

## Chapter X: “French Parents Are Superior”

American mothers who lived in France have written several books urging American parenting addicts to cut back a lot, as the French do. In 2005, Judith Warner published *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*,<sup>1</sup> advocating a position “the idle parent” would appreciate. *The New Yorker* wrote, “martyrdom appears to be the only feasible model for successful maternity—with destructive consequences for both mothers and children. Comparing this situation with her experiences of child-rearing in France, Warner finds American ‘hyper-parenting’—preschool violin and Ritalin on demand—‘just plain crazy.’”<sup>2</sup>

In 2012, American mom Pamela Druckerman – after observing how well behaved French children are – declared “French parents are superior.” Living in France, Druckerman realized only her kids had temper tantrums at playgrounds, only her kids interrupted her mid-conversation, and only her living room had been fully and permanently occupied by her kids’ toys. The reason, she concluded, is that American parents over-indulge children, over-involve ourselves in their lives, and fail to set – or enforce – rules/limits/boundaries that teach children to be patient, responsible, and resolve their own squabbles:

[American] parents usually spent much of [their time] refereeing their kids’ spats, helping their toddlers do laps around the kitchen island, or getting down on the floor to build Lego villages. When French friends visited, by contrast, the grownups had coffee and the children played happily by themselves.

...[T]he French... assume that even good parents aren’t at the constant service of their children, and that there is no need to feel guilty about this. “For me, the evenings are for the parents,” one Parisian mother told 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 preliteracy training, French kids are—by design—toddling around by themselves....

[M]ost French descriptions of American kids include this phrase “*n’importe quoi*,” meaning “whatever” or “anything they like.” It suggests that the American kids don’t have firm boundaries, that their parents lack authority, and that anything goes. It’s the antithesis of the French ideal of the *cadre*, or frame, that French parents often talk about. *Cadre* means that kids have very firm limits about certain things—that’s the frame—and that the parents strictly enforce these. But inside the *cadre*, French parents entrust their kids with quite a lot of freedom and autonomy. ...Many French parents I meet have an easy, calm authority with their children that I can only envy. Their kids actually listen to them. French children aren’t constantly dashing off,

talking back, or engaging in prolonged negotiations.<sup>3</sup>

Embarrassed to eat out with her fussy, whiny, picky kids, Druckerman was shocked how relaxed French children are in restaurants, how quiet they are, how patiently they wait for food to arrive, how willingly they eat fish and vegetables, and how neatly they eat.<sup>4</sup> One trick is that French parents don't let kids snack all day. Children get three meals plus a 4:00 snack. When you wait four hours between meals, peas and carrots look tastier than if you drank chocolate milk an hour earlier. If a French mother buys sweets or bakes a cake, everyone waits till snack time to enjoy them. No instant gratification. If a French mother is talking and her child wants her attention, she tells him – politely but firmly – how long he'll have to wait till mommy will be able to attend to him.

Another American mom who lived in France – but did not write a book – offers this vignette of arms-length Parisian parenting: “Many moons ago in Paris... I refused to let my son go to England on a three-day field trip with his bilingual pre-school class. The school director looked at me warily and said, ‘Madame, holding onto your child is not good for cultivating an independent spirit.’ Then she smiled (a bit smugly, I might add) and said, ‘We only have this problem with Anglo-Saxon mothers.’”<sup>5</sup>

Becoming less obsessive about parenting – and not being your child's servant – will help your child mature and increase your enjoyment of parenting. Many American parents consider parenting a chore. A survey of 909 working women in Texas found that of 19 activities, “childcare” ranked 16th most enjoyable, more enjoyable than only “evening commute,” “working,” and “morning commute.”<sup>6</sup> Mothers actually preferred “housework,” “shopping” and “cooking” to “childcare.” And “childcare” was nearly tied with “evening commute” and “working.”

This is *not* true in France, where parents actually enjoy the time they spend with their children – which likely means children also enjoy the shared time more and gain more from it:

A rather larger difference was observed in the enjoyment of child care and of interactions with children. The American mothers spent more time focused on child care (18% vs. 14% of the waking day), but enjoyed it less. ...[T]he mean of Difmax during childcare is -.22 in Columbus [Ohio], .09 in Rennes [France] ( $t = 2.76$ )... Women in both samples enjoyed one-on-one interaction with their spouse about equally (Difmax averages were .32 and .33), but the corresponding values when children were present were -.05 and .22, suggesting that the presence of the spouse hardly makes American children less annoying to their mother.<sup>7</sup>

This was just about the only significant difference between French and American parents' time

spent on activities and enjoyment of those activities. French parents spent less time with their children and enjoyed the time together whereas American parents spent more time with their children but found it unpleasant: “The most notable exceptions to [the similarity of French and American time expenditure on and enjoyment of activities] are that the Americans find child care substantially more unpleasant than do the French, and the French spend less time engaged in child care and more time eating.”<sup>8</sup> And the relationship between more time spent with one’s children and a lower enjoyment of that time may be causal. One study of 181 American mothers with children under age 5 found that mothers who poured themselves into mothering were less happy and more prone to mental illness, possibly even hurting – rather than helping – their little ones:

intensive parenting in particular, rather than parenting per se, was linked to increased levels of stress, depression and lower life satisfaction...

