



"Going into this, I never would have thought we would parent the way we do," she says. "I thought other parents who did this were crazy."

A lot of people might use the same word to describe the child-rearing philosophy Joanne subscribes to. It's called [attachment parenting](#), and its rise over the past two decades has helped redefine the modern relationship between mother and baby. It's not just staunch devotees like Joanne; the prevalence of this philosophy has shifted mainstream American parenting toward a style that's more about parental devotion and sacrifice than about raising self-sufficient kids.

If you've had a baby in the 21st century, chances are good that you've encountered *The Baby Book*, the 767-page tome responsible for popularizing attachment parenting. First published in 1992, *The Baby Book* is now in print in 18 languages, with more than 1.5 million copies sold. Chances are also good that, consciously or not, you've practiced some derivative of attachment parenting or been influenced by its message that mothers and babies evolved to be close to each other.

While the concept sounds simple, the practicalities of attachment parenting ask a great deal of mothers. The three basic tenets are breast-feeding (sometimes into toddlerhood), co-sleeping (inviting babies into the parental bed or pulling a bassinet alongside it) and "baby wearing," in which infants are literally attached to their mothers via slings. Attachment-parenting dogma also says that every baby's whimper is a plea for help and that no infant should ever be left to cry.

This demanding brand of child rearing has ignited a philosophical battle that rages within the parenting community. At least two books refuting the principles of attachment parenting have already been published this year, on the heels of 2011's blockbuster *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, a book about why parents should demand more from their children and not the other way around. In a way, the arguments for and against attachment parenting mirror questions about family and work that still divide America five decades after the advent of modern feminism, when nearly half the U.S. workforce is made up of women. Ann Romney, wife of the presumptive Republican nominee for President, became known to many voters because of an attack she recently endured for being a stay-at-home mom.

Attachment parenting says that the more time babies spend in their mothers' arms, the better the chances they will turn out to be well-adjusted children. It's not a big leap from there to an inference that can send anxious moms into guilt-induced panic: that any time away from their baby will have lifelong negative consequences. The debate and the anxiety have become a self-perpetuating cycle. So is attachment parenting a misogynist plot to take women out of the workplace and put them back in the home full time? Or is it a way to encourage mothers and babies to form loving bonds, which science has shown is beneficial to long-term emotional health and well-being?

To answer these questions, it seems appropriate to ask the person who wrote the attachment-parenting bible, *The Baby Book*, which turns 20 this year. For all the book's popularity and influence, surprisingly little is known about its author, Dr. William Sears, even though he has appeared on countless television shows, wrote a now defunct but long-running column

## The Man Who Remade Motherhood

By Kate Pickert

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Joanne Beaugard is nothing so much as she is a mother. When she and her husband had trouble conceiving, Joanne quit her job as an accountant to focus full time on getting pregnant. When she did, she chose to give birth at home, without pain medication. Then, for months, Beaugard sat on the couch in her Denver-area living room, nursing her infant from sunup to sundown. She nursed much of the night as well, since the baby slept in bed with Beaugard and her husband Daniel, a software engineer.

When Beaugard got pregnant with her second child, she continued breast-feeding her daughter. This led to a hormonal release that caused contractions and nearly sent her into premature labor. But Beaugard persevered, and the second baby, born March 2, now breast-feeds alongside his big sister, who's nearly 2.

Joanne and Daniel, who've been married since 2004 and "did the yuppie thing for years," according to Joanne, ended much of their social life when they became parents. There are no date nights. Joanne doesn't get away for afternoons to have lunch with her girlfriends. In fact, the only time Joanne has ever left either of her children in anyone else's care was when she was in labor with her second child.

in *Parenting* magazine and has written, with his wife, a whole library of parenting literature.

It turns out that many of Sears' views are less extreme than his critics (and even many of his followers) realize. And attachment parenting is rooted just as much in Sears' childhood as in his experience as a pediatrician. The origins for *The Baby Book*, in fact, can be found in 1950s St. Louis and deep in the Venezuelan jungle.

