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Getting wise to “Babywise”

DO PARENTS WHO
BUY THE
CONTROVERSIAL
BABY-CARE BOOK
KNOW ABOUT ITS
CONSERVATIVE
CHRISTIAN
AGENDA?



BY KATIE ALLISON GRANJU | Lori Rivas finds it painful to think back to the first few months after her 2-year-old son Daniel’s birth. Rivas, a 29-year-old stay-at-home mother from Santa Clarita, Calif., remembers days and nights of struggling to ignore her baby’s crying, of feeling guilty when she longed to rock him to sleep in her arms but believed that she should not. Worst of all, Rivas recalls the day of Daniel’s two week checkup, when the previously healthy infant was discovered to be more than one pound below his birth weight and so dehydrated that he was unable to produce tears.

“I felt that I was failing as a parent,” says Rivas.

Rivas and her 38-year-old husband, Theo, a customer service representative, were not only worried about their son - they were confused. After all, they were conscientiously following the highly detailed dictates of one of today’s most popular child-care guides, a book that glowingly described itself in its own introduction as “an infant management program” that has “worked for thousands of parents and, when faithfully applied, will work wonderfully for you!” In a soothing, authoritative tone, the guide further assured Lori and Theo that, if they adhered to the book’s recommendations, their baby would sleep through the night by approximately 8 weeks of age, cry less than other babies and even have a reduced risk of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and learning disabilities down the road.

This was enough to convince these eager first-time parents. They wanted the best for baby Daniel.

“We went by the book,” explains Lori Rivas.

“The book” is called “On Becoming “Babywise,” from a Christian publishing house, Multnomah/Questar. This slim paperback and its companion volume, “Babywise II,” for parents of “pretoddlers” ages 5 to 15 months, have sold at least a quarter million copies over the past several years, consistently placing in the top 10 most requested parenting titles on both mainstream and Christian booksellers’ lists. The author behind “Babywise I” and “II” is Gary Ezzo, an enigmatic, 50-something, evangelical Christian minister. Ezzo, along with several close family members, heads up Growing Families International, a huge, for-profit “parenting ministry” based in Simi Valley, Calif. GFI has stated that its goals as an organization are “to capture the hearts and minds of the next generation,” because “it takes two generations to affect change (sic). We gave the last over to the ideological humanists; they have our tax dollar and the public classroom to bring about their agenda. We cannot collectively capture the minds of the next generation without educating the minds of today’s parents.” Ezzo’s personal parenting philosophy can be summed up in his public statement: “Raising good children is not a matter of chance but a matter of rightly applying God’s principles in parenting.”

GFI’s ever-expanding product line of conservative Christian parenting materials is reportedly now used by at least 70,000 parents in 6,000 churches across the country each week. “Babywise” and “Babywise II” are the ostensibly secular versions of GFI’s original and still widely used Christian child-care guides. Dr. Robert Bucknam, a young Denver-area pediatrician, is listed as co-author of the “Babywise” books, while Ezzo and his wife, Anne Marie, are named as the sole authors of their religious counterparts. The bestselling “Babywise” books, generally available in the family and parenting aisles of major bookstores, are fundamentally the same guides as the Ezzos’ Christian versions, but with a crucial difference: All biblical and theological references have been removed. GFI refers to the “Babywise” books as “outreach materials” and describes them in its catalog as “the ideal gift for your expectant friends,” and as offering “many of the same biblical principles as (other GFI child-care guides).” The catalog goes on to suggest that “Babywise I” and “II” are “ideally written for the Christian obstetrician, pediatrician or health-care provider to distribute to their patients.” Although GFI makes no attempt to obfuscate its own agenda as an activist evangelical Christian organization in its other, openly religious materials, parents who buy or are given the seemingly mainstream “Babywise” books have no way of knowing that the books’ advice is based largely on GFI’s own unique biblical interpretations. Neither are most “Babywise” readers likely aware that the child-care guide that now sits on their bookshelf next to their well-thumbed Spock or “What to Expect the First Year” is designed to “capture the minds” of their children.

