

Skinner Air Crib

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Skinner's Air Crib

1944, B.F. Skinner and his wife, Yvonne, were expecting their second child. After raising one baby, Skinner felt that he could simplify the process for parents and improve the experience for children. Through some tinkering, he created the “air crib,” a climate controlled environment for an infant. One of these air cribs resides in the gallery at the Center for the History of Psychology in Akron, Ohio.

Skinner had high hopes that the air crib would ease parental burdens and contribute positively to children's development. Skinner was particularly concerned about rearing a baby in the harsh environment of Minnesota where he lived and worked. Keeping the child warm was a central priority. Traditionally, this meant wrapping the baby in clothes and blankets. This not only inhibited the child's self-directed movement, but the baby could easily overheat as well. It also meant labor for parents, from more laundry to frequent bathing of the child.

The air crib was intended to dispense with these concerns. In terms of design, the air crib was basically an oversized metal crib but with a ceiling, three solid walls and a safety-glass pane at the front which could be lowered to move the baby in and out of the crib. Canvas was stretched to create a floor. Sheeting was be rolled on top of the canvas and easily rolled off when soiled. Parents regulated the temperature and humidity of the crib via a control box on top of the crib and clean air was filtered into the crib from below. The crib was also higher than other cribs of the day, allowing easier access to the child without the burden of stooping over.

Skinner's second daughter, Deborah slept and played in this new crib during the first 2 years of her life.

By all accounts she had a healthy, happy childhood and adulthood. The cribs were commercially produced and it is estimated that over 300 children were raised in them. *Psychology Today* ran a short piece on the air crib where the authors tracked down 50 children that used the air crib. The results for these children were positive and the parents enjoyed using the crib. Yvonne also believed it was superior to a standard crib (Epstein, 1995).

So why did the air crib fail to catch on? Why has it become an archival display piece rather than a standard tool for childrearing? Public perception of the air crib was anything but positive. When *Ladies Home Journal* ran a piece on the new crib in 1945, the American public got its first glimpse into the curious new invention (Skinner, 1945). The title of the article, “Baby in a Box,” as well as Skinner’s use of the word “experiment” to describe the experience likely contributed to public skepticism about the device (Bjork, 1997). The image accompanying the article was similarly damaging; it showed Deborah enclosed within the crib, peering out with her face and hands pressed up against the glass. In addition, select parts of the article were reprinted in other major outlets. As a result, many readers did not get the entire story. Some began to make inferences about the nature of the crib based on the much more famous Skinner box. The air crib therefore became associated with rewards, pellets, levers, and the like. People were also wary of using science and technology as aids or perhaps replacements for the loving labor of the mother. Companies also rejected the idea because any problems with such a device could result in exceedingly negative publicity (Benjamin & Nielson-Gammon, 1999; Bjork, 1997).

The controversy over the air crib eventually grew into an urban legend about Skinner’s daughter, Deborah. This legend grew out of the assumed psychological harm of raising a child in an air crib. It was rumored that Deborah’s early experiences in the crib caused her to go crazy, sue her father, and commit suicide. These legends are in fact false; Deborah grew up normally, has talked very positively about her childhood, and has no issues with the air crib (Skinner-Buzan, 2004).

The fascinating story of the air crib highlights the tensions between science, technology, and everyday life. People were so concerned about the possible negative ramifications of this new type of crib that they ignored its potential benefits. Skinner and his wife identified 19 different positive results for both them and their daughter from use of the air crib. A few air cribs do still exist today, some homemade and some passed on from parent to child, but Skinner’s vision of the air crib as the childrearing device of the future never materialized. Public opinion on the device could not be swayed and the possibility of the air crib revolution was relegated to history. ?

References

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