

Benjamin Spock

The famed pediatrician speaks out on parenting in the '90s.

BY DIANE O'CONNELL

Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do." A few simple words, but when they opened a book written by an unknown pediatrician in 1946, they helped create a revolution in attitudes about parenting. The book was *Baby and Child Care*, and the pediatrician was the now-legendary Dr. Benjamin Spock. At a time when the prevailing philosophy was that "doctors know everything," he introduced sensible and humanistic parenting techniques.

This practical book went on to change the way a generation of children was raised, and it became one of the best-selling books of all time. Since its first edition, the book now titled *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*, has sold more than 40 million copies in 39 languages. The sixth revised edition, written with Michael B. Rothenberg, M.D., and recently published by Pocket Books, not only includes updates on medical and practical childrearing but also addresses such concerns of the 1990s as AIDS, divorce, and working families.

Born in 1903, Dr. Spock is the father of two sons by his first marriage to Jane Cheney. After practicing pediatric medicine from 1933 to 1947, he worked as a medical teacher and researcher at the Mayo Clinic, the University of Pittsburgh, and Western Reserve College. During the 1960s, he became active in the anti-Vietnam War movement. In 1972, he ran for president as the candidate of the independent People's Party. Now at 88, he continues to lecture and is working on a new book about values.

Sesame Street Parents' Guide talked with Dr. Spock in Camden, Maine, where he resides from May through October with his second wife, Mary Morgan. In a voice that has grown gravelly with the years, he continues to speak with passion about children and their future.



Though Dr. Spock's book has changed since 1947, his advice, "Trust yourself," endures.

SSPG: What led you to give the advice "trust yourself" to parents in the first edition of your book?

Dr. Spock: Mostly it's that I'd had a year's residency in psychiatry, which didn't have much to do with child care. But it did give me the idea that it doesn't help to scold people and make them feel guilty. I think another reason is that my mother, who was a rather tyrannical person, was fiercely independent. She tried to teach all of us to think for ourselves.

At the time I went into pediatric prac-

tice, mothers were told not to pick up their children or comfort them when they cried. I found mothers were agonized. I just knew that wasn't right.

SSPG: What has changed in the seven years since the last edition came out to warrant a new edition of your book?

Dr. Spock: You'd be surprised. The book now strongly advises against routinely using disposable diapers because it's been found that they really are gradually creating health and sanitation problems. The bowel movement stays in them and is dumped wherever the garbage is dumped. There's a fear that as dumps get fuller and fuller of babies' bowel movements, the waste will leach into the water supply somewhere.

I've also come out against letting babies get tanned. Parents love to put their babies in the sun, get them a nice biscuit color. And we know now that it's not good for babies' skin to burn it.

Another thing I emphasize in this edition is that sexuality is just as much spiritual as it is physical. I think we've warped children's concept of sexuality by making sex education simply anatomy and physiology. We do that because it's just more comfortable for parents than talking about the emotions that are involved. Whenever parents answer children's questions about sex, they ought to include that it's a spiritual relationship, that a man and a woman who love each other want to take care of each other, be kind to each other, and have babies together.

SSPG: What do you think are stresses on the family in the '90s?

Dr. Spock: Oh, practically everything. Everywhere you look competitiveness

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A CONVERSATION WITH... BENJAMIN SPOCK

(continued)

is getting more and more intense. I think it is much too intense in America. I think of such simple things as Little League. Getting boys at a relatively young age to concentrate so on winning is just one of the ways that we encourage competitiveness in our society. And that's one of the things that leads men, when they're grown, to think that their job is to get ahead on Wall Street or wherever. It makes life much more stressful and it distracts men from their family and from neighborhood and cultural activities.

SSPG: One of the major changes in society over the last few years has been the growing number of mothers who work outside the home. What effect do you think that has had?

Dr. Spock: That's a controversial and very complex subject. I think that when women began raising their consciousness, they were right to say they want equality with men. But it was too bad that they took men's standards of prestige of the job and income from the job as the measures of equality, because I think men have been chasing the wrong idols. Men should have raised their own consciousness in 1970 and realized that instead of the whole society saying "The job is the important thing and the income!" they should have been saying "Family is important. Make time for it."

SSPG: Has your thinking about mothers working changed over the years?

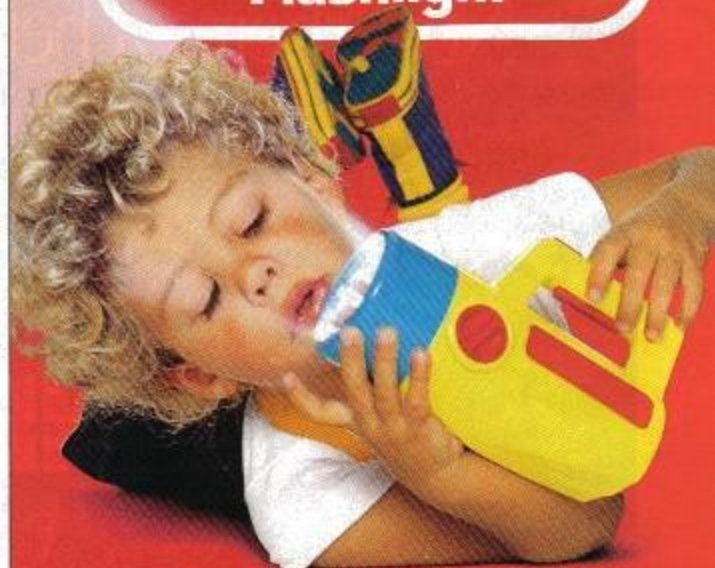
Dr. Spock: In the original edition of my book, I said that mothers may want to work for economic or emotional reasons. But that if they know how important the emotional development of a baby is, they may postpone going to work. Well, I was *hounded* by the women's movement back in the '70s for that. I remember addressing the National Women's Political Caucus when I was running for president in 1972. Gloria Steinem stood up and in a voice loud enough for all 2,000 feminists to hear said, "Dr. Spock, I hope you realize you have been a *major* oppressor of women."

