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One American Mother
Discovers the Wisdom of
French Parenting

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When my daughter is eighteen months old, my husband and I decide to take her on a little summer holiday. We pick a coastal town that's a few hours by train from Paris, where we've been living (I'm American, he's British), and we book a hotel room with a crib. She's our only child at this point, so forgive us for thinking: How hard could it be?

We have breakfast at the hotel. But we have to eat lunch and dinner at the little seafood restaurants around the old port. We quickly discover that two restaurant meals a day, with a toddler, deserve to be their own circle of hell. Bean is briefly interested in food: a piece of bread, or anything fried. But within a few minutes she starts spilling salt shakers and tearing apart sugar packets. Then she demands to be sprung from her high chair so she can dash around the restaurant and bolt dangerously toward the docks.

Our strategy is to finish the meal quickly. We order while we're being seated, then we beg the server to rush out some bread and bring us all our food, appetizers and main courses, simultaneously. While my husband has a few bites of fish, I make sure that Bean doesn't get

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kicked by a waiter or lost at sea. Then we switch. We leave enormous, apologetic tips to compensate for the arc of torn napkins and calamari around our table.

On the walk back to our hotel we swear off travel, joy, and ever having more kids. This “holiday” seals the fact that life as we knew it eighteen months earlier has officially vanished. I’m not sure why we’re even surprised.

After a few more restaurant meals, I notice that the French families all around us don’t look like they’re in hell. Weirdly, they look like they’re on vacation. French children the same age as Bean are sitting contentedly in their high chairs, waiting for their food, or eating fish and even vegetables. There’s no shrieking or whining. Everyone is having one course at a time. And there’s no debris around their tables.

Though I’ve lived in France for a few years, I can’t explain this. In Paris, kids don’t eat in restaurants much. And anyway, I haven’t been watching them. Before I had a child, I never paid attention to anyone else’s. And now I mostly just look at my own. In our current misery, however, I can’t help but notice that there seems to be another way. But what exactly is it? Are French kids just genetically calmer than ours? Have they been bribed (or threatened) into submission? Are they on the receiving end of an old-fashioned seen-but-not-heard parenting philosophy?

It doesn’t seem like it. The French children all around us don’t look cowed. They’re cheerful, chatty, and curious. Their parents are affectionate and attentive. There just seems to be an invisible, civilizing force at their tables—and I’m starting to suspect, in their lives—that’s absent from ours.

Once I start thinking about French parenting, I realize it’s not just mealtime that’s different. I suddenly have lots of questions. Why is it, for example, that in the hundreds of hours I’ve clocked at French playgrounds, I’ve never seen a child (except my own) throw a temper

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tantrum? Why don't my French friends ever need to rush off the phone because their kids are demanding something? Why haven't their living rooms been taken over by teepees and toy kitchens, the way ours has?

And there's more. Why is it that so many of the American kids I meet are on mono-diets of pasta or white rice, or eat only a narrow menu of "kids" foods, whereas my daughter's French friends eat fish, vegetables, and practically everything else? And how is it that, except for a specific time in the afternoon, French kids don't snack?

I hadn't thought I was supposed to admire French parenting. It isn't a *thing*, like French fashion or French cheese. No one visits Paris to soak up the local views on parental authority and guilt management. Quite the contrary: the American mothers I know in Paris are horrified that French mothers barely breast-feed, and let their four-year-olds walk around with pacifiers.

So how come they never point out that so many French babies start sleeping through the night at two or three months old? And why don't they mention that French kids don't require constant attention from adults, and that they seem capable of hearing the word "no" without collapsing?

No one is making a fuss about all this. But it's increasingly clear to me that quietly and en masse, French parents are achieving outcomes that create a whole different atmosphere for family life. When American families visit our home, the parents usually spend much of the visit refereeing their kids' spats, helping their toddlers do laps around the kitchen island, or getting down on the floor to build LEGO villages. There are always a few rounds of crying and consoling. When French friends visit, however, we grown-ups have coffee and the children play happily by themselves.

French parents are very concerned about their kids.¹ They know about pedophiles, allergies, and choking hazards. They take reasonable precautions. But they aren't panicked about their children's well-being.

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This calmer outlook makes them better at both establishing boundaries and giving their kids some autonomy.

I'm hardly the first to point out that middle-class America has a parenting problem. In hundreds of books and articles this problem has been painstakingly diagnosed, critiqued, and named: overparenting, hyperparenting, helicopter-parenting, and my personal favorite, the kindergarchy. One writer defines the problem as "simply paying more attention to the upbringing of children than can possibly be good for them."² Another, Judith Warner, calls it the "culture of total motherhood." (In fact, she realized this was a problem after returning from France.) Nobody seems to like the relentless, unhappy pace of American parenting, least of all parents themselves.

So why do we do it? Why does this American way of parenting seem to be hardwired into our generation, even if—like me—you've left the country? First, starting in the 1980s, there was a mass of data and public rhetoric saying that poor kids fall behind in school because they don't get enough stimulation, especially in the early years. Middle-class parents took this to mean that their own kids would benefit from more stimulation, too.³

Around the same period, the gap between rich and poor Americans began getting much wider. Suddenly, it seemed that parents needed to groom their children to join the new elite. Exposing kids to the right stuff early on—and perhaps ahead of other children the same age—started to seem more urgent.

