

Supernanny to the Rescue: Reality Television as a Transmitter of Cultural Patterns

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Abstract:

In modern society, media has become one of the most important institutions by which culture is communicated from generation to generation. This paper examines one example of a media artifact that communicates messages about proper cultural behavior: the American and British television show *Supernanny*, a reality program in which parents are given parenting advice on how to control their unruly children. Specifically, the cultural practice of family sleeping patterns is analyzed. After a brief history of the history of public discourse in the United States about family sleeping arrangements, this paper looks at four episodes of *Supernanny* in which sleeping habits become a source of conflict between the family and Jo Frost, the child care expert. By examining the ways in which the program frames sleeping habits and the parental role, this paper hopes to illuminate how media artifacts can send messages to the viewing audience about proper and improper behavior, thus promulgating specific cultural beliefs about the correct aims and goals of child-rearing and what makes for a happy and stable adult member of society.

Introduction

As the television show opens, a black Mini Cooper pulls up in front of a suburban house. A close-up on the license plate reveals: SPRNANNY. The occupant, a woman in a tailored suit and glasses, her hair in a bun, gets out and walks up the sidewalk to ring the front doorbell. As it opens, a montage of images spills across the screen, flashforwards to the family about to be introduced: a little girl swears at her mother; a boy shoves his little brother across the room; a father plugs his ears as his son shrieks; a mother chases her screaming son through a parking lot. “Tonight on *Supernanny*,” intones the announcer, “Jo meets the Gorbea family, whose mom shoulders all the household responsibilities while her two-year-old is stuck to her like glue. Jo has two weeks to pry this mom from her son’s grip, get dad to pull his weight around the house, and give the family back the peace and quiet they desperately desire.”

So begins a typical episode of *Supernanny*, a television reality show that aired on UK and US television from 2004 to 2012. The basic structure of the show was always the same: *Supernanny*,

Jo Frost, shows up at the house of parents who need help disciplining and controlling their children. She observes and assesses the situation, consults with the parents about specific problem areas, and over the course of two weeks instructs the parents in how to be better parents: how to set boundaries and limits, how to deal with temper tantrums, how to be positive and nurturing. At the same time, of course, she models for the viewers watching at home what “proper” child-rearing habits should be.

This essay uses *Supernanny* to explore the ways in which culture is transmitted through media messages to shape the patterns of everyday life in a society by looking at one specific issue: family sleeping habits. After a discussion of culture and the media, I will briefly outline the history of tensions in US history over family sleeping arrangements before turning to *Supernanny* as an example of how the media perpetuate cultural practices and standards.

Media as a Culture Bearer

The most succinct definition of culture comes from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*: “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life” (1973, p. 89). That is, culture in a sociological sense is an attitude toward life, expressed in symbols, and passed down from generation to generation. For example, a “marriage” is a pattern of meanings about how people interact with each other, expressed through symbolic forms like rings, spoken vows, public rituals and private behavior. The pattern of what constitutes a “marriage” is handed down from generation to generation through symbolic behavior and communication: people see their parents’ marriage, or they watch how marriage is defined and expressed in social institutions.

Social institutions include things like schools, religion, transmission of beliefs from elders, or—increasingly in modern life—the media. Children in industrialized nations learn many of their first lessons about how to interact with the world from media narratives—television shows, movies, music. And as we advance through our life, many of the first patterns we observe of key areas in life—dating, friendship, education, child care, and work, for example—are in movies and television shows. The media have become key transmitters and educators of the patterns of life—especially narrative media, which tell people the stories that establish and reinforce certain patterns. As Murray, Schwartz & Lichter (2002) put it:

In many regards, the media are bearers of modern culture through the stories that they tell. . . . When cultural forms are activated by a story, the settings deployed are deeper set, less conscious, and more atavistic than are dry scientific analyses. Moreover, cultural motifs are imbued with emotional valence. While harder to evict by logic and evidence, they are easier to activate and direct than are the ‘lessons’ of data-driven efforts to educate the public through dry, propositional presentations of fact. Cultural frameworks serve as motivational triggers and once set in action are rarely countered by logic alone. (186)

In other words, *stories* are more powerful transmitters of culture than facts and statistics. And reality programming, which blends factual reality with structured narrative, can carry a particular weight. In order to better understand *Supernanny*, we must look at the history of the genre of “reality programming” from which it springs.

