



**Traig, J. (2019). Act Natural: A Cultural History of Misadventures in Parenting.
New York: HarperCollins Publishers.**

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Jennifer Traig's "Act Natural" shows the different techniques and customs Western parents use to ease difficult phases of a child's life. Using humour and potent storytelling, Traig reassures the reader that parenting has always been challenging. The entertaining yet informational writing style allows the reader to learn the techniques Western parents, citizens, and medical professionals believed were the most successful parenting methods and child care practices. Traig uses four different subsections to specify the central theme of misguided parenting. Using themes of (1) mortality, (2) outsourcing, (3) child care "hacks," and (4) gender differences, the historical techniques can be evaluated through a knowledgeable yet humorous lens.

The mortality of their child is a parent's most prominent concern. A child's health, safety, and well-being are the primary concern and reason for many of the trials and errors of parenting. Throughout the book, Traig discusses methods to promote a healthy child. The first stage Traig discusses is the process of childbirth. To specify, Traig shares that, "At the time [1770's], 1.5 percent of mothers died in childbirth, but 10 percent of infants did." (p. 59). In order to prevent these mortality rates, the invention of forceps allowed a child to be "guided out" of the womb. Although some inventions were beneficial in preventing mortality, others did the opposite. Spec-

ifically, swaddling resulted in death if done too much or if the child was unsupervised. There was potential that the child would "drown in his own saliva" (p. 110) if he was a big drooler and placed on his back for a certain amount of time. As the newborn develops into a baby, the dangers of death only increase with ineffective devices and tactics. Once a child grows into a teenager, the discussed cause of death is one's sibling. In this case, a significant reason to fight a sibling was for parental attention or the feeling of jealousy towards a sibling. (Traig 181). Traig's ability to connect historical examples with her own experiences makes a very dynamic theme, although connecting the different stories as a reader takes a few chapters to perfect.

Outsourcing in "Act Natural" refers specifically to someone providing care to children despite them not being a parent. Despite the book discussing misadventures, outsourcing has become a prevalent and successful form of child care. An example of this prevalence is boarding schools. Traig explains that "[boarding schools] were an ideal choice for well-off parents who wanted their sons to learn the classics" (p. 17). Despite this high praise, Traig then elaborates on the negatives of this form of outsourcing. The importance of reflecting on the pros and cons of outsourcing is not mentioned often in modern society. However, Traig uses her insight and personal experience to deliver a factual synopsis. Traig discusses the cons and alternatives to the original outsourcing that are common today.

To provide an example, male boarding schools were more abusive, under-supervised, and had more conflict between the male students. When female schools were implemented, they were "less violent, [and] they were also far less challenging" (p. 17). Although boarding school was eventually a wise decision to receive excellent child care at the time, the more modern example

Traig delves into is daycare. The oldest view in “Act Natural” regarding parents taking care of their children was that they did not want to or simply could not. During a time when women and mothers were entering the workforce, there needed to be an adult to watching over the children. When daycares were few, the 60s and 70s were a difficult time to search for a helping hand. Traig expressed, “The grandparents probably did not live nearby, and daycare options were few” (p. 35). The solution depended on factors such as geographical location and even race. Black Panther was among the first organizations to open multiple daycares across the United States (p. 35). The Young Lords; a Chicago street gang turned human rights group, followed their example and opened daycare centers in their churches. Traig points out the interesting dynamic that concerns daycare change with the social views and norms regarding child care. As daycares expanded, the view on parents (specifically mothers) spending time with their children significantly differed from the initial revolutionary decades of pushing women into the workforce (p. 37). The most popular view leading into the 80s was that child care is difficult to find because of the difficulty of finding people who desire to work with children they are not biologically related to (p. 37). The factor Traig highlights in this section is the view of new parents from Generation X. Traig claims they began to resent their lack of parental involvement growing up, so they decided to do the opposite. Columns and opinions about raising children became focused on “reattach[ing] your baby to your body the moment she is born and keep her there pretty much until she goes to college” (p. 38). Modern academics claim that the middle ground is the best option. Overall, the outsourcing theme is very complex, yet Traig does a proficient job of keeping the history and timeline simple.

Before reading “Act Natural,” discussing historical “life hacks” is not a topic of broad and

current interest. The idea of sharing tricks to make specific daily tasks easier seemed to begin with technology, but this is untrue. Tips and tricks from magazines, newspapers, and word of mouth have been present since newspapers and magazines. Dating back to 1617 (p. 12), inventions and techniques parents and servants used to create a calmer environment in the home have been used and shared. The example from 1617 is a method of swaddling and covering a baby to keep the hands free of a servant or mother with household tasks. The “life hacks” Traig shares in the book connect to modern-day inventions such as a baby pouch. A criticism of this overall theme is the lack of modern-day tools parents use to make the time spent with their children easier. The history of these devices is very absorbing. Therefore, a connection or section in the book would be fascinating. Nonetheless, the examples in the book are very entertaining and simultaneously informative. The more amusing example is parents or servants placing children in stools or boxes that resemble a “hoop skirt” or box (p. 118). These were to prevent small and young children from departing the area the carer was in, allowing them to keep a keen eye on the children without the anxiety of a potential injury from a curious infant.

The theme of gender differences is noticeable in the other themes, but in terms of being a singular theme, there are famous examples but with an interesting perspective. Traig analyzes the history and the idea of men feeling qualified to lecture on the female body, which has been prevalent historically. The example given is regarding childbirth (p. 56). Labelled as the most painful experience for humankind, childbirth medical care has developed drastically, along with the definition of credible authority on the subject. In the example of childbirth and female anatomy, the literature and knowledge came from men; precisely, monks who were celibate (p. 56). A history

of prioritizing men is bound to have differences in raising boys versus girls. At times, with infanticide issued by the government, the usual priority was to keep the boys alive (p. 3). The infanticide discussed in the book is specifically in eighteenth and nineteenth-century China (p. 4). Although topics such as this are weighty, Traig successfully adds humour to the situations to remind the reader that for the most part, events of mass infanticide are a concept of the past. The main focus Traig highlights in terms of gender differences are the errors that came with providing men with a large platform to spread information about female anatomy overall and during pregnancy.

With a book that discusses the history of parent and child relationships, academic audiences such as psychologists, specifically social psychologists, can benefit from the different examples and stories Traig writes. The specificity of Traig's writing allows an academic audience to factor historical facts and traditions into their professional environment. Using themes such as gender differences, the relationship between different generations, and their views on outsourcing child care can develop an academic's understanding of the sociocultural view of the family. To summarize, Jennifer Traig's powerful balance between history and personal life experiences allows readers to grasp concepts and facts in "Act Natural".