
Reviewed by: Karen Cordoba, MacEwan University

Jennifer Traig’s book “Act Natural: A Cultural History of Misadvantages in Parenting”, is a whimsical exploration of the complex and often absurd history of parenting advice. Through the use of interesting research, incredibly insightful humour, and significant experience - from family, friends, but most importantly herself -, Traig carefully dissects the evolution of parenting norms and the societal contexts that shape them. Her navigation of past, as well as current conflicting ideologies and questionable practices, pose an argument to the commonly believed myth that parenting is a natural skill and instead presents the idea that continuing to pretend the skills nature can actually be detrimental for parents and children.

Although the book has specific chapters that pertain to the different adventures and challenges that come with parenting, the book is clearly divided into four interesting sections which include themes of (1) outsourcing, (2) child safety, (3) tips and tricks for parenting, and (4) gender differences. Traig successfully maintains a humorous yet informational tone throughout the book that strategically compares her own experience with parenting to the advice and practice of different time eras and cultural contexts.

Traig emphasizes the importance of outsourcing right at the beginning of her book, relying on the nature of certain animals and past generations to do something called “alloparenting”
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(Chapter 1) - which is basically just the term used to explain the ways in which parents outsource their parenting duties, in order to successfully care for offspring -. Traig’s comical tone and the use of outdated practices as examples make it appear as though this idea of outsourcing is silly and sometimes even negative. However, the book wonderfully depicts the ways in which this practice has developed for parents today.

As an instance, Traig uses daycares to speak on both the good and the ugly of parental outsourcing. The arrival of World War II opened doors for daycares as men went off to war and women were required to work; the downside, however, was the lack of safety of the new childcare program, as it was created primarily to create jobs for daycare staff (Chapter 1). Although the system continued to grow over the next decade, becoming a safer option for parents in need of outsourcing – a need which quite literally evolved with parenting -, the leftover guilt created by previous knowledge of the terrible history of daycares, affects parents today. Traig points to her own family’s choice to figure out another way to outsource, as the guilt spur pricked her and her husband into tending to their children a lot more in hopes of avoiding the detrimental damages made to children years back in history.

In terms of child safety – in my opinion, one of the most important themes of Traig’s book – there are compelling points about the history of its significance and how it has evolved today. Once again, Traig’s humorous tone allows the reader to feel light about the unbelievable past of this theme as she speaks about childbirth, abandonment, and infant homicide. Still, she makes it extremely clear that in the subject of parenting, mortality is entirely significant. However, as a sibling myself, Traig’s chapter on sibling conflict was cleverly intriguing. When speaking of child safety, one barely turns an eye to the importance of balance in a multiple-child home, but the battle
for attention and love becomes truly dangerous when handled incorrectly. Infant abandonment in past centuries was extremely common for multiple reasons. Sometimes the parents were too poor to handle multiple children, or the baby was born a girl, or sometimes, parents simply deemed the child unnecessary for the family’s success (Chapter 1). Obviously, today, “exposing” a child – a term that Traig compares to “illegal dumping” of furniture, but with children (Chapter 1) – would be entirely unacceptable, but we fail to relate the feeling of being unwanted to children and their siblings. Traig, although quite dramatically, uses the animal kingdom as a clear example of the nature of sibling rivalry, as she mentions the common fight to the death of sand tiger sharks and multiple bird species (Chapter 7). Regardless, “Act Natural” wonderfully depicts the importance of child safety – as I believe any book would, being as though this is a theme with a considerably clear consensus – but Traig’s ability to present important ideas through comically lightweight language and examples makes an extremely important topic, easy and fun to understand.

Pertaining to the topic of tips and tricks for parenting, Traig’s entire book contains multiple examples of old-school, outdated hacks which were used to “help” parents in their journey of child upbringing. Personally, considering the fact that this is a book about parenting, Traig lacks a specific set of her own advice for parents. Traig makes it clear that this book is what she would have wanted when she was learning how to parent, the assurance that they were doing just fine, “or more precisely, that someone else was doing a lot worse” (Chapter 3), however, snips of her own experience, and previous evil “hacks” for parenting, don’t seem like enough in this specific context. Having a designated section which speaks about her own exposure and practice with child upbringing would elevate this book to a genre further than that of which it currently sits at, one I personally deem as simply comical and anecdotal.
Finally, but definitely not least, the theme of gender differences is broad yet extremely educational. Generally, gender differences are obvious when it comes to child upbringing, but Traig presents a wider variety of issues, all which are extremely specific. The connection made between childbirth and gender stands out as she speaks about past medical practices. The quote “If it’s easy to blame men for the abysmal maternity mortality rates that plague previous generations, it’s because they were in fact to blame” (Chapter 2) proves itself powerful and true as she uses barber-surgeons as an example of the lack of importance previously placed on women’s health. Although it feels obvious that women need much more than a certified barber as help while delivering an entire human being, this theme persists in today’s motherhood, even if the problem presents itself in different ways, which is mostly why I am entirely blown by Traig’s ability to speak on such heavy matter – which as previously mentioned, is still an entirely prevalent issue – while continuing to make it light and easy through the use of wit and relatable language. Traig demonstrates an incredible skill as she seamlessly poses an argument about the importance of men and their responsibilities to learn and seek that knowledge to further attempt to close the gap between gender differences in the context of parenting.

Traig’s “Act Natural” would be a wonderful read for social and family psychologists, as it discusses parental issues and ideas from various historical contexts as well as cultural ones. This book would fit an academic audience more than a public one due to the previously mentioned lack of true parenting advice that the regular public might deem useful to their own parenting journey. However, Traig’s ability to make heavy subject matter a lot more lightweight than usual opens room for an audience that might be starting to learn about the sociocultural psychology of parenting and child upbringing, such as students and maybe even simply those interested in the psychology
of family. I personally found “Act Natural” extremely informational, but most importantly, exciting in its contemporary choice to remain humorous and whimsical, which is why I would recommend it to those interested in the ups and downs of the adventures of parenting.