Television programs based in reality have a long history, from shows from the 1950s like *Queen for a Day*, in which women shared their hard-luck stories to vie for the chance to get all their wishes granted for one day; or *Candid Camera* in which the host played pranks on unsuspecting people caught on camera. However, the term “reality television” or “reality programming” has come to mean a fairly specific (and extremely popular) form of television narrative that, according to Richard Kilborn (1994), involves three definitive aspects:

- *recording “on the wing”, and frequently with the help of lightweight video equipment, of events in the lives of individuals and groups;
 - *the attempt to simulate such real-life events through various forms of dramatized reconstruction;
 - *the incorporation of this material in suitably edited form into an attractively packaged television programme which can be promoted on the strength of its reality credentials.
- (423)

The key point is that the “reality” of reality television is carefully edited and controlled to create a story that illustrates a theme in a compelling and involving fashion: all of the weight of “reality” combined with all of the instinctive appeal of “narrative.” In the service of higher ratings and profits, of course—but cultural narratives and patterns inevitably become part of such programs (for how else can one show a convincing “reality” if not by showing how things ought to be?) and are transmitted in turn to the people watching them. Such programs provide a quite different kind of argumentative strength than instruction manuals and scientific treatises, one that has a distinctive

and more unconscious appeal.

Before turning to look specifically at the “proper” child-rearing patterns modeled in *Supernanny*, we must first take a brief look at the long and combative history of parent-child sleeping practices in the Western world, in order to understand what is at stake when Supernanny Jo Frost steps in to establish her “Bedtime Separation Technique.”

Family Sleeping Arrangements in the West: A Brief History

The late Victorian Era (1837-1901) was a time of increasing scientization of all areas of cultural life in the West. One of the many areas of life to come under scientific scrutiny was the raising of children. Pediatrics as a medical branch arose at that time, particularly under the auspices of Arthur Jacobi, a Prussian-born doctor who opened pediatric units in New York hospitals and helped to found the American Pediatric Society in 1888 (Hatfield, 2007, p. 4). Increasingly, child-rearing was seen as a public health issue rather than a private family issue, and so this time saw the rise of manuals designed to help parents (usually mothers, overwhelmingly the primary childcare providers at the time) raise their children in ways that were more healthy both physically and emotionally.

One of the key texts in this new movement was *The Care and Feeding of Children* by Luther Emmett Holt, one of the pioneers of pediatrics, in 1894. Holt covered a variety of topics in his treatise: the importance of using sterilized milk, the proper temperature at which to keep a nursery, and the process of toilet training among others. More than one generation of American children was raised on Holt’s advice: Dr. Benjamin Spock, the future author of an even more influential book that is discussed later, remembered his mother’s reliance on the Holt manual (Hulbert, 2004, p. 21). A serious and scholarly man, he “informed modern mothers of their duty to become scientific professionals on nutritional matters. They were also to guard their growing children vigilantly against germs and undue stimulation” (Hulbert, 2004, p. 21-22). Holt also weighed in on a growing controversy in Victorian times: the dangers of the shared sleeping bed for parents and children.

Holt’s manual is written in the form of questions and responses; in answer to the question “Should a child sleep in the same bed with its mother or nurse?” he answers in no uncertain terms, “Under no circumstances, if this can possibly be avoided.” He cites the dangers of accidental smothering, and adds that sharing a bed leads to frequent irregular nursing in the night, “which is injurious to both mother and child.” Instead, he urges that each child have its own bed and sleep alone in the night.

