# Introduction

*When I wrote a book about what I'd learned raising three kids in France, I wasn't sure that anyone besides my mother would read it. Actually, I wasn't even convinced that she would make it all the way through (she tends to prefer fiction).*

*But, to my surprise, many non-relatives read the book too. For a while there were lots of angry articles about it. Who was I to insult British and American parenting – if there really is such a thing? Surely there must be lots of little French brats? Had I only researched rich Parisians? Was I extolling socialism – or, worse, bottle-feeding?*

*I'm the sort of person who hears any criticism of herself and immediately thinks: that's so true! I fell into a funk. But then I started getting emails from ordinary parents like me. (I've posted many of these on my website.) I quickly cheered up. They didn't think I'd falsely accused Anglophones of having a parenting problem. Like me, they were living that problem, and they were eager to hear about an alternative.*

*Some parents told me that the book validated what they had already been doing privately – and often guiltily. Others said they'd tried the book's methods on their kids, and that these really did work. (No one was more relieved to hear this than me.) Many asked for more tips and specifics, or for a version of the book – without my personal back-story and voyage of discovery – that they could give as a kind of manual to grandparents, partners and babysitters.*

*This is that book. The 100 tips are my attempt to distil the smartest and most salient principles I've learned from French parents and childcare experts. You don't have to live in Paris to apply them. You don't even have to like cheese. (Though you should have a look at the recipes at the end of the book. They're a sampling of what kids in French nurseries eat, and they're delicious for grown-ups too.)*

*I believe in all 100 keys. But they're not my inventions, or my personal proclamations. And they're not all right for everyone. The French are very clear that every child is different, and that there are no recipes for raising kids. As you read the keys, you'll start to notice that behind many of the individual tips are a few guiding principles. One of these principles was radical for me, as an American: if family life is centred entirely on the children, it's not good for anyone, not even for the kids.*

*I think American parents have already worked this out. Statistics show that as this new intensive style of parenting has taken hold – the one that's popped up seemingly out of nowhere in the last twenty years – marital satisfaction has fallen. Parents are famously less happy than non-parents, and they become more unhappy with each additional child. (Working mothers in Texas apparently prefer housework to childcare.) The most depressing study of middle-class American families I've read describes how parents have gone from being authority figures to being 'valet[s] for the child'. Given*

*the amount of cooking-to-order and schlepping around that goes on, I would add 'personal chefs' and 'chauffeurs' too.*

*The clincher is that we're starting to doubt whether this demanding style of parenting is even good for children. Many of our good intentions – from baby-brain-training videos to the all-consuming quest for the best university place – now seem to be of questionable value. Some experts call the first generation of kids to graduate from this brand of child-rearing 'teacups' because they're so fragile, and warn that the way we're defining success is making these children quite unhappy.*

*Obviously, French parents don't do everything right. And they don't all do the same things. The tips in this book refer to conventional wisdom. They are what French parenting books, magazines and experts generally say you should do – and what most of the middle-class parents I know actually do do, or at least believe they should be doing. (Though a French friend of mine said she planned to give a copy to her brother, so he could 'become more French'.)*

*A lot of 'French' wisdom just feels like common sense. I've received letters from readers describing the overlaps between French parenting and Montessori, or the teachings of a Hungarian-born woman called Magda Gerber. Others assure me that we Americans used to bring up our kids this way too, before Reaganomics, the psychotherapy boom and that study which said that poor*

*children don't hear enough words when they're little. (Let's just say that the American middle class massively overcompensated.)*