Sears, an impressively fit 72-year-old with a deep tan, was raised an "overweight beefeater" in the Midwest. He was born in Miles Davis' hometown of Alton, Ill., about 20 miles north of St. Louis. Sears' father left when he was a month old, forcing him and his mother to move in with his maternal grandparents. While his mother worked as the manager of a dress shop, Sears went to Mass every day and attended Catholic school. "My mother knew I needed discipline, and the nuns made me toe the mark," says Sears. "I still remember Sister Mary Boniface putting her hand on my shoulder, pinching it and saying, 'You behave.'"

Sears mowed lawns and found odd jobs as the neighborhood handyman to help pay his school tuition. "The little old ladies loved me," he says. "At the time, honestly, I thought my childhood sucked. But looking back, I wouldn't change a thing. I think it gave me an appreciation for work ethic." Sears' mother, wanting her son to have positive male role models, paired him with Boy Scout leaders, coaches (Sears was captain of his high school football team) and pastors and priests. This last group was particularly influential.

After he graduated from high school, Sears entered the University of St. Mary of the Lake Mundelein Seminary to become a priest. He studied there for three years, but eventually the desire to have his own family grew strong enough that he dropped out. He graduated from St. Louis University in 1962 and enrolled in medical school there, working as a biology teacher at an all-girls Catholic school to earn money for his tuition. While a senior medical student, Sears was called one day to the bedside of a patient in cardiac arrest. Also on the scene was a new nurse at St. Louis University Hospital.

Her name was Martha, and she had been raised about 30 miles west of Bill's hometown, in St. Peter's, Mo. In addition to sharing a faith — "Growing up, I didn't know any non-Catholics," she says — Martha shared Bill's experience of a difficult childhood. According to Martha, her mother was a diagnosed schizophrenic from a family plagued by mental illness. Peace was hard to find. "There was a lot of anger in my home, a lot of outright fighting, physical punching and stuff like that," says Martha. When she was 4, Martha's father, "the sane parent," she says, died in an accidental drowning. Despite the turmoil, Martha eventually managed to graduate from a Catholic nursing school in St. Louis and met Bill the following year. They got engaged three months later and married six months after that.

The Searses had their first child in 1967, but the couple strayed from their Catholic faith, which caused their marriage to falter. Martha moved out briefly and stopped wearing her wedding ring. Eventually, though, the Searses recommitted to each other and to their faith — this time as evangelicals. Still, when it came to parenting, partly because of her childhood, Martha felt unsure

of herself. "We had Dr. Spock," she says. "But when I got to the part where he says if your kid is screaming and wants to get out of the crib, don't get him, let him throw up, I said, 'I'm done with this book.'"

The advice reminded Martha of a relative she knew as a child who had been "a colicky, fussy baby," she says. "And back then, they didn't know what to do with these babies, and she was just left to cry in her crib," which Martha says she believes "damaged her brain." As an adult, this relative married and had children but suffers from mental illness. "That almost is like Exhibit A for the cry-it-out approach," says Martha, referring to a commonly practiced method, developed by Dr. Richard Ferber, of allowing babies to cry for controlled periods in order to get them to sleep through the night. After seeing all this, how could Martha not tell everyone she knew — and millions she didn't — never to let their babies cry? "You could say I'm reacting to my background," she says.

Sears says on his website that "excessive" crying over "prolonged periods" can damage an infant's brain. He mentions that the cry-it-out approach has the potential to cause "harmful neurologic effects that may have permanent implications on the development of sections of their brain." Sears cites a number of academic studies to back up his point.

A close look at the research, however, does not actually provide evidence that bouts of crying associated with sleep training affect brain development. Several papers Sears cites involved studies of rats. At least one looked at babies who suffered from cases of severe neglect or trauma, perhaps like what Martha witnessed as a child but hardly representative of typical parenting. Other research showed that babies who cry excessively are more likely to suffer from, for example, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, but it's not clear if they cry because of underlying neurological problems that later manifest as ADHD or whether the crying causes the ADHD.