NEXT PAGE: The “Babywise” backlash

Without any major promotion other than word of mouth, the explosive popularity of “Babywise” has quietly turned GFI into a publishing industry phenomenon. However, as more parents like Lori and Theo Rivas speak out about their negative experiences with the advice contained in the books, “Babywise I” and “II” have also become the most controversial American child-care guides in 20 years or more. In response to the books’ radical departure from current pediatric and psychiatric advice, scores of concerned medical, lactation science and child development experts are speaking out against what they see as potentially dangerous child-care guidance, being offered up with little in the way of credible supporting research.

In 1997, approximately 100 health-care providers, including nationally known experts and 20 fellows of the American Academy of Pediatrics, sent a “letter of concern” to the AAP regarding Ezzo’s child-care advice. In February, the Wall Street Journal reported on the growing controversy, and in April, the AAP’s own District IV Chapter Convention passed a resolution calling on the AAP to investigate “Babywise” and its effects on infant health. In the same month’s issue of the AAP News, Dr. Matt Aney, a California pediatrician, wrote an editorial in which he discussed having personally reviewed dozens of medical records of infants with health problems ranging from low weight gain to dehydration to symptoms of depression that developed after parents had followed the feeding advice contained in “Babywise.” The nation’s largest professional organization for lactation professionals, the International Lactation Consultant Association, has become so alarmed by growing numbers of parents using Ezzo’s “infant management program” with poor results that, at its recent international conference in July, the group offered a presentation to a standing-room-only audience on how to deal with “rigid approaches to care giving” in the clients that they see. In the past, “Babywise” co-author Robert Bucknam has suggested that criticism of GFI’s child-care programs is based on prejudice against Christians. However, a highly placed source within the AAP says that the fact that the controversial “Babywise” books are produced by a large Christian organization has actually prevented the AAP from taking an even stronger public position against the popular books.

The great controversy stems in large part from the fact that the “Babywise” approach represents a harsh throwback to decades-old and widely discredited child-care manuals in which mothers were advised to watch the clock rather than their babies’ signals in determining when breast or bottle should be offered. Today, in response to extensive research into infant nutrition and growth, experts strongly advise against “scheduling” and in favor of feeding, preferably breast-feeding, according to a baby’s cues. In recent months, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a “Media Alert” in which the organization emphatically “reaffirms its stance that the best feeding schedules for babies are the ones babies design themselves.” The alert went on to say that “scheduled feedings designed by parents may put babies at risk for poor weight gain and dehydration.”

“Parents shouldn’t try to put their healthy infants on feeding schedules,” says Susan Baker, M.D., chairwoman of the Committee on Nutrition for the AAP and an associate professor at the Medical University of South Carolina. “Babies’ feeding needs are extremely variable. You should nurse your baby when she’s hungry or shows signs of being hungry, no matter when she last ate.”

Ezzo disagrees. With a self-coined term, “Parent Directed Feeding (PDF),” Ezzo continues to advocate feeding-by-the-clock, suggesting, among many other things, that infants breast-fed in the manner advocated by Dr. Baker are “confused,” “uncomfortable” and insecure.” Further, Ezzo recommends that night feeds should generally be phased out by approximately 8 weeks of age, as infants of this age should be sleeping seven or more hours at a stretch if his program has been implemented properly. Ezzo writes that “Between seven and nine weeks, parents [who have followed “Babywise” recommendations from birth] can expect [baby’s] nighttime sleep cycles to be a continuous 7-8 hours. After three months of age, that time is extended to 9-11 hours each night. This nighttime sleep is in addition to ... regular nap times during the day. This means bliss for everyone. Mother. Baby. Father. Siblings. Perhaps even the family pet.”

Not true, says Dr. Richard Ferber, director of Boston’s Center for Pediatric Sleep Disorders at Children’s Hospital and the author of the bestselling “Solve Your Child’s Sleep Problems” (Simon and Schuster). “Parents shouldn’t expect babies to sleep that long that early, although a very few will on their own and in that case, you may sometimes need to actually wake them to feed them,” says Ferber. “There is no good evidence that babies that young can go that long without a feeding.”

