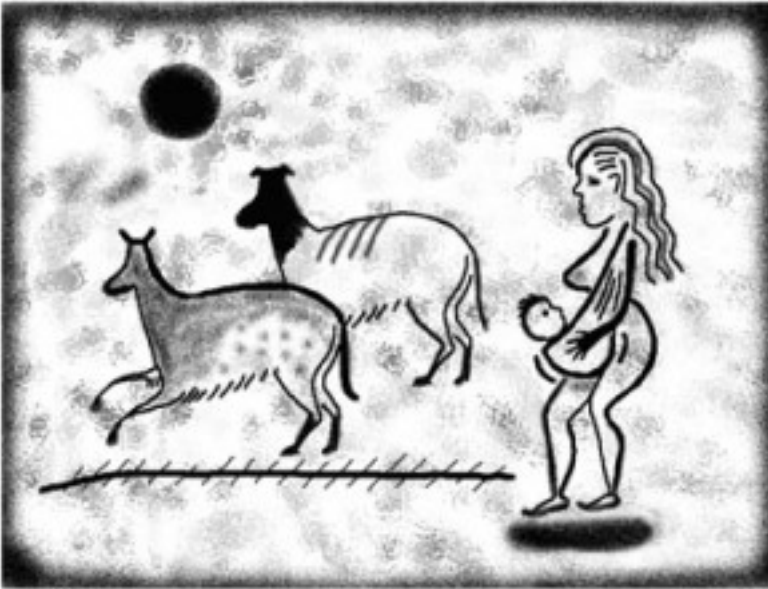


## Why I Hate Dr. Sears

By Cynthia Eller



The other day I was talking to a friend of mine who works in consumer marketing. “What’s new in the corporate world this week?” I asked. Like tales from an exotic land far, far away (though it is only across the Hudson River), stories of her work world fascinate me.

“We just signed this famous pediatrician to work on a project with us,” she answered.

“Oh yeah?” I asked. “Who?”

“Dr. Sears,” she said. “Like the department store. He wrote a book, a Dr. Spock sort of thing. It’s just called *The Baby Book*. Have you ever heard of him?”

“Heard of him?!” I shrieked. “Dr. William Sears? Satan’s evil spawn?”

“Wow,” my friend said. “He seemed like a regular kind of guy.”

I didn’t hate Dr. Sears the first time I encountered him either. I picked up *The Baby Book* within days of delivering my first child in 1994, and like the good student I’ve always been, I carved out

time in my newly fraught schedule to study up on parenting. Why, out of all the advice books on the shelf, did I pick up Dr. Sears's? Was it the subtitle—"Everything You Need to Know About Your Baby From Birth to Age Two"? Did I think I was getting some kind of bargain, a 689-page exhaustive treatment of all important matters pertaining to my child's first two years for only \$21.95? Who knows? I confess, I was not in a particularly good frame of mind at the time. I had a lot of stitches in sensitive places. I had witnessed my body—a more or less well-known quantity by then—inflate into a laughable caricature of itself, and then deflate in an odd, erratic way. I had been shaken loose from my moorings.

But I read *The Baby Book*. And in my sleep-deprived brain, I came to the conviction that Dr. Sears was right about everything—even though I would have preferred it if he weren't—and that if I really loved my child as much as I was certain I did, I would quit my job and sell my husband's camera equipment so I could invest in more nursing bras, since I'd be needing them for some years to come. Through Dr. Sears's eyes, I could see that my frequent desire to escape from my screaming infant meant that I was insufficiently bonded with her. That was a horrible thought. But I also knew the cure prescribed by Dr. Sears: ask those around me to lift some of the burdens of cooking and laundry from my sagging shoulders, so I could spend more time breastfeeding and sleeping with the baby. Then undoubtedly I would begin to love her the way nature intended me to: sublimely, unflinching, with all my other interests in life falling away like dandruff to leave only the single pure desire to give my daughter everything she needed, everything she wanted, everything that every baby should have.

Oh, I wasn't completely taken in. I figured out within the first couple of chapters that Dr. Sears's whole family-bed-sleeping-exclusive-breastfeeding-non-working-mother thing was a little extreme, and that his occasional nods to diversity ("do what works for your family") were probably inserted at the insistence of his editor. I never took him to be any counterpart to beloved Dr. Benjamin Spock, who assured a generation of mothers that they were doing just fine, that babies were resilient.

