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## Random Reviews

Hello again. In this issue Ruth Hungerford takes a look at some of the numerous 'parenting books' available today and gives us her "pick of the bunch".

Remember that readers are invited to submit a review for Random Review, so if you've found a book, magazine or website related to pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, parenting (or whatever!) that you think other members would like, please send us a few lines. No special skills required — just tell us what you did or didn't like, what was useful and what made you laugh or cry. There doesn't have to be a particular theme or topic (that's why it's "Random" Review). We look forward to your letters and email. - Editor

## Parenting Books and Websites

*reviewed by Ruth Hungerford*

Parenting books are everywhere! They give advice on everything one could possibly imagine. And into this minefield of parenting literature ventures the unwary first-time mother or father-to-be, intent on being the best parent they can be and wanting to do everything "right." One of the first things they discover is that all the books have different and often conflicting advice and theories.

Many of the parenting books that are in the local bookshop tend to have an adversarial approach — that is they see the baby as a small terror that the parents have to train into shape. It's you against them! It's all about using the right "technique" to train your baby or your child and then all your problems will be solved. I, both personally and as a psychologist, have a lot of concerns about many of the so-called 'techniques' in many of these books as they are not based on sound evidence and can cause a lot of harm. They also forget one basic point - *that babies and children are people too, and they deserve to be treated with humanity and respect.*

Here are some books that I have found that encourage a parent to trust themselves, to listen to their baby, and to treat their baby as a person.

### **The Rhythm of Life: by Gaia Grant**

The Rhythm of Life reminds us that babies are thousand of years older than the latest parenting theories and that their needs are the same today as they were when the first babies were born.

Gaia Grant takes the reader on a journey through other cultures, past and present and her own experiences as a mother, reflecting on different ways of tuning in to your child and your instincts. Among others she explores the topics of touch, sleeping, crying, eating, discipline, play, and work encouraging the reader to stop and think about their own instincts, philosophy and style and the place they want their child to occupy in the world.

The book is well-written, divided into sensible chapters with lots of sub-headings for easy reading, interspersed with fascinating stories and information from Gaia's extensive research.

Gaia also shares her own experiences — some of which are examples of what she wishes she had done differently. One story in particular sticks in my mind as she relates how she tried, on the advice of psychologists and other "experts" and against her better judgement, to let her daughter cry herself to sleep. It's pretty heart-wrenching stuff as she relates how she dutifully stuck to the regime which went against her own philosophy and how she didn't get the perfect self-settling baby she believed she would get. She eventually went back to feeding her baby as she drifted off to sleep, enjoying those times, and not surprisingly her daughter eventually learned in her own time in her own way how to drift off to sleep herself.

There are some parts of the book that I was surprised at. For example, she doesn't fully explore all the issues surrounding breastfeeding, she talks about the different backpacks and frontpacks available but doesn't mention slings, and she never questions or discusses the medicalisation of childbirth (she chose a hospital birth), but you can't get everything into one book I guess!

This is a good book to read before all the others because it encourages you to get in touch with what you know is right for your baby and to have the confidence to follow your instincts. That way you can then read all those other books and pick out the bits that suit you and your baby and disregard the rest without feeling conflicted and confused.

ISBN 0 86824 770 7

Available at the Hamilton Public Library (Central and Chartwell), at the WHBA library, and at [www.whitcoulls.co.nz](http://www.whitcoulls.co.nz) for \$24.95 (NZ) excl postage.

## **The Continuum Concept: by Jean Liedloff**

I read this book when my baby was a few days old and it struck a chord somewhere inside. Although the thoughts, theories and ideas seemed so radically different to what I had read, heard and seen of parenting so far, somehow what the author was saying seemed so right. Approach this book with an open mind. It's not an easy read as the author is a bit more of a theoretical writer and sometimes you have to search a bit to figure out what she's getting at. But also bear in mind that she never intended the book to be a parenting "manual". So after that introduction are you all desperate to know what the book is about ?

Jean Liedloff spent 2 ½ years living with the Yequana, Stone Age Indians in the South American jungle. There she observed that the children of the Yequana seemed more content and aware of themselves and where they fitted in the world – that is, having a healthy self-esteem. She didn't see any "terrible twos" or unhappy babies and began to observe more closely to try and understand why. She formulated a theory which she called "the continuum concept" that had a number of principles. These include, among others, holding babies "in arms" until they learn to crawl and actively involving babies and children in day to day living so that they can observe and be part of the activities without being the centre of attention.

This is a book that I would challenge all parents (new, old, and expecting) to read. If you have any pre-conceived ideas about parenting and what babies are like then this book will take those ideas and turn them completely inside out. So be open to changing your views and you'll get a lot out of it.

ISBN 0 201 05071 4

Available at [www.continuum-concept.org](http://www.continuum-concept.org) for \$11.20 (USA) excl postage and at [www.whitcoulls.co.nz](http://www.whitcoulls.co.nz) for \$22.95 (NZ) excl postage.

## **The Natural Child: Parenting from the Heart, by Jan Hunt**

This book is a delight! It is essentially a collection of essays on parenting and education that Jan wrote for a parenting column. Each essay is fairly short (two or three pages) which makes it an ideal book for busy parents, as it only takes a few minutes to read one essay. The book is divided into six chapters, Parenting with empathy and trust, Living with a baby, Living with children, Guiding children, Helping children learn, and Advocating for children. Each chapter has between five and eight essays in it.

