

Infant Care— Then and Now

by Judith Reed

Despite the profusion of books on childrearing whose titles—exhortatory, frightening or optimistic—stud publishers' lists each season, the all-time best-selling U.S. Government publication remains *Infant Care*, first published by the Children's Bureau in 1914 and now available in a new—the 13th—edition. (The first three runners-up on the Government Printing Office list are *Prenatal Care*, *Your Child from 1 to 6* and *Your Child from 6 to 12*, all also publications of the Children's Bureau.)

More than 60 million copies of *Infant Care* have been distributed since the book first appeared and it has been translated for readers in many countries. (By 1965, the text had been made available in Arabic, Korean, Japanese, Burmese, Hindi, Afghan-Persian, Spanish, French and Portuguese.) More recently, editions of the guide have been published in both Spanish and English versions.

The newest text was revised in 1980 by Dr. A. Frederick North, a Washington, D.C., pediatrician and author of the 1972 version. Its basic purpose remains the same as that of all previous editions: "To serve as a handy guide for parents who want to be sure their child has a good start in life."



Making a "simple and cheap winter wrap and hood for a young baby," an illustration from the first edition of "Infant Care."

A pocket history of changing attitudes and practices in child care is embodied in the series of revisions of this popular guide and, indeed, many researchers have mined its material for analytical reviews of child development philosophies in the United States. In 1953, for example, Martha Wolfenstein wrote "Trends in Infant Care," an analysis of "the trends in severity and mildness in handling the impulses of the child, as manifested in the areas of thumb-sucking, weaning, masturbation, and bowel and bladder training."¹ In 1965, the Children's Bureau itself analyzed some of the changes in its pamphlet, *The Story of Infant Care*.²

The first edition of *Infant Care* marked the eighth publication of the new Children's Bureau (founded in 1912) and the second in its "Care of Children" series. Written by Mrs. Max West, author of its predecessor, *Prenatal Care*, it opened with a blank birth registration form printed on the inside cover. The first paragraph of the text began: "One of the most important services to render the newborn baby is to have his birth promptly and properly registered." (In 1914, not all states required the attending physician or midwife to report a birth.)

The "Care of Children" series was initiated as a result of the first work



Two illustrations from the 1980 edition of "Infant Care."

the Children's Bureau undertook: a study of why babies died. For two years the 15-member Bureau staff gathered information on infant mortality in the United States, in a study that was the first of its kind undertaken by any nation. As Julia Lathrop, first Chief of the Children's Bureau, explained in a speech before the 9th National Conference on Child Labor in Jacksonville, Florida in 1913:

"Instead of examining the record of deaths and compiling the statistics therefrom, the birth records were to be first studied, the homes of all the babies born within a certain year visited, and each child traced through his first year, or through so much of the first year as he had lived."³

The studies were conducted in a series of small industrial communities, beginning with Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in 1913. The lives of infants born in seven other cities were studied from 1913 to 1919. In all, representatives of the Children's Bureau visited the homes of more than 25,000 babies.

The project, Miss Lathrop explained, was "an entirely democratic inquiry, since the only basis for including any family within it was the fact that a child had been born within that family during the selected year, thus giving a picture, not of a favorable or unfavorable segment of the

community, but of the whole community."

By the end of the study the Bureau could show that the greatest proportion of infant deaths resulted from remediable conditions existing before birth and that "babies born into poor homes had less chance of surviving than those born into well-to-do homes."⁴ In one city studied, for example—Baltimore, Maryland—the Bureau found that one out of every 27 babies born in the most prosperous homes died, as compared to one out of every seven babies born in poorer Baltimore homes. Other factors investigated that influenced the infant death rate included sickness or death of the mother, sanitary conditions and the physical care the baby received. Breast-fed babies, the Bureau found, had a better chance for surviving the perilous first year than bottle-fed babies.

Explaining Bureau plans for publishing a series of pamphlets for parents, Miss Lathrop wrote in her 1913 annual report:

"In studying the subject of infant mortality, our attention was drawn to the fact, well-known to physicians, that of the deaths occurring in the early days of life, a large proportion are the result of conditions existing before birth. The latest reports of the Bureau of the Census . . . show that



slightly more than 42 percent of the infants dying under 1 year of age . . . in 1911 did not live to complete the first month of life, and that of this 42 percent almost seven-tenths died as a result of prenatal conditions or of injury and accident at birth. Of those

that lived less than one week about 83 percent died of such causes, and of the number that lived less than one day 94 percent died of these causes. The existence of these facts justified the publication of a pamphlet on prenatal care . . . This pamphlet

will be followed by others covering the periods of infancy and childhood."