Holding and rocking a child to lull it to sleep is to be avoided: “It is a habit easily acquired, but hard to break, and a very useless and sometimes injurious one.” Instead, a child should be placed in its crib or bed in a darkened room while awake, to fall asleep on its own.

And if one’s child doesn’t want to fall asleep on his or her own? Holt details different kinds of crying (from hunger, from pain) and labels one kind of crying “the cry of indulgence”:

This is often heard even in very young infants, who cry to be rocked, to be carried about, sometimes for a light in the room, for a bottle to suck, or for the continuance of any other bad habit which has been acquired.

This type of crying is not to be encouraged at night: the mother should check to make sure the child is not in pain, but after that the child

should simply be allowed to ‘cry it out.’ This often requires an hour, and in extreme cases, two or three hours. A second struggle will seldom last more than ten or fifteen minutes, and a third will rarely be necessary.

In this way, Holt explains, a child is to be gently but firmly taught to sleep in its own bed.

Holt’s advice shaped more than one generation of caregivers in the West, and although there have always been people who disagreed with his views on sleeping habits, they became extremely widespread, to the point that merely suggesting perhaps parents could be more flexible was considered revolutionary. When Dr. Benjamin Spock wrote *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* in 1946, with its first line of “Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do,” it quickly became a best-seller in the United States—and remained a best-seller through seven editions and five decades. Spock’s advice to parents was much more relaxed than the generations of doctors before, some of whom admonished parents to never kiss or hug their children for fear of germs and creating psychological dependence: “If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning. Give them a pat on the head if they have made an extraordinarily good job of a difficult task,” said one expert in 1928, for example (Watson and Watson, pp. 81-82).

Compared to the rigid focus on training children to follow a strict schedule and become independent and autonomous, Spock’s was considered highly “permissive”—to the point where a Vice President

of the United States once accused him of ruining the morals of a generation of American children (Pace, 1998). However, even as late as 1998 (in the 7th edition and the last to be written entirely by Spock) he notes that

Children can sleep in a room by themselves from the time they are born, if convenient. . . . if they start sleeping in their parents' room, two or three months is a good age to move them. . . . If they haven't been moved out of the parents' room by six months, it is a good idea to put them in their own room at that time. (101-102)

Although he is careful to point out that “in certain cultures co-sleeping is very common,” he also warns that if children aren't moved out by six months “there is a chance that they may become dependent on this arrangement and be afraid and unwilling to sleep anywhere else” (102).

In English, of course, “dependence” is an inherently bad term and something to be avoided at all costs. “Independence” is the ultimate goal of full adulthood and one to be worked toward as early as possible. For example, in a recent comparison of U.S. and European parents of the top terms used to describe their babies (Harkness & Super, 2006), only the American parents had “independent” (more common terms in Europe were “happy,” “even tempered,” “easy,” and “calm,” none of which appeared in the top of the American sample). In addition, only Americans were likely to describe their child as “rebellious,” a term that basically is the same as “independent,” just with a stronger and slightly (but not entirely, given the culture) more negative meaning.

Having a room of one's own is a necessary step to independence, no matter how much the child may seem outwardly to dislike the idea at first. As such, having a special, personal room created for one's baby even before his or her arrival is part of being a good parent. A search for “nursery tour” on Youtube results in over 400,000 videos, nearly all of pregnant mothers showing off the room they have prepared for their child. They are all decorated in a unique, personalized style, and the vast majority feature the baby's name spelled out above their crib—marking the room as their personal space before they are even born.

Not surprisingly, there exists a great deal of advice for parents on how to teach their children to sleep in a separate bed or room. Recently, the “Ferber method,” named after U.S. pediatrician Richard Ferber, has become one of the more common ways to attempt to adjust one's child to sleeping separately. The Ferber method, introduced in 1986 in a book called *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems*, recommends that parents separate themselves gradually from their children by putting

them down to sleep and then leaving the room. When the child cries, the parent should wait three minutes before checking, then go in and make sure the child knows the parent is there.

