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The Only Baby Book You'll Ever Need

By MICHAEL ERARD JAN. 31, 2015

SOUTH PORTLAND, Me. — LIKE many parents, I have a particular book I like to give to friends when they announce they're pregnant for the first time. It is the book I read early in my wife's pregnancy, blurting out passages about everything from birth, baby minding and child rearing to education, work and discipline. But you probably won't find it in the baby section of your local bookstore. "The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings," by David F. Lancy, is an academic title — but it's possibly the only book that new parents will ever need.

The book, which first appeared in 2008 and is about to be published in a second edition, is a far cry from "What to Expect When You're Expecting." Professor Lancy, who teaches at Utah State University, has pored over the anthropology literature to collect insights from a range of culture types, along with primate studies, history and his own fieldwork in seven countries. He's not explicitly writing for parents. Yet through factoids and analysis, he demonstrates something that American parents desperately need to hear: Children are raised in all sorts of ways, and they all turn out just fine.

Children in Fiji, for example, are not allowed to address adults, or even make eye contact with them. In Gapun, an isolated village in Papua

New Guinea, children are encouraged to hit dogs and chickens, and to raise knives at siblings. At 8 or 9 years old, boys among the Touareg, a nomadic people in North Africa, get a baby camel to care for. Try sitting on the couch with your partner and keeping these to yourself as you read.

This is not “Ripley’s Believe It or Not,” anthropological trivia into the weird and wonderful ways of mankind. I took a larger point from all this — namely that humans have a tremendous capacity for living inside their culture and accepting those arrangements as natural, and finding other arrangements weird, unnatural, even abhorrent.

When you’re a first-time parent, something perverse happens that makes you seem like a visitor to your own culture. In the first year of my son’s life, I found myself pondering things like baby rattles. Where do they come from? Why do we give rattles to babies? Are there cultures where babies don’t get rattles? (Indeed, there are.)

At precisely the moment that I was worrying about my cultural performance of parenthood, I stumbled across mention of “The Anthropology of Childhood” on a blog and got a copy. I was immediately taken. The book does not render judgments, like other parenting books we know. “My goal is to offer a correction to the ethnocentric lens that sees children only as precious, innocent and preternaturally cute cherubs,” Professor Lancy writes. “I hope to uncover something close to the norm for children’s lives and those of their caretakers.”

That norm is that children are expected to earn their keep, starting at a very early age (or they are tolerated as semi-supernatural forces, the “changelings” of the book’s title). Worldwide, there is little formal schooling; most knowledge is learned through play and imitation. Kids may spend more time overseen by older siblings than adults. Fathers

have very little to do with their children. And adults in most cultures rarely, if ever, play with their children as extensively as we do with ours.

The first-time parent faces a bewildering array of commercial products and schools of parenting philosophies: attachment parenting, “Resources for Infant Educators,” “Baby Wise,” the list rolls on. But “The Anthropology of Childhood” shows that neither the supermarket baby aisle nor our parenting ideologies are truly diverse. The real divide isn’t between people who co-sleep and those who don’t, or between those who use cloth diapers and those who use disposables. It is between what Professor Lancy, in lectures, has deemed “pick when ripe” cultures versus “pick when green” cultures.

In the “pick when ripe” culture, babies and toddlers are largely ignored by adults, and may not be named until they’re weaned. They undergo what he calls a “village curriculum”: running errands, delivering messages and doing small-scale versions of adult tasks. Only later are they “picked,” or fully recognized as individuals. In contrast, in “pick when green” cultures, including our own, it’s never too early to socialize babies or recognize their personhood.

Professor Lancy calls the American way of doing pick when green a “neontocracy,” in which adults provide services to relatively few children who are considered priceless, even though they’re useless. One senses him rolling his eyes at modern American parents, impelled to get down on the floor to play Legos with their kids. But he admits that each culture evolves the child-rearing strategies it needs to reproduce itself, and he posits that pick when green is necessary in a complex society like ours. Whether it should be exported is another question.

We take our cultural practices as a timeless given, but I was fascinated to read the historical origin of our modern neontocracy: 17th-

century Netherlands. Wealthy and urbanized, the Dutch middle class began treating their children as inherently valuable, not as future labor. Birthrates dropped because more children survived infancy; the pampered offspring could be trained at an early age. We can blame the political philosopher John Locke for our current child-rearing preoccupations. He carried Dutch ideas back to England in the 1680s, where Protestant radicals like the Puritans and Quakers picked them up. We, and our “godlike cherubs,” as Professor Lancy calls them, are their heirs.

And I was glad for an ethnographic antidote to the ubiquity of developmental psychologists, whose advice often lacks a vital cultural perspective. Case in point: When my wife and I were sleeplessly losing our wits, we read through advice books on infant sleep, none of which mentioned that sleeping for eight uninterrupted hours in a bed in separate rooms is a distinct cultural anomaly. For most cultures, sleep is social. Around the world, people sleep in groups; with animals; in briefer chunks of time; without coverings.

Once we learned that ours is not the norm, we relaxed. The fact that our year-old son wasn't sleeping the way we wanted him to didn't mean he lacked something; it meant that he wasn't developmentally ready to be acculturated to our cultural model of sleep, not all at once.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about “The Anthropology of Childhood” was how it taught me to value things that, in a cross-cultural perspective, might suddenly seem arbitrary: how we approach hygiene, for example, or teach etiquette. As a parent, I realized, my job is to transmit my culture. It helps to think of your child as a stranger in a strange land, like a study-abroad student you are hosting long term and to whom you must, patiently and constantly, explain the land they're

visiting.

“In our culture, we don’t put our feet on the table,” I have heard myself say. “I suppose there are cultures where you can, but this isn’t one of them.”

Then we get on the floor and play Legos, which is what we do in our culture.

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