*The Baby Book* is crammed wall-to-wall with anecdotes from Dr. Sears's own parenting, with additional italicized comments from his wife Martha. Many of Dr. Sears's anecdotes—and Martha's too—take the general form of "I used to think this, like everyone else . . . maybe even like you . . . but then, suddenly, I understood that no, that was wrong, and *this* was right." In other words, his was the voice of the convert. I'm a religious studies professor, so I can tell you with some authority that converts can be a real piece of work.

At last count, Dr. Sears, whose website calls him "America's pediatrician" (apparently the title is up for grabs; T. Berry Brazelton goes by the same moniker), and Nurse Martha have eight children. As Dr. Sears tells it, they reared their first three children by the old-school book: feed them when they

cry, pop them back in their cribs, and leave them in other people's care while you continue with your careers. They were torn, of course, like all working parents, struggling to find the right balance. But it wasn't until the arrival of their fourth child, Hayden, their "high-needs" child, that they saw the light. (Martha saw it first.) Children need more than this, *deserve* more than this. In fact, it is every child's birthright to sleep nestled between their parents for a couple of years, firmly latched onto a maternal nipple whenever he or she wants.

You say this interferes with other tasks like doing the grocery shopping, loading the dishwasher, using the toilet? Your problem, not theirs. The needs of a baby are large, and they are their own justification. Luckily, this problem of grocery-shopping and dishwasher-loading and toilet-using is easily remedied. For only twenty-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents, you can purchase the "Dr. Sears Original Babysling": a few yards of fabric which, when artfully slung over your shoulder, will permit you to hang your infant around your neck whenever you have to get up out of the family bed. This is, quite literally, "attachment parenting."

Dr. Sears covers a lot of territory in *The Baby Book*, but from chapter one he dives into the main task at hand: to build a case for attachment parenting. He does this in many ways, but most often he appeals to Nature. It is *natural*, he says, for children to be breastfed, carried, cuddled, and slept with for the first couple of years of their lives. How does Dr. Sears know that this is what Nature intends for children? Is this something they taught him in medical school? No. He knows this is the "natural" way to parent because it is what indigenous tribal people the world over do.

Indeed, Dr. Sears dates his epiphany about "babywearing" to an international parenting conference at which he and Martha interviewed two women from Zambia. These women were carrying their infants in slings. (Dr. Sears reports that the slings "matched their native dress." How colorful!) Dr. Sears and Martha were impressed with how "content" the babies were, and how "attentive" their mothers were to them. As Dr. Sears explains, "women in their culture don't have the benefits of books and studies about mothering hormones." Yet they have something more important to offer those of us staggering under the weight of lengthy tomes and scientific statistics: their firsthand experience of parenting in harmony with Nature.

What does natural parenting look like? Oh, I'm sure you've heard the stories: women in Asia or Africa or Australia who carry their children close to their bodies all day, breastfeeding them every twenty minutes or so. These women intuitively know when their baby is about to eliminate, the story goes, and they pluck the baby out of the sling to do its business in a tidy, efficient manner. Most impressively, their babies *never cry*. Oh, they may fuss a bit now and again, but they never resort to real bawling, because they never have to. Mom is perpetually in sync with them and their needs. Intra-uterine bliss gracefully gives way to extra-uterine bliss as they are carried and nursed

kangaroo-style for many months after their ejection into the world of the breathing. Only gradually, on baby's own schedule, do adventures like eating solid food and walking begin.

There's only one problem with this Sears-styled utopia: it doesn't exist. I've read a lot of ethnographies of tribal people and I can tell you that the whole babies-who-don't-cry thing just isn't true. Some anthropologists visiting some tribal groups say that the babies in these groups don't cry. But as often as not, somewhere later in their monograph they'll make a passing reference to a screaming baby keeping the whole village up all night. (Seems they've bought into the same myths the rest of us have, and try not to let the evidence get in their way.) Besides, most anthropologists who report on parenting among tribal peoples have spent a year or maybe two with a group of people in a small village whose population rarely numbers over a hundred. Do you think it just might be possible that during the year they visited, all three new babies in the village happened to be mellow, easy-going sorts? Such things do happen. Maybe if the anthropologist visited in a different year, when a couple of colicky babies came along, it would be a whole different story.

Other anthropologists never make such extravagant claims about tearless infants. For example, in *Women of the Forest*, Yolanda and Robert Murphy note that the Mundurucú of South America parent as though they all had their own personal dog-eared copy of Dr. Sears's *The Baby Book* by their side. They breastfeed on demand, rarely wean their babies before the age of three, carry them all day in slings and sleep with them all night. And their babies cry—a lot. The Murphys report that these children “do not have happy dispositions, and there is a heavy frequency of chronic crying and emotional upsets.”