The authors conclude: “If intensive mothering is related to so many negative mental health outcomes, why do women do it? They may think that it makes them better mothers, so they are willing to sacrifice their own mental health to enhance their children’s cognitive, social and emotional outcomes. In reality, intensive parenting may have the opposite effect on children from what parents intend.”<sup>9</sup>

As enticing as less-is-more parenting sounds, French parenting – a schizophrenic combination of authoritarianism and *laissez-faire* – probably goes too far in the direction of self-indulgent parenting. The French seldom breast-feed babies very long and seem focused on ignoring children as much as possible:

[Ms. Druckerman] notices how readily her French peers detach from their kids. “I’ve never seen a French mother climb a jungle gym, go down a slide with her child, or sit on a seesaw—all regular sights back in the United States and among Americans visiting France,” she writes. At a merry-go-round near the Eiffel Tower, a French mother describes how she mentally checks out for half an hour while her young sons ride: “I spend 30 minutes in pure relaxation.” Ms. Druckerman, when her daughter gets on the ride, spends the entire time “waiting to wave... each time she comes around.”<sup>10</sup>

French preschools seem similarly optimized for teacher laziness:

Children... must eat quietly at the table at the scheduled hour; and they must nap when told to nap. The rest of the time they can do whatever they choose, ambling around the playroom undirected. Ms. Druckerman wants to know: “Where are the music circles and organized activities?” She is told that children should be allowed to get bored—and learn to amuse themselves. Meanwhile, her daughter picks up a lot of French phrases in the command form: *couche-toi!* (go to sleep) and on *va pas crier!* (we’re not going to scream).<sup>11</sup>

Even Druckerman confesses French parents go too far:

Some parents are too strict. They don't listen to their kids and they are too authoritarian. I find I'm more affectionate with my kids than French parents are. I think they are more hands off. They don't feel they have to constantly interact with their kids.

They can also take underpraising too far. The French think self-esteem comes from accomplishment, not praise. In school, you're more likely to get negative feedback or no feedback. The only thing my daughter's preschool teacher said about her the whole year was that she was calm. I wanted a little more feedback.<sup>12</sup>

Americans are disappointed by our primary and secondary schools and student academic performance, equal to the OECD average on the PISA tests. If French parenting is so marvelous, why do French children score slightly worse?<sup>13</sup>

Some French even reject Druckerman's claim French children are well behaved: "[She] can't have witnessed some of the scenes we see in supermarkets in this country, and I can assure you French children do have tantrums. Every Sunday in church I suffer and am distracted, especially when I am the one who conducts the songs for the assembly, as some parents are totally unable to control their kids."<sup>14</sup>

And some French claim French parents produce well-behaved children by destroying children's independence and *joie de vivre*:

I view the first 20 years of my life as a constant fight against the education ideas that rule in France. Now that I have a child, my almost monomaniacal obsession is how to protect her from French parenting and French education, which is why we are considering Montessori schools and homeschooling/unschooling rather than put her in French schools. (Let me rephrase that: I am considering setting myself on fire rather than put her in French schools.)

The way French education works, and I don't know if I could put it in a more charitable way, is that it seeks to mercilessly beat any shred of nonconformity out of children (the beating is now done mostly psychologically) so that they may be slotted into a society that, itself, treats nonconformity the way the immune system treats foreign elements.<sup>15</sup>

But perhaps the most powerful critique of French parents is that their authoritarian style fails to teach true self-discipline and morality:

Elizabeth Brahy, a mom of two who's lived in France for 17 years, thinks French children only seem better behaved because their parents are very strict with them — sometimes overly so. But when away from adults, she says, they're not nearly the same.

"They toe the line when they're with their parents," she says, essentially because they are scared of getting in trouble. "But away from them, they're worse behaved than American kids." ... "You

go to the park, and you see these kids running wild, pushing and shoving and stealing toys, and no one is disciplining them.”<sup>16</sup>

Another American mother living in Paris reports:

There isn't an expat I know — and I'm lucky to have friends and acquaintances from all over the world, from Poland and Canada, England and Turkey, the Netherlands and New Zealand, among others — who isn't concerned about sending their children to French state schools, where strict discipline, negative feedback and rote memorization rule the day...

[French parents] are much more willing to wage emotional and physical warfare with their children than my friends and I are... [W]hat passes for acceptable here as a means to make children compliant is unacceptable to every expat parent, no matter the nationality, I know.

I've seen a woman on the sidewalk grab a teen's hair and pull him to her violently, a woman beating her son in the car seat to make him shut up, and perhaps more damning than anything else, I've seen French parents simply ignoring their children. Entire coffee klatschs here are dedicated to recounting deplorable French parenting we've witnessed...

French kids don't have fun at home, they don't have fun at school, so when they get to a neutral place like the playground, where their mothers or nannies talk on the phone or take smoke breaks, they are often prone to act like wild animals.

Truly, many Parisian parents regard the park as a place where they can simply ignore their children, and children know that just about anything goes there. They will shamelessly take toys from their peers, assault other kids savagely, literally climb on top of younger children, brazenly disregard the direction of other parents, and look at you with seething hatred in their eyes.<sup>17</sup>

I'm no expert on French parenting, but what I've read suggests French parenting is highly authoritarian, and authoritarian parenting tends to produce obedience/compliance without instilling positive character values or encouraging healthy creativity and exploration. That's hardly a model to emulate.