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## Parentonomics: An Economist Dad Looks at Parenting

**Joshua Gans**
The MIT Press (Mar 27, 2009)
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What do you get when you cross an economist with a new dad? Answer: Joshua Gans and his comical observations on the functions of parenting. Gans turns his professional eye toward the personal experience of raising children and invites other parents to see habits and relationships from a different perspective-that of an economist.

All parents wonder at the effectiveness of toilet “training” the wisdom of various punishments and how the heck they are supposed to attend two birthday parties at the same time without losing their minds. Gans considers these issues and more by the light of economic theory. “The question was whether economics-which worries a lot about incentives-could be of any use to parents-who also worry a lot about incentives” he writes in his preface.

Gans finds ample opportunities to use incentives in his own family life. To start their first child on the road to a diaperless state Gans and his wife adopted an incentive popular among many families: the time-tested jellybean. Hoping for a better performance they upped the ante to chocolate frogs which worked quite well except that Child No. 1 learned to make one bathroom trip into three trips to earn more frogs.

Sticks like carrots also play an important role in parenting Gans writes: “The economic theory of punishment is simple-a punishment is like a price: set it at a high enough level to deter behavior…When punishments work to deter behavior they do not need to be repeated.” This might actually come as a relief to parents who cant understand why their children still wont clean their rooms do their chores or practice common sense despite repeated punishments. Its not the fault of the parents or the children; its simply the wrong punishment.

Gans doesnt claim to have all the answers; he even warns readers that he is not a parenting expert and may be of no help at all. However few parents will fail to see his method for deciding the tooth fairys deposit as genius or appreciate the way he uses Google Maps to solve the problem of simultaneous birthday parties. His methodical witty prose perfectly fits his approach to family life and provides ample chance to giggle.

Less a manual than a memoir by a man unafraid of laughing at himself *Parentonomics* is a great distraction for moms and dads navigating complicated negotiations with their children.

ANDI DIEHN (April 14, 2009)

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