Whether babies cry in every culture or only some, the underlying premise that all peoples who haven't been smeared with the taint of Western industrial-capitalist-consumerist values parent their children in the same “natural” way is absurd. Glance through *A World of Babies* (edited by Judy S. Deloache and Alma Gottlieb), in which anthropologists imaginatively construct childcare manuals for seven different cultures. The Beng of the Ivory Coast give their babies twice daily enemas (perhaps to compensate for the lack of Pampers? so they won't have to know exactly when to snatch baby out of the sling?). They swear that these enemas are necessary for the baby's health, and that parents should not be prevented from performing them by their baby's screams of anguish. The Balinese start their babies on mashed bananas and rice cereal the first day of their lives. They are certain that colostrum is indigestible, and the baby needs to eat something before the mother's milk comes in. The Trobriand Islanders, immortalized in the 1920s in a watershed ethnography by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, are often viewed as the archetypal blissed-out, natural-and-free, half-naked human-animals luxuriating in a South Seas paradise. Yet they wean their babies around their first birthday, careless of the World Health Organization's advice that mother's milk is the perfect nutrition for babies up until at least age two. They accomplish this by

sending mom away on a surprise (to the baby) vacation for a week or so, leaving the baby to dad's tender ministrations. (What would Dr. Sears say about *that*?)

So the notion that all tribal peoples parent in the same "natural" way is untrue. It's also insulting. It suggests that "they," unlike "us," lack intelligence and initiative; that they act out of animal instinct and do not, as we do, create complex and unique cultures; that they are somehow closer to the apes than we are. As a scholar, I consider this kind of worshipful but patronizing attitude toward indigenous peoples a serious error in the interpretation and analysis of human culture. As a parent, I resent having to measure my civilized, bookish, awkward approach to mothering against the supposedly effortless, natural perfection of "simpler" women the world over . . . especially when these "simpler" and more "natural" women don't actually exist. Wherever you find people mothering children, it is as complicated and culturally-bound as mothering is here at home. The natural mother, as such, is only an invention of Western "civilized" sensibilities.

Dr. Sears has eagerly adopted the natural mother in order to more effectively market the type of parenting that he's singled out as his favorite. And this, really, is what annoys me about Dr. Sears. He doesn't sell his "original babysling" as just one solution among many to the problem of caring for a pre-ambulatory child while attending to the tasks of daily life. (And how original can a couple of yards of fabric be, anyway, when it's purportedly been de rigeur human infant care equipment for "untold eons"?) No, he is selling it as *the* equipment for *the* form of parenting that anyone who truly loves her children will adopt. Wear your baby enough, *The Baby Book* suggests, and you will morph into a mom like Karen, one of the many mothers Dr. Sears writes about approvingly (or was that paternally?). Karen had a career. She was a "perfectionist" who "was used to doing everything right." As Dr. Sears explains, Karen carried that attitude over into parenting, "and wanted to do everything right for her baby" (unlike the rest of us?). So Karen wore her baby in a sling, and as a result became so bonded to baby Jane that she couldn't go back to that career of hers—it would require her to "separate" from the baby. Instead she found a new sort of job, one where she could work and wear her baby. "Babywearing," Dr. Sears concludes, "provides the circumstance that strengthens the bond, and because the bond is strengthened the mother seeks out a life-style that allows the babywearing bond to continue—another example of how babywearing does something good for the mother, for the baby, and for society."

Every other way of parenting apart from "attachment parenting," Dr. Sears implies, is sloppy seconds. A compromise. Or, more to the point, a travesty. What can be said about parents who choose to go against Nature? You have to pity them, I guess. And their poor children.

In my opinion, it is a cruel thing to tell a new mother that babies who are mothered "naturally" (read: correctly) never cry. It turns your baby's every whimper into an indictment of your naturalness and

adequacy as a mother. Baby is not “securely attached”; baby has not “bonded” to his or her “primary caregiver” (that’s supposed to be you, if you have any maternal feeling at all, and if you don’t, why did you have the baby?). That’s quite a lot to read into “waaah, waaah.” The last time I checked, “waaah, waaah” is an inarticulate expression that could be translated in many ways, only one of which is “Bad mommy! Bad mommy!”

