Why American Kids Are Brats

By Judith Warner | @judithwarner | February 10, 2012

Amidst all the talk this past week about Pamela Druckerman’s new book, *Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting*, there was one phrase that immediately lodged itself in my mind. It was in a sidebar that ran with the *Wall Street Journal* adaptation of her book, “Why French Parents Are Superior,” and it said this: “Children should say hello, goodbye, thank you and please. It helps them to learn that they aren’t the only ones with feelings and needs.”

That statement points directly to what I see as one of the most meaningful differences between the French and (contemporary) American style of parenting. I don’t happen to believe, as the *Journal* pushed Druckerman’s argument to say, that French parenting is necessarily superior, overall, to what we do in America. I don’t think French children are, overall, better or happier people — such generalizations are silly. But it is true that French kids can be a whole lot more pleasant to be around than our own. They’re more polite. They’re better socialized. They generally get with the program; they help out when called upon to do so, and they don’t demand special treatment. And that comes directly from being taught, from the earliest age, that they’re not the only ones with feelings and needs.

I say all this based on many years of extended hanging out time with French families, both before and after my own girls — who, like Druckerman’s children, were born in France — came along. In fact, that experience — and the contrast with the American way of parenting I discovered when I moved back to the States — inspired my book *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, the main argument of which Druckerman recapitulates at the very beginning of *Bringing Up Bébé*. (Fuller disclosure: she interviewed me for the book as well.)

Like Druckerman, I’ve often noted wistfully how French children know how to handle themselves in restaurants. I’ve envied how French children eat what’s put in front of them, put themselves to bed when instructed to, and, generally, tend to help keep the wheels of family life moving pretty smoothly. But the difference that struck me the most deeply, when my family moved to Washington, D.C., from Paris and my older daughter began preschool, was how much more basically respectful French children were of other people. Indeed, how much emphasis French parents put on demanding they behave respectfully toward other people. And how that respect helped make life more enjoyable.

In the years when I was gathering wool for, and then formally researching and writing *Perfect Madness*, I was disheartened time and again by the ways parents in the U.S. often did just the opposite. American parents assiduously strove to make sure that their children’s wants and needs came first, no matter what. This sometimes had a name — “advocating for your child” — and was clearly predicated on the belief that if you didn’t yourself do it, didn’t teach your child to “self-advocate,” no one would, and in the great stampede for resources and rewards your child would get left behind in the dust. In my preschool-mom world back then, this