The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care

The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care written by Benjamin Spock, is a manual on infant and child care first published in 1946. The book, along with Dr. Spock, attained fame almost instantly, selling 500,000 copies in its first six months. By 1998, over 50 million copies of the book had been sold, making it the best-selling book of the twentieth century in America, aside from the Bible. As of 2011, the book had been translated into 39 languages.

Spock and his manual helped revolutionize child-rearing methods for the post-World War II generation. Mothers heavily relied on Spock’s advice and appreciated his friendly, reassuring tone. Spock emphasizes in his book that, above all, parents should have confidence in their abilities and trust their instincts. The famous first line of the book reads, “Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do.”

HISTORY

CHILD CARE BEFORE SPOCK

Spock’s book helped revolutionize child care in the 1940s and 1950s. Prior to this, rigid schedules permeated pediatric care. Influential authors like behavioral psychiatrist John B. Watson, who wrote Psychological Care of Infant and Child in 1928, and pediatrician Emmett Holt, who wrote The Care and Feeding of Children: A Catechism for the Use of Mothers and Children’s Nurses in 1894, told parents to feed babies on strict schedules and start toilet training at an early, specific age. They obsessed over rigidity because they believed that irregularities in feeding and bowel movements were causing the widespread diarrheal diseases seen among babies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

INTENT

As a practicing pediatrician in the 1930s, Spock noticed that prevailing methods in pediatric care seemed cruel and ignored the emotional needs of the child. He wanted to explore the psychological reasons behind common problems seen during practices like [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8] [9] [10].
Spock, Benjamin, and Morgan, Mary.

Maier, Thomas.

Hidalgo, Louise. “Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care at 65.”

Although Spock’s reputation has changed over time, Spock continued to be a leading authority on child care until his death. In 1990, the widespread move to the suburbs broke up families, increasing parents’ reliance on experts’ advice over grandparents’ advice. Spock’s optimistic book reflects the hopefulness of the post-war period and society’s focus on children. Because post-war... children more opportunities, parents became more concerned with providing the best for their children. At the same time,...

REVISED EDITIONS

Within a year of being published, The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care had already sold 750,000 copies, mostly by word-of-mouth advertising. Mothers appreciated that Spock was not condescending in his writing and instead very empathetic towards parents, acknowledging how likely it can be to care for children. Although he believed that much of children’s personality and behavior rested in the parents’ hands, he did not scare parents with this large responsibility of raising a “good” child, like earlier child care experts. Spock was popularized by mentions in household magazines and famous television shows, such as [5]. Spock quickly became a household name in the 1950s and is frequently credited for helping to raise a generation of “Spock babies” in the post-war period heavily relied on his advice; by 1956, The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care was already selling a million copies each year. [2]

By the mid-1960s, however, book sales quickly slowed due to Spock’s tarnished reputation after his publicized involvement in protests of the Vietnam War. Skepticism of his work increased, especially among colleagues, who criticized Spock for not being researcher and relying too heavily on anecdotal evidence in his book. [3]

By the late 1960s, Spock faced widespread criticism for endorsing an overly permissive parenting style. Many commentators blamed Spock for helping to create the counterculture of the 1960s. Critics believed the current youth were rebellious due to the freedoms they were brought up by Baby and Child Care. Spock, however, continued to defend himself, saying he had always been influential in family parenting. [4]

In the 1970s, with the rise of the women’s liberation movement, feminists began to publicly criticize Spock for the sexist philosophy apparent in his book. Spock was thus forced to confront his own ideas about gender roles and gender stereotyping. [5]

Near the end of his life, Spock’s changing ideas on nutrition were reflected in the popular edition of his book, where he advocated a vegan diet. Spock’s views, however, were criticized by some experts as being too extreme; critics were concerned that a vegan diet was likely to result in nutritional deficiencies for children unless carefully planned. [6]

LEGACY

Baby and Child Care popularized new ideas about child care in the years following World War II, encouraging flexibility, common sense, affection, and Freudian philosophy. Spock’s reassuring advice gave parents the confidence to use their best judgment. [7] Spock also masked Freudian explanations of children’s behavior in plainspoken language to avoid offending his readers, making Freud accessible to mainstream America. [8] In 1959, Look magazine praised Spock, noting that “perhaps no other single influence on an entire nation’s ideas about babies...-My views have been naturalness, common sense, reassurance, Sigmund Freud and even joy to parents all over the world.” [9]

Spock’s optimistic book reflects the hopefulness of the post-war period and society’s focus on children. Because post-war affluence helped parents give children more opportunities, parents became more concerned with providing the best for their children the widespread move to the suburbs broke up families, increasing parents’ reliance on experts’ advice over grandparents’ advice. [10]

Although Spock’s reputation has changed over time, Spock continued to be an influential leader in child care until his death. In 1990, Life magazine named Spock one of the 100 most important people of the twentieth century. Upon Spock’s death in 1998, two more editions were published. [11]
The book was at times controversial; Spock was accused of advocating permissiveness. Others criticized the book’s status as a bible for parents, bemoaning its influence on generations of children. On the other hand, many parents believe that the book increased their confidence; especially for women, Spock’s assertion that it was acceptable to be irritated or impatient on occasion debunked myths about the “perfect parent.” He also urged parents to be active in politics and their communities, to make their children’s world better.