

Your child's health

by Loraine Stern, M.D.

Should Parents Be Stricter?

A new crop of childrearing experts think so. Here's what I think

In My Opinion...

Children do have a right to privacy, but only for truly private things such as using the bathroom. As long as a child lives in your house, you have the right to enter her room (after knocking), to keep a television and VCR out of her room, and to make sure the computer hooked up to the Internet is situated where you can see what is on the screen.

A few weeks ago, a new mother came to me confused and upset. She was breastfeeding her 3-week-old infant on a strict, every three-hours schedule because she had read a book advocating that babies be taught from the beginning to fit into their families' routines. At first, things were fine. But all of a sudden, Patrick was demanding to be fed every two hours, and it was breaking his mother's heart to let him cry until three hours had passed.

I explained that infants sometimes go through growth spurts, and it's perfectly normal for them to need more frequent feedings. Strictness and discipline have their place, I told her, but not with infants.

I'm disturbed by a new wave of child-care books that have cropped up in the past few years, promoting a less permissive, more structured approach to parenting. One author claims he knows "God's, Way" to rear children. How arrogant! That author also recommends hitting babies as young as 18 months with a rubber spatula to make them obey. Another preaches early toilet training rather than "wishy-washy Freudian mumbo jumbo" that allows a child to set the pace.

I believe that children do need firm limits and a certain amount of structure. But we also need to temper these restrictions with allowances for each child's needs and personality.

Here are a few guidelines that I hope will help reassure you:

One size does not fit all. One expert claims that a baby's individual temperament is not an issue when it comes to parenting. I say that's horse-feathers. What will work depends a great deal on your baby's temperament, as any parent will tell you. Besides, if there were one magic way to bring up all children, wouldn't we all know it by now?

Be a critical reader. A particular book may give you a good problem-solving tip, but beware of using anything as an absolute guide. While many book publishers and magazines (including *Woman's Day*) hire people whose entire job is to check all the facts as they're reported, it isn't always the case. Sometimes, authors can say whatever they want and need not substantiate it, particularly if they're stating an opinion.

That doesn't mean you should distrust everything you read—some books and magazine articles are written by conscientious and careful writers. It does mean, however, that you should be skeptical of unequivocal statements, such as "All dairy products are bad."

If a book gives you permission to do what feels right, embrace it. If it makes no sense, throw it out.

Listen to your heart. Most of us are the best parents we know how to be. Our actions are based on the kind of people we are, the way we were brought up and the needs and personalities of each child. Always rely on your own good judgment and good sense.

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