I now think both sexes should recognize child rearing as the most important job and then make provisions as best they can. There are better and worse ways of trying to solve this problem. With some families, if the mother has to go to work, she turns the child over to her sister or to her mother, and the sister or the mother feels an obligation. I laugh to think what my mother would have said if I and my first wife had tried to turn over the care of our children to her. She would have said, "I should say not! I spent one whole lifetime raising children; why should I try to raise yours?"

SSPG: What about day care?

Dr. Spock: Today we know that high-quality day care is a reasonably good substitute for parental care. The trouble is that most people can't afford high-quality day care. It's absolutely shocking. We have men in government who think that it's still important to spend trillions of dollars on a defense budget and to neglect day care, to neglect federal aid to education, to neglect a federal system of health care.

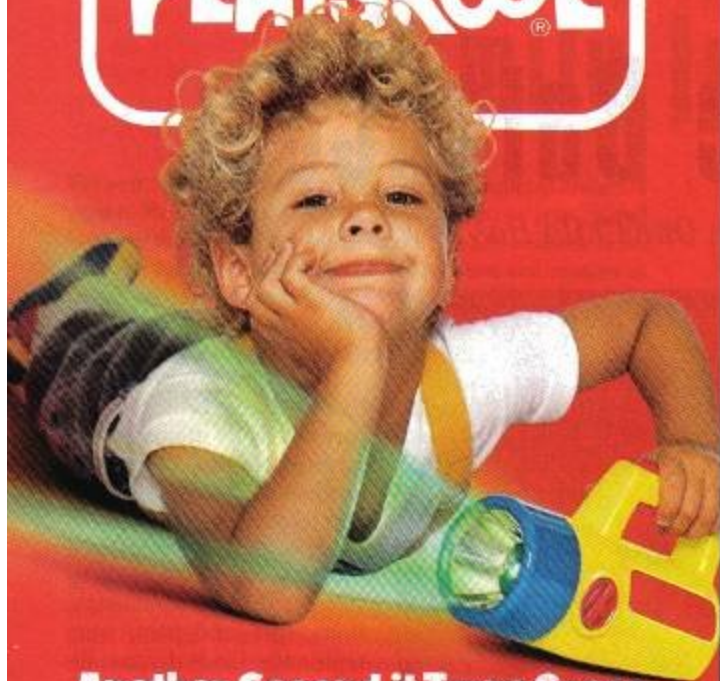
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It distresses me that people will become very active politically when it comes to disarmament or taxes, but when it comes to day care the steam goes out of them.

SSPG: What kinds of things do you think parents should be doing as advocates for their children?

Dr. Spock: The first thing is to vote. The reason is because the industries that support political parties in the United States are interested in furthering their own financial position. Not only should parents vote, they should vote more selectively, not just on the basis of a likable personality.

SSPG: Is there anything else that you believe parents can do?

Dr. Spock: They can demonstrate and lobby. All you have to do is get a dozen people and go and see your senator or your local representative to lobby. They can also write letters. A lot of people think that letter-writing doesn't do any good, that it's sort of namby-pamby. But during the Vietnam period, when I was particularly active, I became acquainted with loads of representatives and senators and they all said the same thing: "We can't help but be influenced by the mail." You can also write letters to the editor. The space is absolutely free. I think parents owe it to themselves, particularly to their children, to be politically active.

SSPG: In January we published the results of a poll in the *Parents' Guide* on raising kids in a changing world. And we concluded from the responses that parents feel the world

outside the home is getting worse, but within the home they are trying to instill in their children the values with which they were brought up.

Dr. Spock: I think that's right. The most important thing is the values instilled in children by their parents. Some people think that parents have to be stern to teach values. But the values will be absorbed more if the parents are living the values that they're trying to teach, and if they are friendly and not disapproving when they talk about their values.

SSPG: What kinds of values should parents be trying to instill in their children?

Dr. Spock: At the ages of three, four, and five, children love to be helpful—to do grown-up things—and parents should be very careful to foster that. Especially during early childhood, all children should have chores. I particularly disapprove of parents saying "Oh, they're only young once, so let 'em have a good time." I think that's really corrupting.

SSPG: What is the one thing you would tell our readers?

Dr. Spock: That young children are watching them all the time and patterning themselves after their parents. The example the parents set is very important. They should realize that all children are trying very hard to be as much like their parents as they can be. ■

Diane O'Connell is senior editor of Sesame Street Parents' Guide.

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