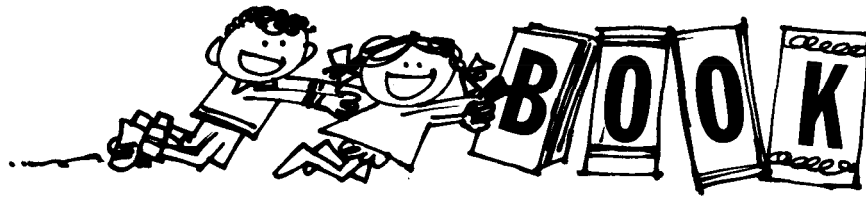


Book Review Editor
Ruth Stewart



HOW TO BE THE PARENTS OF A HANDICAPPED CHILD

by Kerry Kenihan

A Penguin Publication of 202 pages

Published in Australia, 1981.

Cost \$5.95

The book deals frankly and honestly with the many and varied problems of adjusting to life with a handicapped child. It is easy to read and for a pleasant change is written in readily understood English.

It is basically a book which is written for the parents of a handicapped child, however I feel that many people, doctors, social workers and the community at large could benefit from the knowledge shared in the book. The book offers no miracle cures or immediate answers, but suggests ways in which adjustments to your new life can be made easier.

Mrs Kenihan discusses many subjects within the book, that to my knowledge have not been tackled by any other author. She concentrates not only on the child, but the effect which the child can have upon the family as a whole.

She discusses the plight of the migrant and the single parent, also the trauma which many parents face when they decide to have their child institutionalised. As well as this she touches extending the family after the birth of a handicapped child, as well as the possibility of integration into society through normal educational channels. As a finishing touch to the book Mrs Kenihan has compiled a fairly comprehensive guide to groups and organisations which may be able to help you and/or your child through this difficult time. This guide covers all States.

I found that the book did not really cover the case of the undiagnosed child, although the subject was touched upon. Possibly the reason for this is the fact that Mrs Kenihan's child was diagnosed at birth.

Many parents are left to face the problems of an undiagnosed child alone. Nobody is quite game enough to tell the parents until the absolute last moment that there is something wrong with their child. These parents spend many months, possibly even years tramping from one doctor to another searching for an answer, often only to be told that they are worrying excessively, that they do not really know what they are talking about or perhaps are being overprotective, especially if the child is their first. I would stress at this point how vitally important it is that professional people not dismiss these parents, but listen to them and the reasons for suspecting something is wrong. Many parents are left in the dark, when it would be much easier for them to be given the honest opinion of the doctor, whether based on an educated guess or medical tests. In the majority of cases parents are more readily equipped to handle a known situation. I was one of these parents struggling to find an answer and if my son had not been so severely physically handicapped, we may still be searching.

I would not hesitate to recommend the book to anyone, especially a parent whose child had just been diagnosed as handicapped in any way.

Mrs Patricia Florent
Mother of a 21-month-old child who has cerebral palsy.



Childless by Choice

by Jean E. Veevers.

220 pp. Butterworths,

Toronto 1980 Price \$16.

The question "why do people have children?" is a pretty large and complex one, which cannot be answered simply in terms of the utilitarian or Malthusian theories favoured by most demographers and students of fertility. One possible strategy for answering the large and complex question might be to focus on the small group who deliberately opt not to have children, and ask "why are some people voluntarily childless?"

There is a growing number of studies of the voluntarily childless, particularly the married voluntarily childless, but this is the first full-length book on the topic which studies the phenomenon, rather than offers a defence of the childfree life.

