

# Why French Parents Are Superior

By **PAMELA DRUCKERMAN**

When my daughter was 18 months old, my husband and I decided to take her on a little summer holiday. We picked a coastal town that's a few hours by train from Paris, where we were living (I'm American, he's British), and booked a hotel room with a crib. Bean, as we call her, was our only child at this point, so forgive us for thinking: How hard could it be?

We ate breakfast at the hotel, but we had to eat lunch and dinner at the little seafood restaurants around the old port. We quickly discovered that having two restaurant meals a day with a toddler deserved to be its own circle of hell.

Bean would take a brief interest in the food, but within a few minutes she was spilling salt shakers and tearing apart sugar packets. Then she demanded to be sprung from her high chair so she could dash around the restaurant and bolt dangerously toward the docks.

Our strategy was to finish the meal quickly. We ordered while being seated, then begged the server to rush out some bread and bring us our appetizers and main courses at the same time. While my husband took a few bites of fish, I

made sure that Bean didn't get kicked by a waiter or lost at sea. Then we switched. We left enormous, apologetic tips to compensate for the arc of torn napkins and calamari around our table.

After a few more harrowing restaurant visits, I started noticing that the French families around us didn't look like they were sharing our mealtime agony. Weirdly, they looked like they were on vacation. French toddlers were sitting contentedly in their high chairs, waiting for their food, or eating fish and even vegetables. There was no shrieking or whining. And there was no debris around their tables.

Though by that time I'd lived in France for a few years, I couldn't explain this. And once I started thinking about French parenting, I realized it wasn't just mealtime that was different. I suddenly had lots of questions. Why was it, for example, that in the hundreds of hours I'd clocked at French playgrounds, I'd never seen a child (except my own) throw a temper tantrum? Why didn't my French friends ever need to rush off the phone because their kids were demanding something? Why hadn't their living rooms been taken over by teepees and toy kitchens, the way ours had?

Soon it became clear to me that quietly and en masse, French parents were achieving outcomes that created a whole differ-

ent atmosphere for family life. When American families visited our home, the parents usually spent much of the visit refereeing their kids' spats, helping their toddlers do laps around the kitchen island, or getting down on the floor to build Lego villages. When French friends visited, by contrast, the grownups had coffee and the children played happily by themselves.

By the end of our ruined beach holiday, I decided to figure out what French parents were doing differently. Why didn't French children throw food? And why weren't their parents shouting? Could I change my wiring and get the same results with my own offspring?

Driven partly by maternal desperation, I have spent the last several years investigating French parenting. And now, with Bean 6 years old and twins who are 3, I can tell you this: The French aren't perfect, but they have some parenting secrets that really do work.

I first realized I was on to something when I discovered a 2009 study, led by economists at Princeton, comparing the child-care experiences of similarly situated mothers in Columbus, Ohio, and Rennes, France. The researchers found that American moms considered it more than twice as unpleasant to deal with their kids. In a different study by the

same economists, working mothers in Texas said that even housework was more pleasant than child care.

Rest assured, I certainly don't suffer from a pro-France bias. *Au contraire*, I'm not even sure that I like living here. I certainly don't want my kids growing up to become sniffy Parisians.

But for all its problems, France is the perfect foil for the current problems in American parenting. Middle-class French parents (I didn't follow the very rich or poor) have values that look familiar to me. They are zealous about talking to their kids, showing them nature and reading them lots of books. They take them to tennis lessons, painting classes and interactive science museums.

Yet the French have managed to be involved with their families without becoming obsessive. They assume that even good parents aren't at the constant service of their children, and that there is no need to feel guilty about this. "For me, the evenings are for the parents," one Parisian mother told me. "My daughter can be with us if she wants, but it's adult time." French parents want their kids to be stimulated, but not all the time. While some American toddlers are getting Mandarin tutors and preliteracy training, French kids are—by design—toddling around by themselves.

I'm hardly the first to point out that middle-class America has a parenting problem. This problem has been painstakingly diagnosed, critiqued and named: overparenting, hyperparenting, helicopter parenting, and my personal favorite, the kindergarchy. Nobody seems to like the relentless, unhappy pace of American parenting, least of all parents themselves.



