

Think Parenting Is No Fun? You're Not Alone.

Why our efforts to make our kids happy are making us miserable BY KATE STONE LOMBARDI



Does raising kids give you anxiety? Parents today make extreme efforts to give their bundles of joy every possible advantage—and the result isn't always pretty.

Browse the parenting section on Amazon, and you'll find more than 100,000 books offering guidance on everything from boosting your infant's IQ to raising a future sports champion. Jennifer Senior has some additional advice for moms and dads: Don't read those books.

"When I look at that shelf, I don't see help," says Senior. "I see anxiety. I see a giant kid-colored monument to our collective panic."

Senior, a Chappaqua native, is the author of *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*. Perhaps it's a paradox that Senior's new book is also filed under "parenting." But Senior, a contributing editor at *New York Magazine* and the mother of a 6-year-old, is not interested in telling people how to raise their children. Rather, she's concerned with the enormous stress that modern parenting takes on today's moms and dads.

Generations of parents have dealt with wailing infants, sleep deprivation, and other challenges that come with raising a family. As Senior illustrates in her book, today's parents seem to be uniquely mired in confusion and angst. They've adopted an intensive, exhausting style of raising their children. At the same time, parents—especially mothers—constantly question themselves on whether they're doing the right thing.

This self-doubting, hyper-parenting approach is taking its toll, which Senior documents through interviews, as well as through an impressive range of research.

The good news is that Senior is not piling on—making parents feel bad about one more thing. Instead, she looks at how we've gotten here, and then explores how parents might be a little easier on themselves.

How dramatically have things changed? Childhood, as we think of it, is a relatively new concept. Not that many generations ago, Senior explains, children worked like adults—on farms, in factories, in mines. Kids were economic assets, not innocents to be protected. But with the introduction of child labor laws at the end of the 19th century, and particularly after World War II, childhood was redefined. It became the parents' job to shield their children, providing financial and physical security. Instead of kids working for the family, parents began working to make

Understanding Toddlers

"Now, Jayden, stop crying. You can't have the cookie now, but you can have it after lunch, okay?"

Jayden is 2. What's wrong with this conversation? For starters, Jayden has a toddler brain. And that brain isn't equipped for understanding negotiation. Jayden's prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain that plans, reasons, and controls impulse—is barely developed.

Now he's on the ground, howling. Mom is losing it. Parents of toddlers have countless moments like this. Understanding brain development can help, says Jennifer Senior. A child Jayden's age simply doesn't have the ability to understand delayed gratification. Toddlers live entirely in the present.

"If you say 'No, you can't have that cookie now, you can have it in 10 minutes,' it's a catastrophe for them, because they don't know what 10 minutes from now means," Senior said in a 2014 NPR interview.

Accepting the limits of toddlers' capacity for rational discussion can help ease the frustration for parents. As to the "Okay?" tacked on to the discussion? As Senior told NPR, "No 2- or 3-year-old has ever looked up at their mother or father and said, 'Oh yeah, you're right. That's a really good point.'"

their kids happy. So (relatively) new is this concept, that the word "parenting" didn't even come into use as a verb until the 1970s. In her book, Senior quotes sociologist Viviana A. Zelizer, who describes today's children as "economically worthless but emotionally priceless."

Children may not have financial value, but they're viewed as future assets, assets that require a great deal of investment—cultivated in endless lessons, classes, and sports practices. The stress of getting it right—from the perfect prenatal diet to the right college acceptance—has reached unprecedented levels.

"It's almost like people are now seeing their children like a job," says Jodi Rosenwasser, the owner of Jodi's Gym, with locations in Westchester and Manhattan offering children's gymnastics programs. With more than 30 years in the business, Rosenwasser says she's seen parents become increasingly anxious and exhausted. "Parents today are feeling like they need to impart and do everything exactly right."

For many couples, the transition to parenthood is not the joyful, existential fulfillment they'd imagined. In her book, Senior quotes studies revealing that children generate more conflict in a marriage than anything else. Sure, kids bring increased financial tension and a completely readjusted sex and social life. But parents fight the most—and the most aggressively—about the division of household labor, Senior explains.

