

From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is Trending Globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin. Emily Oster's 2013 book *Expecting Better* was inspired by the countless health recommendations she got while she was pregnant. An economist at the Watson Institute with a penchant for challenging conventional wisdom, she dove into the research on healthy pregnancies and wrote a book that separated the meaningful advice from the noise.

Her newest book *Crib Sheet* applies the same statistical rigor and skepticism to the conventional wisdom behind early childhood parenting. Both books are filled with clarity and insights, and they've become required reading for many young and soon to be parents, including one in particular who's really helped spread the word.

**EMILY OSTER:** Amy Schumer decided she really liked the first book and then she's been really nice about this book also. And so I think basically timing this book with Amy Schumer's pregnancy has pretty much been the key.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** I talked to Emily about some of the most surprising findings from her book and how this work intersects with her research at Watson. I started by asking her what she thinks data analysis can teach us about parenting.

**EMILY OSTER:** I actually wasn't sure that I would write a book about parenting, because I wasn't sure, I think, that data was as helpful as it was with some of the questions in pregnancy, which were a little more-- in some ways like a little more straightforward. But I think when you parent, you realize especially in early parenting there are just a tremendous number of decisions.

And it can be very hard to think about how to make those choices. So something like breastfeeding or different kinds of sleep choices, vaccinations, there are many of them. And when people are faced with them you get a lot of advice from many sides. Do this, do this, this is the most important thing you can do, this is the only right choice.

And I think what the data brings in this case is a real understanding of which of these choices are really important to make one way, like which of these things are really-- this is something you should definitely do, and which of them, there are some costs, there are some benefits, there are a variety of right choices.

And so what the book tries to do is both show people what that data is, but then also put it a

little bit inside a decision framework and try to help people think about the decisions. I think that's in some ways more of the service of the book even than the data.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** What are some of the main misconceptions you came across, and then some of the things that are sort of unequivocally borne out by the data?

**EMILY OSTER:** One thing I spent a lot of time on in the book is breastfeeding, because I think it looms very large for new parents, particularly for new moms, and it gets a huge amount of attention. And if you read online about the benefits of breastfeeding, you will see a lot of things cited, some of which seem like things that could be backed by evidence, like raising kids' IQ or improving their health, some of which seem like they must be made up, like it will improve your friendships-- there's no evidence for that.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** I had actually never heard that before.

**EMILY OSTER:** Yeah, that's a good one.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

You've managed to get through your whole life-- you probably have good friends.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Yes, yes. But I breastfed, so--

**EMILY OSTER:** Right, so you don't know. You don't know if that's why. So when you dig into the data on this, the data shows that there are some benefits to breastfeeding, which really do hold up. So some improvements in digestion for the baby, some improvements in eczema or rashes in the first year. Maybe some effects on ear infections early on, maybe even some long term benefits for the mother in terms of breast cancer reduction.

So there is a solid pocket of good evidence for benefits. But some of these claims, particularly a lot of the things around long term effects on the kids like IQ, obesity reductions, other kinds of disease benefits, those do not seem to hold up in the best data. And so I think in the end, the picture on breast feeding is a bit more nuanced than what people sometimes hear.

Which is not to say that it isn't beneficial, that it isn't something that is good. Certainly not to say that. But it's also not the only thing that is important. I think often for moms particularly, early on in their experience of having a kid, if breastfeeding is hard or if it doesn't work or you don't want to, there can be just a tremendous amount of shame that is heaped upon women

for failing to give their kids the best start, as they say.

And I think that this dials that back a little bit that says, yeah, if you don't do this, maybe your kid will have a little more diarrhea in the first year, but it is not the thing that is going to keep them from being successful adult.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And you might still have friends.

**EMILY OSTER:** And you might still have friends.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Well, that that makes me wonder, when someone like you who's trained to look at data and understand it and sort of dismantle some of these studies, do you think that there's an agenda behind some of them, or are they just flawed?

**EMILY OSTER:** I think in this case a lot of it is just that they're flawed. So I think in the case of breastfeeding, if you look at why might you think that breastfeeding would lower obesity, for example, in kids, you can compare kids who are breastfed and kids who are not. And you will indeed find that the kids who are breastfed are thinner.

But that doesn't mean that's causal. There are a lot of other things that are different between kids who are breastfed, kids who are not, thinking about their family background, about their parents, and so on. And when you do a better job adjusting for those by including better controls or by looking at two siblings or by using a randomized trial, that's where you see those effects go away.