The science on attachment is also easily misunderstood and misused. The father of attachment theory is John Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst who in the mid — 20th century studied orphans and children abandoned by their mothers. The difference between children without consistent relationships with parents (or parental figures of any kind) and well-parented children who are fed formula (instead of breast milk) and put in bouncy seats (instead of slings) is huge. The former, science says, are headed for developmental and emotional problems. There's no science to show that the latter will turn out any different from children raised via the attachment-parenting methods championed by Sears. But it is easy for a mother reading Sears to confuse the two and believe she is doing irreparable harm by not holding her baby constantly and ensuring the infant never cries for more than a moment.

Sears' followers trust him as much because of his role as a father as because of the four decades he's spent in medicine. The Searses have eight children, ages 20 to 45. So much parenting has given them a wide range of experiences. They have a son with Down syndrome and an adopted daughter. Martha birthed four children in hospitals and three at home. Their first three babies were "easy"; their fourth had terrible colic. The three oldest boys are all doctors. The Searses have seen it all, the thinking goes, and they write extensively about their own parenting in their books.

In addition to their experiences at home, Sears says, "We use our practice as a laboratory," describing his advice as "what works for most parents most of the time." But Sears actually came up with his particular brand of mother-baby closeness after reading a book called *The Continuum Concept*, written by Jean Liedloff and published in 1975. In the early 1950s, Liedloff, born and raised in Manhattan, dropped out of Cornell University and was traveling around Europe, working as a part-time model. On an impulse, she accepted an invitation to travel to Venezuela on a diamond-plundering expedition. After seven months in the jungle, Liedloff returned to New York with about \$1,000 in profits. She returned to the Venezuelan jungle four more times over 2 years.

During her travels, Liedloff watched indigenous people in the South American jungle care for their babies. She observed that the infants were carried all the time and seemed to cry less than their Western counterparts. Back in New York, Liedloff turned this observation into *The Continuum Concept*, writing that the jungle children (she called them "little angels") "were uniformly well-behaved: never fought, were never punished, always obeyed happily and instantly." In contrast, she wrote, Western parents will leave a baby to cry "until its heart is broken and it gives up, goes numb, and becomes a 'good baby.'"

Liedloff's general theory was that American parents had become divorced from their natural instincts, to the detriment of their babies. "We read the book and thought, Well, this is neat," says Sears. The predecessor to the blockbuster *Baby Book* was Sears' *Creative Parenting: How to Use the New Continuum Concept to Raise Children Successfully from Birth to Adolescence*, published in 1982.

Despite her deep interest in the connections between mothers and babies, Liedloff never had children. She died in 2011 on a houseboat in Sausalito, Calif., where she lived with her cat, Tulip.

Fans and critics of attachment parenting can agree on two things: there has been a sea change in American child rearing over the past 20 years, and no one has been a more enthusiastic cheerleader for it than Sears. Slings and carriers, like the kind Sears sells on his website [AskDrSears.com](http://AskDrSears.com) are now on every list of must-have baby gear. Breast-feeding is more popular than at any other time since the baby-formula boom of the 1950s. And despite public-health warnings against it, in 2005, according to the CDC, 19% of 2-month-old babies slept in beds with their mothers, a phenomenon almost unheard of 20 years ago.

"So many of the ideas of attachment parenting are in the culture even if you don't believe in Dr. Sears per se," says Pamela Druckerman, author of *Bringing Up Bébé*, a new book on French parenting, which Druckerman says demands far less of mothers than its American counterpart. "This is a new common sense."

Parental common sense has a way of evolving, usually in a reactionary way. Dr. Benjamin Spock first published his volume *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care* in 1945, but before that, child-rearing conventional wisdom was based on the book *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, written by James Watson and published in 1928. Watson's methods sound almost criminally neglectful by today's standards. He warned of "the dangers lurking in a mother's kiss," urging parents to shake their

children's hands in the morning and put their children out in backyards alone inside fences. Spock pushed this aside in his book, telling parents to trust their instincts, writing, "You know more than you think you do." The same kind of reactionary behavior happens in parents themselves. The Searses promote a style of parenting that's the opposite of what they grew up with; Liedloff did too. In *The Continuum Concept*, she reveals that she was raised by her grandmother. "Turning to my mother always ended in my being hurt," she wrote.

