parenting the french way

By Yvonne Eve Walus *

parents say

- Auckland Dad: "Where do they keep all those well-behaved French kids? On my many trips to Paris, I've only seen the noisy and unruly ones."
- Auckland Mum: "I remember my own parents raising me pretty much the way described in this book. We had strict rules about being polite to adults, eating whatever food was served, no snacking. But outside those rules, we had total freedom."
- An American Mum in Paris: "Yeah, French children don't throw food ... when people are watching."

Do French children really not throw food? Do French parents really do parenting better than the rest of us? Here are some cultural generalisations to get you thinking.

french children don't throw food

As soon as I heard the title French Children Don't Throw Food, I wanted to read the book. Not that my own kids throw their dinner around, but Mr 8-Year-Old's vegetable menu is limited to cooked peas and raw carrots, and he can't sit still at the table for 5 minutes.

The first thing the American author says is that there's no right or wrong way of parenting. Pamela Druckerman decided to try "the French way" because she lives in France. When she makes generalisations about New York mums and Parisian mums, they remain just that – generalisations. Not all English-speaking children eat junk food, and not all French children like broccoli.

generalisations

1. french parenting is not a project

In contrast to many English-speakers, French mums don't read more than one or two pregnancy books, nor do they spend hours on www.babycenter.com. They prepare the layette and trust nature to perform its miracle – without memorising in which gestation week the baby's eyelids will form. When the baby arrives, they don't constantly push to achieve developmental milestones ahead of the schedule – the baby will roll over when she's ready.

2. french babies drink formula

Druckerman says: "French mothers know that breast is best, but they don't treat breastfeeding as a measure of the mum." They experience no guilt or peer pressure if they move onto the bottle, either as a supplement or as a replacement.

3. french parents observe

Don't we all? Turns out, it's not as simple as just staring adoringly at your baby when she's kicking at the play gym. Observation is the main philosophy in French parenting, and it involves tuning in to your baby's needs, being sensitive to when she needs you and when she's best left to experience the world on her own.

4. french parents don't over-stimulate

Babies need downtime to process what they've learnt. They don't want to be constantly watched, spoken to, or played with. I'm a big time offender when it comes to over-stimulating my baby. With my first, I had a wall chart with daily activities which I ticked as I completed them: five sessions of tummy-time, three books, 10 minutes of music, one session of tickling her hands and feet with soft brush bristles. Looking back I could have done with a healthy dose of French pragmatism.

5. french babies sleep through

When her baby was 3-months-old, Pamela's neighbours started asking her whether the baby was sleeping through. She thought they were joking. Apparently, though, after the initial few weeks, French parents tell the baby to sleep, do the bedtime routine and, voilà, the baby sleeps. Not sure I believe that one. Okay, there's also the bit about French parents practising The Pause, i.e, not rushing to get the baby the minute she wakes at night. If you let her be, the French wisdom goes, she'll learn to enter into the next sleep cycle by herself.

6. french children eat vegetables

Starting with the baby's first solids, French kids are given puréed spinach and courgettes. Pretty soon, they stop being fed on demand and eat four times a day with the rest of the family – no snacks. By the time they go to daycare, they can eat a four-course meal that would be the envy of many New Zealand parents: cream of leek soup, fillet of hake with butter sauce, spinach with béchamel, Roquefort cheese, rhubarb compote. For a few days, I tried to be more adventurous with my dinner menus. My 10-year-old will now eat Brie and Camembert, but my 8-year-old still hasn't budged on cauliflower.

7. french manners

In addition to please and thank you, French children are supposed to say a clear hello and goodbye to adults who come to visit – no staying in their room and sneaking into the kitchen without acknowledging the guests! And when it comes to sitting at the table, French parents "aren't unreasonable. After 20 or 30 minutes, a small child may be excused." 20 minutes! Wow.

8. french mums look chic

It's important for French mothers to have a life away from the baby. Often, they will resume full-time jobs within 12 weeks of giving birth. Even those with newborns always look well groomed, and they get back to their pre-pregnancy weight within three months. (All I can say is: thank goodness I'm not French!)

9. french discipline

In a nutshell: rigid boundaries, but total freedom within those boundaries. So, bedtime is at 8 o'clock, but as long as the child doesn't come out of the bedroom, they can pretty much do what they like.

10. french schools disappoint

The author admits it's not all rosy. French state schools, for example, are notorious in ex-pat communities for their strict discipline, negative feedback to children and rote memorisation. "I think there's less of an emphasis on creativity," Druckerman says. "French schools, in particular, train kids to be analytical rather than creative. And I think French schools discourage risk-taking."

final thoughts

It was fascinating to read about raising a child in a culture that's not your own. Your children end up being your guides to the new country, and it's up to you as the parent to teach them about their roots. This is also important for parents whose values are different from those displayed by society. We have the power to teach our kids what we deem important ... the French way, or otherwise!

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