So in some sense, I think that there is-- there has been some policy push which I think has maybe encouraged some of these more aggressive statements in an effort to encourage people to do this behavior, which is good for-- in some ways. And I think that that policy has maybe led us to overinterpret some of these results and not be as clear headed about some of the limitations of the data.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Does that drive you crazy, that people are making decisions based on flawed data?

**EMILY OSTER:** Yes. Yes it does.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** I can only imagine. You know, and I'm thinking about the lay public confusing correlation and causality, or even not knowing that that's what's going on, and not just policymakers but individuals sort of taking data and justifying-- using it to sort of justify their own decisions, like

stay at home moms have more well-adjusted kids or whatever.

**EMILY OSTER:** Yeah, and I think one of the things that happens in a lot of these settings is that it is very easy to find a study that supports the thing that you think. So when you say, you know, can you find a study that says that being a stay at home mom is good? Sure. Yes. I'm sure there's many studies like that. Can you find a study that says being a working mom is good? Yeah, absolutely.

And and the problem is that a study is not the literature. And so a lot of the work in the book is to say let's look not at a single study, not at the one study you would find 3 o'clock in the morning when you were agonizing about your work choices, but what does the whole literature say as an aggregate?

And that is the thing on which you should base your decisions, not whatever is the last thing that came out in *The New York Times* or the last thing that you saw on the internet. And I think that that can be hard for-- that can be hard to communicate.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Well, the book is so great because you did all the homework. You looked at-- how many studies did you look at?

**EMILY OSTER:** So there is, in the back of the book, there's like 15 single spaced pages of citations. And I think that probably represents maybe a quarter of the studies that I actually read for the book.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** That's amazing. But then you do this great service which, is the bottom line at the end of every chapter.

**EMILY OSTER:** All you have to do is read the box. Yeah.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** But the writing's so great. It's such a brisk, conversational, fun, slightly sassy, casual, friendly tone. I love that. It's very readable. The book made me grateful that I had my kids so long ago and also not in this country, because everyone's so nervous. I feel like that's a recent phenomenon.

**EMILY OSTER:** So you know people ask that a lot. Has parenting become more anxiety-- have we gotten more obsessed with it? Has it been more stressful?

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And guilt plays such a-- guilt and shame.

**EMILY OSTER:** And I don't know that we really know. I have that impression also. But I think it is also hard to

remember what your parenting was like from the distance. So when I think about my mother's kind of report of being a parent, she seems very relaxed in her telling about the past.

But then she actually has, my mom left me very detailed-- has given me very detailed notes of when I was a baby. She has a detailed book with all of her notes about what I was doing. And I will say, she's just as neurotic and obsessive as I am. And so in some sense I wonder if a little bit of this feels like you know people had kids 30 years ago are like, oh yeah, we just like, it was like no problem, wouldn't worry about it. And now-- and you know, but in the moment they were more worried.

I do-- I will say I think that there are clearly big changes in how protective we have gotten about our kids, around things like, is it OK to walk home from school? Your stuff where like when I was a kid everybody walked home from school. And that was no big deal. Even as pretty young kids. And that is much more unusual now.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Well and I also wonder if, say, 50 years ago, there was less choice involved in terms of roles of, let's say, in a nuclear family, what the woman could and couldn't do or was expected to do. And I think maybe that makes questions particularly fraught. And so we're trying to grapple with that.

Yeah, I think it's also that we're having kids older. So this is something I talk about a little in the book, that by the time-- the sort of demographic shift in the age of childbearing means that by the time some parts, at least in parts of the population, women are having kids much later after they have done a lot of other stuff.

And I think in some ways been used to achieving things in other spaces. And so this becomes-- can become a little bit more like something to achieve. Like, I'm going to do the-- I'm going to achieve the parenting the same way I achieved college or my job. And parenting is maybe harder to achieve than your job.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** So much harder.

**EMILY OSTER:** So much harder.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** It strikes me that all this nervousness and doubt is kind of a first world problem. Am I wrong about that? I don't know that everyone has the luxury to sort of worry themselves over these questions.

**EMILY OSTER:** Yeah I think it's not just a first world problem, it's a problem associated with a particular subset of first world parents.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Can you say a little more about that?

