

American moms creating a parenting melting pot

Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY | 10:10 p.m. EDT May 9, 2013

Beyond American books and blogs, mothers scour the world for parenting best practices.



(Photo: Philip Hunter for USA TODAY)

When young American mothers wrestle with the daily struggles of parenting, where do they look for advice?

Increasingly, anywhere but here.

Call it the parenting melting pot, as mothers build on the American framework of raising children by importing the best practices of other cultures — whether the laissez faire approach of the French to the give-them-space allowances in Iceland to the unforgiving rigidity of China's "Tiger Moms."

This search for just the right parenting mix goes well beyond the U.S.-based books and myriad mommy blogs, embracing a global view that has become more a way of life than a trendy divergence.

"I wanted to read about a different outlook, on making your kids more a part of your family, instead of the center of your family," says Rebecca Gordon, a 35-year-old New Yorker with a 3-month-old daughter.

Gordon, who on Sunday will celebrate her first Mother's Day, joins many of her peers in venturing beyond the 50 states. Several recent books about parenting practices around the world have even become top sellers. And, since these moms have grown up largely with the Internet, are often well-traveled and have a diverse group of international friends, thinking globally is almost second nature.

Such interest doesn't surprise Jennifer Lansford, a research professor at the Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy in Durham, N.C.

"As the world becomes a more global place, there is interest from parents in many countries about what parents in other countries are doing," she says.

A developmental psychologist, Lansford has since 2003 studied parenting in nine countries, including the USA. She says most parenting research comes from Western industrialized countries and has left out the "vast majority of the world's children," but that's beginning to change. Later this month, she will present her findings at a conference in Sweden where researchers from China, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, the Philippines and the USA will discuss parenting across cultures.

Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, an associate professor who teaches child development courses at Ohio State University in Columbus, makes sure her students read about parenting philosophies elsewhere.

"The idea is not necessarily to adopt one of these perspectives, but to calm down because there are different ways to do things," she says.

Emma Swift, 34, whose four kids are ages 4 to 14, was born in Germany and moved to Iceland when she was 5. She's been in the USA nine years and now lives in Madison, Wis., where she says differences are apparent at the pool.

"We let them make mistakes in Iceland," she says. In Madison, "there are lifeguards at every corner. As soon as a child goes into a run or walk, the lifeguards will be yelling."

THE WEST VS. THE REST

Erin Black, 39 and a mother of three from New York, points to the emotional and physical strains inherent in American culture as a reason to seek "clues" from abroad.

"I think when you look at the depression, obesity and anxiety in our country's children, that is fairly unique to America," says Black, whose children range in age from 1 to 6.

Rachel Rodgers, 31, of Rapid City, S.D., has read books and blogs about motherhood in other countries, including France and Africa, both places she's traveled.

"I think it's part of growing up in my generation with so much information at our fingertips," Rodgers says. "We have a natural inclination to over-research everything," says the lawyer with a 19-month-old daughter, and a son on the way in June. "That's what we're used to doing."



Riley Rodgers, center, sits with father Dediako Rodgers and mother Rachel Rodgers. (Photo: Philip Hunter for USA TODAY)

Jasjit Sangha, a researcher at the Center for Women's Studies and Education at the University of Toronto, co-edited a collection of essays in the book *South Asian Mothering: Negotiating Culture, Family and Selfhood*, out in March. She says the interest in global motherhood is natural.

"What they're looking for is trying to figure out the best parts of other cultures," Sangha says.

Parents in Western cultures tend to emphasize individual achievement and independence over other values, according to a team of pediatricians from Boston University Medical Center, writing in the journal *Pediatrics* last month.

Western parents "offer frequent praise, may favor verbal feedback over close physical contact, and promote independent behaviors," the article says. "Children are encouraged to think critically, question the status quo, and distinguish themselves from others."

Many other cultures — particularly Asian, African and Latino, the paper notes — put a higher value on collective achievement. They expect children to "obey authority, share their possessions, and place the needs of the family and community before their own."

Yale Law School professor Amy Chua's book on "traditional Chinese" or "Tiger Mom" parenting offered another cultural approach that sparked lots of controversy about proper parenting. Her website calls her book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, out in 2011, "the story of her family's journey in two cultures."

SEEKING 'THE ANSWER'

Mei-Ling Hopgood has seen such cultural differences firsthand. Hopgood, 39, an associate professor of journalism at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., was born in Taiwan but raised in the USA. Both her daughters, ages 5 and almost 2, were born in Argentina, where she and her husband lived for seven years. Her book, *How Eskimos Keep Their Babies Warm: And Other Adventures in Parenting*, came out last year.

"American parents are just looking for 'The Answer' all the time — the best way — and they are worried the way they are doing things is the wrong way," she says. "If you look at the way people parent in a lot of places, there's not this anxiety about what to do right."

