n a dubious revolution in child-rearing, the superstitions of old wives have
been replaced by the superstitions of child-rearing experts. Mothers are now
pelted with advice on how they are harming their kids, from sleeping on their
backs during the third trimester to praising them with “Good job!” The advisories,
no matter how onerous, contradictory, or tenuous, ratchet ever upward, since who
wants to take a chance?

A savior for whipsawed mothers is Emily Oster, a professor at Brown—not of
pediatrics or psychology but economics. In best-selling books (Expecting Better,
Cribsheet, and most recently The Family Firm), her popular newsletter, and social
media, Oster weighs trade-offs, distinguishes trivial from substantial risks, and
evaluates evidence for causation in a messy world. Enriching this analytical
brilliance is the common sense and empathy that come from being a mother
herself.

Oster shows how data, a scary word, can be a humanizing force. As one mother put
it, “She restored my sense of being an adult with a working brain and not just a
working uterus.”

Pinker is the Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University and the
author of The Blank Slate and Rationality