According to Ferber, any ill-informed child-care advice that suggests that very young infants should be sleeping through the night has the potential to leave new parents frustrated as they wonder what's "wrong" with their own baby.

Medical textbook co-author Kathleen Auerbach, Ph.D., a nationally known International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC), concurs. "This is completely out of keeping with how infants sleep and eat. An 8-week-old infant gets approximately 30 percent of all food volume in the hours between midnight and 8 a.m. To deny babies fully one-third of their total food volume by 2 months of age is asking for trouble," says Auerbach.

Although Ezzo's PDF is not recognized (or even mentioned) in any recent peer-reviewed medical literature, "Babywise" boldly informs new parents that "PDF is a new and major paradigm shift for the [lactation science] industry and not all [lactation] consultants have a working understanding of routine breast-feeding dynamics." In fact, leading lactation consultants say that it is Ezzo, Bucknam and their supporters who lack a basic understanding of lactation science. Among other things, "Babywise" states that feeding a baby too frequently can actually decrease breast milk production and even "compromise a child's health." According to Kathleen Huggins, R.N., M.S., and an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant, as well as author of "The Nursing Mother's Companion" and "The Nursing Mother's Guide to Weaning" (Harvard Common Press), this information is simply wrong.

"The more often a woman feeds her baby, the more milk she will make. The less often she feeds her baby, the less milk she will make. This is an established aspect of human physiology," says Huggins, who has herself worked with several families who saw their infants lose or fail to gain weight after following the feeding advice in "Babywise," including one pair of newborn twins who were diagnosed with "failure to thrive." Huggins says that she was able to convince the babies' mother to respond to their cues and feed them more frequently, leading to a quick recovery. "Some women may be able to maintain a good milk supply with a feeding schedule, but many, many will not, particularly after the first few months," adds Huggins.

Katherine Dettwyler, Ph.D., an associate professor of anthropology at Texas A&M University and one of the world's foremost authorities on biocultural perspectives on infant feeding, says that human infants were designed to eat frequently and at their own pace, which may vary markedly from baby to baby. "The composition of human milk is similar to that of other primates, with low fat and protein levels typical of a continuous contact species," explains Dettwyler. "Babies are designed to be fed very frequently for the first few months of life ... To cloak 'convenience for parents' in the guise of a rigid feeding schedule being 'best for the baby' is really misleading."

Dr. Carl Hays, a Burlington, Iowa, obstetrician and a member of what GFI calls its "medical advisory board," concedes that PDF does not have widespread medical support, but says that he promotes it anyway. "Too-frequent feeding doesn't allow the breast to refill. Although it is true that this is not what the research currently says, nothing is carved in stone. I think you are going to see some interesting studies on this very soon," he says. He declined to predict where or when these studies would be published.

NEXT PAGE: Leave that crying baby alone

Although it is the feeding recommendations in “Babywise” that have received the most negative attention, much of the other child-care advice in the books is similarly diametrically opposed to modern pediatric and psychological practice. For example, babies who resist the prescribed napping and bedtime components of the “Babywise” regimen are left to wail alone in their cribs for up to an hour at a stretch in order to “train” them. Play time is highly structured, with ever-increasing portions of a baby’s day spent in solitary “roomtime” or “playpen time.” According to Ezzo, skills such as “creativity,” “mental focusing” and a “sustained attention span” may be “seriously delayed if your child misses out on structured playpen time.”

“Once parents have their infant’s eating and sleeping patterns under control, it’s time to do the same with waketime activities,” writes Ezzo. “Playpens are necessary to help parents optimize a child’s development.”

After babies reach only 6 months of age, parents are instructed to begin punitive disciplinary measures such as “squeezing or swatting” of the child’s hands or “isolation” in the crib for “rebellious” infractions including “foolishness,” “malicious defiance” or even playing with food on the highchair tray. Ezzo explains to parents that the use of “pain” and “discomfort” can be essential disciplinary tools. After age 2 and a half, children who have a toileting accident are required to clean themselves up.