Although Sears' guidelines for round-the-clock maternal devotion have drawn ire, it's hard to argue with his overall message that babies who are cuddled feel secure. He surely deserves credit for promoting breast-feeding and the idea that the bond between mother and baby is critical. At the same time, though, his homespun language and sometimes vague or contradictory statements can muddy things, leaving mothers to overlook the nuances and take an all-or-nothing approach.

Mothers seem divided into several camps. Some, like Joanne Beauregard, fully commit to the Sears model, attend to every whimper, stay home and happily cuddle their babies 24 hours a day. Sears has become a hero to this set. [Jamie Lynne Grumet](#), a 26-year-old mother of two in Los Angeles who breast-feeds her 3-year-old son, says of Sears, "He has a very gentle spirit, and I find what he's saying to be nonjudgmental and relevant." Other mothers — particularly those who work or have multiple children — endorse the idea of maternal closeness (who doesn't?) but think Sears is out of his mind. Modern parenting literature, after all, is full of advice about getting babies on manageable schedules, a Sears no-no, and baby stores are brimming with devices in which parents can park their babies to get much needed breaks.

A third category includes mothers caught in the middle. These parents try to achieve Sears' ideal of nursing, baby wearing and co-sleeping but fall short for some reason and find themselves immobilized by their seeming parental inadequacy. They suffer from what two New York City parenting consultants call "posttraumatic Sears disorder."

Maybe these parents just take Sears too literally. "When somebody says attachment parenting, what comes into my mind is a mother with a newborn on one hip, a 2-year-old on the other hip and a 3-year-old on her back. And she hasn't taken a shower in a week and a half," says Jim Sears, the Searses' oldest son. "My parents really didn't do that, even though a lot of their readers ended up doing that."

In his newest books, Sears added sections devoted to balancing mothers' and babies' needs. This was, he says, in response to the bleary-eyed moms who streamed into his pediatric practice after the first edition of *The Baby Book* was published. Sears tells mothers, "Do the best you can with the resources you have"; he tells husbands to book massages for their wives and shoo them out of the house so they can get a break from parenting.

Much of Sears' instruction for fathers revolves around the supportive role they can play for their wives. Do the dishes so mom can focus on breast-feeding, is a typical piece of advice. But Sears also encourages "attachment fathering," pointing out that dads can wear their babies just as well as mothers.

Still, it's easy to see shades of sexism or naiveté — which one, it's hard to say — in Sears' chapters on working and parenting. Even Jim, who's divorced and stars on the television show *The Doctors*, says that before his wife had children, she "was very career-oriented," but this changed "once the baby was on the way and the hormones kicked in." Jim's ex-wife gave up the corporate career she had before their children were born for a less demanding job that allowed her to bring her babies to work. Sears also encourages mothers to start home businesses instead of heading to the office every day and describes his baby sling as a convenient hands-free device that's "work and wear." He says about 60% of mothers with children in his pediatric practice work outside their homes, and indeed, some career mothers are drawn to an attachment-parenting model that helps them get close to their babies when they finally come home from work.

But does Sears really believe it's O.K. for moms to work? A 1997 evangelical version of *The Baby Book* called *The Complete Book of Christian Parenting & Child Care*, which the Seases say they wrote to counter the fire-and-brimstone, discipline-oriented message evangelical parents were used to, includes a chapter called "Going Back to Work?" that says, "[Some] mothers choose to go back to their jobs quickly simply because they don't understand how disruptive that is to the well-being of their babies. So many babies in our culture are not being cared for in the way God designed, and we as a nation are paying the price."