"I think parents in America are looking for common-sense solutions and alternatives to the parenting style that's taken hold among the middle-class in the United States," says Pamela Druckerman, 43, an American mother of three living in Paris. Her book on the wisdom of French parenting, *Bringing Up Bébé*, was a hot topic in parenting circles last year.

"The advantage of looking at the way another culture raises kids is not some parenting theory — it's actually looking at the place and seeing what works in practice," she says.

Cassie Hay, 30, of Jersey City, N.J., has a 4-month-old son. Her takeaway from Druckerman's book is "the children are children and the adults are adults, and the entire universe shouldn't be centered around the child" — a shift she acknowledges can be "very hard" to adapt in the real world. "I was interested in seeing if this was actually feasible."

'IT'S ALL ON US'

Christine Gross-Loh researched parenting practices and interviewed parents from seven countries for her book *Parenting Without Borders: Surprising Lessons Parents Around the World Can Teach Us*, out earlier this month. It looks at measures of parental well-being and happiness and academic achievement among children.

Gross-Loh — a mother of four, ages 3 to 12, in Cambridge, Mass. — says most other cultures have more of the "it takes a village" approach, but in the USA, "it's all on us." Parents here have much less maternity and paternity leave and less financial assistance for health care and yet face increasing expectations of sending their kids to college. Although there are more dual-income households, they face rising child care costs and the stress of juggling it all makes American parents feel overwhelmed, she says.

Parenting expert Susan Newman, a social psychologist from Metuchen, N.J., says all the concern over how other cultures parent has to be tempered by the reality all parents know.

"Much of parenting is reactionary: 'How do I solve this problem?' " she says. "No single approach can work within the American culture or even within one family, because every child in that family is different."

INTERNATIONAL PARENTING PRIMER

For her new book, *Parenting Without Borders*, author Christine Gross-Loh gathered childrearing lessons from around the world and shares some, organized by country.

- **Finland:** Despite starting academics later (age 7), shorter school days (sometimes as little as four hours), less homework and more recess than American kids, Finnish children are among the highest achievers in the world.
- **Sweden:** "Don't control your kids: teach them to control themselves." Swedish parents believe in childrearing that combines gentle guidance and lots of freedom to make responsible choices for themselves. Swedish children are among the top on measures of well-being and happiness.
- **Germany:** "Make sure children play." In Germany, kindergartens (ages 3-6) are nearly all free-play based, because they strongly believe in the importance of plentiful unstructured play during the early childhood years. When Germany experimented with academic kindergarten during a wave of early-learning reform in the 1970s, they found that kids' academic and social achievement suffered later down the line — so they reverted back to their free-play model.
- **France:** Parents raise their children to enjoy the benefits of good food and assiduously cultivate their patience. They believe it's their duty to educate their children how to eat, as important as teaching a child to read.
- **Japan:** Japanese parents teach their children to always consider others from the time they're babies — they cultivate this social awareness the way parents elsewhere might cultivate their child's cognitive skills. Adults don't hover, but "let the children work it out," because being allowed ample practice in social interactions is what they believe to be the best way to raise kids of character who have a moral compass.
- **China:** Chinese parents don't think a dose of family obligation will stifle a child. They think it will help inspire him to do well and stay on a straight path.
- **Italy:** "No kid's meals." The concept of picky eating is practically unheard of. Instead of assuming kids won't want to be adventurous and preparing

separate children's meals for them, Italian families believe in modeling the joys of eating with others through leisurely family dinners and gatherings.

BOOKS

Despite all the parenting advice online, some experts have taken a more comprehensive look at childrearing across cultures. Among the books that offer a more global perspective:

- *Parenting Without Borders: Surprising Lessons Parents Around the World Can Teach Us* by Christine Gross-Loh: a mother of four, Gross-Loh lived for five years with her kids in Japan, which sparked her interest in parenting practices around the world. Her multicultural approach includes topics such as sleeping, eating, self-esteem and play.
- *Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting* by Pamela Druckerman: a mother of three, Druckerman has lived in Paris since 2004 and shares her observations about the differences she's noticed between the French approach and parenting in the USA.
- *Bébé Day by Day: 100 Keys to French Parenting* by Pamela Druckerman: a how-to-guide on a variety of topics with 100 rules and a discussion of parenting the French way, out this year as a follow-up.
- *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua: a mother of two, the Yale Law School professor sparked controversy with her book that championed the strict and traditional parenting methods of her Chinese immigrant parents.
- *How Eskimos Keep Their Babies Warm: And Other Adventures in Parenting (from Argentina to Tanzania and everywhere in between)* by Mei-Ling Hopgood: a mother of two, Hopgood was born in Taiwan and raised in the USA. Both her daughters were born in Argentina, where she and her husband lived for seven years.
- *South Asian Mothering: Negotiating Culture, Family and Selfhood* edited by Jasjit Sangha and Tahira Consalves: a collection of essays that explores cultural norms and values and explains perceptions and parenting practices of South Asians.