

THE PARENTS WHO BELIEVE INFLICTING PAIN IS GOD'S WILL

We expose the horrific practices of two controversial US childcare 'gurus', as they arrive in Britain.

[Photo of child, with hands protecting her head, shrinking from a woman's hand raised as if to strike, with smaller, inset photo of the Ezzo couple smiling.]

EZZOS' CREDO

- Babies are born with elements of evil that have to be suppressed.
- You can harm a baby by picking him or her up too much.
- The fact that the Father did not intervene when His son cried out on the Cross is a lesson for all parents with young babies.
- Sharing a bed with your baby or carrying him around in a sling is likely to lead to teenage rebellion and broken families.
- If a child over the age of two and a half wets the bed, he should be expected to tidy it up himself.
- Rebellion in babies, whether foolishness or malicious defiance should be punished by squeezing or swatting their hands or isolating them.
- If a child responds angrily to chastisement, he may have too much freedom, or his spankings may have been half-hearted.

[Photo of author]

By Anna Wright

Later today an American couple who expound frightening new theories on how to bring up children will begin a series of meetings to spread their mantra across Britain. Applying "God's principles in parenting", their philosophy advises parents that newborn babies should not be allowed to dictate their lifestyle but should be woken for feeding at set times and left to cry at others. From the age of 18 months, children should be smacked for poor table manners, straying off their play mats or failing to show respect for adults.

The arrival of the Christian fundamentalists Gary and Anne-Marie Ezzo has been met with protests from the NSPCC and childcare professionals, who condemn the guidelines as being responsible for babies failing to thrive, suffering psychological damage and even coming close to death.

Three talks will be taking place over the weekend at churches of various denominations. They are open to all at no cost, but a spokesman for the organizers Christian Education Europe implies that the purchase of Ezzo books will be compulsory. For many supporters - desperate to ensure their children don't add to increasing crime rates., promiscuity levels and drug-abuse tallies - the Ezzos bring a message of hope. Frank Stout, a father of two speaks for many concerned parents when he says "I have no intention of raising an out-of-control child."

Anne-Marie's paediatric nursing background, and Gary's decade as a pastor combine to encourage trust, and more than 600,000 people have put their faith in the couples methods. Their company Growing Families International, through which they run their courses and sell books and merchandise, currently makes 2.5 million pounds a year. A member of the accounts department confirms edgily that it is "not a profit making organization" but refuses to speculate on what happens to the money, snapping "That sort of information is not available to the public".

Despite their popularity among some traditionalists and churchgoers, the ideas promoted in the Babywise books and Growing Kids God's Way have provoked furious arguments over what constitutes cruelty. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) says "Their cold and regimented approach to childcare cannot demand with the complex demands of parenthood and is likely to lead to conflict between parents and children". Devotees, however, claim their methods are "the practical application of Biblical ethics," and that their results speak for themselves.

The couple began their work in 1984, when the Ezzos, who already had two grown-up daughters, met six other couples every week to discuss "right and wrong, good and evil, and what it looks like in everyday parenting". When they agreed to a further class the

following year, 160 parents signed up. There were 400 more in 1986 and another 600 in 1987. Now, they claim: "The message continues to spread by word of mouth and changed lives."

Critics believe that it is the pressure of combining a hectic modern lifestyle and parenthood that makes the Ezzo's promise of a full night's sleep and cheerful obedience so tempting. In contrast, most supporters would deny any motive but the good of their children and of the wider community. They do claim, after all, to have God on their side.

"Praise God that the Father did not intervene when His Son cried out on the cross," cites Gary as justification for leaving babies to cry if it is not a scheduled feeding time. Support for loving corporal punishment can be found again and again in the Bible for those who are seeking it, including the Proverb "He that spareth his rod hateth his son; but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes".