To write the first pamphlet, Miss Lathrop chose a woman with children of her own. In 1912 Mrs. Max West, a writer, graduate of the University of Minnesota and the mother of five children, joined the staff of the Children's Bureau.

Miss Lathrop's letter of transmittal for *Infant Care*, published in the first edition, notes that Mrs. West's text resulted from the same method of preparation used for *Prenatal Care*: "namely, exhaustive study of the standard literature on the hygiene of infancy as well as consultations with physicians, nurses, and other specialists in this field."

"There is no purpose to invade the field of the medical or nursing professions," she wrote, "but rather to furnish such statements regarding hygiene and normal living as every mother has a right to possess in the interest of herself and her children."⁵

The need for such guides, in a period when very little of a non-technical nature on the care of babies was available, is seen in the response to *Infant Care*. By 1921, more than one and a half million copies of the first edition had been circulated. Its reception by the medical profession was largely favorable. *Infant Care*, Dr. Borden S. Veeder of the Department of Pediatrics, Washington University Medical School, wrote in 1915 "is by far the best that has ever been published on the subject. . . I want to have a copy placed in the hands of every one of the students in our classes and a copy for each nurse in the University Training School for Nurses." A Minnesota physician wrote: "In my opinion, there is no better work on the subject in print." And although some doctors wrote to disagree with certain portions of the booklet, most agreed that it met—successfully—a great need.

In 1919, in preparation for the first revision of *Infant Care*, an Advisory Medical Committee was set up to review the manuscript—and many others to come. At one of its meetings, the following resolution was passed: "The committee requests and urges very strongly that names



Illustration from "Infant Care" (1980).

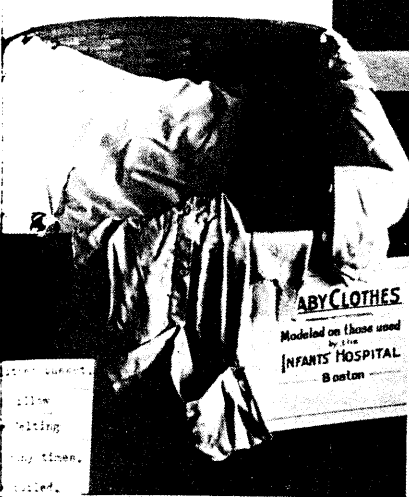
BABY'S BED.

Cost	
Basket	125
Mattress and Pillow	94
Sheets and Pillow case	33
Blanket	62
<i>Total</i>	3.15

Mattress Made on Plan of Dr. T.M. Ritch



Far left: Making a baby's bed from a clothes basket (total cost: \$3.15), from the first edition of "Infant Care." Left: illustration from "Infant Care" (1980).



of compilers of *Infant Care* be omitted from the cover [of the booklet] and credit for the work be given in the letter of transmittal."

The doctors offered several reasons for their request, including the assertion that such a publication was "merely a compilation" and so should not carry an author's name.

"I think there is a slight injustice in this attitude," Mrs. West confided to Miss Lathrop's secretary, "for, after all, I had borne five children, and as I am not a hopelessly feeble-minded woman I must have learned a few things for myself by that process. Also, everyone learns from others. Even doctors themselves. So I do not think it quite just to exclude me entirely from the pale of the educated!"¹⁶

The Committee's recommendation was adopted and no author's name has appeared on a cover of *Infant Care* since then.

The first revision of *Infant Care* appeared in 1921. Eight years later the text was rewritten and 10 more revisions or new texts appeared in the years from 1931 to 1980.

A comparison of the first and 13th editions of the book tells, of course, a great deal about changing health and social conditions in the United States, as well as changing attitudes to and understanding of child development and nurture.

The first edition concentrates on hygiene and physical care; the 13th includes a series of developmental

charts, introduced in 1972, which parents can use as a guide in assessing children's progress.

Included among the very practical advice offered in 1914 are instructions for making a child's first bed from a clothes basket or orange crate, using table padding "folded to four thicknesses" as a "very good mattress," together with instructions on how to wash it. Two and a half pages of the 87-page booklet, which cost 15 cents, are devoted to diapers—folding and laundering them and the making of inside diaper pads, from old towels, knitted underwear and even from "sphagnum moss enclosed in cheesecloth," a convenience used, Mrs. West had discovered, in New Zealand.

Another two and a half pages are devoted to discussion of "artificial feeding"—the use of milk as a substitute for breastfeeding. They cover what kind of milk to use and how to care for it and heat it. Instructions on making a home-made icebox are included.

