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An Economist Sheds Light on Parenting

An Interview with Emily Oster

*Emily Oster is a professor of economics at Brown University, and the author of *Expecting Better: Why the Conventional Pregnancy Wisdom Is Wrong—and What You Really Need to Know* and *Cribsheet: A Data-Driven Guide to Better, More Relaxed Parenting, from Birth to Preschool*. Here she answers questions posed by the *Parents League*.*

In *Expecting Better*, you used your training as an economist to study medical data and debunk some of the conventional wisdom that makes pregnancy so anxiety-riddled. In *Cribsheet*, you used the same data-driven approach to help parents of young children make more informed decisions about childrearing. What motivated your work?

The main motivation was my own pregnancy and parenting. When I got pregnant I found myself surrounded by advice, but with very little information behind it. What motivated me most were questions like prenatal testing. What type of screening to have seemed really important and personal to me, and yet the advice was very one-size-fits-all. This came up over and over again—advice which wasn't tailored to individuals, didn't take into account the differences in preferences or constraints across parents, and often didn't seem based on data. I found myself using the tools I used in my job—as an economist—in the service of my pregnancy and later parenting. The books ultimately came out of the thinking that others might benefit from this approach.

For readers who are not familiar with your book, please take a topic—let's say, choosing whether to work outside the home—and show us how you apply economic models to decision-making.

I advocate in the book for a two-step process to decision-making in general. First, figure out what the data says. Second, combine that data with your family preferences and constraints to make a decision.

In the case of the choice to work or not, the key data most people want is whether kids do better (in school, or later) if they have a stay-at-home parent or two working parents. This means the first step is to look into the data on this. When I do that, I find that while there is evidence in favor of early maternity leave, when we look for evidence on older children (even kids in the 4- to 12-month range) we do not see evidence that kids do better with a stay-at-home parent. The outcomes for children are similar for both choices.

Given this, it's especially important to think about the other issues—the family preferences and constraints. I suggest that parents should think about what they want. Do both parents want to work? Those are the preferences. And what are the implications for the family budget—that's really the constraints. Only by combining these can you make choices which work for the whole family.

You dislike the phrase “studies say.” Why?

As people have become more interested in evidence-based decision-making—in parenting and elsewhere—there has been an increased emphasis in the media on covering medical and other studies. This is broadly great, but it runs into the issue that you can often find at least some study which supports whatever view you already held. In medicine and in public health it is common for there to be many, many small studies on a given question and sometimes they have conflicting points of view. When you look at the literature overall, you can often find the truth, but if you are looking for a study to support your view, you can probably find that too. This is frustrating.

A basic tenet of your books is there is no one “right” way to manage pregnancy or to raise young children. But you emphasize the importance of making data-

driven decisions while there is still time to make choices. Young parents have little time to read extensively during pregnancy and, especially, in the first few months of infancy. Besides reading your books, what resources should they seek—and is there a timeline for thinking about the most basic issues, like breastfeeding and sleep training?

I think the main mistake that many new parents make—it is one I made for sure—is attempting to make these important decisions in the middle of the night. Decisions about sleep training approaches should not be made when your kid is crying a lot at 3 a.m.

This doesn't mean, though, that you need to make all parenting choices before the child arrives. This is probably asking too much of parents, and it is hard to know what kind of preferences you have without actually seeing the child. I think my best advice here is to try to do some reading about the big early parenting decisions—breastfeeding, sleep—before the kid arrives and try to get on the same page with your partner about these choices. You'll have more time for discussion and will be more rested during pregnancy than once the baby comes.

And then once the baby has arrived, try to carve out a little time together every few weeks to discuss how things are going and whether there are important changes you want to make. This kind of check-in is probably good for the marriage, even if it doesn't end up changing your parenting.

On that note, please share your thoughts on the pros and cons of the internet as a source for parenting information.

The big plus of the internet is that it *is* there at 3 a.m. when you want to know whether that is a normal color for baby poop, or you just want someone to also be awake with you. I think this can be really helpful when you're in the isolating throes of very new parenting.

On the other hand, the internet introduces a whole new set of

people to judge your parenting and tell you you're doing it wrong. And the sheer volume of information on the internet can make it easy to go down the rabbit hole of studies and evidence.

I think the main challenge is to get the good here without the bad—which is hard.

Pregnant women and young parents are so susceptible to guilt (Is that a decaf? Are you feeding that baby *formula*? That child should be wearing a hat.). What is your advice to parents, especially mothers, who are subjected to unwanted judgment?

