

Fêting the Heart

Media for fostering trust, compassion, and creativity in families and communities

One of the foundations of attachment parenting is responding to children’s needs with empathy. A potent social skill, empathy creates better relationships not only with kids, but with partners, friends, and neighbors. It’s also an important element of many acts of social change, as is made evident in several of the books featured in this review. The most obvious example of this is the work of Mary Gordon, whose school programs, detailed in her book *Roots of Empathy*, empower kids to treat each other and themselves with kindness and respect. Empathy is also a core component of William Stillman’s advocacy for those with autism spectrum disorders. Author of *Empowered Autism Parenting*, Stillman draws on his own experience of living with Asperger’s syndrome to establish bonds with those whom many assume are incapable of connection. Herb Kohl, author of *The Herb Kohl Reader*, has accomplished a similar feat: educating the many labeled “unable to learn.” His secret? In part, simply remembering what it was like to be a child. Read on to find out more about the books by these remarkable people, along with those of others who shed light on how to create peaceful, healthy families and communities.

Helping Baby Sleep: The Science and Practice of Gentle Bedtime Parenting, by Anni Gethin, PhD, and Beth Macgregor, is an excellent attachment-parenting guide to regulating little ones’ sleep without making them “cry it out.” The authors’ research-based arguments assert that responding to babies’ nighttime needs actually contributes to the development of their brains, while “sleep-training” programs harm neurological growth. They outline straightforward solutions for common sleep issues, as well as ideas for self-care. (Celestial Arts, 2009)

In Breastfeeding with Comfort and Joy: A Photographic Guide for Mom and Those Who Help Her, Laura Keegan, RN, FNP, combines sound lactation instruction with evocative, beautifully composed photographs, in both black-and-white and color, that depict proper positioning, holds, and posture, as well as the tender bond between mother and nursing babe. It’s said that a picture is worth a thousand words, and this is particularly true in the case of breastfeeding, making this book all the more valuable. (Lifeforce Family Health Care, 2008; www.lifeforcefamilyhealth.com/breastfeeding_book.htm)

Mary Gordon’s *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child* outlines the author’s exceptional program for helping at-risk elementary and even high school students learn to think about how others feel. Gordon’s magic ingredient? Babies. In her program, a mother-infant pair visits a classroom once a month so that students can become familiar with babies’ many needs and witness how a responsive mother appropriately attends to them. For abused and otherwise attachment-deprived kids, watching this mother-infant exchange can prove a revelation that, with coaching, may facilitate marked changes in their behavior. I think it’s a brilliant idea—and with *Roots of Empathy* programs now in New Zealand, Australia, the US, Canada, and Japan, it’s evidently a successful one. (The Experiment, 2009; www.rootsofempathy.org)

In The Power of Your Child’s Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success, Charlotte Reznick, PhD, offers practical, easy-to-implement guided visualizations and breathing exercises that help children to tap into their intuition for the purpose of easing their emotional and physical pain. Grounded, accessible, and not the least bit woo-woo, this book is a boon for anyone seeking to help soothe a child’s fear and worry. (Perigee, 2009)

Empowered Autism Parenting: Celebrating (and Defending) Your Child’s Place in the World, by William Stillman, should be on the bookshelf of anyone, parent or professional, who works with people with autism spectrum disorders. Stillman, who himself has Asperger’s syndrome, maintains that we need to “always presume the intellect” of a person with autism. Keeping this perspective in mind, he teaches parents how to compassionately respond to their children’s sensitivities and problematic behaviors, as well as how to effectively communicate with even those who are nonverbal. I highly recommend not only this book, but all of Stillman’s publications. (Jossey-Bass, 2009)

The Herb Kohl Reader: Awakening the Heart of Teaching, by Herb Kohl, features selections from some of the esteemed educator’s 35-odd books. These eloquent, precisely written, thoroughly inspiring excerpts fall into four categories: Kohl’s early days as an activist, his ideas for curricula that facilitate critical thinking and creative problem solving, the juxtaposition of his dual roles as parent and teacher, and his views on current pedagogical issues. (The New Press, 2009)

Rev. Lisa K. Sykes’s *Sacred Spark* is a well-written, heart-wrenching page-turner that offers an activist’s view of the unfolding of an international controversy: the possible link between autism and the mercury-containing vaccine preservative thimerosal. Sykes, a United Methodist minister and mother of a child with autism, and her colleagues continue to push the federal government to acknowledge the link between mercury and autism, and have triumphantly advocated for the removal of thimerosal from many vaccines. (Fourth Lloyd Productions, 2009; www.sacredsparkbook.com)

In Coop: A Year of Poultry, Pigs, and Parenting, Michael Perry writes in vibrant, rhythmic prose about homesteading, homebirth, homeschooling, and the search for the good life. At turns laugh-out-loud funny and poignant, Perry’s stories brim with genuineness and heart.

