

Wise words

Child psychoanalyst Susan Isaacs had another, lesser-known role: as an agony aunt.

Caroline Vollans makes the case for considering her advice in the context of modern practice

It is a little known fact that a woman respected for her ground-breaking work in nursery education and her extensive work as a child psychoanalyst was also a prolific parenting advisor. Her words of advice were written about 80 years ago in a column in *The Nursery World*, as it was called then.

'Everyday difficulties' appeared weekly from 1929 to 1936 and readers were invited to write in: 'Ursula Wise is always pleased to have letters from mothers about difficulties with children. All queries are answered on these pages, so please give initials or a pseudonym'. What was not known by the readers, however, was that Ursula Wise was too a pseudonym.

Although they were informed in 1934 that 'Ursula Wise is, in fact, a psychologist, holding the degree of MA, DSc, whose authority to advise on the difficulties of childhood is unquestioned by those who know her', the name of this agony aunt was not disclosed.

It was later revealed to be Susan Isaacs. Writing for seven years on a weekly basis constitutes a considerable amount of advice – advice that remains relevant today. Sleeping, eating, tantrums, night terrors, disobedience, rivalry, stubbornness, education, discipline and many more concerns can be found in her columns.

'DMW', writing in about bedtime difficulties, received this reply: 'Your firmness is a help to the child; that is a very desirable thing. But it needs to be combined with unstinted affection and with willingness to give the child special comfort in circumstances when she requires it. I would not worry about not always being as patient as you might wish to be. It is no use expecting oneself to be "perfect", and it is very difficult to deal with such states of anxiety with a child when they go on day after day, evening after evening.' (12 August, 1936).

'LJR', worried about the 'terrible twos', was encouraged: 'A period of



rebelliousness and temper seem to be quite a normal occurrence round about two to four years of age. In part it must be taken as a sign of healthy development towards independence and self-reliance. It is simply a matter of maintaining steady firmness and gentle affection towards her, and resting secure in your own mind that, given these conditions, the child will pass through this phase of difficulty' (20 August, 1930).

BREAKING THE BABY

Reading her columns, it is evident that Wise was unremittably understanding of both the child and parents when dealing with the vast majority of concerns. She was writing at a time when Dr Frederic Truby King's 'mothercraft' was considered the go-to approach for mothers and nannies.

King became prevalent when his baby-rearing approach was seen as the main contributing factor to a decrease in infant mortality in New Zealand. He laid out a rigid routine of feeding, sleeping, fresh air, toileting and keeping a good distance (physical and emotional) from one's baby. King's approach to rearing calves and babies was pretty much identical.

Though many parents made reference to King in their letters to Wise, it is noteworthy that she never criticised him. Clearly, however, his somewhat

draconian techniques had not solved all the difficulties of raising children, otherwise they would not have been writing to her in the first place.

Wise, contrary to King's one-size-fits-all approach, responded to her correspondents on a one-by-one basis, always considering the particular circumstances. While King's approach was about toughening babies up from day one (sometimes referred to as 'breaking the baby'), Wise's was about helping babies and their parents get through their difficulties.

Her usual style was to be firm and clear in a pleasant, affectionate manner. The phrases 'with a quiet, pleasant firmness', 'with a quiet, steady firmness' and 'with patience and tact' appear consistently in her letters.

In response to a mother's qualms about her daughter's shyness, Wise said, 'I should do my best to give her



Isaacs, or 'Wise', was understanding of both parents' and children's needs

quiet, calm encouragement, without any over persuasion or special attention' (3 December, 1930). 'Anthony' writes concerned about her daughter's preoccupation with death, and Wise responded, 'The best comfort to her is to see that we ourselves are not preoccupied with this problem, but remain cheerfully interested in life, and happy in our relations with other people, in spite of the inescapable fact of ultimate death' (3 October, 1934).

REASSURANCE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Wise, in general, seemed to think that given time, reassurance and encouragement, many difficulties would be temporary and not turn into problems. She certainly did not view a child's individuality or particularity as trouble. In reply to 'Petro', bothered about her son's fussy eating, she said, 'When a child has such a persistent dislike of a particular type of food there is surely no justification for trying to force it on him. If he will eat the egg which is considered good for him in other ways but boiled, what possible good reason can there be for insisting that he should have it boiled? It seems such a pity to make unnecessary difficulties' (15 April, 1931).

Wise was, however, unequivocal in what she had to say if she

considered something to be problematic – smacking, for example. Uncharacteristically, this is the one situation in which she would resolutely admonish a parent, having no time at all for the 'it hurts me more than it hurts her' line: 'Let me say that I wish I could understand how it is possible for anyone seriously to claim that smacking a child hurts her more than it hurts the child. I confess that I feel that to be complete humbug.' (*Troubles of Children and Parents*, Susan Isaacs, Methuen, 1948, page 37 – a selection of her columns).

Similarly, Wise did not shy away from what she thought might be more deep-seated problems needing more than ordinary attention. 'ABC' asked Wise about dealing with her child's stammer. In reply, she wrote: 'The treatment of stammering is a highly technical affair, upon which one cannot give general advice without first-hand observation of the child. So much depends upon the sort of difficulties, and still more upon the underlying cause'. Wise then went on to recommend and give details of a psychologist and invited further correspondence from 'ABC' (21 May, 1930).

Interestingly, Isaacs, though incredibly sympathetic to the plight of infancy, was opposed to a practice

Interestingly, Isaacs was opposed to a practice that has become far more routine – that of always praising, perhaps over-praising, a child

ON SAYING SORRY...

'I should certainly not punish him or try to make him apologise. Apologies from a child as young as that, unless they were absolutely spontaneous, have no value except to soothe the pride of the offended grown-up. But I should definitely ask him not to do it and show a little displeasure on your part.' (*The Nursery World*, 26 November, 1930)

that has certainly become far more routine over the years – that of always praising, perhaps over-praising, a child. She said, 'Praise is very good for some children, but it is a great pity to feed the child's appetite for it so much that she cannot be happy without constant flattery' and 'It does sound to me as if you were trying to be too coaxing all round'.

RARELY SURPASSED

Commenting on her work and her book *Troubles of Children and Parents*, her recent biographer Philip Graham (2009) states, 'Her writing has rarely been surpassed by those "baby books" since her time.'

Is it not puzzling, then, as to why she is not more of a well-known figure in the world of parenting? King, just before her time, and Donald Winnicott, just after, are both very well known.

In a recent online BBC article called 'Six childcare gurus who have changed parenting', the first woman to get a mention was Penelope Leach (1970s), who was writing nearly 40 years after Isaacs. Yet one only has to take a brief look at Isaacs' substantial archives at the Institute of Education to see that she was a prominent figure for her correspondents. It is heartening to think that *Nursery World* recognised her value.

Susan Isaacs, a pioneer of looking at the individual child against their family background and bringing psychoanalysis, education and parenting into dialogue, needs recovering. Eighty years on, she offers invaluable wise words. ■

Caroline Vollans is a psychoanalyst, teacher and offers supervision in early years settings, cvollans@hotmail.co.uk



PHOTO AT KENSINGTON CHILDREN'S CENTRE, LIVERPOOL, BY GUZELIAN