

Report on Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo and Growing Families International Aired on the British Broadcasting Corporation Television Program *Newsnight* Thursday, October 29, 1999

As with American investigative news programs, the Newsnight broadcast included reports on several issues. Only the portions related to the Ezzos and Growing Families International (GFI) have been reproduced here.

The program interviewer was British journalist Jeremy Paxman. Others featured in this report:

- ◆ *A British grandmother whose identity was concealed*
- ◆ *BBC reporter Gillian Joseph*
- ◆ *Health Visitors Association representative Christine Bidmead (The Health Visitors Association provides the majority of pre-school pediatric care as part of Britain's centralized health care system.)*
- ◆ *British developmental psychologist and author Dr. Penelope Leach*
- ◆ *American parents Michelle and Michael Hsieh*

The report also included footage of the Hsiehs and their son Matthew, as well as footage from a GFI-produced promotional video. Paxman and the Ezzos were speaking live, in studio. The rest of the report was pre-recorded.

This transcript and accompanying photos have been produced with the permission of the BBC. The transcript has been produced as accurately as a possible from a recording of the program; an occasional few words of unintelligible cross-talk between Paxman and the Ezzos have been omitted.

Introduction at Beginning of Program

Concealed Woman: Sometimes he would be taken almost every hour into the room and be beaten. I could hear the sound.

Paxman: And biblical parenting is the newest in Christian America's advice on childcare. But, for them, smacking is the only way to remove a young child's guilt.



Report (Last on the Evening's Broadcast)

Paxman: The Health Visitors Association is not up there in the vanguard of militant trade unionism, and yet this weekend they plan a demonstration. It's not in support of more pay or anything like that; it's against an American couple who are here in Britain to promote their ideas about child rearing. They are, to say the least, controversial since what they advocate includes what they call "chastisement" and denying babies food. I'll be talking to them shortly. But first Gillian Joseph reports on what they're advocating.



GFI Video: Families today are faced with the difficult challenge of raising children who have a heart for God in an environment plagued with ever-increasing moral decay.

Michelle Hsieh: In the beginning, we thought they sounded wonderful. We wanted to raise loving and obedient children, and it sounded like by following their suggestions and techniques that they offered, that we would be able to do that.



Joseph: Mike and Michelle Hsieh followed the Ezzos' program for feeding babies with an unquestioning Christian zeal. They attended classes at their local church, even before their eldest child, Matthew, was born. There, they were taught not to feed on demand but stick to a maximum three-hour schedule. At home, their child rearing manuals were followed to the letter. As he grew older, they applied the Ezzos' philosophy on "high chair manners" and would restrain their baby as they tried to feed him.



Michelle Hsieh: Looking back, I believe the most outrageous thing we did was to keep Matthew on the strict feeding schedule. Keeping him on those feeding schedules, I think, took away some of the trust that he had in us, and when he was hungry and showing us cues of, you know, wanting to suckle or sucking on his hand, we would just try to pacify him in other ways.



Joseph: At Matthew's four-month checkup, his parents discovered that his weight had plummeted. By his next visit, he'd dropped off the charts altogether. But the Hsiehs persisted with the Ezzos' program. At nine-and-a-half months, Matthew was admitted to hospital.



Michelle Hsieh: It was awful. We felt like our—I mean, I honestly believe he would have died had we not admitted him to the hospital. He completely rejected all food at that point—rejected nursing and all kind of spoon-fed baby food.



Michael Hsieh: To watch our child throwing up in the hospital with the little nutrition that we could get him down through his nose, I mean, that was just [pause] the worst pain emotionally and physically you could put a parent through, to watch their child suffer like that.



Joseph: Matthew's pediatrician told *Newsnight* that his food aversion wasn't due to any medical condition, but the combination of inexperience and a strong desire to apply the Ezzos' feeding principles. Health professionals on both sides of the Atlantic stress the importance of feeding babies on demand.



Bidmead: The more a baby sucks at the breast and suckles, then it stimulates the mother to produce more milk. So it's really important right from the start that when the baby cries and is hungry, that it's put to the breast. There's no instance I could think of that we would say you don't feed the baby on demand.



Joseph: Child development isn't an exact science, but despite room for interpretation, child psychologists point with particular alarm to the Ezzos' theories on "highchair manners." Their use of isolation, both as a punishment and as a way of limiting a child's emotional attachment to the mother, may also cause damage.