A great read. (HarperCollins, 2009)

CHILDREN’S BOOKS

I keep on my desk a copy of *Big Rabbit’s Bad Mood*, by Ramona BĂdescu and illustrated by Delphine Durand, for those days when I’m feeling a bit wrecked. Big Rabbit is cranky, his Bad Mood characterized by a gray, fuzzy, oblong creature with a diabolical smile. The Bad Mood sticks to him through his everyday activities like a piece of maniacal Velcro. Our hero tries a variety of modes of self-care to rid himself of the unwanted guest: he distracts himself with TV, makes a bite to eat, phones his friends and even his mother, all to no avail—until he gets the idea to lure the Bad Mood out of the house. Big Rabbit opens the front door and—Surprise! His previously unavailable compadres—and, yes, Mom—greet him with cake and presents. And guess what? At the ensuing birthday shebang, there’s no Bad Mood to be found. (Chronicle Books, 2009)

CHILDREN’S SPOKEN WORD

Nelson Mandela’s *Favorite African Folktales*, an audiobook benefiting South African children impacted by HIV/AIDS and directed by Alfre Woodward, is a star-studded affair featuring the talents of such actors as Whoopi Goldberg, Alan Rickman, Samuel L. Jackson, Charlize Theron, and Helen Mirren. The outstanding collection also includes several tracks of rousing music performed and/or composed by South African musicians Johnny Clegg and Vusi Mahlasela. Dynamic illustrations for each story, from an array of artists, are available on a bonus CD-ROM. (Hachette, 2009)

MUSIC

When I listen to Fran King on Sunflow’s *Under the Stars*, I have to keep reminding myself that I’m not hearing Paul McCartney. King and Nancy Falkow—whose combo of grit and heart is somewhat like Sheryl Crow’s—have put together a humdinger of an album: soothing, melodic songs that may be written with children in mind, but whose warm vocals, seamless harmonies, multilayered instrumentals, poetic lyrics, and sophisticated style will definitely appeal to adults. I highly recommend this one! (Head Space, 2008; www.myspace.com/sunflowmusic)

DVDs

Happy SAHD: A Documentary about 21st Century Dads, by Michael Ivan Schwartz, investigates a growing phenomenon in the US: the stay-at-home dad (SAHD). The film explores issues specific to these fathers via interviews with members of the support group Baltimore Dads, many of whom are at home due to their wives’ greater earning power. They explain how they cope with a society that’s perplexed by their role and continuously questions their childrearing approaches, capacity to nurture, and very masculinity. The SAHDs featured in this film really don’t care what others think—but they do enjoy their strong relationships with their kids. (Loud Communications, 2009; www.happysahd.com)

Chicks-n-Chickens’s Lullaby Exercises, created by Darcy Novo Albrecht, is an innovative fitness program mamas can do while wearing or carrying their babies. The 35-minute DVD and accompanying CD are separated into “Groove” and “Sleep” segments. The “Groove” portion of the DVD is devoted to squats, cardio, and moves for legs, arms, and tummy; the “Sleep” portion is simply swaying and stretching until baby starts to doze, if he or she isn’t already. The exercises are set to the music of alternative country-rock musician Lisa Phenix. (Chicks-n-Chickens, 2008; www.chicks-n-chickens.com)

CHILDREN’S DVDs

In The Little Travelers: Bali, viewers tag along with Chantelle and Nakia (ages five and three) as they watch stunning Balinese dances, eat exotic foods, and hang out with monkeys. The sisters take turns narrating the film, and their fine enunciation makes the entertaining and clearly written script all the more easy to follow. The polished production keeps just enough rough edges to feel authentic. The series includes DVDs on trips to Japan and Iran. (Little Travelers, 2007; <http://thelittletravelers.com>)

The Riddle in a Bottle, by the multi-talented sister-brother team of Laura and Robert Sams, is an inventive, humorous tale that educates about the environment as it entertains. The Samses’ quirky dialogue, clever songs, and comedic timing combine with impressive footage of sea turtles, muskrats, and frogs to make for a splendid, original children’s flick. (Sisbro Studios, 2008; www.sisbro.com)

Melissa Chianta is *Mothering’s* managing editor. The best part of her job is getting to check out new media.