it, as if there were only one correct and godly way to raise children," Hetrick wrote in a statement to the *Journal*.

Even some once-devoted believers are now questioning Ezzo's advice. Ginny Hunt, thirty-six, of Fredericksburg, Virginia, and her husband first used Ezzo's program in 1992 to help with their oldest son, then nine. But it wasn't until their third child was born that things began to fall apart. When the infant was eight weeks old, Hunt tried to get him to sleep through the night, as the program instructed. For three nights the baby screamed from one A.M. to four A.M.

Finally, on the third night, Hunt couldn't take it any longer. "I scooped him up in my arms and begged his forgiveness," she says. "That was the turning point. I began to notice the emotional distance [the program] was creating with my children." Yes, her kids were obedient, but it also seemed she was spanking them too often.

Today, Hunt relies on her own instincts as a mother. "I do have regrets," she admits. "I regret not allowing them the wiggle room to grow as children. I have no doubt the program works. But I wasn't willing to pay the price Gary Ezzo demands. And that price was my relationship with my children." •