Summarizing the approach, Jessica Linnell tells parents that “you should not stay until the baby has fallen asleep (or even stopped crying). The purpose of the check-in is to reassure your baby that you are still there to help her, and reassure yourself that she is safe” (91). Over the course of a few days to a week, the child should adjust to sleeping alone and stop crying.

Interestingly, when recommending that parents allow their children to “cry it out” or to use the gradual separation method, most advice books focus more on the suffering of the parents than that of the child. Linnell, for example, stresses that “the extinction method” of not entering the room and letting the child cry itself to sleep

is extremely hard for many parents to handle emotionally. Listening to your baby cry and not responding to his cries can wreck havoc on a parent’s well-being. Many parents feel they are causing their baby emotional harm and will give in before three nights pass. (86)

The experts cited in Linnell’s book that support these methods (not all do) stress firmly that learning to sleep alone is good for a child: “Babies adapt very quickly and are much happier once they sleep more productively,” (88) says one. “Teaching a child to sleep on his own helps teach self-reliance and independence.” Many parents “overlook their responsibility to teach their children how to be good sleepers,” says another (89). Nearly all agreed that the Ferber method worked to train children to sleep independently, usually within three days, and this was its great advantage. However, nearly all of them mention that the system’s greatest disadvantage is the toll it takes on the parent who must sit by while their child cries for them: “Oftentimes, parents experience more stress trying this strategy than they feel it is worth,” a family therapist is quoted as saying (93). “It is heartbreaking to listen to your baby cry. . . it takes willpower,” says another cited expert (94). “Some parents simply cannot follow through with the process. . . . some parents may feel they are causing harm to their baby by not responding to his cries,” agrees another (94). The theme is clear: acclimating your child to their own room is a difficult process *for the parent*, but a parent with “willpower” and a sense of responsibility, who can overcome the *feeling* that they are harming their child, will be doing their child a great favor in the long run, helping them to become self-reliant and independent adults. This is a theme we will see come up again and again in *Supernanny* as she models correct behavior to both the parents on the show and the parents in the audience.

Not all Western pediatricians uniformly recommend careful separation of parents and children while sleeping. An approach called “attachment parenting,” for example, rejects the well-entrenched idea that children should sleep separately from their parents as soon as possible, citing the evidence of the many cultures in which “co-sleeping” is the norm as well as the emotional needs of the children: “Where would babies themselves prefer sleeping? Suppose you were a baby,” suggests William Sears, one of the most well-known attachment parenting experts. “Would you rather sleep alone behind bars in a dark room or snuggled close to your favorite person in the whole wide world? The choice is obvious” (104). Attachment parenting and other approaches that encourage parents and children to sleep together do exist in the West, but the most common assumption is that children will have their own room as soon as possible, and that this is not a luxury, but an essential part of learning to become an independent adult. As we shall see, this is an assumption that *Supernanny* believes in strongly and reinforces through its narrative structure.

Supernanny and the Suffering Parent

Supernanny aired in the US and UK from 2004 to 2012, during which time “Supernanny” Jo Frost helped dozens of parents. Not every episode had a focus on bedtime behavior as a problem area, but very many of them did: when sleeping separately is the cultural ideal, bedtime can quickly become a fraught power struggle in which exhausted parents and stubborn children clash. In this paper, I look at four episodes of *Supernanny* in which sleeping arrangements are key. Three are American families from the first US season (2005), and one is a British family from the third UK season (2006).

The setup for *Supernanny* was always the same: parents who felt they needed her help would send her an “audition CD” showing their household, generally featuring the bad behavior of their children, and talk about how helpless they felt. One theme to the show was that although the parents generally framed the problem as located in their children, Frost’s focus was on teaching parents to be better parents. The blame for children’s bad behavior lies not in the children but in the poor parenting skills of their parents, according to the show. A large part of the appeal of the show lay in the concept of *schadenfreude*—that is, in enjoying watching other people do things wrong and suffering for it. Story after story about the popularity of *Supernanny* mentioned this attraction: “[*Supernanny*] makes you feel better about your parenting by revealing what *truly* crappy parenting looks like,” wrote Heather Havrilesky for the online magazine *Salon*, adding, “Jo may not make much of a difference in these parents’ lives, but she sure makes us parents feel damn proud that our kids don’t soil themselves and eat Cheetos for dinner.” NPR quoted another viewer as saying she

enjoyed the realization that “my kids are not nearly as bad as some of the other kids out there, and my parenting skills are not as bad as some of the parents” (Blair).