Christians who reject the Ezzos' methods state that God's way cannot possibly be one which puts children in danger. The fact that the Babywise literature instructs mothers repeatedly not to feel guilty suggests that their advice goes directly against maternal instinct. Lori Rivas, a housewife from California, had decided to follow the recommended Parent Directed Feeding routine with her first-born, Daniel. She endured constant misery while forcing herself to leave him alone except at set times, believing that installing a regular pattern would prove beneficial. She will never forget the moment at a routine neonatal check-up when she was told her son was so dehydrated that he was unable to produce tears.

Another worried mother wrote to the Growing Families International Website that, in obeying the guidelines in Babywise she had allowed her baby to cry for such long periods that he had lost his voice and had blood in his throat.

Having approached Ezzo-style childcare with conviction, many parents feel they have let down both their baby and God when the system doesn't work for them. Lori recalls: "I felt that I was failing as a parent." The very title Growing Kids God's Way implies that there is no acceptable Christian alternative and the instructions suggest that any deviance will cause both physical and moral harm. Gary Ezzo says: "Of course you can harm a baby by picking him or her up too much." He insists that creativity, mental focusing and a sustained attention span may be "seriously delayed if your child misses out on [the] structured playpen time" advocated in the book.

Parents who criticize the Growing Families International methods are frequently ostracized from their church. But adopting the system also often leads to alienation from other members of the family and community. The Ezzos encourage followers to hide their actions and beliefs from outsiders who may not approve. Parents have been told to avoid spanking their children in public, to beware of neighbors overhearing the cries and to instruct their children not to tell anyone about their chastisement for fear of misunderstandings.

Their practical instructions on how to spank are always accompanied with the assertion that this is God's way. "Pain is a gift from God. It's a wonderful thing even though none of us enjoy it," says Gary. "It has a purpose, pain helps a child focus and gain self-control over particular moral weakness, whether it be disobeying, talking back, lying - pain plays a part in the process. "

Once a child reaches 18 months, the Ezzo's recommend that "swatting" or "squeezing" the toddler's hand is replaced by spanking with a 'somewhat flexible instrument'. This should apparently sting 'without inflicting pain or muscle damage ... If there is no pain, then the instrument is probably too light or too flexible."

Rubber spatulas used for cleaning bowls are described as suitable but even these guidelines are not enough to ensure that the children are left unmarked by their punishment. One desperate mother writing on the Internet couldn't understand why, despite sticking to Ezzo's advice, her toddler had developed welts where she had hit him.

The Ezzo's promise that close adherence to their instructions will result in a well-behaved child, where "obedience means he is following your directions the first time, all the way, with a happy heart." Critics believe that apparent good behavior is actually fear or a broken spirit, whether in a baby who has already given up hope of unconditional love and attention, or a child who fears the reprisals of doing anything he had not been specifically instructed to do.

Kathleen Auerbach, a breastfeeding consultant and medical writer, recalls one infant who, after two months on the Babywise program, was not only underweight but listless and unwilling to make eye contact with his mother.

Armed with the books, a clock and a spatula the Ezzo's devoted followers may produce children who do as they are told, but happiness is harder to enforce.

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EDITORIAL

STOP THIS VILE CULT

We have come a long way since the Victorian era, when there was the presumption that children should be seen and not heard. Back then, corporal punishment was considered an acceptable form of chastisement.

Even the strictest of Victorian fathers, however, would have balked at the methods advocated by the Ezzo family. This American couple preach a philosophy that can only be called cruelty. They advocate spanking of children at least five times a day and argue that new born babies should not be allowed to dictate their parent's lifestyle but be left to cry until set feeding times.

For a child to grow into an emotionally balanced adult, one thing is absolutely clear; he or she needs love and attention. The Ezzos' writings typify the sort of dangerous nonsense that can have a superficial attraction to some vulnerable people looking for something in their lives.

Yes, this is a free country and these people are entitled to their views. But only up to a point. Once these views start to cause harm - whether physical or emotional - then we enter a different ball game altogether.

Cults are, by their very nature, difficult to outlaw and hard to control. We know one when we see one, but persuading their victims to see it is an horrendously difficult task. The Ezzos should be treated with contempt, not regarded as some kind of moral guardians.