When I reflect on this, I think that some of our susceptibility to guilt is because we lack confidence in our choices. When someone says, “Oh, I can’t believe you are doing it like that,” it feels worse if we are not sure it’s the right choice—it’s easy to slip into “You’re right, why am I doing it like that? I must be a terrible parent.”

In light of this, my advice is basically to own your choices. Think carefully about the right choices for you, and then know that they are just that: the right choices for you. And maybe they are not the right choices for other people. Maybe that lady in the coffee shop loves decaf coffee, so that’s great for her. But that doesn’t mean that it’s the right choice for you.

And once you have this confidence, the right actual response is something like “Thanks for your comments. Some weather we are having, huh?”

You must meet so many parents with stories to share. What is the most common concern you have encountered?

I think the two questions I get the most are, first, about sleep and about rules about co-sleeping. A lot of parents wonder about these risks since this is something where the rhetoric on risks is very stringent, and yet there are also people who make very strong positive claims about the benefits. It’s kind of a classic case where it seems like no matter what you do someone will think you are

a bad parent. My conclusions on this are somewhat nuanced—basically, there is some risk of co-sleeping, but it is small—and I think they do thread the needle a bit between the two extremes.

The other big question I get is about preschools—what is the best kind of preschool. Unfortunately, this is a case where data simply doesn't have much to say. One thing I often tell parents is once you are at the stage of worrying about the right preschool philosophy, your kid is probably going to do well no matter what, so it's best to just pick the one that is most convenient.

You are the parent of two young children. How have your own experiences as a parent affected your approach to this work?

My kids are obviously a huge part of this work, since it was my pregnancy and parenting which motivated the books. I will say that I think it would have been hard to write the books when I had only one child, since I feel like a lot of the early period with my daughter was so frantic that I didn't really have time to use a lot of the more research-intensive approaches that I would ideally use. Every day brought another decision we weren't prepared for.

When my son arrived about four years later it was much easier to think about the key big decisions we had to make, and do the research and planning around them. So the second book is really much more motivated by his existence.

In some ways the biggest thing is just that my experiences as a parent convinced me of the need for a book like this.

Are there any parenting practices in your family that changed as a result of your research?

Most of the research for the book I did in the service of making these choices so the parenting choices preceded the book rather than vice versa. But one exception is in the case of discipline. When writing the book, I ended up finding some reasonably good literature on the value of programs like 1-2-3-Magic, which emphasize consistency and not getting angry in discipline programs. The fact that there was good evidence here surprised

me, and we ended up changing some aspects of our disciplinary approach in response.

Have your research and work on these books changed the way you interact with your colleagues and students?

My books end up selling a lot among economist parents—not too surprising—so when I give talks now I do end up talking more about the books and the evidence in the books than I did before. I also think that because I did this somewhat unusual thing of writing for a non-academic audience I get a lot of questions from other economists about how to think about doing that. Economists, like many academics, are sometimes resistant to communicating with a non-specialist audience and I think I’ve gone further than most in trying to do so.

But mostly I think it doesn’t matter much. Economists are mostly interested in economics papers, so in the end when we get together, that’s what we talk about.

Please share the best parenting advice you’ve ever received.

I should preface this by saying I’m not sure this is the best parenting advice anyone could have gotten, but it was for sure the best for me.

When my daughter was 2 we had planned a trip to France and I somehow got obsessed with a worry about bees. When we got to our well-child visit before the trip, I had this long list of obsessive questions: “We’re going to this location, it has a lot of bees. What if Penelope gets stung? She’s never been stung before. What if she is allergic? Should I bring an EpiPen?” It went on.

Our doctor kind of looked at me thoughtfully, paused and then said, “Yeah, I’d just try not to think about that.” Which was of course exactly right—you cannot control everything, and this is one of a billion remote concerns which I could obsess about. So, it was better to let it go. It’s something I think about a lot as new neuroses arrive. (Which is frequent.)

Many parents have followed you through pregnancy and into the early years of childhood. They hope you continue the trajectory and give them guidance as their children grow. But you have said that data does not speak as readily to the issues faced by parents of older children. That said, is there any one piece of advice you would give our readers to hold close as they continue their journey as parents?

One of the things I came to think as I wrote this book is that I probably give too much advice. Really, a big point here is that many choices are good choices, and it is easy for advice to be seen as judgement. So I have been trying (with I'd say minimal-to-moderate success) to be less bossy. But here's one I wish I listened to myself: Everyone should pee before we leave the house even if they do not feel they need to go.