In addition, however, the show did provide more than just the enjoyment of others’ inadequacy. Blair quotes the same viewer as saying that it’s like a “free parenting class” in which you can watch other parents learning from their mistakes. Indeed, at the cultural level, programs like *Supernanny* served to pass on conventional wisdom on the topic of parenting. And the conclusion it draws, over and over again, is that parents must be strong and teach their children to be independent, no matter how much it pains them.

Each episode of *Supernanny* follows the same pattern: Jo Frost arrives at a family’s door and observes the way the family functions and communicates for one day. Then she sits down with the parents and explains what they are doing wrong, and what they must do to improve. Usually starting with a clear family schedule to be followed, Frost then hands out advice on how to administer discipline through timeouts, how to encourage better communication between parents and children, and how to enforce separate sleeping arrangements.

Under Frost’s kind but firm guidance, the family always makes some slight gains after some initial resistance. However, the next stage involves Frost leaving the family for a few days—while leaving behind an array of cameras to capture the family’s behavior. Inevitably, the parents fail to follow through on her advice, and the household slips back into chaos. Frost comes back in a few days to firmly scold the parents for their failure: “Mommy needed a good talking-to!” she says of the Bullard mother as she drives back. The parents, chastened and contrite, promise to redouble their efforts, and progress is made before the program ends. Each episode ends with an update about the state of the family—always much improved, of course.

When it comes to sleeping arrangements, all four of the families examined here come under intense criticism from Frost for having sleeping arrangements that disrupt the household and harm their children. The Howat and Bullard families both have children who refuse to go to bed, insisting on staying up with their parents until everyone is dropping with exhaustion, and screaming and crying when left in their own room. The Wischmeyers and Gorbeas are even more criticized, because in these families the mothers sleep in the same bed as their children. At the beginning of each episode, during the observation period, Frost explicitly points out when the family sleeping arrangements are bad: “Getting into bed with them is only going to make things worse,” she chides the Wischmeyers. “Mom and Dad have allowed Rylan's sleeping pattern to take over the entire family of an

evening. This issue seriously needs to change, because it's affecting everybody in the family dramatically," she says of the Bullards.

Of the four families, the Gorbeas come under the most criticism, because the two-year old son absolutely refuses to be separated from his mother at any time. If she tries to walk away, he throws his arms around her legs and makes her drag him around the house; he shrieks and screams if they are more than a few feet apart. During the observation period for the Gorbea family, Frost's criticism of the situation was scathing and sardonic: "You really can't believe that at birth Adam was separated from his mother, because he is totally attached to her hip 24/7," she notes as the camera follows mother Evaline carrying Adam everywhere. "I really don't know how Evaline gets *anything* done in that house, because Adam takes up all her time," she adds, calling Adam his mother's "ball and chain." The problem is not Adam, but his mother: "You treat him like a baby, and so he acts like a baby, but he's not a baby. He's two years old," Frost says, adding, "You've let this go on far too long." When Evaline admits that "He's slept with me almost every single night" since he was born and "I'm probably just as attached to him as he is to me," Frost's horrified reaction lets the audience know that the correct cultural practices are not being followed here. Something must be done, and Frost has a clear and simple plan for parents to teach their children how to be independent.

