

Research shows 50 years of motherhood manuals set standards too high for new mums

March 12 2012

New research at the University of Warwick into 50 years of motherhood manuals has revealed how despite their differences they have always issued advice as orders and set unattainably high standards for new mums and babies.

Angela Davis, from the Department of History at the University of Warwick, carried out 160 interviews with women of all ages and from all backgrounds to explore their [experiences](#) of motherhood for her new book, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in [England](#), 1945-2000*.

She spoke to women about the [advice](#) given by six childcare ‘experts’ who had all published popular books on the best way to raise a baby. Ranging from the 1940s to 2000, the authors were Frederick Truby King, John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott, Benjamin Spock, Penelope Leach and Gina Ford.

Dr Davis found although the advice from these experts changed over the decades, the one thing that didn’t change was the way it was delivered. Whatever the message for mothers, it was given as an order with a threat of dire consequences if mother or child failed to behave as expected.

Dr Davis said: “Despite all the differences in advice advocated by these childcare ‘bibles’ over the years, it is interesting that they all have striking similarities in terms of how the experts presented their advice.

Whatever the message, the advice was given in the form of an order and the authors highlighted extreme consequences if mothers did not follow the methods of childrearing that they advocated.

“Levels of behaviour these childcare manuals set for mothers and [babies](#) are often unattainably high, meaning women could be left feeling like failures when these targets were not achieved. Therefore while women could find supportive messages within childcare literature, some also found the advice more troubling.”

During her research Dr Davis often spoke to women who were different generations of the same family. She found when reflecting back upon the changes that they had seen from when they were babies, to when they had their own children, and then watching their children raise their own families, they were still unsure of what had really been the best approach.

Dr Davis said: “I was struck by the cyclical nature of these [childcare](#) bibles, we start out with quite strict rules laid down by Frederick Truby King, whose influence is very much evident in the 1940s and following decades. The principal thread running through his books are that babies need strict routines. We then find the advice becomes less authoritarian and regimented as we go through the decades and the influences of Bowlby, Winnicott, Spock and Leach.

“However, when we reach the 1990s when Gina Ford came to prominence, we come back to the strict regimented approach of Frederick Truby King several decades earlier. More than 50 years on and experts still cannot agree on the best way to approach [motherhood](#), and all this conflicting advice just leaves [women](#) feeling confused and disillusioned.”

More information: *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in*

England, 1945-2000 by Angela Davis is published by Manchester University Press.

Provided by University of Warwick

Citation: Research shows 50 years of motherhood manuals set standards too high for new mums (2012, March 12) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-03-years-motherhood-manuals-standards-high.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--