

What the French can teach us about raising children

Robyn Pearce



Her American friends spend their visits resolving spats between their kids, but her French friends sip coffee while the kids play

Aren't school cultural exchanges wonderful opportunities to expand our horizons? My daughter-in-law Lauren spent her final year of high school as an exchange student near Paris. From that one event has grown wonderful friendships and a positive impact on hundreds of people at opposite ends of the world.

In my own immediate family many of us have exchanged visits (some of us multiple times); two of my granddaughters are bi-lingual and

have an honorary set of French "grandparents"; now in my mature years I'm having a ball learning French – and that's just for starters!

Just recently I accompanied Lauren, her mother, and our shared granddaughters to France to attend the wedding of Lauren's host brother. It was all the lovely things you'd expect – and I learnt some stuff too.

Because I wasn't with teachers I won't endeavour to extrapolate the insights into education. However, if you've got observations

or experiences with French education I'm sure our trusty editor would love to hear from you.

The French raise their children differently – and get markedly better behaviour than what I commonly see at home. In the month I was away, most of my time was spent living with French friends.

I cannot remember ever seeing a French child throwing a tantrum or acting up. And I was with many children over the first 20 days, including at the wedding which, in true French style, was an awesome family event in multiple parts, three different venues, and spread over two days.

One example was meal times. I noticed quite young children patiently waiting for their diner [dinner], which usually showed up about eight o'clock. Even toddlers were rarely fed earlier. It was regarded as important that they sit at the table with the grown-ups and learn to be part of the wider family group. Neither were they allowed to dominate the conversation, although they certainly weren't repressed. Once they'd eaten they politely asked to be excused and were allowed to go off to play – but not to watch TV (at least in the families I spent most time with).

However, it wasn't just eating time that produced well-behaved French children. Everywhere I went I was impressed. How come, as a nation, that their kids are better behaved than what we commonly see these days in English-speaking Western countries?

I found the key to this puzzle in my two-hour stop-over at Singapore on the way home. Browsing in a bookshop, I was halted in mid-stride by *Bringing Up Bébé – one American mother discovering the wisdom of French parenting* by Pamela Druckerman.

The journalist author has lived in Paris for some years. About to have her first baby, she began to notice the same as I – that French children are different from American children. Here are some excerpts from the inside front cover:

- French parents insist they're not doing anything special. Yet the French children Druckerman knows sleep through the night at two or three months, while children of her American friends take a year or more.
- French kids eat well-rounded meals that are more likely to include braised leeks than chicken nuggets.
- Her American friends spend their visits resolving spats between their kids, but her

French friends sip coffee while the kids play.

- French mothers assume that even good parents aren't at the constant service of their children and that there's no need to feel guilty about this. They have an easy, calm authority with their kids that Druckerman can only envy.
- French kids are just as boisterous, curious and creative as Americans. They're just far better behaved and more in command of themselves.
- French parents are extremely strict about some things, and strikingly permissive about others. To be a different kind of parent, you don't just need a different parenting philosophy. *You need a very different view of what a child actually is.*

One theme she constantly comes back to is *teaching them delayed gratification*. She asks: "Could it be that making children delay gratification – as middle-class French parents do – actually makes them calmer and more resilient? Whereas middle-class American kids, who are in general more used to getting what they want right away, go to pieces under stress?"

"Whenever I go back to America, I realise that miserable, screaming toddlers demanding to get out of their strollers or pitching themselves onto the sidewalk are part of the scenery of daily life.

"I rarely see such scenes in Paris. French babies and toddlers, who are used to waiting longer, seem oddly calm about not getting what they want right away. When I visit French families and hang out with their kids, there's a conspicuous lack of whining and complaining.

"I regularly see what amounts to a minor miracle: adults in the company of small children at home, having entire coups of coffee and full-length adult conversations. Waiting is even part of the parenting vernacular. Instead of saying "quiet" or "stop" to rowdy kids, French parents often just issue a sharp "attend", which means "wait".

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She also observed a major focus on *teaching children their place in the family* and how to behave. The common French philosophy (and I completely agree with it, having raised five kids who are all leaders in their fields) is:

- We're the parents, they're kids.
- We're the bosses; they need (and intuitively seek) for boundaries.

Our job is to teach them how to grow into well-adjusted members of society; their job is to be taught, with as little stress as possible to all concerned.

There's no way they know what's good for themselves – and we're not just talking toddlers. This applies to teenagers as well.

It seems to me that too many parents in today's over-informed, excessively politically correct and US-influenced world think their job is to make life smooth and easy for their little ones – smooth out the bumps, not let them get upset, or leave them upset for as short a time as possible. This includes not letting them feel too much frustration.

French parents, on the other hand, know that initial frustration (not getting what they want, when they want it) teaches children resilience, adaptability, resilience and all the other good virtues that a well-adjusted adult would exhibit. It also makes life much less stressful for their families as they grow up – and it's never too early to start. It's really important for them to hear "no" and "wait".

Every experienced teacher knows that badly behaved children are seeking boundaries. Give them firm guidelines and consequences and they'll calm down very quickly – if delivered with

firmness and a clear intention by the responsible adult. Every child will push the boundaries, and strong-willed children will push even more. If we as parents don't stand firm we deny them the boundaries they seek – so they'll continue to push until they get them.

There's another key French national characteristic which applies to everyone, not just children, and that's a huge emphasis on good manners. Even small children are expected to be courteous, greet people with "Bonjour" or "Bonsoir" and at least two kisses (if they're family friends).

As a footnote to this point on good manners, you might be thinking, "What about the arrogant French shopkeepers I've heard of?"

If we get rudeness it's almost always because we've (unintentionally) invited it. In many cases you're actually entering their homes, albeit the commercial part. In part because of this, a really basic courtesy when you enter a French shop is to immediately greet the attendant. Consider our normal shopping behaviour in Australia and New Zealand. Many of us don't greet the attendant until we're ready to purchase. So you can see why French shopkeepers think we're rude – and treat us appropriately.

Here's to more cultural exchanges. They help create a more informed and tolerant world – if we take the time to listen, watch and learn. **ET**



Robyn Pearce helps exhausted overloaded teachers find more time, control their paperwork and get home earlier. www.gettingagrip.com.

She is a Certified Speaking Professional (top speaking accreditation in the profession of speaking and held by only about 800 people around the world).

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