Jan's first essay "getting it about children" sets the scene for the book. In this essay she explains that "... people either get it or they don't. They either understand that children are human beings that deserve to be treated like human beings – or they just don't get it." (p.7). From this great beginning the book moves through essays on babies (e.g. "when a baby cries how should a parent respond?"), through to essays on living with children. Jan gives practical advice (e.g. "ten alternatives to punishment"). She also supports home or un-schooling and her arguments for un-schooling/home schooling make a lot of sense. Even if you choose to send your children to a mainstream school Jan's essays give an insight into how children learn and can help you to pay attention to what is happening for your child's into how children learn and can help you to pay attention to what is happening for your child's learning at different times. Her chapter on advocating for children, also reminds us adults that children are vulnerable members of our society and we must all take responsibility for protecting them.

What I particular enjoy about Jan's writing is that she gets to the heart of the matter quickly and simply. One of my favorite essays is "the parenting golden rule" (p 79). In this essay Jan uses the context of a husband and wife relationship to illustrate the how silly common disciplinary methods,

such as time out, physical punishment, counting, and consequences, can be . For example, *“the wife reminds her husband, who is reading the newspaper after dinner, that it’s his turn to do the dishes. He murmurs “Mm hmmm” and keeps on reading. The wife says, firmly, “you have to do the dishes now! Ten, nine, eight, seven ...” Will the husband feel like co-operating with his wife? Or will he conclude that he’s married a lunatic?”*

ISBN 0 86571 440 1. Available at [www.naturalchild.org](http://www.naturalchild.org) \$15.00 (USA) excl postage and [www.whitcoulls.co.nz](http://www.whitcoulls.co.nz) \$36.99 (NZ) excl postage.

## **Caring for babies at night: by Jane Elizabeth**

This compact book written by a mother of three who researches and teaches in child development, reviews research about babies’ sleeping patterns and provides practical ideas for working with your baby and their sleep needs or patterns. The author also surveyed 200 New Zealand families and reports some of those research findings in the book and gives a brief history of child-rearing patterns in New Zealand.

This book differs from some of the others in that it is shorter (great for busy parents who don’t have much time) and it is written by a New Zealander (always a bonus!) Most importantly it begins by determining what is normal for babies and why, then discusses ways that parents can work with baby and his or her needs, rather than assuming that all babies should “sleep through” and those that don’t are abnormal or naughty and need training to become “normal.”

One of the more interesting ‘titbits’ that Jane reports includes a study which found that newborn babies are so different from each other in their sleep needs that some sleep as little as 11 hours and others as much as 21½ hours over a 24-hour period! If you have a baby that doesn’t “sleep through” and everyone is hassling you about it, have a read of this book and be reassured that your baby is perfectly normal, and there are things you can do to ensure you get enough rest. If you do have a baby that “sleeps through”, count your blessings because the next one might be different!

ISBN 0 5827 18201, published by Longman Paul Auckland New Zealand, 1998.

## **Website review: [www.naturalchild.org](http://www.naturalchild.org)**

I really like this website. It is bright and colourful, regularly updated, and such a positive environment to be surfing in! The natural child project website was started by Jan Hunt and her son Jason in 1996. Their objective is “to help parents understand the critical importance of the earliest years of childhood, and to provide the kinds of information and encouraging support they need to treat their children with unconditional love and respect.” They have posted the following as their vision:

***“Our vision is a world in which all children are treated with dignity, respect, understanding, and compassion. In such a world, every child can grow into adulthood with a generous capacity for love and trust. Our society has no more urgent task.”***

The site covers information and advice on all aspects of attachment parenting (raising children with respect and trust), unschooling (trusting the child to set the “curriculum”), and child advocacy (including documents from children’s advocacy organizations around the world). In the Table of Contents, articles are listed by author as well as by topic. There is also a search engine for finding specific subjects.

They have a “Parenting Site of the Month”, which honors web sites that provide critical information and encouragement to parents. They also have the chapter *Common Objections to Homeschooling* from John Holt’s book *Teach Your Own*, as well as an entire book, *Whatever Happened to Mother? A Primer For Those Who Care About Children*, by Dr. James Kimmel. Another section entitled “Attachment Parenting Research”, reports on current scientific studies that confirm the long-term benefits of extended breastfeeding, family co-sleeping, responsiveness to crying, and other aspects of attachment parenting.

They also have an online shop where you can buy books on birth by some of the ‘giants’ in the natural birth field like Suzanne Arms (Immaculate Deception), Sheila Kitzinger, Michel Odent and others. They also have books on parenting, breastfeeding, and other things to buy like bumper stickers, parenting cards, Waldorf nursing dolls and so on. And, of course, they sell Jan Hunt’s book *The Natural Child: Parenting from the Heart* (reviewed above). The main downside of course is that this is a US site so the shipping costs can make things too expensive. But I find that I can get ideas of what books are good and then look them up on the Whitcoulls (NZ) site!

**About the reviewer:** Ruth Hungerford is a mother of two girls, both born at home as planned, and a self employed social researcher and the editor of the Waikato Home Birth Association Inc. Newsmagazine. She lives in Hamilton, New Zealand.