Parents were advised to avoid "loose" or "dipped" milk, sold from open cans, and it is also interesting to note here the sentence: "If one is obliged to use milk having a high percentage of fat, such as that from Jersey or Guernsey cows, some part of the fat should be removed before making up the feedings." The 1980 edition of *Infant Care* advises the use of powdered formula containing vita-

mins and iron if good refrigeration is unavailable, a product unobtainable by readers of the first guide.

In 1914, parents were told to limit an infant's diet to liquids for the first 10 months, after which "he may have part of a soft egg, a small piece of crisp toast or zwieback or a crust of bread." A "teaspoonful of rare scraped beef, mutton or chicken" was to be introduced when the child was 15 months old. The 1980 edition advises limiting a child's milk-drinking after the age of 6 months, when "your baby needs nourishment from foods other than milk or formula."

Fifteen pages of the first edition are devoted to "How To Keep The Baby Well." They include advice on "Common Ailments," which ranged from diarrhea, colic and "cold in the head" to rickets, thought to be due to "faulty food and improper living conditions;" and scurvy, "probably due to improper diet"; "Contagious Diseases," including measles, "particularly fatal in the first year of life," whooping cough, which was "frequently fatal," syphilis, tuberculosis, hookworm disease and trachoma; and "General Health Conditions," with warning sections on germs, flies and patent medicines. Also included here is a caution that children should never be threatened with a visit from a doctor "as a means of securing obedience."

The 1980 edition includes a



Illustration from the current edition of "Infant Care."

schedule of recommended immunizations and check-ups.

In addition to the changes that have resulted from scientific advances are those related to changed patterns of family life and childrearing. In 1914, for instance, the subject of thumbsucking (or finger sucking) appeared under a section headed "Bad Habits" and mothers were warned that "resolution and patience" was required to break the practice. "The thumb or finger must be persistently and constantly removed from the mouth and the baby's attention diverted. . . . The sleeve may be pinned or sewed down over the fingers of the offending hand



Single copies of *Infant Care*, published by the Administration for Children, Youth and Families, are available free from: LSDS, Dept. 76-E, Washington, D.C. 20401. Multiple copies of the 65-page, illustrated booklet (Pub. No. (OHDS) 80-30015) can be purchased at \$2.00 each (25 percent discount on orders of 100 or more) from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.



for several days and nights, or the hand may be put in a cotton mitten." The use of a pacifier was also frowned on. ("The baby does not teach himself this disgusting habit, and he should not have to suffer for it," Mrs. West wrote.)

The 1980 edition of *Infant Care* introduces the topic under the heading "Sucking" and notes: "Most babies get their thumbs and fingers in their mouths and suck on them. Many seem to find it especially enjoyable and do it often. It causes no harm and can be ignored." Use of a pacifier during a child's first year is approved as harmless, with the caution that it should not be substituted for the attention, food or diaper change needed.

Toilet training, that continuing focal point for argument between one generation of parents and the next, was to be begun early in 1914, "by the third month or even earlier in some cases." It was to be "carried out with the utmost gentleness, since scolding and punishment will serve only to frighten the child and to destroy the natural impulses, while laughter will tend to relax the muscles and to promote an easy movement." A "scrupulously clean, ordinary porcelain cuspidor" was recommended (warmed during cold weather) and it was to be presented to the baby at

the same hour every day, persistently "until the habit is formed." The mother was to take the cuspidor in her lap "seating the baby upon it with his back toward her breast, so that she may support him in a comfortable position."

By 1963, *Infant Care* advised parents that "Most babies aren't ready to master such delicate timing until long past a year of age, so the subject [of toilet training] scarcely belongs in a book on infants." Some advice on how to handle the training, "when you decide to start," however, was given. The subject is entirely absent from the 1980 edition.

The role of the father was barely referred to in the 1914 text. In a section on "Playing With The Baby," mothers are told that while "all babies need 'mothering' and should have plenty of it," active play with a baby—"rocking the baby, jumping him up and down on her knee, tossing him, shaking his bed or carriage, and, in general, keeping him in constant motion"—should be avoided. And, Mrs. West adds: "It is a regrettable fact that the few minutes of play that the father has when he gets home at night, which is often the only time he has with the child, may result in nervous disturbance of the baby and upset his regular habits." Newer editions of *Infant Care* show father feeding, changing and playing with the baby.

But despite these and many other changes from edition to edition, the 1980 version shares with all its predecessors a common goal: to summarize the best available information on child health care and development. ■

¹ Martha Wolfenstein, "Trends in Infant Care," in Marvin B. Sussman, ed., *Sourcebook In Marriage And the Family, 2nd edition*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963.

² *The Story of Infant Care*, Children's Bureau, Welfare Administration, DHEW, 1965.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Infant Care* by Mrs. Max West, Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1914.

⁶ *The Story of Infant Care, op.cit.*