Despite the plethora of respected research demonstrating the critical importance of early parent-child attachment, “Babywise” breezily dismisses this concept as little more than self-indulgent psychobabble. Thus, parents are told that they can actually harm a child by too much rocking or holding and that they should, at all costs, avoid “emotionalism” in responding to a baby’s cries lest parents be held “in bondage” to the child.

“Of course you can harm a baby by picking him or her up too much,” asserts Ezzo.

As radical as these recommendations sound, they are actually considerably toned down from those made in earlier editions, in obvious response to many specific complaints by medical professionals. The 1993 and 1995 editions of “Babywise,” which are still available in many bookstores, contain dozens of even more bizarre medical claims. Examples include Ezzo’s contention that placing an infant to sleep on his stomach is not a risk factor for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and his assertion that mothers who feed their infants more frequently than recommended by the “Babywise” schedule -- renamed a “flexible routine” in the newest edition -- will be plagued by “an abnormal hormonal condition” leading to post-partum depression. Although some of Ezzo’s more controversial claims have now been slightly modified, GFI has never publicly retracted earlier misstatements; instead, the most current Babywise speaks of “exciting new information” that has motivated the revisions.

One of Ezzo’s fallacies still in circulation is his dangerously inaccurate description of how a new parent should assess a baby’s nutritional intake. Earlier editions of “Babywise” advised parents to count wet, but not dirty diapers, a seemingly minor but serious omission, according to certified lactation consultant Jan Barger, the current editor of “Clinical Issues in Lactation.”

“Previous editions of ‘Babywise’ didn’t give parents good information on how to judge adequate caloric intake in their infants. This, combined with the book’s recommendation for less than optimal numbers of feedings, could have been the cause of many of the cases we have seen of ‘Babywise’ babies with poor weight gain and a diagnosis of failure to thrive,” says Barger, who has served as president of ILCA and as a member of the examining board for lactation consultants’ professional certification.

One notable development found in the newest version of “Babywise” is Ezzo’s attempt to shore up his advice with supporting documentation. Incredibly, the 1998 edition actually cites the work of Ezzo critics Kathleen Huggins and Kathleen Auerbach as being supportive of Parent Directed Feeding. The book also relies heavily on GFI’s own self-conducted, never-before-published studies. Although the phraseology Ezzo uses to describe GFI’s “survey” of more than 500 infants leaves an impression of rigorous medical research, no actual peer review process, as defined by the scientific community, was employed. Instead, according to GFI spokesman Mark Severance, the 35 members of GFI’s self-selected “medical advisory board” were sent copies of the newest edition of “Babywise” and asked to offer a critique. Reportedly, when asked, at least one advisory board member has been quoted as saying that she never even read the book, while another has stated that he looked at it, but offered no input. In the past, Ezzo has written that GFI has “hundreds of pediatricians” providing the organization with “expert medical advice.” However, GFI has never been able to produce such a list.

Upon learning how she has been cited in the latest edition of “Babywise,” Auerbach says that her research has been presented to “Babywise” readers inaccurately and out of context. “There is no such thing as an ‘average’ baby, nor is there such a thing as an ‘average routine’ that will work for everyone,” says Auerbach. “I have seen too many families who tried [PDF] and found that it did nothing but cause heartache for the parents and a baby who not only failed to thrive, but shut down psychologically.” Auerbach recalls one infant in particular who, after two months on the “Babywise” program, was not only underweight but listless and unwilling to make eye contact with his mother.

NEXT PAGE: Disguised child-hate

Amy Scott, a mother, writer and sociologist who has observed extensively on the GFI Internet message boards in order to gain greater insight into how and why parents are using Ezzo's programs, says that it is clear that the "Babywise" approach is indeed popular with busy modern parents who wish to train babies to conveniently adapt to their lives rather than vice versa. However, she believes that there is more to the books' appeal.