**EMILY OSTER:** I mean, I think this-- and this comes up all the time and sort of thinking about this book, that the choice of what is exactly the right kind of schooling. So I talk a little bit at the end about people who wonder like, is it good to have Montessori or play based preschool? There are a lot of people, forget about people outside the US, there are a lot of families in the US where there is no luxury to think about what is the right kind of preschool. There is like the daycare you can or preschool you can afford, or the thing you can afford [INAUDIBLE] and then there's other things.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And also moms who work because they have to work.

**EMILY OSTER:** Moms who work because they have to work. So a lot of-- I think that in some ways, I mean this was a challenge for me in writing this book, that I think the book is providing some information that is broadly useful. There are clearly some things that I write about, some choices, that not everyone is going to have access to. And I think we have to be careful when we think about framing these choices or thinking about policy to be aware that we need to try to improve policies so more people have these kind of choices.

I think this even comes up in something like breastfeeding. So you'll see many of the debates about breastfeeding that percolate up into places like *The Atlantic* or *Time* are around kind of some well-off moms arguing that we should be encouraging people to breastfeed for 18 months or two years. And some people saying, well it should only be a year. And you know, these are kind of debates which are happening in a particular set of people.

Whereas in the meantime there are a large share of women in the US who don't breastfeed at all or who breastfeed only for two days in a hospital. To the extent that there are benefits of breastfeeding, they seem to accrue early on in life. So from a policy standpoint, it would probably be much more effective to spend more time on how can we support the choice to breastfeed for six weeks for everybody rather than have an argument about how important is it to go from a year to two years for a small set of the population. And I think that that disconnect I find jarring. And I think is something we need to be addressing more directly.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Were there any gaps that you found in data that could be elucidated?

**EMILY OSTER:** There are almost all gaps. I mean one of the things that I think some-- one of the reactions I've gotten a little bit [INAUDIBLE] book is, people would say like, I can't believe how bad the data is. Like, how could you write a book with such bad-- where the data is so bad. That's not always true. I mean, there are pieces here where the data is better.

But then there are some places. An example I think people care a lot about his screen time. So people wonder a lot about, is it OK to have my kid playing the iPad, watch TV, watch videos. What about these YouTube videos where kids are opening gifts? Like should I let my kid watch those horrible videos? So weird.

And I think unfortunately that the data on screen time is very bad. And we have a little bit of data on TV. It mostly relies-- the best of that mostly relies on pretty old evidence, some even from the introduction of TV in like the 50s, which is not super-- maybe not super relevant to the current day.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Like when there were three channels.

**EMILY OSTER:** Right, and people actually did watch a lot of TV even when there were only three channels. But there were only three channels. They didn't watch as much. The variety was more limited. The kind of everyday exposure to screens is just much less. And if you want to ask the question, like well is it OK for my kid to watch like 30 minutes a day of TV on the iPad? What about playing these apps? What if the apps are like-- what if they're educational apps? What really counts as an educational app? Like this is something on which we have no evidence.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Is anyone working on that?

**EMILY OSTER:** I'm guessing-- I'm sure many people are working on this. I think part of the problem is that this is very new. So even, between my kids are four and eight, even between them my son-- my younger kid definitely has much more like a facility with iPads than my older one does.

So if you said, like, I'm interested in the impacts of playing iPad games on grades in high school or graduate, those kids are not old enough yet for that. So I think that's one issue. And I think the other one is that the choice of what to have your kid do in terms of screens is related to a lot of other things in the family.

So we're going to run into all the same problems you run into in something like breastfeeding, which is just like with the kinds of kids who are watching a ton of TV or playing a ton of iPad or

video games are going to be different from the kids who are not. And how do we separate those out? So I think that those are big challenges that mean that these gaps are not likely to be filled soon.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Was there any study that made you go, oh, darn, I did it wrong.

**EMILY OSTER:** So I think that the one place where-- and I don't, this is not my fault, but the one thing that comes up here is peanut allergies. So when my daughter was born, we got the advice, like don't expose her to peanuts before she's two, because that will make her more likely to be allergic. Fortunately she is not allergic.

But then between my daughter and my son, basically research, really compelling research, came out that said that exposing your kids to peanuts early it makes them less likely to be allergic. And those effects are enormous. They're like 75% less likely to be allergic. They're like just enormously huge.