Probably if I’d picked up a copy of *The Baby Book* before I got pregnant, I would have either decided that Dr. Sears was some kind of patriarchal-backlash, woman-hating fanatic, or I would have realized on the spot that yes, he was right, and therefore a person like me had no business having children. When I actually read *The Baby Book*, the conclusion I drew was the second one, but by then it was too late: I’d already had the baby. So I figured that either I could do my beloved child irreparable emotional harm, or I could become someone different, the sort of person who could be a good parent. So what if the person Dr. Sears wanted me to become bore no relation to the former me? So what if she took the feminist revolution I was deeply committed to a few thousand years backward? Was I going to let my daughter, my infinitely precious daughter, be the victim of my fancy-pants politics?

Certainly not. And so I became a morose, reluctant advocate of the theory of “attachment parenting.” Not because it appealed to me, not because it was the way I wanted to parent, but because it was the way I thought I should parent. With my tiny, helpless daughter lying in my arms, “should” seemed to be the only relevant consideration.

It took many months, but I got over my attachment to attachment parenting. I renamed *The Baby Book* “How to Be a Perfect Mother and Why You’ll Never Be One.” I considered the radical act of just throwing the book away. But actually, Dr. Sears is a darned good pediatrician, and the section on infant illnesses is one of the most informative and reassuring you’ll find out there. In the end, my husband decided that *The Baby Book* should live in our garage in an undisclosed location. If I wanted Dr. Sears’s wisdom on teething or ear infections, he told me, he could consult the index, read the key sections, and report back to me. I would never be tempted to thumb through the other pages that lay waiting to suck me back into a bottomless shame spiral.

Many fans of *The Baby Book* claim an ability to take Dr. Sears with a grain of salt, following his advice when it suits them and ignoring it when it doesn’t. I lacked this talent, or maybe the confidence. Dr. Sears presented a babies-and-parents-and-the-whole-universe perspective, and I bought it, the whole package.

Why? It’s not so hard to figure out: Sears and all the other self-styled baby experts catch us at a weak moment, when we are so exhausted and unsure of ourselves, and so deliriously in love with

our demanding babies. This is why Dr. Sears is not simply annoying, but actually dangerous: because he speaks with the voice of false authority to the uncertain and fearful; that is, to new mothers.

I remember a friend of mine saying that after she had her first child, she avoided the company of other new mothers because she felt like they were all judging her. Her husband, who thought she should get out more, told her she was being paranoid. Nonsense, I told her. Of course they were all judging her! Probably more harshly than she even imagined, and for reasons that border on the freakishly insignificant, like what brand of clothes the baby was wearing, how many blankets were tucked around him on a cold day, or whether or not he was permitted a pacifier. In my experience anyway, first-time motherhood is a one-way ticket back to high school. You remember high school . . . that place where there were one or two ways to be cool and five thousand ways to be a loser, and no one hesitated to tell you to which group you belonged?

Honestly, I have no objection to people sleeping with their babies or carrying them in slings. I have done both these things. I would do them again. I breastfed my infants too (only for four or five months apiece; but some of my best friends are long-time lactators, I swear, and I applaud them on their choice). And I don't really hate Dr. Sears. I'm sure he's a well-intentioned man doing the best he can with his profitable baby-care and parenting-propaganda industry. Whoever Dr. Sears's relatives are, I don't actually suppose that Satan is among them. I would just appreciate it if he—and everyone else who ventures to publicly voice their opinions about parenting—would underline the point that there is more than one way to be a good parent, and that there always has been. That Nature is not dictating a single “natural” way of doing things.

Want to stay at home with your kids? Then do it. Do it because you want to and because you can. Want to leave your kids with someone else while you go work, or play, or follow out your own interests? Then do it. Do it because you want to and because you can. If you don't have a choice, do what you must out of necessity, and know that love, real love, matters more than time or money either one, as generations of children from many classes and cultures can attest.

But when you have a choice, don't choose to do what you'd rather not do out of a sense of beleaguered duty. Don't suffer on your children's account. Chances are, they will never thank you for it. Love them, enjoy them, let them see who you are (who you *already* are, not the Stepford Mom you think you need to be). Given enough time, they will become whoever they will be.

*Author's Note: My children are now ages eight and two. On good days, I believe everything I have written here, and pat myself on the back for making such excellent, life-affirming choices for myself, my children, and our family. On bad days, I wonder if my toddler's tantrums aren't due to her*

*psyche-scarring experiences in full-time daycare, and mercilessly second-guess all those same choices. My children are a delight and a blessing, and being a mother is really, really hard.*

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*Art by Penny Van Horn*