In the middle of each episode of *Supernanny*. Frost explains to the parents what must be done to create distance between themselves and their children. Frost is careful to point out on her web page that her method is *not* the Ferber Method, nor does she tell parents to simply let their children "cry it out." However, her technique, called the Controlled Timed Crying Technique, has many similarities. The basic steps are to first, have a soothing routine and at the same time every night, put the child down in their bed and leave the room. When the child cries for their parents' return, the parent must do nothing for two minutes. After two minutes, the parent can re-enter the room, touch the child and say "shhh" without making eye contact ("look at the bridge of their nose" advises Frost) and leave again. If the child gets out of bed, the parent must quickly but firmly put them back in bed, saying "Goodnight." After the first time out of bed, the parent is to no longer say anything, but simply put them back into bed without eye contact and leave the room again. In extreme cases (the Gorbeas and the Bullards) a parent is encouraged to kneel on the floor next to the child's bed, looking down without making eye contact, so the child knows their parent is there.

This process is extremely painful for both the children and the parents, and the sleeping segments are some of the most emotionally fraught of the show. As the children scream, throw things, slam doors, sob and sometimes hit their parents, Frost exhorts the parents to stay strong and to not give any reinforcement to their children as they keep putting them back in bed. “John and Melora *must* continue to ignore Alaia and keep putting her back into bed,” she tells the camera/audience as the Wischmeyers endure a screaming tantrum by their daughter. “You don’t reward him with communication at all,” she reminds Tara Howat as she puts her son back into bed a staggering ninety-eight times in one night. “Don’t look at him—don’t look at him!” she chides Jen Bullard as her son sobs in his crib. “Say nothing, Jen.” Evaline Gorbea, the overly-attached mother, proves the hardest to convince, and Frost must tell her over and over again to stick to the script: “Sit down on the floor and put your head down,” she says. “Sit on the floor, no eye contact. No talking, no eye contact, and put him straight back to bed!” As Adam slowly grows quiet, Evaline starts to sneak a look at her son only to be told in a whisper, “Keep your head down.”

One of the themes of the show is that the parents suffer greatly while teaching their children to sleep alone. None of the parents on the show seem callous or gleeful about leaving their children alone; all exhibit signs of deep distress as they listen to them cry. Parents twist their hands together, cross their arms to hug themselves nervously, chew their lips, bury their face in their hands. Some of them cry. On her web page, Frost warns parents that there is no way to avoid feeling badly during this training: “Your heart will beat faster, your adrenaline levels will increase, you will feel like you are screwing up your kid and immediately feel like you are being a bad parent. . . . Expect the urge to go into the room right away.”

This urge must be fought in order to teach the child how to sleep alone, even though it feels utterly unnatural at an emotional level. The cultural imperative to teach independence

Each episode focuses on the parents expressing how miserable and helpless they felt. “I think the toughest part for me was hearing Alaia crying for me to sleep with her. I felt like I was almost...mistreating her,” says Melora Wischmeyer. “Honestly, I just wanted to go lay down with them.” “How can I listen to my baby cry for me and not do anything about it?” says Evaline Gorbea. “Emotionally it hurt a hundred times worse.” Jen Bullard says that “I started to feel kind of...anxious about the routine, when I had to bow my head and basically ignore him. When Rylan was just crying, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, it just got to be too much. At one point, I almost got up and grabbed him out of the crib. Although it was only twenty-five minutes, it seemed like an hour.” In the case of both the Gorbeas and the Bullards, Frost ends up kneeling on the floor with the

mother as they weep: “Listening to her child call her name was ripping her heart out,” she says of Jen Bullard. With Evaline Gorbea, she takes Evaline’s hands in hers and as Adam screams, they rock back and forth in what is nearly an attitude of prayer.

Eventually, however, each child does eventually go to sleep. Frost is liberal with her compliments to parents after they succeed, reminding them over and over that no matter how difficult it was, they did the right thing: “You have shown AMAZING strength, and you should be proud of that,” she reassures Evaline Gorbea. Addressing the camera, she tells the audience about Tara Howat: “I’m really proud of her. I really do think she’s doing remarkably well.” Later she tells Tara directly about her struggle to put her son to bed that “That was a heavy one hour and forty-five minutes. But you did it. You should be extremely proud of yourself.” About the Bullard family, she tells the audience once again, “I’m very proud of Jen and Bryce. I’m proud that they embraced their fear, embraced their anxiety.” The key fears and anxieties to be overcome are not the child’s fear of the dark or anxiety about being alone, but the parents’ terror and insecurity about letting go of their child.