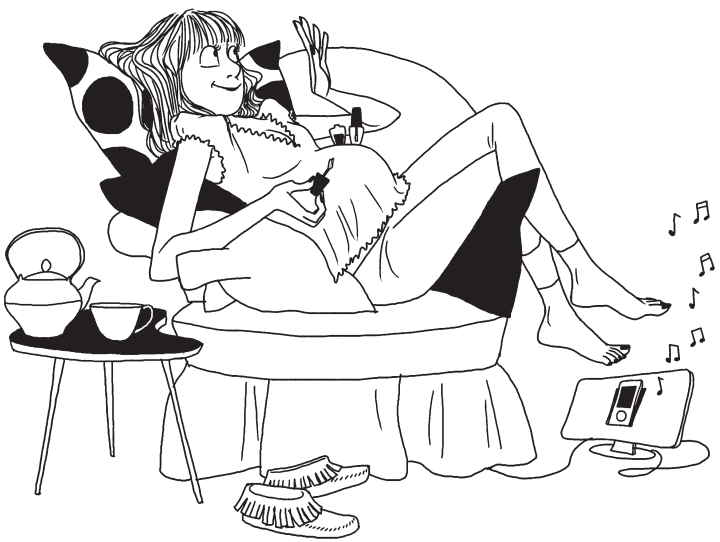
*But some French ideas have a power and elegance that's all their own. French parents widely believe that babies are rational, that you should combine a little bit of strictness with a lot of freedom, and that you should listen carefully to children, but not feel obliged to do everything they say. Their ability to move their offspring on from 'children's foods' is remarkable. Above all, the French think that the best parenting happens when you're calm. What's really neat is that, in France, you have an entire nation, in real time, trying to follow these principles. It's like a country-sized control group. Come and visit. You'll be amazed.*

*French parenting is particularly relevant to us now because it's a kind of mirror image of what's been happening in Britain and America. We Anglophones tend to think you should teach children cognitive skills such as reading as soon as possible; the French focus instead on 'soft' skills like socializing and empathy in the early years. We want our kids to be stimulated a lot; they think down-time is just as crucial. We often hesitate to frustrate a child; they think a child who can't cope with frustration will grow up miserable. We're focused on the outcomes of parenting; they think the quality of the eighteen or so years you'll spend living together counts for a lot too. We tend to think that long-term sleep deprivation, routine*

*tantrums, picky eating and constant interruptions are more or less inevitable when you have small children. They believe these things are – please imagine me saying this in a French accent –* impossible.

*I'm a journalist, not a parenting expert. So what really sold me on French principles was the data. Many things that French parents do by intuition, tradition or trial-and-error are exactly what the latest English-language research recommends. The French take for granted that you can teach little babies how to sleep through the night; that patience can be learned; that too much praise can be damaging for children; that you should become attuned to a baby's rhythms; that toddlers don't need flash cards; and that tasting foods makes you like those foods. Science is now telling us this too. (To keep the tips simple, I've listed many of the relevant studies in the bibliography on page 177.)*

*Please take this book as inspiration, not doctrine. And be flexible. One of the French sayings I didn't have room for was 'You have to keep changing what you do.' Kids evolve quickly. As they do, you can keep the same guiding principles, but you may need to apply them differently. I hope that this book helps make that possible. Rather than giving lots of specific rules, it's more like a toolbox to help parents work things out on their own. As the old saying goes: don't give a man a* filet de saumon à la vapeur de fenouil. *Just teach him how to fish.*



# Pregnancy

## A Croissant in the Oven

*All pregnant women worry. You're making a human being, after all. Some of us can barely make dinner. But in Britain and America, worrying is practically an Olympic sport. We feel we must choose a parenting philosophy, and weigh up whether each bite of food we eat is in the baby's best interest. All this angst doesn't feel pleasant. But to many of us, it does feel necessary. We're signalling that there's nothing we won't sacrifice for our unborn child.*

*The French don't encourage this anxiety. Instead, in the word cloud of French pregnancy, terms like 'serenity', 'balance' and 'zen' keep popping up. Mothers-to-be are expected to signal their competence by showing how calm they are, and by demonstrating that they still experience pleasure. This small shift in emphasis makes a very big difference.*

1.

# Pregnancy is not a research project

French mothers-to-be might read a baby book or two, but they don't baby-proof their homes beyond recognition, or select a stroller as if they were choosing a husband. There is an important difference between being prepared and being the person who recites the names of chromosomal disorders at dinner.

Making a baby is more mysterious and meaningful than anything you've ever done (unless you've been pregnant before, or had cats). You can dwell on the enormity of that without trying to micromanage your pregnancy, and without anointing a personal guru. The most important voice to have inside your head is your own.

2.