Why? Senior argues that we're still deeply conflicted about women in the workplace. She notes a 2013 Pew poll on "Breadwinner Moms." Part of the poll reports that a record number of Americans were more accepting of women out-earning their husbands; in fact, four out of 10 mothers are the primary or sole breadwinners in a family. Yet another question



STAYING SANE

Jennifer Senior has some advice on dealing with parenting stress:

Stop feeling guilty. Parents today spend more time with their children than any other generation. That includes working mothers, who log more hours with their kids than moms did in 1965, when most women weren't even in the workforce.

Avoid judgmental parenting books and unforgiving Mommy blogs. People have raised kids since time in memoriam without "expert" advice.

Beware of parents who are especially dogmatic in their child-rearing philosophy. "The more tyrannizing a fellow parents' point of view, the more suspicious you should be of what they've got to prove," she says.

Take heart: Research from 1.7 million Gallup surveys (collected between 2008 and 2012) shows that parents with children ages 15 or younger experience more highs, as well as lows, than those without children. Parents also report greater feelings of meaning and reward than non-parents. It isn't always fun, but the moments of joy are transcendent.

reveals that 51 percent of Americans think children are better off if the mother stays home and doesn't hold a job.

The two responses, Senior says, are impossible to reconcile, and the ambivalence they reflect is played out in parental arguments in kitchens and family rooms all over the country. "Without scripts telling us who does what, couples fight," she says.

Today's 24/7 technology ratchets up the stress even further. This generation of parents is the first with smartphones. Having WiFi in the palm of your hand is both a blessing and a curse. Technology has allowed parents far more work flexibility, often with the option to work from home. But it also means constant distraction—either from work deadlines or from children.

That's familiar territory for Jen Yoel, a North Salem mother of three school-aged children, who works from home for an au pair agency. "It's hard, because you're never off—you're always glued to the phone," Yoel explains. "I try to be focused on the kids when they're home, but if I can sneak away for an email or a phone call, I'll do it." Still, she says, "when you're not 100 percent focused, they know it."

Yoel ferries her children to gymnastics, music lessons, soccer, lacrosse, basketball, and Kumon enrichment courses. She squeezes in business calls from the car, and carries her iPad so she can work during her kids' activities.

As most Westchester parents know, the Yoel family's range of activities is nothing unusual. Senior calls it "concerted cultivation." Parents often exhaust themselves in trying to give their children every advantage. The author isn't revisiting the "overscheduled child" argument. She's putting it in context: Today's parents are trying to prepare their kids for an uncertain future.

The frantic rounds of Mandarin classes or private pitching coaches or AP tutors aren't necessarily a reflection of over-privileged parents trying to produce trophy children. In many cases they are, Senior says in her book, "a legitimate fear response, a reasonable and deeply internalized reaction to a shrinking economic pie." Parents worry that an average child is no longer enough.

Julie Ross, executive director of childhood education organization Parenting Horizons, sees this constantly. "Parents are uncomfortable living with the unknown and they're trying to use every means at their disposal to 'ensure' that their kids will be successful," says Ross, who offers parenting workshops and seminars in her Manhattan office. "I consistently tell the parents that I work with, 'You are at your worst as a parent when you are fearful of the future.'"

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Moms and dads serving as cheerleaders, playmates, homework tutors, resumé builders, and clear-inghouses for all manner of enrichments is a relatively new phenomenon. The effect it will have on children is uncertain. But the toll on parents—the "no fun" from Senior's book title—is clear.

"Mothers come in looking so unhappy, with no smile, no joy, no light in their eyes, and I think they're so exhausted," says Jodi Rosenwasser. "I feel really bad for them."

So what's a parent to do? During her TED Talk, Senior presented an idea that sounds shocking—if not blasphemous—in our current kid-centric culture: Rethink your goal of a raising a happy child. Instead, focus on creating productive and moral kids, hoping "that happiness will come to them through the good that they do, their accomplishments, and the love that they feel from us," she said.

Actually, that's a pretty retro concept. It was popular back when parents didn't expect nearly as much of themselves. Back before we worried endlessly about children's "self-esteem." Back before the word "parenting" became a verb. Somehow, the species has survived. **W**

Kate Stone Lombardi is a journalist and the author of *The Mama's Boy Myth*. She's grateful her kids grew up when *Dr. Spock's Baby and Childcare* was the only parenting book on her shelf.