Dr Veevers reports on a study of 136 voluntarily childless people in Canada, which she carried out between 1972 and 1978. Like all the other researchers in this area, she faced the problem of dealing with a sample drawn (by advertising for volunteers) from a population whose characteristics, including size, are unknown. While she is properly cautious about generalising too far from her data, she concludes that the voluntarily childless married couple can be described as follows: urban upper-middle class, non-religious, well educated, committed to "adults only" pleasures, placing heavy emphasis on the intensity of the relationship between spouses and, by and large, very contented with their situation, whether they opted to be childless very early on, or simply drifted into it through postponing having children until a lifestyle had evolved which precluded them entirely. Her conclusion is that the childfree couples she spoke with are neither sick nor sad; rather "for many of the childless, the maintenance of sound mental health is not achieved in spite of being childless, but is predicated on the continued avoidance of parenthood". (p.159)



Her argument is clear; the writing is lively, and the quotations from the extended unstructured interviews are fascinating. The book is obviously intended for the general rather than the specialist reader, with the technical details of the sampling procedure confined to an appendix, and statistical jargon kept to a minimum. It is an excellent example of how to make accounts of research accessible to the lay public. Nonetheless, there are some elements in it which will perturb readers, whether they are specialists or not.

For a start, the book doesn't really offer an account of the *process* which childless couples go through, although it sets up the ideal typology of early deciders vs. procrastinators. The 135 people interviewed turn out to be largely wives, with only 29 couples who spoke together to the researchers. Of course, a wife can offer accurate comments on her husband's education and job, but when she comments on how "we" reached the state of permanent childlessness, she is really talking about "we as I see us". The twists and turns in the process, and the possibility of conflict between the two individuals involved get smoothed over when only one person reports on what happened. This deficiency becomes more serious when we realise that Veevers is using as a model the idea of childfree marriage as a world that has been constructed through interaction between husband and wife, and with the social environment around them.

Another problem with her study is the way in which she seems to assume that the environment surrounding the childless couple is invariably a hostile one. While we have a good deal of evidence of the strength of pronatalism in our society, it is also possible that pressure to have children varies at different times, and in different social groups. The picture that Veevers paints of an embattled couple, reinforcing each other in their determination not to let other people pressure them into doing

what they do not wish to do, completely fails to take this into account.

The static picture of childless couples as "a reference group of one" comes partly from Veevers' ignoring the element of socio-economic status in her analysis. She notes that most of her sample could be described as "upper-middle class" and leaves it pretty much at that. While her data would only allow speculation, looking at the way in which her people were making their own childless world and investigating the circumstances beyond their choosing which constrained them might have been fruitful. One could, for instance speculate about the pressures on middle-class children to be highly involved in work, and how these conflict with the (probably unspoken) pressure to run a child-centred family. Is this class-based pressure related to the phenomenon that Veevers claims to have found in a "number" of cases, of women who reject children but have a remarkably "old-fashioned" view of what being a good mother actually means, including the idea that good mothers must be home with their pre-schoolers, and that no other presence but theirs will suffice for their children? And how does class interrelate with the other great constraint that applies to family behaviour — sex? There is almost no analysis which contrasts the husbands in the sample with their wives, and what a pity this is!

The somewhat shallow and static picture which the book paints comes, I think, from a basic methodological deficiency. The interviews which provided the data were taped, and were listened to during the analytical stage, but, due to the inevitable restraints imposed by lack of funds, were not transcribed. Without a permanent record of what was said, interview data can only be used to provide a superficial analysis. The problem of how to store and deal with qualitative data has bedevilled researchers for years, and

has probably contributed to the low status which qualitative methodology has been accorded in the social sciences. If Veevers had had access to a word-processor and a computer program like the one which Lyn and Tom Richards at La Trobe University are developing to deal with unstructured data, what richness she might have produced!

More in-depth analysis of her data would, I think have led Veevers away from the fairly simple either/or typologies which she uses, and might have caused her to avoid the one item in the book which makes my blood run cold. In a thought-provoking chapter on the implications for social policy of her research, Veevers comments on the need for more rationality in discussing the questions associated with having children, and implies that it would be desirable for interested professionals to think about developing a "predictive parent" test, to enable couples to decide for themselves whether they should have children. The implications of this are fairly shocking, and seem to me to point along a path which ends with involuntary sterilisation for the socially unfit. Deeper analysis of the question "why have these people decided not to have children" would, I think have induced a frame of mind which would not lead to such facile and dangerous conclusions.

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