# Calm is better for Bébé

If you're not persuaded to be calm for your own sake, do it for your unborn child. French pregnancy magazines say that the foetus senses his mother's moods. He's jolted by too much stress, and soothed when pleasure hormones cross the placenta. Experts urge pregnant women to discuss their concerns with a doctor or therapist and to pamper themselves with pedicures, romantic nights out (preferably with the baby's father) and lunches with friends. According to the French, the resulting *zen maman* pops out a *bébé zen*, and a calm pregnancy sets the tone for calm parenting.

3.

# French mothers eat sushi (sometimes)

France's future *mamans* try to keep the risks in perspective. They know that some things – like cigarettes and alcohol – are categorically hazardous for the unborn child. French doctors now advise going cold turkey on both (though some pregnant women still have the occasional *coupe de champagne*). But other things are dangerous only if they happen to be contaminated. Sushi, salami, uncooked shellfish, raw eggs and unpasteurized cheese are in this category. This is not to say that you should rush out and eat oysters. Listen to the advice of your doctor or midwife. Just remember that accidentally eating unpasteurized Parmesan cheese with your pasta is not grounds for a nervous breakdown.

4.

# The baby doesn't need brioche

In France, pregnancy isn't an excuse to devour the foods you've been denying yourself – or guiltily bingeing on – since adolescence. If your body cries out for doughnuts, distract it by eating an apple or a piece of cheese. French women's long-term strategy is to enjoy the occasional bowl of *mousse au chocolat*. This quells the beast, and makes it less likely that they'll go overboard on sweet foods later. This practice of moderation, not self-deprivation, could explain why a recent French pregnancy book is called *Emergency: She Wants Strawberries*.

5.

# Eat for one (and a bit)

Do like the French, and plan to emerge from pregnancy with your figure and your feminine allure intact. Remember that it will be much easier to lose the baby-weight if you haven't put on too much while pregnant. Take your doctor's weight-gain limits seriously. The French limits are lower than British and American ones, and women treat them like holy edicts. One French guide says that a moderately active pregnant woman needs an additional 200 to 500 calories per day, but warns that anything more 'inevitably turns into fat'. This careful eating needn't feel austere. Crucially, French women don't eat merely to nourish the foetus. They also aim to eat for pleasure.

6.

# Don't borrow your husband's shirts

Dressing like a shapeless blob is bad for morale (yours and your mate's, possibly even the baby's). Take a tip from Parisiennes, and don't lose your sense of style just because you're pregnant. Invest strategically in a few flattering maternity clothes. Then convert cardigans and leggings from your wardrobe into pregnancy gear, and brighten yourself up with lipstick and coloured scarves. Attention to these details signals that you're not graduating from 'woman' to 'mum'. You can be both.

7.

# Don't lose your mojo

French pregnancy magazines don't just say that it's OK to have sex; they spell out exactly how to do it – including lists of pregnancy-safe sex toys (nothing with batteries), aphrodisiacs (mustard, cinnamon, chocolate) and detailed instructions on how to manoeuvre yourself into third-trimester positions. Accompanying fashion spreads show pregnant women in lacy maternity lingerie with come-hither looks. Pregnant French women don't morph into sex goddesses; they have the same fluctuating libidos as the rest of us. But they don't behave as if they've crossed into a realm where intimacy is on hold. They know that if you put your seductive powers in the deep freeze, it's hard to thaw them out later.

## 8.

# Epidurals aren't evil

The French don't view childbirth as a heroic test of pain tolerance, or as early evidence of the trials a mother will be willing to undergo for her child. French women don't typically launch their babies into the world amid a frenzy of micromanagement in which they specify the lighting, the guest list, and who gets to catch the baby when it comes out.

There are midwives, pre-natal baby whisperers and even some home births in France. The French don't think there's anything wrong with giving birth the way you want to. But they believe the main aim is to get the baby safely from your uterus into your arms. While some things may be better *au naturel* (breasts and maple syrup come to mind), others are better with a giant dose of drugs. Even French women who subsist on organic food and plan to breastfeed well into pre-school are delighted when the anaesthetist arrives.

9.

# Papa: don't stand at the business end

Unless you are actually delivering the baby, don't stand at the 'end of the tunnel' during the final moments of labour. Yes, there's the miracle of life to witness. Of course you want to seem welcoming to your child. But consider meeting him half a second later, in order to preserve your partner's feminine mystique. It gets messy down there. As the French saying goes, not all truths should be told.