Leach: I think it's the fact that this whole Ezzo program contradicts what we know of the way children develop and the way they learn. It's kind of counter-childhood. We now a lot now about how stimulation's used by children in their neural develop-

ment, in, actually in building brains, not just how brains work, but how they build. And a lot of this repressive stuff is actually counter to that.



GFI Video: It is the belief of Growing Families International that once the seeds of biblical parenting...



Joseph: One of the things that attracted the Hsiehs to the Ezzo program was its promise of an obedient, God-fearing child. In the pursuit of that goal, the literature advocates physical punishment. One British grandmother says her son followed the Ezzos' templates of smacking so religiously that she seriously considered informing social services. She's concealed her identity in order to preserve her relationship with her grandchildren.

Concealed Woman: There seemed to be days when sometimes he would be taken almost every hour into the room and be beaten. I could hear the sound. Then he would cry, and then there would be a long period of silence, and eventually they would come out of the room. [Pause] And in an hour's time, the whole thing would start again. And I did, actually, hear him pleading not to be beaten.



They're forbidden to share their feelings. They have to bottle all their feelings down. They have to be good, well-behaved children, so everything is banged down inside.



Joseph: Eventually, when she could bear it no longer, she confronted her daughter-in-law.



Concealed Woman: I went and spoke to her, and she sat opposite me, and I gave her my concerns. And I looked straight at her, and I realized that I'd had absolutely no weight whatsoever. She had God on her side, and once she had God on her side, she was invincible.



Man on GFI Video: It provides the moral basis for children to function in society with a focus on others.



Woman on GFI Video: God's Word never changes. And even though there are philosophies that come and go, God's Word never changes.



Joseph: There's clearly much more to the Ezzos' philosophy than "spare the rod and spoil the child." The system they champion encompasses a whole school of thought contrary to current child-centered theory. They measure their success by the number of books they sell worldwide, but the only true way of judging them will be when this generation of Ezzo babies become parents themselves.



Paxman: And Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo are here in the studio. Can we be clear, first of all, what your medical qualifications are?



Gary Ezzo: Uh, I don't have any medical qualifications. Anne Marie...

Paxman: But your wife?

Gary Ezzo: ...is a nurse

Anne Marie Ezzo: I'm a registered nurse.

Paxman: A nurse, right. The American Pediatric Association says your advice on feeding babies is wrong. Why should we take the word of, with respect, one nurse against 53,000 registered pediatric practitioners?

Gary Ezzo: Well, first of all our advice on feeding babies is identical to the American Academy of Pediatrics', number one. Certainly number two, there's a comparison here, number two, uh, the American Academy of Pediatrics themselves have never come out with that statement. Others have written opinions like that, there have been counter opinions. But the, the basic blend of our teaching and the Academy's teaching is, is probably very well on the same track.



Paxman: I have here a letter from the AAP executive director. It says newborns should be nursed whenever they show signs of hunger, such as increased alertness, etc., etc., etc. That is completely contradictory to what you recommend.



Gary Ezzo: No, I have it right here in the book. It says exactly, "Crying is a late signal of hunger. Newborns should be fed whenever there is a cue." We have it; I don't know why it must be said, this is....



Paxman: You're saying...

Gary Ezzo: It's all right here.



Paxman: ...forget it. You can feed children whenever they wish to be fed.

Gary Ezzo: They should be fed on cue with [pause] guidelines with parental assessment. And that's....

Paxman: So it's not true that you, that you believe that at the age of eight weeks, they should not be fed overnight, for example.



Gary Ezzo: If a baby needs to be fed at night, he should be fed. In fact, we say very, very clearly that whenever a baby's hungry, he should be fed.

Paxman: How could people have got such a wrong impression, then? Such a wrong impression that their children end up in hospital with their lives at risk?

Gary Ezzo: Well, first of all, we're not quite sure that what we just saw here had a degree of legitimacy. You had a lot of errors in here. Number one, any baby, as we read in the article, any baby that went to the hospital five times in the first week and was, was not kept is a problem at the hospital.



Paxman: No, it isn't. It's a problem because the parents...

Gary Ezzo: No, no.

