

The Importance of the In-Arms Phase

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In the two and a half years during which I lived among Stone Age Indians in the South American jungle (not all at once, but on five separate expeditions with a lot of time between them for reflection), I came to see that our human nature is not what we have been brought up to believe it is. Babies of the Yequana tribe, far from needing peace and quiet to go to sleep, snoozed blissfully whenever they were tired, while the men, women, or children carrying them danced, ran, walked, shouted, or paddled canoes. Toddlers played together without fighting or arguing, and they obeyed their elders instantly and willingly.

The notion of punishing a child had apparently never occurred to these people, nor did their behavior show anything that could truly be called permissiveness. No child would have dreamed of inconveniencing, interrupting, or being waited on by an adult. And by the age of four, children were contributing more to the work force in their family than they were costing others.

Babes in arms almost never cried and, fascinatingly, did not wave their arms, kick, arch their backs, or flex their hands and feet. They sat quietly in their slings or slept on someone's hip — exploding the myth that babies need to flex to "exercise." They also did not throw up unless extremely ill and did not suffer from colic. When startled during the first months of crawling and walking, they did not expect anyone to go to them but rather went on their own to their mother or other caretakers for the measure of reassurance needed before resuming their explorations. Without supervision, even the smallest tots rarely hurt themselves.

Is their "human nature" different from ours? Some people actually imagine that it is, but there is, of course, only one human species. What can *we* learn from the Yequana tribe?

Our Innate Expectations

Primarily, we can try to grasp fully the formative power of what I call the in-arms phase. It begins at birth and ends with the commencement of creeping, when the infant can depart and return at will to the caretaker's knee. It consists, simply, of the infant having 24-hour contact with an adult or older child.

At first, I merely observed that this in-arms experience had an impressively salutary effect on the babies and that they were no "trouble" to manage. Their bodies were soft and conformed to any position convenient to their bearers — some of whom even dangled their babies down their backs while holding them by the wrist. I do not mean to recommend this position, but the fact that it is possible demonstrates the scope of what constitutes comfort for a baby. In contrast to this is the desperate *discomfort* of infants laid carefully in a crib or carriage, tenderly tucked in, and left to go rigid with the desire for the living body that is by nature their rightful place — a body belonging to someone who will "believe" their cries and relieve their craving with welcoming arms.

Why the incompetence in our society? From childhood on, we are taught not to believe in our instinctive knowledge. We are told that parents and teachers know best and that when our feelings do not concur with their ideas, we must be wrong. Conditioned to mistrust or utterly disbelieve our feelings, we are easily convinced not to believe the baby whose cries say "You should hold me!" "I should be next to your body!" "Don't leave me!" Instead, we overrule our natural response and follow the going fashion dictated by babycare "experts." The loss of faith in our innate expertise leaves us turning from one book to another as each successive fad fails.

It is important to understand who the real experts are. The second greatest babycare expert is within us, just as surely as it resides in every surviving species that, by definition, must know how to care for its young. The greatest expert of all is, of course, the baby — programmed by millions of years of evolution to signal his or her own kind by sound and action when care is incorrect. Evolution is a refining process that has honed our innate behavior with magnificent precision. The signal from the baby, the understanding of the signal by his or her people, the impulse to obey it — all are part of our species' character.

The presumptuous intellect has shown itself to be ill-equipped to guess at the authentic requirements of human babies. The question is often: Should I pick up the baby when he or she cries? Or should I first let the baby cry for a while? Or should I let the baby cry so that this child know who is boss and will not become a "tyrant"?

No baby would agree to *any* of these impositions. Unanimously, they let us know by the clearest signals that *they should not be put down at all*. As this option has not been widely advocated in contemporary Western civilization, the relationship between parent and child has remained steadfastly adversarial. The game has been about how to get the baby to sleep in the crib, whether or not to oppose the baby's cries has not been considered. Although Tine Thevenin's book, *The Family Bed*, and others have gone some way to open the subject up of having children sleep with parents, the important principle has not been clearly addressed: *to act against our nature as a species is inevitably to lose well-being*.

Once we have grasped and accepted the principle of respecting our innate expectations, we will be able to discover precisely what those expectations are — in other words, what evolution has accustomed us to experience.

The Formative Role of the In-Arms Phase

How did I come to see the in-arms phase as crucial to a person's development? First, I saw the relaxed and happy people in the forests of South America lugging around their babies and never putting them down. Little by little, I was able to see a connection between that simple fact and the quality of their lives. Later still, I have come to certain conclusions about how and why being in constant contact with the active caretaker is essential to the initial postnatal stage of development.

For one thing, it appears that the person carrying the baby (usually the mother in the first months, then often a four- to 12-year-old child who brings the baby back to the mother for feeding) is laying the foundation for later experience. The baby passively participates in the bearers running, walking, laughing, talking, working, and playing. The particular activities, the pace, the inflections of the language, the variety of sights, night and day, the range of temperatures, wetness and dryness, and the sounds of community life form a basis for the active participation that will begin at six or eight months of age with creeping, crawling, and then walking. A baby who has spent this time lying in a quiet crib or looking at the inside of a carriage, or at the sky, will have missed most of this essential experience.