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Adventures in Parenting

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The Newest, Latest Parenting Trend

By *LISA BELKIN*

Two recent articles are cause for a lot of chatter on parenting Web sites, highlighting, as they do, new trends that are not actually new and may not actually be trends.

“Move over L. Ron,” writes Gina Piccalo, over on [The Daily Beast.com](#). “Rejecting the trend of pressure-cooker, high-achievement-oriented development for their kids, some Hollywood power parents are embracing a back-to-basics approach that critics say has cultlike aspects. The parents, according to people familiar with the approach, include Tobey Maguire, Helen Hunt, Jamie Lee Curtis, Jason Alexander, Felicity Huffman and husband, William H. Macy.”

Umm? Huh? The “cult” Piccalo is writing about is called [Resources for Infant Educators](#), known as RIE and pronounced “wry.” It has been around since 1978, when it was founded by an educator (Magda Gerber) and a pediatric neurologist (Tom Forrest). It is, as Piccalo describes it, a push-back against “parenting that can seem an extreme sport geared toward raising a bionic generation of high-achieving super-babies,” replacing it with a “follow your child’s lead” philosophy. Paradoxically, declaring it a trend goes against the very “don’t worry about the crowd” foundation upon which it is based.

RIE, at its core, sees no need for fancy gadgets, and Baby Einstein, and directed play. Think of it as a decrease in sensory static, and as a refutation of the “keeping up with everyone else” mentality. That said, at its core, it can be more than a little tricky to implement. As Jenna McCarthy notes on [iVillage.com](#), (responding to the Daily Beast article):

For instance, parents are encouraged not to immediately console a sobbing tot but to view a baby’s cries as intelligent, meaningful communication in need of deciphering. Which is all kinds of enlightened and fabulous in theory — until you’ve got a career-making conference call or other children sleeping nearby. Similarly, while I agree that the RIE motto “never disturb a contented baby” makes a nice wall plaque, when you’ve got to get another kid to soccer practice, dinner is burning on the stove and the U.P.S. guy is banging on the screen door demanding a signature, sometimes baby’s precious contentment is going to have to be disturbed.

In *The Wall Street Journal* this weekend, the writer Erica Jong (yes, the one who wrote “Fear of Flying”), objects to “attachment parenting” for these practical sorts of reasons, along with

some corresponding philosophical ones. Describing the past two decades as “an orgy of motherphilia,” she blames “The Baby Book,” by William and Martha Sears, which is the “bible” of attachment parenting. The result, she says, is that motherhood in particular and parenting more broadly has become “the ultimate bondage”:

I try to imagine what it would have been like for me to follow the suggestions of attachment parenting while I was a single mother and full-time breadwinner. I would have had to take my baby on lecture tours, in and out of airports, television stations and hotels. But that was impossible. Her schedule and mine could not have diverged more. So I hired nannies, left my daughter home and felt guilty for my own imperfect attachment. I can't imagine having done it any other way. Even if every hotel and every airport had had a beautiful baby facility — which, of course, they didn't — the schedules of children are not so malleable. Children are naturally afraid of unfamiliar baby sitters, so parents change their lives to accommodate them. In the absence of societal adjustment to the needs of children, parents have to revise their own schedules.

We are in a period of retrenchment against progressive social policies, and the women pursuing political life today owe more to Evita Peron than to Eleanor Roosevelt. “Mama grizzlies” like Sarah Palin never acknowledge that there are any difficulties in bearing and raising children. Nor do they acknowledge any helpers as they thrust their babies into the arms of siblings or daddies. The baby has become the ultimate political tool.

I hope to talk more about Jong's critique of attachment parenting, and tomorrow I will have a guest post by the co-author of the book by Dr. Sears.

But first, a detour to the question of this need we seem to have to identify and follow the latest parenting trend. At the end of Jong's piece there is a list titled “2000 Years of Parenting Advice.” It includes:

- Proper measures must be taken to ensure that [children] shall be tactful and courteous in their address; for nothing is so deservedly disliked as tactless characters. “The Education of Children,” Plutarch, A.D. 110
- I will also advise his feet to be wash'd every day in cold water, and to have his shoes so thin, that they might leak and let in water. ... It is recommendable for its cleanliness; but that which I aim at in it, is health; and therefore I limit it not precisely to any time of the day. “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” John Locke, 1693
- Babies under 6 months old should never be played with; and the less of it at any time the better for the infant. “The Care and Feeding of Children,” L. Emmett Holt, 1894
- Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit in your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning. Give them a pat on the head if they have made an extraordinary good job of a difficult task. “Psychological Care of

Infant and Child,” John B. Watson, 1928

•The more people have studied different methods of bringing up children, the more they have come to the conclusion that what good mothers and fathers instinctively feel like doing for their babies is usually best after all. Furthermore, all parents do their best job when they have a natural, easy confidence in themselves. Better to make a few mistakes from being natural than to do everything letter-perfect out of a feeling of worry. “The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care,” Benjamin Spock, 1946

So it is not at all new, this search by parents for THE answer, and this rotating cast of experts eager to provide one. We tend to think it is only the latest generation — OUR generation — that has made parenting into a competition or an unattainable ideal. But that, too, it seems, is a longstanding trend.