

***Psychology and parenting*** by Jean Gross  
Open University Press, Philadelphia, 1989. 147 pp

The author describes her work as primarily a book for parents and for professionals who are working with children and families. Content includes chapters on parenting, reward systems, punishment and its alternatives, communication and children's thinking. There are three chapters focussing on specific problem areas, namely, fears, habits and aggression, two chapters on relationships between children, siblings and friends and, finally, a chapter which gives an overview with advice on seeking further help.

The author aims to link many areas of research, for example, research into parenting style, child temperament, cognition and socialisation, being careful to report only well established literature to support her contentions. The intervention approaches recommended are principally based in the theory and practice of applied behaviour analysis. For example, guidelines for good parenting such as rule setting, effective instruction giving and the appropriate use of feedback are based on the behavioural family work of Patterson, Forehand and their colleagues. Descriptions of behavioural intervention procedures relate to the parent training literature of the 1970's which reports the efficacy of reinforcement, punishment and its alternatives.

One of the alternatives to punishment mentioned in the book is time out which the author defines as "removal of the child from the scene of the crime". This form of exclusionary time out is briefly described, pitfalls to be avoided are listed and a case example is given. Unfortunately an important rule for the implementation of time out is omitted. Nowhere does the author state that the brief period spent in time out should be minutes of quiet behaviour. Parents who are not told this may release the child

from time out after two minutes of tantrums. This provides negative reinforcement for unacceptable behaviour, thus increasing the likelihood that the child will throw a tantrum in the future. Attention to detail such as this is important if written advice is to have a positive effect on parenting skills.

Of the two chapters on communication, one focuses on procedures recommended by Parent Effectiveness Training (Gordon, 1970) such as reflection of feelings and the use of "I messages". There is a potential problem when advice from different theoretical perspectives is included in the same book. Parents should be advised that procedures from a humanistic perspective may produce different outcomes from those based on behavioural principles. For example, reflection of a child's angry outbursts may inadvertently reinforce those outbursts if the child is seeking attention whereas behavioural theory would recommend the removal of parental attention in such a circumstance.

The other chapter on communication deals with "normal" developmental problems of childhood such as sleep disorders, bedwetting and soiling, eating problems and stealing. The grouping of these problems under "Communication" is puzzling; it is unlikely that the reader would expect to find such topics under that heading. However, the author argues that these troublesome behaviours might be seen as a "cry for help", that their "symptoms" are a sign of unresolved conflict. In this way the author introduces elements of psychodynamically oriented theory.

In a more general sense, the ability of the book to achieve one of its aims is in question. The publishers claim that the book is a practical guide for parents yet it is unlikely to be

successful as a self administered advice package for parents who wish to manage their children's problematic behaviour. There are two main reasons for this. First, research on written materials for parent training suggests that broad focus texts which are used under self-administered conditions may be less likely to equip parents with new skills than narrow focus texts or written advice which is adjunctive to other forms of parent training requiring a high degree of "therapist" contact (Glasgow and Rosen, 1978; McMahon & Forehand, 1980). Before claims are made regarding the effectiveness of broad focus self-administered parenting guides, the achievement of objectives needs to be very carefully evaluated.

The second concern relates to the readability of the written material. Reading levels required of written materials for parent training are typically high (O'Farrell and Keuthen, 1983). This renders the information unavailable to many who require it. Unfortunately this book errs in the reading difficulty of much of its prose. In order to obtain a measure of reading ease, the reviewer obtained eight, 100 word samples which were analysed according to the Flesch (1948) formula for readability. An overall reading ease score of 45.26 was obtained which placed the book at year 12/first year tertiary level. In addition there was enormous variation between the chapters sampled. One chapter sample was rated at grade 8 to 9 level (which was the lowest level for this book) whilst other samples rated as "extremely difficult/college level".

The style and presentation of the book are fairly conventional. Chapters employ standard headings and sub-headings and occasionally charts are included. There is a reference list at the end of every chapter which contains all studies cited in the

chapter, but no reference is made to material specifically designed for parents. Presentation could be improved by the inclusion of drawings, cartoons and boxes which would create more variety and interest for parents who are not regular readers of academic publications.

Despite the above criticisms, the book has strengths in its breadth of coverage of research into child development and parenting skills. The author should be commended, also, for basing information on research rather than on "supposition, pious hopes or any personal point of view" as she states in the Preface.

This book could prove to be a useful additional resource for parents who

are skilled readers and who are either receiving advice from a professional on an individual basis or who are attending a group parent education program. Although the author claims that this book is not intended for students, it could serve as a general introduction to parenting theory and practice for those wishing to study in this area.

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## References

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# CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

## A Conference about children and young people in substitute care

19 - 21 March, 1991

### Objectives of the Conference:

To establish new directions in responding to the needs of children who traditionally enter care, by focussing on three major aspects -

- staying put - keeping children within their families
- moving in - helping children move into care, appropriately planning care for children
- moving on - reunifying children, helping children with placement disruption, helping children into independence

### Keynote Conference Speakers:

- John Fitzgerald, O.B.E. - the Bridge Child Care Consultancy Service, London
- Barbara Szwarc - Research Officer  
Family Focus
- Ruby Hammond - Head of Aboriginal Issues Unit  
Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, South Australia
- Gerard Menses - Director,  
Anglican Community Services, South Australia

Location: ADELAIDE - Regency Park Centre for Young Disabled

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