Paxman: ...was under ins...had been advised...

Gary Ezzo: No, no.

Paxman: ...not to disclose that they were following your program.

Gary Ezzo: Oh, no, no. Right here we have...

Paxman: That's what the parents say.

Gary Ezzo: Jeremy, right here, "Openly,..." page 100, "Openly share actual feeding times and precisely what you are doing. Cite all sources for feeding time recommendations found in chapter four." And this is dealing with how to contact a consultant, how to talk to your pediatrician, how to... we don't say any of that.

Paxman: You acknowledge no responsibility whatsoever, then.

Gary Ezzo: Not in, not in this case, no. But there are, there is, responsibility, parental responsibility. There's pediatric responsibility. There's lactation consultant responsibility there.



Paxman: If somehow a parent should get into their heads that you have advised them that they should follow something other than feeding on demand, which is what very large numbers of people who follow your practice appear to believe, and that should result in a death, that's nothing to do with you.



Gary Ezzo: No, no. First of all, I think, we're, we're – we've got to qualify some terms here. We talk about, instead of feeding on demand – that's nebulous. There is cue fee... infant-led feeding, there is clock feeding, and then there's parent-directed. The difference simply is this. On infant-led feeding, which is commonly referred to as demand feeding, if a baby cries, it signals hunger at one hour, you feed it. The problem with that, though, if it cries and signals hunger at *eight* hours, after eight hours, you feed it. Therein lies the danger; that's the problem with the system. Parent-directed says, look, cue plus parental assessment equals feeding time.



Paxman: If your advice conflicts with that of a person's pediatrician, who should they believe?



Gary Ezzo: Oh, pediatrician. As we say that,...

Anne Marie Ezzo: And we clearly state that in our books.



Gary Ezzo: Yeah, clearly. Pediatrician's the final authority, always.

Anne Marie Ezzo: And even with the case of this young couple, and we feel very badly that their child ended up in the hospital, but in the article, they went in every single day for their whole first week...

Gary Ezzo: Right.

Anne Marie Ezzo: ...um, there's nothing....

Paxman: Let's look at the case, then of spanking.

Gary Ezzo: Okay. Let's do that.

Paxman: In young children, spanking is the only way to get rid of guilt. That's your belief.

Gary Ezzo: Actually, that was Piaget's belief. We adopted it.

Paxman: You, you believe it.

Gary Ezzo: Uh, no.

Paxman: You don't believe it.

Gary Ezzo: Not, there's context, age....

Paxman: Well, why is it in your books?

Gary Ezzo: Well, there is the context in which that is stated — it's talking about in early childhood before there's development of a moral conscience that fully can regulate and, uh...

Paxman: Then justify the statement which appears in your 1993 edition *Growing Kids God's Way*, explaining how to smack a child in diapers.

Gary Ezzo: Yeah, you lift up the diaper. If you're going to give them a little swat, because you have a twenty-two-month-old, give 'em a swat, don't swat 'em on the diaper, just lift it up a little and give 'em a little swat on the backside. [Mr. Ezzo motions with right arm as if swatting gently with hand.]

Paxman: And that is a matter of practice? How frequently should you smack a child?

Gary Ezzo: Well, context, age, all those things. There, there is no number how frequently, frequently you should do that. I mean, let's hope none...

Anne Marie Ezzo: There would be no need to smack a child unless there was just cause. And we....

Paxman: Could you explain why it is that smacking is the only way to get a child aware of guilt?

Gary Ezzo: Get, get rid of his guilt?

Paxman: Get rid of a child's guilt, yes.



Gary Ezzo: No, I can't, because we don't necessarily believe that in the context in which you're presenting it. What we're talking about is there's got to be removal of guilt somehow. Smacking, as we're talking about in young children, is one of the ways. To say it's the only way is probably – well, that's 1993, and this is 1999. There's been like six editions since, so....



Paxman: So, do you want to apologize to people who acted on the basis of your 1993 advice?

Gary Ezzo: Well, I don't think necessarily that that is so way off the mark that it needs a public apology, but if you feel it does, I guess I, I apologize right now – if that had any implications, and if any one parent, out of 52 videos, if that one statement did something that moved the other 52 videos out of its, their context....

Paxman: Okay. Thank you both very much.

Gary Ezzo: You're welcome.

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