"After reading what these parents have to say, I am left with a disturbing and more complex picture," says Scott. "Many of these mothers are working very hard at being good parents. The problem is this: through simple bad luck or through their religious institution, they have been offered a seemingly rational plan for child-care that is full of misinformation, denial and disguised child-hate."

Scott notes that, depending on a child's individual temperament, Ezzo's recommendations appear to either work brilliantly -- meaning that the child essentially gives up and stops protesting completely -- or leave parents incredibly frustrated as to why, no matter how many times they "swat" the baby, she still won't use good "highchair manners."

Author and lactation consultant Huggins agrees, observing that parents who read "Babywise" may believe that they are experiencing success with the program when in fact, the opposite is true. "What Ezzo is saying 'works' in that many babies do eventually stop crying as they become resigned to taking only small amounts of milk. In that way, you could say it works," says Huggins.

In interview after interview with families who are using "Babywise," parents spoke of their sincere desire to produce "obedient," "respectful" children. Rarely did these parents mention a hope to produce emotionally healthy adults. Overwhelmingly, "Babywise" parents accepted without question the conventional wisdom that "kids today" are out of control. Faced with the onslaught of media images of rampaging middle-schoolers and wilding teens, these parents believe that by cracking down on what Ezzo defines as infant rebellion now, they will prevent problems later.

"I have no intention of raising an out-of-control child," says Franklin Stout, a 32-year-old father of two who is implementing "Babywise" methods with his young children. "My wife and I like having a guide to help us know how to respond to our sons' different behaviors. We believe that firm discipline in the first year or two will save us all a lot of grief later."

Several parents spoke of their belief that, after reading the books, they are convinced that any other child-rearing philosophy might eventually produce some type of obnoxious felon. Some of them may have gotten this idea from a statement made by "Babywise" co-author Bucknam, who in 1997 told the Denver Post: "As they [babies not fed on a schedule] get older, every whine is an opportunity to feed. They become more demanding. They become brats."

"I believe that never teaching a young child to delay gratification sets the stage for immoral behavior as an adult," says Karen (who declined to give her last name in her response to an Internet survey), a mother of four who says that she has found Ezzo's teachings to be a "blessing" in her home.

"Telling parents that there is one simple way to get kids to behave is, well, let's just put it like this: This type of parenting is part of this whole swing to the right all over the country," says pediatrician and Harvard professor T. Berry Brazelton, known to millions of American parents and grandparents as the author of "Touchpoints" (Addison-Wesley) and numerous other bestselling books on parenting and child development. "I feel bad for young parents who are being told that if they follow this program or that program, they won't have problems. You have to look below the surface to see what's going on with each individual family."

After reviewing "Babywise," noted social historian Stephanie Coontz, author of "The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap" and "The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms With America's Changing Families" (Basic Books), says that she is able to understand how some parents are drawn to Ezzo's advice. "The way this book has been hyped speaks to real dilemmas faced by parents today," says Coontz. "Unfortunately, this book may give the wrong answers. The book provides solutions to real problems that are at least as bad as the real problems themselves."

NEXT PAGE: The answers are in the Bible

Although “Babywise I” and “II” contain little in the way of credible supporting scientific research, the religious versions of GFI’s child-care guides use the Bible in order to explain Ezzo’s rigid recommendations. Additionally, some of the health-care providers (many of whom are not even pediatricians) who have been willing to offer their public support for “Babywise” attribute at least part of their acclaim for the program to their own spiritual beliefs and the books’ religious underpinnings. Ezzo writes that “in Biblical times, a new mother did not lounge around in a bathrobe for weeks on end attempting to establish a bond with her child,” and he uses the Christian crucifixion as justification for letting infants cry it out, writing: “Praise God that the Father did not intervene when His Son cried out on the cross.” Ezzo explains his support for allowing babies to cry for long stretches by noting that “God is not sitting on His throne waiting to jump at our every cry, trying to prove he loves us.”

But not every Christian group agrees with Ezzo’s belief that there is anything “Christian” about his harsh child-rearing dictates. The California mega-church from which Ezzo launched GFI -- the Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, which has a 10,000-member evangelical Christian congregation -- has now publicly withdrawn support for his programs, citing issues of integrity and theology. Many congregations around the country are reporting painful schisms as Ezzo proponents attempt to force their courses and materials onto parents in the church.

