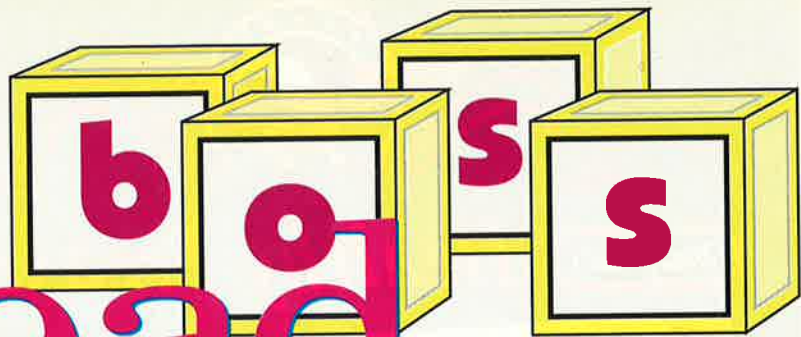


One Step

Ahead



by Michele Sprague

Spring cleaning is not on the top of my list when it comes to fun things to do, but it does unearth some interesting surprises. I remember a spring eight years ago. While cleaning my two-year-old's room I discovered a well worn and tattered book heavily edited in red crayon. Pages were missing, scraps of paper inserted, and a new chapter, scrawled in red, was crammed between sections one and two. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that an enterprising six-year-old, Bea N. Charge, authored this well read book, *The American Baby Rule Book*.

Like the many books parents seek for guidance in raising children, this one offered babies techniques to gain control of their households and their parents' hearts. It consisted of two sections entitled, "Inexperienced Parents: Mold Them the Way You Want" and "Experienced Parents: a Challenge, But You Can Wear Them Down."

I remembered the times I came across stubby red crayons during the past two years. They were in my daughter's crib stuffed between the mattress and headboard and tucked in her pockets, occasionally with scraps of paper. Once I found paper in her toy chest with words in red crayon. I finally realized my precocious two-year-old was reading and editing *The American Baby Rule Book*.

My husband and I read every child rearing book we could get our hands on. We finally realized why the experts' advice didn't work for us. Our daughter was reading a book on how to raise parents. She was always one step ahead of us. Later I found out that Bea N. Charge had distributed hundreds of copies to babies in hospital nurseries.

I remembered our daughter's birth. Right from the start she held our hearts

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captive. She spoke her first words immediately following birth, "aa...aa...aah...." We didn't know it then, but she'd told us who would be in charge. It wasn't us.

She set the stage by demanding feeding every two hours and wanting nothing to do with naps. One quick reference to the *The American Baby Rule Book* and she knew what to do:

Babies do not have to take naps unless they want to. Make a small fussy sound. If that doesn't bring in Mommy or Daddy, raise your voice gradually until it reaches an ear-piercing howl.

This strategy worked every time. When she uttered a small sound, as if on cue I flew into my baby's room and rescued her from the nap monsters. Needless to say, she didn't take naps often. She became quite a supervisor while observing me watering flowers, cooking dinner and vacuuming the floor. She offered cooing approval or protested by crying.

My daughter was talented. She created art masterpieces from her dinners, carefully mixing colors and textures. She even made sculptures from mashed acorn squash. Most babies are uninhibited and natural artists; they

approach their dinners like artists approaching their canvas and paints. *The American Baby Rule Book* has an interesting chapter about this: "Let's Make Dinner Fun." Let's look at a couple of excerpts. One is dedicated to art; the other suggests a table game.

Mommies have no imagination when it comes to preparing dinners, the book reads. Play with your food until it is arranged in interesting piles. Don't be afraid to mix things together to make new colors. Squish food between your fingers to give it texture.

Crumble a cracker or cookie and see how many crumbs you can make. It's fun watching Mommy's face when you push the crumbs on the floor. Remember to look innocent and smile.

Through experimentation, my daughter came up with an unique topping for ice cream—cooked frozen peas. Like candy sprinkles on sugar cookies, they added splashes of color. I wondered if green beans would work?

No matter how pretty a dinner looks, or how much babies have experimented with mixtures and textures, sometimes dinners don't pass the taste test. And no one critiques dinners better than babies. They are like wine connoisseurs. On

more than one occasion I witnessed the slow, methodical evaluation of foods—especially when I served acorn squash. Of course, *The American Baby Rule Book* offers taste testers techniques in its chapter, “Critiquing Culinary Delights.”

Sometimes Mommies serve yucky foods and call them nutritious. There are plenty of yummy foods available, so why eat the yucky ones. Make sure your Mommy knows how you feel about the food she serves you. Give her your evaluation slowly and deliberately. Look serious. Without warning, pucker your mouth, stick out your tongue and say, “ppugh....” Make sure the yucky food dribbles out of your mouth and trails down your bib. If you do a good job and look really disgusting, maybe Mommy will not serve this food again. Better yet, tell Mommy to buy a tasty jarred baby food. You’ll avoid the yuckiness and you’ll get the nutrition.