*Nicolas Héron for The Wall Street Journal*

Delphine Porcher with daughter Pauline. The family's daily rituals are an apprenticeship in learning to wait.

Of course, the French have all kinds of public services that help to make having kids more appealing and less stressful. Parents don't have to pay for preschool, worry about health insurance or save for college. Many get monthly cash allotments—wired directly into their bank accounts—just for having kids.

But these public services don't explain all of the differences. The French, I found, seem to have a whole different framework for raising kids. When I asked French parents how they disciplined their children, it took them a few beats just to understand what I

meant. "Ah, you mean how do we *educate* them?" they asked. "Discipline," I soon realized, is a narrow, seldom-used notion that deals with punishment. Whereas "educating" (which has nothing to do with school) is something they imagined themselves to be doing all the time.

One of the keys to this education is the simple act of learning how to wait. It is why the French babies I meet mostly sleep through the night from two or three months old. Their parents don't pick them up the second they start crying, allowing the babies to learn how to fall back asleep. It is also why French toddlers will sit happily at a restaurant. Rather than snacking all day like American children, they mostly have to wait until mealtime to eat. (French kids consistently have three meals a day and one snack around 4 p.m.)

One Saturday I visited Delphine Porcher, a pretty labor lawyer in her mid-30s who lives with her family in the suburbs east of Paris. When I arrived, her husband was working on his laptop in the living room, while 1-year-old Aubane napped nearby. Pauline, their 3-year-old, was sitting at the kitchen table, completely absorbed in the task of plopping cupcake batter into little wrappers. She somehow resisted the temptation to eat the batter.

Delphine said that she never set out specifically to teach her

kids patience. But her family's daily rituals are an ongoing apprenticeship in how to delay gratification. Delphine said that she sometimes bought Pauline candy. (Bonbons are on display in most bakeries.) But Pauline wasn't allowed to eat the candy until that day's snack, even if it meant waiting many hours.

When Pauline tried to interrupt our conversation, Delphine said, "Just wait two minutes, my little one. I'm in the middle of talking." It was both very polite and very firm. I was struck both by how sweetly Delphine said it and by how certain she seemed that Pauline would obey her. Delphine was also teaching her kids a related skill: learning to play by themselves. "The most important thing is that he learns to be happy by himself," she said of her son, Aubane.

It's a skill that French mothers explicitly try to cultivate in their kids more than American mothers do. In a 2004 study on the parenting beliefs of college-educated mothers in the U.S. and France, the American moms said that encouraging one's child to play alone was of average importance. But the French moms said it was very important.

Later, I emailed Walter Mischel, the world's leading expert on how children learn to delay gratification. As it happened, Mr. Mischel, 80 years old and a professor of psychology at

Columbia University, was in Paris, staying at his longtime girlfriend's apartment. He agreed to meet me for coffee.

Mr. Mischel is most famous for devising the "marshmallow test" in the late 1960s when he was at Stanford. In it, an experimenter leads a 4- or 5-year-old into a room where there is a marshmallow on a table. The experimenter tells the child he's going to leave the room for a little while, and that if the child doesn't eat the marshmallow until he comes back, he'll be rewarded with two marshmallows. If he eats the marshmallow, he'll get only that one.

Most kids could only wait about 30 seconds. Only one in three resisted for the full 15 minutes that the experimenter was away. The trick, the researchers found, was that the good delayers were able to distract themselves.

Following up in the mid-1980s, Mr. Mischel and his colleagues found that the good delayers were better at concentrating and reasoning, and didn't "tend to go to pieces under stress," as their report said.

Could it be that teaching children how to delay gratification—as middle-class French parents do—actually makes them calmer and more resilient? Might this partly explain why middle-class American kids, who are in general more used

to getting what they want right away, so often fall apart under stress?

Mr. Mischel, who is originally from Vienna, hasn't performed the marshmallow test on French children. But as a longtime observer of France, he said that he was struck by the difference between French and American kids. In the U.S., he said, "certainly the impression one has is that self-control has gotten increasingly difficult for kids."

