French Parents Don't Give In

100 parenting tips from Paris

Pamela Druckerman

Author of the No. 1 *Sunday Times* bestseller
French Children Don't Throw Food

About the Book

When *French Children Don't Throw Food* was published it caused a storm, fuelling newspaper headlines and discussion in social media for months. A smart and witty account of Pamela Druckerman's own experience of life as an expat mother of small children living in Paris, it struck a chord with many parents by asking how the French manage to raise such well-behaved children compared to ours.

Pamela Druckerman has now distilled her insights into this practical handbook, containing one hundred short and straightforward tips for making parenting that little bit easier and more pleasurable for the rest of us.

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20. Practise ‘la Pause’
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22. Try the talking cure
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24. Trust that your baby will ‘do his nights’
25. If you miss the window for the Pause, let your baby cry it out

Food: Bébé Gourmet

26. There are no ‘children’s’ foods
27. There’s just one snack a day
28. Don’t solve a crisis with a cookie
29. You are the keeper of the fridge
30. Make your child your sous-chef
31. Serve food in courses, vegetables first
32. Everyone eats the same thing
33. You just have to taste it
34. Keep broccoli in the mix
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40. Keep the day’s nutritional balance in mind
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For Simon
and the individuals

Introduction

When I wrote a book about what I'd learned raising three kids in France, I wasn't sure that anyone besides my mother would read it. Actually, I wasn't even convinced that she would make it all the way through (she tends to prefer fiction).

But, to my surprise, many non-relatives read the book too. For a while there were lots of angry articles about it. Who was I to insult British and American parenting – if there really is such a thing? Surely there must be lots of little French brats? Had I only researched rich Parisians? Was I extolling socialism – or, worse, bottle-feeding?

I'm the sort of person who hears any criticism of herself and immediately thinks: that's so true! I fell into a funk. But then I started getting emails from ordinary parents like me. (I've posted many of these on my website.) I quickly cheered up. They didn't think I'd falsely accused Anglophones of having a parenting problem. Like me, they were living that problem, and they were eager to hear about an alternative.

Some parents told me that the book validated what they had already been doing privately – and often guiltily. Others said they'd tried the book's methods on their kids, and that these really did work. (No one was more relieved to hear this than me.) Many asked for more tips and specifics, or for a version of the book – without my personal back-story and voyage of discovery – that they could give as a kind of manual to grandparents, partners and babysitters.

This is that book. The 100 tips are my attempt to distil the smartest and most salient principles I've learned from French parents and childcare experts. You don't have to live in Paris to apply them. You don't even have to like cheese. (Though you should have a look at the recipes at

the end of the book. They're a sampling of what kids in French nurseries eat, and they're delicious for grown-ups too.)

I believe in all 100 keys. But they're not my inventions, or my personal proclamations. And they're not all right for everyone. The French are very clear that every child is different, and that there are no recipes for raising kids. As you read the keys, you'll start to notice that behind many of the individual tips are a few guiding principles. One of these principles was radical for me, as an American: if family life is centred entirely on the children, it's not good for anyone, not even for the kids.

I think American parents have already worked this out. Statistics show that as this new intensive style of parenting has taken hold – the one that's popped up seemingly out of nowhere in the last twenty years – marital satisfaction has fallen. Parents are famously less happy than non-parents, and they become more unhappy with each additional child. (Working mothers in Texas apparently prefer housework to childcare.) The most depressing study of middle-class American families I've read describes how parents have gone from being authority figures to being 'valet[s] for the child'. Given the amount of cooking-to-order and schlepping around that goes on, I would add 'personal chefs' and 'chauffeurs' too.

The clincher is that we're starting to doubt whether this demanding style of parenting is even good for children. Many of our good intentions – from baby-brain-training videos to the all-consuming quest for the best university place – now seem to be of questionable value. Some experts call the first generation of kids to graduate from this brand of child-rearing 'teacups' because they're so fragile, and warn that the way we're defining success is making these children quite unhappy.

Obviously, French parents don't do everything right. And they don't all do the same things. The tips in this book refer

to conventional wisdom. They are what French parenting books, magazines and experts generally say you should do – and what most of the middle-class parents I know actually do do, or at least believe they should be doing. (Though a French friend of mine said she planned to give a copy to her brother, so he could 'become more French'.)

A lot of 'French' wisdom just feels like common sense. I've received letters from readers describing the overlaps between French parenting and Montessori, or the teachings of a Hungarian-born woman called Magda Gerber. Others assure me that we Americans used to bring up our kids this way too, before Reaganomics, the psychotherapy boom and that study which said that poor children don't hear enough words when they're little. (Let's just say that the American middle class massively overcompensated.)

But some French ideas have a power and elegance that's all their own. French parents widely believe that babies are rational, that you should combine a little bit of strictness with a lot of freedom, and that you should listen carefully to children, but not feel obliged to do everything they say. Their ability to move their offspring on from 'children's foods' is remarkable. Above all, the French think that the best parenting happens when you're calm. What's really neat is that, in France, you have an entire nation, in real time, trying to follow these principles. It's like a country-sized control group. Come and visit. You'll be amazed.

French parenting is particularly relevant to us now because it's a kind of mirror image of what's been happening in Britain and America. We Anglophones tend to think you should teach children cognitive skills such as reading as soon as possible; the French focus instead on 'soft' skills like socializing and empathy in the early years. We want our kids to be stimulated a lot; they think down-time is just as crucial. We often hesitate to frustrate a child; they think a child who can't cope with frustration will grow

up miserable. We're focused on the outcomes of parenting; they think the quality of the eighteen or so years you'll spend living together counts for a lot too. We tend to think that long-term sleep deprivation, routine tantrums, picky eating and constant interruptions are more or less inevitable when you have small children. They believe these things are – please imagine me saying this in a French accent – impossible.

I'm a journalist, not a parenting expert. So what really sold me on French principles was the data. Many things that French parents do by intuition, tradition or trial-and-error are exactly what the latest English-language research recommends. The French take for granted that you can teach little babies how to sleep through the night; that patience can be learned; that too much praise can be damaging for children; that you should become attuned to a baby's rhythms; that toddlers don't need flash cards; and that tasting foods makes you like those foods. Science is now telling us this too. (To keep the tips simple, I've listed many of the relevant studies in the bibliography here.)

Please take this book as inspiration, not doctrine. And be flexible. One of the French sayings I didn't have room for was 'You have to keep changing what you do.' Kids evolve quickly. As they do, you can keep the same guiding principles, but you may need to apply them differently. I hope that this book helps make that possible. Rather than giving lots of specific rules, it's more like a toolbox to help parents work things out on their own. As the old saying goes: don't give a man a filet de saumon à la vapeur de fenouil. *Just teach him how to fish.*

Pregnancy
A Croissant in the Oven

All pregnant women worry. You're making a human being, after all. Some of us can barely make dinner. But in Britain and America, worrying is practically an Olympic sport. We feel we must choose a parenting philosophy, and weigh up whether each bite of food we eat is in the baby's best interest. All this angst doesn't feel pleasant. But to many of us, it does feel necessary. We're signalling that there's nothing we won't sacrifice for our unborn child.

The French don't encourage this anxiety. Instead, in the word cloud of French pregnancy, terms like 'serenity', 'balance' and 'zen' keep popping up. Mothers-to-be are expected to signal their competence by showing how calm they are, and by demonstrating that they still experience pleasure. This small shift in emphasis makes a very big difference.