Sears says his thinking has evolved since then. He says the calls he gets from reporters almost every week asking about the plight of the working mom annoy him — immensely — and that such critiques are a gross oversimplification of his message. Yet alongside advice about balance, the Seases also suggest mothers quit their jobs and borrow money to make up the difference. The couple subsidized their sons' wives so they could stay home with the Sears grandchildren. Says Martha: "It was the least we could do."

A rusty, netless basketball hoop hangs over the garage of the two-story Orange County, California, house Bill and Martha bought in 1989. Inside the house, a deep L-shaped sofa dominates the living room, and most afternoons classical music plays on a plastic boom-box CD player near Sears' writing "office," a corner of the living space taken up by a messy wooden desk. The rest of the home is not much neater. The most striking feature of the house, which is perched on a bluff above the beach, is an unobstructed view of the Pacific Ocean.

It can be hard to square Sears' relatively modest environs with his empire, which includes not just his books but also his for-profit website and a wide variety of other baby-related commercial ventures. Sears is an endorsement machine, lending his seal of approval to a huge array of products, including nutritional supplements, baby food and even an online retailer of wild Alaskan salmon. He and his family — he has outsourced some of the Sears empire to his adult children — also earn fees from the sale of various attachment-parenting paraphernalia, including breast-feeding-privacy shawls, baby-carrying slings and a popular bassinet that attaches directly to the side of an adult bed. (You would never catch Sears endorsing many of the objects people traditionally associate with babies, like strollers, bottles or cribs, the last of which Sears says puts infants "behind bars.")

In 1997 Sears was diagnosed with Stage 3 colon cancer. He is in remission after surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, but ever since, he's been obsessed with his health. He has "the blood pressure of a youngster," he says. Sears says he takes no prescription drugs and subsists on a daily diet that revolves around a smoothie packed with fruit, vegetables and supplements. He exercises at least two hours a day.

Sears is mostly retired, but he spends two afternoons per week at his practice. The reception area of the office has a giant skylight, making the space airy and sunny. There are Winnie the Pooh blinds on the windows and various Sears products and books on display at the front desk.

When he's on duty, Sears wears running sneakers and blue scrubs with DR. BILL stitched on the front. He has to go by his first name to differentiate himself from Dr. (Bob) Sears, his son who practices there full time, and Dr. (Jim) Sears, who drops by the office when he's not in Los Angeles taping his television show. The elder Sears moves fast when he's working, grabbing charts and rushing from one patient room to the next. Many of the parents who bring their children to Sears live in Capistrano Beach, Calif., where the practice is located, but others travel an hour by car from Los Angeles or San Diego. Dr. Bill also does consultations by Skype for patients as far away as Europe.

On a recent afternoon, a 6-month-old baby named Layla Beck was stripped down to a cloth diaper and squirming on her mother's lap as she waited for her checkup. When Sears appeared, he pressed on Layla's tiny belly and listened to her heartbeat without the baby's ever leaving the arms of her mother Sarah. Meanwhile, Sarah talked to Sears about eating (Layla was exclusively breast-fed), sleeping (the baby slept in the bed with her parents) and immunization (she was considering whether to vaccinate Layla).

With his school-age patients, Sears begins each exam with a hug. This can seem awkward, but it almost always ends with the child smiling. The day he examined Layla, he also saw the children of an evangelical homeschooling family, an 18-month-old baby with a mysterious autoimmune disorder and a school-age boy suffering from depression. Leaving the exam room of the boy, Sears muttered, "That's the kind of case where you really wish you had more time."

When the day was over, Sears headed home. There, he was met by his granddaughter Ashton, who had been complaining of a rash on her face. Sears cupped Ashton's face in his palm, whipped out a pen light and shone it on her cheek. "Grandpa's going to give you some cream for that, O.K.?"

Soon Martha arrived home from Mass. She led the family back to the Catholic Church four years ago and attends services every day. Sears greeted his wife, who headed toward the kitchen. Before long, three generations of the Sears family settled at the table for dinner.

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