Additionally, the most recent issue of the magazine of the Christian Research Institute, a fundamentalist “cult-watch” organization, features a lengthy and meticulously documented cover story titled “More Than Just a Parenting Ministry?” alleging that GFI has consistently exhibited “cultic tendencies,” including authoritarianism, isolationism, physical and emotional endangerment and hardball tactics used against naysayers. As one example, GFI parenting classes disallow any debate concerning the course materials. Some parents who have taken the courses say that they were instructed by GFI representatives not to discuss what they learned in class with anyone who has not themselves completed GFI parenting training. GFI’s Web site message boards are similarly intolerant of any disagreement. Those who are not deemed to be “like-minded” have had their Web access permanently blocked from what GFI calls its Internet “Family Room.” (In my own case, after I requested an interview with the Ezzos and registered to log on to the forum in order to research this article, GFI’s Web site forum administrator informed me via e-mail that she had “checked me out” at the request of Anne Marie Ezzo. She wrote that she had made the determination from information found on my family’s personal home page that I am “not in agreement with [GFI’s] beliefs and so I have denied you access.” This is despite the fact that I had never posted or attempted to post to GFI’s message boards. The forum administrator further cited privacy concerns. Not surprisingly, I was also denied an interview with the Ezzos.)

Dr. Barbara Francis, a well-known Christian licensed marriage and family therapist has written of her own reservations regarding GFI’s encouragement of secrecy among supporters. She notes in a recent article for a professional journal that at least one GFI publication she has reviewed advised parents to avoid spanking their children in public, to be careful about neighbors hearing their children’s cries in apartment buildings and “to instruct one’s children not to tell anyone -- even the child’s other parent in a divorce situation -- about occurring chastisement (GFI’s euphemism for corporal punishment), due to potential ‘misunderstandings.’”

Dissenting Christians who have attempted to establish a dialogue with Gary Ezzo have sometimes found themselves on the receiving end of patronizing vitriol. Often, Ezzo declines to correspond with “outsiders” about his views. However, in one Internet chat exchange with Christian mothers who sought clarification of GFI parenting advice, Ezzo wrote that participating in the discussion was like “being in the henhouse at egg-laying time.” Ezzo went on to write that, “ladies, I do have other more important activities to fill up my day, than the go nowhere debates with emotionally charged demand feeding mothers talking about demand feeding practices.”

Outspoken critics of GFI report being investigated, publicly misrepresented and even harassed by the organization. Steve Rein, an assistant professor at a Virginia university, maintains a Web site critiquing GFI materials and an e-mail discussion list for Christian parents, many of whom hold negative views of Ezzo’s parenting philosophy. He says that GFI has unsuccessfully pressed for criminal prosecution of his activities and subsequently threatened civil action against his employer and him. He also says that GFI consistently monitors his listserv.

“I think that Gary Ezzo really has a sense that they are engaged in some kind of holy war. Sure, he’s making money, probably a lot of it, but I think there’s more to it,” says Rein, who has had to hire an attorney to deal with GFI.

After a May 1996 report on religious parenting programs sponsored by the Orange County [California] Child Abuse Prevention Council concluded that GFI's materials contained many disturbing elements that had the potential to lead to child abuse, the council received such a deluge of time-consuming phone calls from GFI supporters that it was forced to ask that its report no longer be made public so that its office could get its work done. While the current director of the council says that she has no reason to believe that the phone calls were orchestrated in any way, she says that they were certainly "overwhelming."