American parents want their kids to be patient, of course. We encourage our kids to share, to wait their turn, to set the table and to practice the piano. But patience isn't a skill that we hone quite as assiduously as French parents do. We tend to view whether kids are good at waiting as a matter of temperament. In our view, parents either luck out and get a child who waits well or they don't.

French parents and caregivers find it hard to believe that we are so *laissez-faire* about this crucial ability. When I mentioned the topic at a dinner party in Paris, my French host launched into a story about the year he lived in Southern California.

He and his wife had befriended an American couple and decided to spend a weekend away with them in Santa Barbara.

It was the first time they'd met each other's kids, who ranged in age from about 7 to 15. Years later, they still remember how the American kids frequently interrupted the adults in midsentence. And there were no fixed mealtimes; the American kids just went to the refrigerator and took food whenever they wanted. To the French couple, it seemed like the American kids were in charge.

"What struck us, and bothered us, was that the parents never said 'no,' " the husband said. The children did "*n'importe quoi*," his wife added.

After a while, it struck me that most French descriptions of American kids include this phrase "*n'importe quoi*," meaning "whatever" or "anything they like." It suggests that the American kids don't have firm boundaries, that their parents lack authority, and that anything goes. It's the antithesis of the French ideal of the *cadre*, or frame, that French parents often talk about. *Cadre* means that kids have very firm limits about certain things—that's the frame—and that the parents strictly enforce these. But inside the *cadre*, French parents entrust their kids with quite a lot of freedom and autonomy.

Authority is one of the most impressive parts of French parenting—and perhaps the toughest one to master. Many French parents I meet have an easy, calm authority with

their children that I can only envy. Their kids actually listen to them. French children aren't constantly dashing off, talking back, or engaging in prolonged negotiations.

One Sunday morning at the park, my neighbor Frédérique witnessed me trying to cope with my son Leo, who was then 2 years old. Leo did everything quickly, and when I went to the park with him, I was in constant motion, too. He seemed to regard the gates around play areas as merely an invitation to exit.

Frédérique had recently adopted a beautiful redheaded 3-year-old from a Russian orphanage. At the time of our outing, she had been a mother for all of three months. Yet just by virtue of being French, she already had a whole different vision of authority than I did—what was *possible* and *pas possible*.

Frédérique and I were sitting at the perimeter of the sandbox, trying to talk. But Leo kept dashing outside the gate surrounding the sandbox. Each time, I got up to chase him, scold him, and drag him back while he screamed. At first, Frédérique watched this little ritual in silence. Then, without any condescension, she said that if I was running after Leo all the time, we wouldn't be able to indulge in the small pleasure of sitting and chatting for a few minutes.

"That's true," I said. "But what can I do?" Frédérique said I should be sterner with Leo. In my mind, spending the afternoon chasing Leo was inevitable. In her mind, it was *pas possible*.

I pointed out that I'd been scolding Leo for the last 20 minutes. Frédérique smiled. She said that I needed to make my "no" stronger and to really believe in it. The next time Leo tried to run outside the gate, I said "no" more sharply than usual. He left anyway. I followed and dragged him back. "You see?" I said. "It's not possible."

Frédérique smiled again and told me not to shout but rather to speak with more conviction. I was scared that I would terrify him. "Don't worry," Frederique said, urging me on.

Leo didn't listen the next time either. But I gradually felt my "nos" coming from a more convincing place. They weren't louder, but they were more self-assured. By the fourth try, when I was finally brimming with conviction, Leo approached the gate but—miraculously—didn't open it. He looked back and eyed me warily. I widened my eyes and tried to look disapproving.

After about 10 minutes, Leo stopped trying to leave altogether. He seemed to forget about the gate and just played in the

sandbox with the other kids. Soon Frédérique and I were chatting, with our legs stretched out in front of us. I was shocked that Leo suddenly viewed me as an authority figure.

"See that," Frédérique said, not gloating. "It was your tone of voice." She pointed out that Leo didn't appear to be traumatized. For the moment—and possibly for the first time ever—he actually seemed like a French child.

*—Adapted from "Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting," to be published Tuesday by the Penguin Press.*