Most parents are elated that they have weathered the storm of their child’s distress to give them the tools they need to become fully mature human beings. Early in her episode, Jen Bullard is wrung with guilt, saying things like “I feel like I’ve done something wrong to create this” over and over again: “I feel like a horrible mom,” she admits tearfully,

Because you only have one chance with these kids. And I just feel like if I don’t know what I’m doing, they’re going to pay for it. I just love my boys so much and I don’t want to screw them up.

By the end of the show, her relief that she might have her boys back on the right track is palpable: “I was just so happy I can’t even put it into words,” she says after her younger son sleeps through the night. “I’m overwhelmed with joy right now.” Melora Wischmeyer sighs that “The technique is wonderful. I think it should be manually written down and handed out at birth *to every mother and dad in the world*” [emphasis added]. The cultural stricture that children should sleep alone to become fully mature and independent adults is assumed to be a universal one, one that all parents should be aspiring to.

Not all parents feel the joy Melora Wischmeyer expresses. At the end of her grueling night, Evaline Gorbea stands in the kitchen, shaken and pale, as Frost hugs her. “When Jo and I left the

room,” she says to the camera, “Jo was...excited. She was happy for me. I didn’t feel good about myself.” Frost reassures her, but she remains doubtful, saying haltingly: “Tomorrow I’ll probably feel a little bit...more excited about it, but...right now I’m just...just in pieces.” Even at the end of the show, she seems more resigned than joyous. “It’s really up to me to want to change,” she admits. “Now I understand how necessary it is that I create a space between Adam and myself.” But her emotional deflation is the cost of triumph as defined by Frost: “You can now separate yourself from your child and go into a separate room,” Frost points out. This is all for her son’s good, and the show frames her suffering and sadness as the sacrifice that a good parent has to make in order to ensure a healthy life for his or her children.

Conclusion

Reality television is particularly satisfying to viewers because it combines a sense of authenticity with a strong narrative arc in which “characters” experience dramas of punishment and redemption. Viewers can watch people whose parenting skills are worse than theirs, and gain satisfying closure. The terrible parenting on display at the beginning mingles relief (I’m not that bad!) with horror (might I become that bad?) As one viewer states, the show is also a “cautionary tale: When you see how bad it can be if you don’t do these things, it gets you to do them” (Blair). So there is a combined smugness and aspirational quality to watching the show that can be quite compelling.

Thus *Supernanny* is an extremely effective reflector and conductor of cultural values: the assumption that it is best for your children to sleep in their own room, alone is never questioned, each set of parents knows perfectly well that what they’re doing is *wrong* and bad for their children, and they have called Jo Frost in to correct their bad behavior. Never does a parent argue with Frost that sleeping together is not harmful to their children; the show’s editing frames all of the parents as deeply ashamed of their “weakness” and desperately in need of more strength and discipline in order to become better parents. Frost helps them achieve this strength, and in so doing, the show makes clear over and over again to the people watching what the “correct” behavior for a good parent is.

As each episode ends, Frost leaves a tearful, grateful family behind as she climbs back into her car. The family explains to the camera how Frost has changed their lives: “Jo Jo make Mommy and Daddy happy,” lisps one of the Wischmeyer twins. The other former terror says earnestly, “Jo Jo make me good.” Then it is time for Frost to move on to the next episode and the next family desperately in need of her help in order to teach the parents how to achieve clear boundaries and encourage independence in their children. “I’ve done what I was meant to do with this family, and

I'm off to the next one now!" she announces, leaving the viewer to wonder: "is my family one of the ones that needs her help? Am I doing all I can to instill a healthy sense of independence in my kids?" And so cultural values are passed on and reinforced in a modern mediated world.

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