Recently a young mother asked what I thought of Dr Harvey Karp’s book on infant sleep. All her friends were using it enthusiastically. What advice could I give?

While I had been aware of the Happiest Baby phenomenon, and particularly the celebrity acclaim Dr Karp’s “5 S” proposal had created, I had dismissed this offering as yet another parenting book unlikely to provide new benefit for my patients. But when parents talk, I need to listen. It was clearly time to learn what tricks Dr Karp might teach this old dog.

The Happiest Baby Guide to Great Sleep provides a roadmap for parents who are struggling with their child’s sleep. The book reintroduces and expands on ideas Dr Karp pioneered in his previous works, The Happiest Baby on the Block and The Happiest Toddler on the Block.

Dr Karp initially provides an excellent lay overview of sleep physiology. The book is then organized to explore sleep problems at different ages. For each stage, Dr Karp discusses normal developmental behaviors that impact sleep. Then he provides stage-specific advice. He debunks common myths. He identifies and supports evidence-based recommendations (back to sleep, immunizations, etc). He boldly wades into controversial topics, like bed sharing, providing balanced facts parents can use to reach independent conclusions. In the last chapters, he explores special situations, such as ADHD, obstructive sleep apnea, and night terrors.

Throughout, Dr Karp uses vignettes to illustrate his methods and successes. Unfortunately, the graphs, diagrams, and charts, used for emphasis, are of poor quality. However, the book is well indexed so parents can navigate to a particular issue for review.

While this book primarily deals with sleep, it contains much more. Dr Karp does a superb job helping parents understand why difficult but normal childhood behaviors evolve. He encourages parents to develop positive daytime behaviors that reduce sleep issues. To this end, he suggests wonderfully creative strategies including “side-talking,” “playing the fool,” and “patience stretching.” These techniques evolve from well-studied positive reinforcement interventions. They will arm even experienced providers with new arrows in their quiver of parental advice.

Dr Karp’s style is informal. Some might find his use of monikers like “your little bug” or “your cave kid” endearing. Others may find this cloying or perhaps condescending. But his messages are clear and frequently reinforced in readily understandable language.

Yet the value of any parent guide lies in its validity and safety. Dr Karp asserts that the basis for infant sleep improvement is to create an environment that mimics the womb. His famous “5 S” interventions (swaddling, sucking, shushing, stomach/side position, and swinging) come from this theory. Primary care physicians will recognize each of the “5 S’s” as well known strategies. Dr Karp’s genius is to take these and package them into a series of specific steps that parents can faithfully follow.

A recent research article assessed the efficacy of these interventions on infant crying, sleep, and parental stress. This study, limited in part by providing video training only, did not find significant differences when parents used Dr Karp’s methods. Unfortunately, there are no evidence-based reviews that critically assess his approaches.

So could Michelle Pfeiffer, Pierce Brosnan, and many others with anecdotally positive experiences, be wrong? Perhaps satisfaction comes from a sense of empowerment in having specific step-by-step directions to follow in difficult situations. Other research suggests that increased parental empowerment is one primary result of his approach.

Providers should also be aware of some controversial recommendations.
Dr Karp advocates that white noise (show-
er level) be used throughout the night and at
naptime to promote sleep. Unfortunately, there
are no current studies that support the safety
of long-term white noise in term infants. Be-
cause there is ample evidence correlating hear-
ing loss in preterm infants with ambient noise
in NICUs, it may be prudent to limit prolonged
noise exposure in all children.

Dr Karp advocates waking sleeping infants
to feed them at parental bedtime (“dream
feed”). In an environment where childhood
obesity is rampant, feeding infants and older
children who do not exhibit hunger cues should
be viewed with extreme caution.

In sum, Dr Karp has provided a book full of
many wonderful ideas that will help promote
happy parenting. It contains creative positive
reinforcement strategies providers can share
with parents. For these treats, this dog raises
one slightly arthritic paw of approval. How-
ever, before blithely recommending this book,
providers should understand that there is a
lack of scientific evidence about some recom-
mendations and potential harm in others.

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behavioral intervention to reduce crying among infants.
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In the Shadow of Asclepius:
Poems From American Medicine
Howard F. Stein
Indianapolis, IN, Dog Ear Publishing, 2011, 97 pp., $11.95,
Paperback.

In his ninth collection of
poems, psychologist How-
ard Stein, PhD, explores
imaginatively the lives of
both patients and care-
givers in this institu-
tionalized dance we call
modern medicine. I come
away with a confirmed
sense of the stubborn
difficulty of day-to-day living
for those who come to us for help, in the face of
which the concerns and rituals of us medical
folk—from the logistics of office scheduling to
the medications we offer for healing—take on
an almost surreal quality because they miss
the mark so widely. It is a tragic mismatch
of expectations that leaves both partners ex-
hausted, physically and emotionally—even
spiritually. And yet, what gives Stein’s poems
their power is that the fountain of empathy in-
side us never runs dry, and despite the failures,
the frustrations, and the disappointments, both
caregivers and patients keep coming back to
each other.

There is nothing out of the ordinary about
the situations that concern Stein, nor the lan-
guage he uses to give them life. Alliteration,
rhyme, and meter are virtually absent here, as
are metaphor and simile. Everything depends
on his discerning eye and an empathic, mostly
unsentimental heart.

In his poems, nature often serves as a gorge-
ous counterpoint to our human follies but
also conspires against us. The poems are full
of description of rain, snow, biting wind and
bitter cold—friends of illness. And braving the
elements, patients doggedly make their way to
us, so that the cold welcome they often receive
seems like warmth and comfort by comparison.

In the last third of this ample collection,
Stein explores personal loss, and perhaps not
surprisingly, this is where his poetry is most
powerful. The lives of patients, doctors, nurses,
and aides are evoked mostly through the ex-
tenational details that anyone might see, but only
a poet would notice. In the poems of the clos-
ing section, struggling with personal illness
and parental loss, Stein inhabits an internal
landscape of loss and redemption. Here, the
simplicity and directness of his approach bearsipper fruit and, at its best, contains echoes of
Emily Dickinson, as in this passage that con-
cludes his final poem, a question that captures
the book’s entire project and still reverberates
for me long after I’ve closed its covers:

Have you found
A quiet place
For your soul
Where, though you’re
Rent to pieces,
You’re still whole?

It’s an elusive and, as we’ve all experienced,
an ephemeral place. You find it for a moment
or two each day if you’re lucky, before it’s lost
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