Alongside this competitive parenting was a growing belief that kids are psychologically fragile. Today's young parents are part of the most psychoanalyzed generation ever and have absorbed the idea that every choice we make could damage our kids. We also came of age during the divorce boom in the 1980s, and we're determined to act more selflessly than we believe our own parents did.

And although the rate of violent crime in the United States has plunged since its peak in the early 1990s, news reports create the im-

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pression that children are at greater physical risk than ever.⁴ We feel that we're parenting in a very dangerous world, and that we must be perpetually vigilant.

The result of all this is a parenting style that's stressful and exhausting. But now, in France, I've glimpsed another way. A blend of journalistic curiosity and maternal desperation kicks in. By the end of our ruined beach holiday, I've decided to figure out what French parents are doing differently. It will be a work of investigative parenting. Why don't French children throw food? And why aren't their parents shouting? What is the invisible, civilizing force that the French have harnessed? Can I change my wiring and apply it to my own offspring?

I realize I'm on to something when I discover a research study⁵ led by an economist at Princeton, in which mothers in Columbus, Ohio, said child care was more than twice as unpleasant as comparable mothers in the city of Rennes, France, did. This bears out my own observations in Paris and on trips back home to the United States: there's something about the way the French parent that makes it less of a grind and more of a pleasure.

I'm convinced that the secrets of French parenting are hiding in plain sight. It's just that nobody has looked for them before. I start stashing a notebook in my diaper bag. Every doctor's visit, dinner party, playdate, and puppet show becomes a chance to observe French parents in action, and to figure out what unspoken rules they're following.

At first it's hard to tell. French parents seem to vacillate between being extremely strict and shockingly permissive. Interrogating them isn't much help either. Most parents I speak to insist that they're not doing anything special. To the contrary, they're convinced that France is beset by a "child king" syndrome in which parents have lost their authority. (To which I respond, "You don't know from 'child kings.' Please visit New York.")

For several years, and through the birth of two more children in

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Paris, I keep uncovering clues. I discover, for instance, that there's a "Dr. Spock" of France, who's a household name around the country, but who doesn't have a single English-language book in print. I read this woman's books, along with many others. I interview dozens of parents and experts. And I eavesdrop shamelessly during school drop-offs and trips to the supermarket. Finally, I think I've discovered what French parents do differently.

When I say "French parents" I'm generalizing of course. Everyone's different. Most of the parents I meet live in Paris and its suburbs. Most have university degrees and professional jobs and earn above the French average. They aren't the superrich or the media elites. They're the educated middle and upper-middle classes. So are the American parents I compare them to.

Still, when I travel around France I see that middle-class Parisians' basic views on how to raise kids would sound familiar to a working-class mother in the French provinces. Indeed, I'm struck that while French parents may not know exactly what they do, they all seem to be doing more or less the same thing. Well-off lawyers, caregivers in French day-care centers, public-school teachers, and old ladies who chastise me in the park, all spout the same basic principles. So does practically every French baby book and parenting magazine I read. It quickly becomes clear that having a child in France doesn't require choosing a parenting philosophy. Everyone takes the basic rules for granted. That fact alone makes the mood less anxious.

Why France? I certainly don't suffer from a pro-France bias. *Au contraire*, I'm not even sure that I like living here. I certainly don't want my kids growing up into snifty Parisians. But for all its problems, France is the perfect foil for the current problems in American parenting. On the one hand, middle-class French parents have values that look very familiar to me. Parisian parents are zealous about talking to their kids, showing them nature, and reading them lots of books. They

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take them to tennis lessons, painting classes, and interactive science museums.

Yet the French have managed to be involved without becoming obsessive. They assume that even good parents aren't at the constant service of their children, and that there's no need to feel guilty about this. "For me, the evenings are for the parents," one Parisian mother tells me. "My daughter can be with us if she wants, but it's adult time." French parents want their kids to be stimulated, but not all the time. While some American toddlers are getting Mandarin tutors and pre-literacy training, French kids are—by design—toddling around by themselves.

And the French are doing a lot of parenting. While its neighbors are suffering from population declines, France is having a baby boom. In the European Union, only the Irish have a higher birth rate.⁶

The French have all kinds of public services that surely help make having kids more appealing and less stressful. Parents don't have to pay for preschool, worry about health insurance, or save for college. Many get monthly cash allotments—wired directly into their bank accounts—just for having kids.

But these public services don't explain the differences I see. The French seem to have a whole different framework for raising kids. When I ask French parents how they discipline their children, it takes them a few beats just to understand what I mean. "Ah, you mean how do we *educate* them?" they ask. "Discipline," I soon realize, is a narrow, seldom-used category that deals with punishment. Whereas "educating" (which has nothing to do with school) is something they imagine themselves to be doing all the time.

For years now, headlines have been declaring the demise of the current style of American child rearing. There are dozens of books offering Americans helpful theories on how to parent differently.

I haven't got a theory. What I do have, spread out in front of me,

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is a fully functioning society of good little sleepers, gourmet eaters, and reasonably relaxed parents. I'm starting with that outcome and working backward to figure out how the French got there. It turns out that to be a different kind of parent, you don't just need a different parenting philosophy. You need a very different view of what a child actually is.

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