



commission for  
children and young people  
and child guardian

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## Media Release

### Letter to the Editor – *Bringing Up Baby* documentary screening on ABC1 on Thursdays

Dear Editor

I am writing to express my concern about the documentary *Bringing Up Baby* screened on ABC1 on Thursdays since 19 February.

The program compares three parenting approaches that were influential over the last 100 years. It is a real-time experiment on new born infants in which parents implement one of the practices under the guidance of a mentor who is an advocate of each of the practices. Essentially, this program denigrates the complex issues of child-rearing to a reality TV program.

I have three main areas of concern.

The first is that one of the parenting approaches, that of Truby King (1915), has been thoroughly discredited, and contradicts an extensive body of (real) research on the importance of a nurturing environment for babies to learn to trust adults. The Truby King approach entails rigorously timed feeding, limited physical contact and comforting, and leaving infants to cry outside. Failing to meet infants' basic emotional needs to be held and reassured can produce a strong and lasting stress reaction in these children.

The early years are critical in terms of infants' and children's brain development and have a long-term impact on outcomes in well-being, learning and social development. It is now well established that a stressful environment and trauma in early childhood can have lasting negative effects throughout an individual's life. The Truby King approach is tantamount to child neglect in that it entails not meeting the emotional needs of the child.

For the babies in this program, the opportunities for bonding and interaction with their parents in the first weeks of life which is not permitted under the Truby King approach cannot be replaced and have been 'tossed away' in the name of a ratings based reality TV show.

My second concern is that another of the approaches, the Continuum approach by Jean Liedloff (1975), advocates some practices that ignore current knowledge about safe sleeping practices. Extended educational programs in Australia have successfully lowered the incidence of SIDS, and programs such as *Bringing up Baby* risk undermining the progress made in this area. The disclaimer added by the ABC after the first program as a result of pressure by lobby group does not reduce this risk.

The third issue relates to the use of infants in reality television programs which raises major issues about children's rights. This sort of program promotes the idea that infants are 'things to be done to' rather than people with human rights and needs. It suggests that our society condones experiments on non-consenting human beings as long as they are too young to opt out. The program was defended by the Channel 4 in the UK in 2007 on the basis that it was an important social experiment, therefore the producers should be called upon to demonstrate the appropriate scientific and ethical approvals. Research such as this would never receive ethical clearance if proposed by a university. The program portrays the babies involved as objects who can be exposed to abusive or neglectful parenting in the cause of pseudo-science for entertainment.

Some of those defending the program say it is important to hear about the range of methods and to understand the history of child rearing beliefs. The question is not whether there should be debate over child rearing practices, or whether any one of these practices is right or wrong, although the Truby King method is completely counter to current research findings – the real question is whether experiments carried out by television producers on infants and children are appropriate and ethical.

I call upon the ABC to provide a more balanced, current and comprehensive view of parenting practices, and to highlight some of the exciting research findings of the last two decades.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Fraser  
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and Child Guardian**