So then by the time my son was born, they were like, first thing you should give him is peanuts. Like that should be the first food. And I think that is the moment where you're like oh. Usually evidence on what is the right thing to do does not evolve that quickly. And so usually you'd say, oh, a little more evidence has maybe moved us a little bit. This was something where there was one piece of advice, and then there was a totally different obviously correct piece of advice that you got right afterwards. And so fortunately my daughter is not allergic to peanuts.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** I know this book has been wildly popular, and that's great. And I want to talk about that in a second. But I just wanted to ask you about how it was received within your field. I mean, is-- do you get the sense that there was a gendered lens applied to this book at all, or the previous book. Like are these subjects seen as less serious than other areas of economic theory, let's say?

**EMILY OSTER:** For sure. I mean, I think I got more of that with the first book because I think that I was younger. It was more unexpected. I think that having written one book then writing another book, people were like, oh, I guess that's what you do. And I think that pregnancy is a particularly gendered topic. I mean, more so than parenting.

And so yeah, I think-- I mean this is an unusual thing to do. And I think that economics is a pretty male dominated field. And there are certainly people in the field who think, you know,

this is not a serious topic to study. And then there are many people who are like, wow, my wife really liked your book. And like, you know, that's cool. So I mean there's like some very positive stuff. And then I think there are some that's more mixed.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Do you have-- you write for both a mass audience and and for in your field. Do you have a preference between working on an academic project versus one that has a broader appeal?

**EMILY OSTER:** I like them both for different reasons. The sort of broader appeal projects require a different skill set. So So in most of the cases in the book I'm not producing new knowledge. I am synthesizing knowledge and thinking about the challenge of how do you explain some thing around causality or the limits of data or decision making to an audience that doesn't have the kind of jargon-y specified training.

And that part is really fun. And I find the book writing in some ways easier, and sort of more closed ended. So you write the chapter and then I've finished the chapter. Papers don't have-- often don't have that feature. But at the same time the sort of moment of learning something new that no one else knows. That's kind of the-- that's like the magic of doing your own research.

And you don't get that moment in this kind of writing. So I like to do them both. And I think that increasingly these sort of fed off each other. So some of the things that have come up when I read the literature for the books has that influenced the kind of work that I've been interested in doing in my academic work. So they kind of fit together.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Well, outside your field in the reading public, how do you explain how amazingly well this book has been received? Besides its brilliance. I mean, what is it-- what's resonating with people?

**EMILY OSTER:** I think that I hit a good moment of people feeling this anxiety and kind of pressure and the feeling of sort of being constantly told what to do and not knowing what is the right choice. And wanting to make a choice that works but then just flip flopping all the time. I think that that is a feeling that resonated with a lot of women.

And I think that the book does something which a lot of-- which other books maybe haven't, which is to say there are many right choices. And in some sense, that's the message. Like, you can make the right choice for you. It's not going to be the right choice for someone else, and that's why you can't be ping-ponging back and forth between what all the different people say because none of those people is you.

And you need to make the choices that will make you happy. And you need to see the data, think about the choices, and then just make something that's your choice. And I think somehow that message resonated. And to be totally honest actually the other thing is that Amy Schumer decided she really liked the first book. And then she's been really nice about this book also. And so I think basically timing this book with Amy Schumer's pregnancy has pretty much been the key.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Well done, both of you. That's great. That's a new marketing strategy.

**EMILY OSTER:** Yeah, no, it was unexpected.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** But it is, it's such a gift that the bottom line is basically-- the global bottom line for the book is relax and trust yourself, in a way, and stop listening to the noise.

**EMILY OSTER:** Yeah.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** What's your next project?

**EMILY OSTER:** So I have some-- actually some stuff that we've talked about on this podcast that I'm trying to finish up. I think I may actually write something academic about breastfeeding and patterns in breastfeeding and some of these issues you talked about around selection and what kinds of moms have been more likely to breastfeed over time. But I don't know. I'm actually sort of finishing up some things and thinking about what's next.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Great, well I hope you'll keep us posted.

**EMILY OSTER:** I will.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And come back and talk to us some more.

**EMILY OSTER:** Thank you.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Thanks for coming in, Emily.

**EMILY OSTER:** Thanks.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** This episode of trending globally was produced by Dan Richards. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin. You can subscribe to us on iTunes, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast app. If you like what you hear, leave us a rating and review on iTunes. It really

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