

In the age of crumbling families, a Superpop

By Elaine D'Aurizio
Staff Writer

When Jerry Cammarata needs advice on raising children, he asks the animals.

"Watch how the animals view law and order, family relationships, helpfulness, fun, and communication — it's all there without human pretensions," says Cammarata, the first man in the country to win a paternity leave from his job.

The result? The Cammarata brood watches television lying down and holding onto each other like the monkeys do. Everyone sits at the table tall and straight like giraffes. If the baby cries, someone runs, pronto.

"No ape would be so cruel as to desert its baby at night," says the 32-year-old Staten Islander who left his post as a speech pathologist with the New York City Board of Education six years ago to spend more time at home with his daughters, Elizabeth, now 10, and Michelle, 6.

The child-rearing jungle

The animal game was a method Cammarata devised to explain life to his daughters and to help him cope in the

child-rearing jungle when his four-year leave began in 1974.

But the youthful Cammarata found he was having so much fun being a poppa that he returned only part-time to his job as a teacher. Along the way, he jotted down his ideas in "The Fun Book of Fatherhood." In 303 pages, he humorously demonstrates through animal examples that there's more than one approach to raising children.

"The problem today is that parents are being helped to death by psychologists, social workers, and teachers instead of raising their children themselves," Cammarata says.

He's urging other fathers to follow his lead and spend more hours with their offspring.

"There's no formula to raising children," insists the "Superpop," as he's called by friends and relatives. "If we relax, and fathers spend more time with their kids, we wouldn't have so many neurotic housewives hauled to court for child abuse, fewer candidates for the big house, half-way house, or the cashew nut ward."

Cammarata wants more paternity leaves for fathers, a return to the ex-

tended family of relatives, and parenting plans and counseling for employees so they can spend more time at home.

More productive workers

"Big business must give more than a family picnic," he says. "They have to assist parents, because a good parent is a more productive, happy worker."

Animated and talkative, Cammarata is taking his ideas across the country in lectures and on television talk shows. He's vying for the job of delegate to the White House Conference on Families, too.

The victory in his fight to stay at home came at the height of the feminist struggle for women to shed the shackles of stove and baby.

Cammarata won after his case sparked the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to rule that any business or firm that offers women employees maternity leaves also must give men paternity leaves. Most companies have such leaves, but few men know they are entitled them. And the companies keep quiet about it, Cammarata asserts.

So far, few men have taken his advice, but he thinks more will follow his reverse-liberation example.

Serious about his work, Cammarata is zany enough to make the Guinness Book of World Records twice. The first time was for singing 75 hours while bathing without water in a bathtub in the New York City streets. The second was when he composed a 52-minute production of total silence on a record album aimed at teaching children how to listen carefully.

Listening is important

It's this combination of order and imagination that Cammarata believes parents need: "Sensitivity is important,

being responsive, having some order, and, above all, being a good listener."

Cammarata practices what he preaches at home. He and wife, Margy, don't give orders. "We try through the example of the animals to consider being responsible, fair, and basically good people."

Cammarata says that if there's a problem, he wants to know about it first. But he's first in line for fun, too — like finding out what kind of bushes will lure butterflies to the back yard for Elizabeth.

"Kids have to get up in the morning and think about how they can have fun that day — to take any situation and make it original."

But he wasn't always so dedicated to hearth and small fry. He was too busy making money as a full-time speech pathologist, working part-time in a hospital and conducting a practice on weekends.

The turning point came one day when his daughter asked him to bring back a rat from the rat race: "I knew I had to spend more time at home."

The extended family

After he won the paternity leave, he sold the family home and moved into a two-family house with his in-laws to cut down on food and heating bills. Savings and part-time jobs helped.

"The extended family of aunts, uncles, and grandparents all within reach gives kids a chance to hear stories about their parents," Cammarata says. "In the process, they learn acceptable and unacceptable behavior."

Cammarata says he often feels like a rhino rushing through the forest. "I have no idea of where I'm going until I get the scent, and zingo, then I know where I'm going and what to do."

He says all parents are a little like rhinos — absolutely at a loss.

"In the raising of kids, it's good to know that whatever we try, somewhere in the animal kingdom, someone else has tried it first!"



Staff photo by Rick Gage

The Cammaratas: 10-year-old Elizabeth, left; Michelle, 6, and their parents, Margy and Jerry.

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Jerry Garrard

Public Relations:

Communication Center
Suite PH
185 Maryland Avenue
Staten Island, NY 10305
(212) 720-8400