

# Hunter-gatherer childhoods may offer clues to improving education and well-being in developed countries

March 7 2023

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Published today in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, a new study by Dr. Nikhil Chaudhary, an evolutionary anthropologist at

the University of Cambridge, and Dr. Annie Swanepoel, a child psychiatrist, calls for new research into child mental health in hunter-gatherer societies. They explore the possibility that some common aspects of hunter-gatherer childhoods could help families in economically developed countries. Eventually, hunter-gatherer behaviors could inform "experimental intervention trials" in homes, schools and nurseries.

The authors acknowledge that children living in [hunter-gatherer societies](#) live in very different environments and circumstances than those in developed countries. They also stress that [hunter-gatherer](#) children invariably face many difficulties that are not experienced in developed countries, and therefore, caution that these childhoods should not be idealized.

Drawing on his own observations of the BaYaka people in Congo and the extensive research of anthropologists studying other hunter-gatherer societies, Dr. Chaudhary highlights major differences in the ways in which hunter-gatherer children are cared for compared to their peers in developed countries. He stresses that "contemporary [hunter-gatherers](#) must not be thought of as 'living fossils,' and while their ways of life may offer some clues about our prehistory, they are still very much modern populations, each with a unique cultural and demographic history."

## **Physical contact and attentiveness**

Despite increasing uptake of baby carriers and baby massage in developed countries, levels of physical contact with infants remain far higher in hunter-gatherer societies. In Botswana, for instance, 10-20 week old !Kung infants are in [physical contact](#) with someone for around 90% of daylight hours, and almost 100% of crying bouts are responded to, almost always with comforting or nursing—scolding is extremely rare.

The study points out that this exceptionally attentive childcare is made possible because of the major role played by non-parental caregivers, or "alloparents," which is far rarer in developed countries.

## **Non-parental caregivers**

In many hunter-gatherer societies, alloparents provide almost half of a child's care. A previous study found that in the DRC, Efe infants have 14 alloparents a day by the time they are 18 weeks old, and are passed between caregivers eight times an hour.

Dr. Chaudhary said, "Parents now have much less childcare support from their familial and social networks than would likely have been the case during most of our [evolutionary history](#). Such differences seem likely to create the kind of evolutionary mismatches that could be harmful to both caregivers and children."

"The availability of other caregivers can reduce the negative impacts of stress within the nuclear family, and the risk of maternal depression, which has knock-on effects for child well-being and cognitive development."

The study emphasizes that alloparenting is a core human adaptation, contradicting "intensive mothering" narratives, which emphasize that mothers should use their maternal instincts to manage childcare alone. Dr. Chaudhary and Dr. Swanepoel write that "such narratives can lead to maternal exhaustion and have dangerous consequences."

## **Caregiving ratios**

The study points out that communal living in hunter-gatherer societies results in a very high ratio of available caregivers to infants/toddlers, which can even exceed 10:1.

This contrasts starkly with the nuclear family unit, and even more so with nursery settings, in developed countries. According to the UK's Department of Education regulations, nurseries require ratios of 1 caregiver to 3 children aged under 2 years, or 1 caregiver to 4 children aged 2-3.

Dr. Chaudhary said, "Almost all day, hunter-gatherer infants and toddlers have a capable caregiver within a couple of meters of them. From the infant's perspective, that proximity and responsiveness, is very different from what is experienced in many nursery settings in the UK. If that ratio is stretched even thinner, we need to consider the possibility that this could have impacts on children's well-being."

## **Children providing care and mixed-age active learning**

In hunter-gatherer societies, children play a significantly bigger role in providing care to infants and toddlers than is the case in developed countries. In some communities they begin providing some childcare from the age of four and are capable of sensitive caregiving; and it is common to see older but still pre-adolescent children looking after infants.

By contrast, the NSPCC in the UK recommends that when leaving pre-adolescent children at home, babysitters should be in their late teens at least.

Dr. Chaudhary said, "In developed countries, children are busy with schooling and may have less opportunity to develop caregiving competence. However, we should at least explore the possibility that older siblings could play a greater role in supporting their parents, which might also enhance their own social development."

The study also points out that instructive teaching is rare in hunter-gatherer societies and that infants primarily learn via observation and imitation. From around the age of 2, hunter-gatherer children spend large portions of the day in mixed-age (2-16) "playgroups" without adult supervision. There, they learn from one another, acquiring skills and knowledge collaboratively via highly active play practice and exploration.

Learning and play are two sides of the same coin, which contrasts with the lesson time/playtime dichotomy of schooling in the UK and other developed countries.

Dr. Chaudhary and Dr. Swanepoel note that "classroom schooling is often at odds with the modes of learning typical of human evolutionary history." The study acknowledges that children living in hunter-gather societies live in very different environments and circumstances than those in developed countries:

The researchers explain, "Foraging skills are very different to those required to make a living in market-economies, and classroom teaching is certainly necessary to learn the latter. But children may possess certain psychological learning adaptations that can be practically harnessed in some aspects of their schooling. When peer and [active learning](#) can be incorporated, they have been shown to improve motivation and performance, and reduce stress." The authors also highlight that physical activity interventions have been shown to aid performance among students diagnosed with ADHD.

The study calls for more research into children's [mental health](#) in hunter-gatherer societies to test whether the hypothesized evolutionary mismatches actually exist. If they do, such insights could then be used to direct experimental intervention trials in developed countries.

Working with a team from the Royal College of Psychiatrists, Dr. Chaudhary and Dr. Swanepoel hope that greater collaboration between evolutionary anthropologists and child psychiatrists/psychologists can help to advance our understanding of the conditions that [children](#) need to thrive.

**More information:** Hunter-gatherer childhoods may offer clues to improving education and wellbeing in developed countries, Cambridge study argues, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.13773](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13773)

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Hunter-gatherer childhoods may offer clues to improving education and well-being in developed countries (2023, March 7) retrieved 8 March 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-03-hunter-gatherer-childhoods-clues-well-being-countries.html>

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