Gary Ezzo and Robert Bucknam have in the past responded to families who report experiencing problems with their child-care guidance by suggesting that the parents in question should have used the ideas in "Babywise" more flexibly and with a dose of common sense. Although the books do sprinkle warnings against "legalism" and in favor of "context" throughout their pages, the overall message remains one of rigid, uncompromising parental authoritarianism toward even the tiniest newborn. GFI's message boards provide insight into how parents, particularly religious users of Ezzo's programs, are applying his ideas to real-life situations in their own homes. In recent months, one anxious mother posted to the boards of allowing her young infant to cry for so long over the course of several weeks that the baby lost his voice and had blood in his throat (GFI quickly removed this mother's post from public view). In another instance, a parent wrote of her frustration with having to spank her unruly toddler (with a flexible instrument, as Ezzo recommends for babies after the second year) so often that welts appeared. Yet another father spoke of leaving his 13-month-old in isolation in her crib off and on for up to four hours in response to her stubborn refusal to use baby sign language to communicate that she was "all done" with her meal. In the case of each of these alarming tales, GFI "contact moms," volunteer laywomen designated by the organization to offer support to other parents in the appropriate use of their programs, actually suggested a stricter adherence to the program and more structure for the children (although it was noted that hitting a child as per Ezzo's instructions should inflict pain without leaving visible marks).

"Parenting like this shows very little respect for children," says pediatrician Brazelton. "It's very adultamorphic and not sensitive to the baby. Although parents should gently set limits, punitive discipline for very young children and babies is repressive and can quash exploration and excitement in the first two years of life. It will be interesting to see some follow up on these kids in later years. I suspect that they'll have a lot of inner rebellion."

Don and Jeanne Elium, family therapists and authors of the books "Raising a Son," "Raising a Daughter" and the new "Raising a Family: Living on Planet Parenthood" (Celestial Arts), concur with Brazelton that the discipline practices promoted by Ezzo are neither age-appropriate nor effective in the long run.

"All isolating a baby or young toddler teaches them is that the world is not a safe place to be in," says Don Elium. "Let a baby be a baby so that she can be an adult when it's time to be an adult."

"Leaving a baby alone to cry in order to punish or to train them to sleep can create a sense of rage that comes from abandonment and hopelessness," agrees Jeanne Elium. "These children will probably pay an expensive price in therapy later."

Babywise supporter Dr. Carl Hays vehemently disagrees. "If you are sure that a baby has been fed and changed and isn't in distress, there is no harm in leaving them alone to cry," explains Hays. "If you respond too quickly, these babies become trained to expect every need to be gratified. This can, of course, lead to problems for kids down the road." When asked to elaborate on what these problems might be, Hays suggests contacting GFI headquarters for answers.

Despite all the controversy and the existence of a number of Web sites devoted to discouraging the use of the "Babywise" program, the books continue to fly off the shelves and pass from parent to parent, leaving observers frustrated.

Dr. William Sears, a practicing pediatrician and clinical assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Southern California School of Medicine, as well as the bestselling author of more than 20 child-care titles including "The Baby Book," has been one of the most vocal critics of "Babywise." Sears is the leading medical advocate of an increasingly popular style of nurturing called attachment parenting, which represents the antithesis of Ezzo's recommendations. Ezzo takes a dim and even hostile view of attachment parenting, having referred to it as "neoprimitivistic" and redolent of "third world maternal disorder." However, after Theo and Lori Rivas abandoned

the “Babywise” approach in favor of the hands-on, relaxed parenting style advocated by Sears, they saw both Daniel and his 3-month-old brother, Michael, thrive. Lori holds and breast-feeds the boys frequently.

“People began calling me about the stuff in this book several years ago, but I basically ignored it, thinking that it was so far out that it would just die out. I wish that more of us had spoken out earlier,” says Sears, who has in the past referred to “Babywise” as “probably the most dangerous program of teaching about babies and children that I have seen in my 25 years of being a pediatrician.

“A new mother is vulnerable and a new father often wants his wife back to himself after only a few weeks. This program preys on this and promises parents that they can train a baby to sleep when parents want to sleep, fit in to the parents’ established lifestyle and not be a bother. I think that the widespread acceptance of this program represents a sad commentary on the wisdom and discernment of today’s parents.”

SALON | Aug. 6, 1998

Katie Allison Granju is the mother of three. Her book on attachment parenting will be published by Pocket Books in 1999.