

Book Review

Why Have Kids: A New Mom Explores The Truth About Parenting And Happiness

Jessica Valenti

Reviewed by Kimberly Allen

The feminist framework has had enormous implications on the field of parenting, and specifically on the field of parent education. After all, women have historically been the primary caretakers of children and the primary users of parenting education materials. That is why it makes sense to pay attention to Jessica Valenti's book *Why Have Kids: A New Mom Explores the Truth about Parenting and Happiness*.

Jessica Valenti, founder of a popular blog called feministing.com, is a feminist writer and activist who has been said to have "dragged feminism into the 21st century" (Khaleeli 2011). Valenti moved into the realm of parenting education with her book, which describes her own entry into motherhood as well as offering a critique on the parenting industry and how our culture views motherhood and parenting.

Valenti's book begins by describing her own difficulty with childbirth. "Most people get flowers when they give birth — I got a two-pound baby and a failing liver" (p ix). Valenti's failing health and the failing health of her baby was just part of the story. She went on to describe examples of how parenting isn't always what it is cracked up to be. Valenti argues that parenting needs a paradigm shift, and she further suggests the quest for perfect parenting has left many parents feeling isolated and oftentimes miserable.

The book is divided into two sections: "Lies" and "Truth." In the Lies section, Valenti uses case studies and specific examples to demonstrate how "the parenting industrial complex" is actually making parents anxious and hyper-sensitive. She challenges some of the basic ideas that most parenting experts embrace. For example, she challenges the now-standard idea that breast-feeding is best and should be used no matter what. As Valenti points out with compassionate stories, breast-feeding is not an option for some parents, and trying to breast-feed when it isn't working can be stressful, overwhelming, and sometimes even quite dangerous for the mother and child.

In the Truth portion of her book, Valenti tells heartbreaking stories about how parents, and in particular, mothers are often viewed negatively when they do not conform to societal norms about parenting. In fact, she shares story after story of how mothers are blamed, criticized, and sometimes criminalized for parenting choices. She describes a mother that crossed the street with her children in order to catch a bus. A drunk driver hit the mother and her children, killing her young son. The mother was charged with second-degree homicide for failing to use a cross walk and she was sentenced to three years in prison. The drunk driver served only six months.

Although her stories can be seen as extreme examples, Valenti's point is clear — as our culture of parenting changes, so does the intensity of blaming mothers. Parents are more anxious now than ever before, and are also more isolated. So why have kids? she asks. There is a tremendous amount of pressure to always do the right thing for children and there are extreme consequences for parents who don't do what society deems the right thing. Valenti suggests that we need a paradigm shift away from the notion of perfection and toward the notion of acceptance and support of each other.

The field of parenting and parenting education continues to evolve, and those of us who work with parents have to navigate both the popular culture and research-based approaches to helping parents. In order to do that effectively, we need to keep our eye on the culture of parenting. Valenti's book is an impressive glimpse into an alternative view of parenting that resonates with a great many people. My take-away from her book is that perfect parenting doesn't exist. We need to be OK with that, and more importantly, help the parents we serve to be OK with that.

References

Valenti, Jessica. 2012. *Why have kids: A new mom explores the truth about parenting and happiness*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Khaleeli, Homa. 2011. Jessica Valenti: Pioneering blogger whose online activism dragged feminism into the 21st century. *The Guardian*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/mar/08/jessica-valenti-100-women>