Even though the book is packed with suggestions, the author encourages babies to alter rules and make their own. Apparently my daughter followed this advice, crossing out some rules, and replacing them with new ones. This is one of the rules she eliminated.

Babies don’t have to drink apple-prune juice. It’s for Grandmas and Grandpas. If your Mommy insists that you drink this juice, innocently knock it over, look surprised, and say “uh ohh....” Clasp your hands over your mouth for effect. If Mommy looks upset, cry. If you can talk, it’s even better to cry and say, “Sowwe.”

My daughter enjoyed apple-prune juice and drank it regularly. That may explain why she replaced the rule with the following. Apple-prune juice is yummy. Mommy calls it nutritious. (I wonder why it doesn’t taste like nutritious acorn squash.) Anyway, we can’t always give our Mommies a hard time. That would make them sad.

The American Baby Rule Book contains information on a variety of subjects. It includes everything a baby needs to know to be happy. But the underlying message is how to wrap your parents around your fingers and be in charge. The longest chapter is dedicated to fun: “Babies Love to Have Fun...n...n.” However, most of the book’s suggestions do not bear the parent’s stamp of approval.

One of the popular games listed in the book is “Let’s Hide Daddy’s Car Keys,” a favorite game among American babies. Keys are fun to play with and make a neat

jingling sound. It’s fun to hide them and watch Daddy rush around. Sometimes Daddy will give you a cookie if you find them.

My daughter added another suggestion. This works great with shoes, too. Hide at least one of your shoes a few minutes before you go bye-bye. It’s great fun! (Warning: If you forget where you hid your shoe, you may have to go bye-bye wearing Cookie Monster slippers. They definitely do not go with pretty pink dresses.)

Experienced parents are a challenge, but you can wear them down.

Also, my creative daughter added a new game for older toddlers. It’s called Hide and Seek, but has an original twist. When Mommy is in material stores convince her to let you out of your stroller to look at the pretty pattern books. When Mommy is busy with the books, take off and play hide and seek among the bolts of fabric. Invite other kids to join. Don’t worry if Mommy tells you that this will be the last time she will take you into a fabric store. You will get to go next month when there is another sale.

I remember that game well. My daughter played it until she entered kindergarten. Thank goodness she finally settled down!

My favorite chapter is the new one crammed between sections one and two. My dear sweet daughter painstakingly wrote this chapter. Its title is “Just Say No.”

Needless to say, this book gives babies the upper hand. Who would have thought that while parents are reading books on child rearing, babies are reading books on parent rearing. By the time I found the book, our daughter was clearly in charge. We didn’t plan it that way. We just wanted to raise a healthy, happy, successful child. She was happy, and she was in control.

We must remember that in spite of all the maneuvering to gain control, babies are insecure and need to know they are loved. Even *The American Baby Rule Book* recognizes this and

suggests ways to get reassurance in the chapter, “Testing Parents—Do they Really Love You?” Many may recall being put through a similar version of this test:

Leave your favorite toy or blankie at Grandma’s. When it’s bedtime, cry and say that you can’t sleep without it. See if your parents will go to Grandma’s to get your beloved blankie.

Finally, the book concludes with a chapter on assertiveness. The last paragraph is:

All babies love their parents. But,

remember YOU MUST BE IN CHARGE. You must establish the rules immediately if you want things your way. Mix fussing with loving to keep your parents off guard. When they least expect it, wrap your little arms around their neck, give them a sloppy wet kiss and say, “I wuv you.”

Discovering this book was mind boggling. My husband and I thought we were being good parents, and molding our child to our expectations. Little did we know that she was always one step ahead of us, molding us to her version of the perfect parents. *The American Baby Rule Book* contains information that should not be made available to young children, let alone babies. Inexperienced parents do not have a chance! How did Bea learn so much so soon? I wondered if my youngest daughter received a copy of the book. I could think of a few rules she would apply differently and wouldn’t be surprised if she added a couple of chapters.

You may wonder why I am reminiscing about finding this book eight years ago. My friend Julie called today and said, “Guess what I found in Joshua’s drawer when I was putting away his clothes?” Hesitantly I said, “Did you find drugs?” “No,” she said. “It’s a book. Wait until you hear the title—‘Teenagers, Keep Your Parents in Line.’” “Who’s the author?” “It must be a pen name,” said Julie. “The cover says it’s by Bea N. Charge.”

So Bea’s at it again, I thought to myself and smiled. My advice to Julie was, “Make sure you read it so you know what you’re up against.” ♦

