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Childhood and the Family: An Anthropological View

Melvin Konner

3 FOR MOST OF US – WHETHER PARENTS, teachers, or both – the key question is always, “What is best for our children?” Of course, on bad days, the other key question – “How can I live through their childhood?” – seems a pretty close second. But in reality we usually take a lot of chances with our own welfare in order to promote theirs. Yet, we’re often pretty confused about just how to do that. Once upon a time, the organization of the family and the method of rearing children was pretty well dictated by what Grandma and Grandpa said – backed up by a very clear set of religious principles and educational goals.

Not any more. Certainly, the principles and goals are still there, but we are no longer prepared to bow to authority the way we once did. In fact, most of us can watch our ministers and rabbis, teachers and principals – even, if they are honest, Grandmas and Grandpas – struggling with the same kinds of confusion that get parents bogged down. We all read the same newspapers and share the same fears: drug abuse, school-age pregnancy, the rise of divorce and single-parent families, the decline of test scores in school children. And we all watch the same experts on television; psychiatrists, psychologists, pediatricians, professors of education, evangelists, philosophers, and even actors assault us with authoritative observations about what children need and how we should best foster their development.

They sound great, but they often contradict each other, and sometimes they even manage to contradict common sense. They may tell us to do things that can’t be done, or describe things that have no way of applying to a particular situation or child, or give advice that flies in the face of our values, or make predictions that simply don’t come true. So, we end up falling back on some combination of instinct and Grandma – with

a heavy dose of teacher-expectation and family-next-door – in responding to the colossal pressure of what the children *seem* to want and need every day.

This isn’t necessarily bad. But, before we give up entirely on a more rational approach to all this, we could think for a while about something a little larger than our own communities and our own subcultural values. In fact, we could think about something really big, like the whole vast experience of the human species – and even its ancestors – bringing up children generation after generation everywhere on the planet.

I have had the experience of being an anthropologist who spent two years with a fairly exotic people, the !Kung San, or Bushmen, of Botswana in Africa. This experience certainly jarred my complacency about various pieces of received American wisdom regarding childhood and the family. But later I also had the experience of going to medical school in mid-career. Unlike anthropology, this is a fairly restrictive sort of training process, emphasizing as it must the first responsibility of the physician: to do no harm. Although I don’t practice medicine, the physician in me has since acted routinely to restrain the speculation done by the anthropologist. They argue a good deal; the anthropologist wants to challenge American conventions of child care and family life that have no real justification aside from habit, but the physician sees constantly the red flag of risk and wants to be sure not to fix anything that isn’t broken.

All along, children’s psychological development was a central scientific interest of mine. So, it isn’t surprising that along the way I accumulated three children of my own (girl, boy, girl, presently eleven, eight, and three). They have had the good or bad luck to be a sometime proving ground for some of the ideas I picked up in exotic places, like the Kalahari Desert and a big-city pediatric emergency room. I don’t feel guilty about this; every parent collects ideas from here and

Melvin Konner teaches anthropology at Emory University and is affiliated with the psychiatry and neurology departments of the Emory University School of Medicine. He graduated from Brooklyn College and earned his doctorate in biological anthropology and his medical degree from Harvard University. His book about medical school, *Becoming a Doctor*, was published in 1987. Mel taught at Harvard for seven years. For two years he lived and did research among the Kalahari Bushmen, the !Kung San. His most recent book, co-authored with Boyd Eaton and Marjorie Shostak, is *Paleolithic Prescription: A Program for Diet and Exercise and a Design for Living*.

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I'm just as confused as anyone else, but I do have some ideas that may be different and useful – or at least offbeat and amusing. Like most fathers, I have to run my ideas past a committee of two in which the children's mother has at least an equal voice. Even the kids have something to say in the matter, in a subcommittee sort of way. Anthropology weighs in with its exotic facts and theories, and medicine, too, with its sober cautions; but so in the end do teacher, peers, television, and Grandma. If I have something to offer, it will not be answers; it is most likely to be a view of the process of thought I go through in attempting to integrate what I know with what I feel and what I do.

When anthropologists think about the family, the questions we raise gather around two main emphases. The first is the evolutionary issue: where did the family come from and what is it for? These two questions are intimately related in the world-view of someone who does not see the world as resulting



from a divine plan – just as they have always been in the minds of those who do see such a plan. But the idea of a divine plan and the idea of an evolutionary emergence have very different consequences for how the questions are answered. The second is the cross-cultural one: what variations on the themes of childhood and the family have been found by anthropologists in our dogged exotic travels; or, put another way, what is possible within the framework of human nature?

As to the first, evolutionary concern, we stem from an ape-like ancestor that – like present-day monkeys and apes – was almost certainly highly social. We can be sure that the mother-child bond was at the center of social life. It is more difficult to specify the role of the father. Yet it is very unlikely that the mother was alone in her responsibilities; rather, she was affiliated with at least some other adults, probably female relatives if not male consorts, and most likely both. The presence of other mother-child pairs would often have made possible sympathetic companionship, modeling, and perhaps sharing, in the difficult effort of child care. Equally important would be the presence of other children as playmates for one's own child. Studies of monkeys have repeatedly shown that such playmates are as valuable as parents in fostering normal psychological development.

Against this background of ape-like social life, human evolution introduced some crucial innovations. Within the group, males and females tended to pair off on a long-term basis. Hunting introduced a division of labor by sex, but women provided at least half the group's sustenance through the gathering of wild plant foods. They also did the great preponderance of the child care. The sharing of meat formed the basis of simple economic structures, but women provided their children with plant foods, too, sustaining them long after weaning; this pattern was not found among our ape-like ancestors.

Tool use and, later, tool making provided

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opportunities for ever more impressive food collection and self-defense, while the evolution of language made the sharing and passing on of such techniques steadily more possible. We have much in common with monkeys and apes in the way we care for our children, but human language provides a foundation and a context for the care that makes caretaking and teaching almost synonymous. Intelligence was an evolutionary gift that made life more interesting even while it directly enhanced survival. And the gift of language markedly widened the circle of influence exercised by adults on the growing child.

As the human species expanded through the habitable world, this hunting and gathering existence retained remarkable consistencies for hundreds of thousands of years. But about ten thousand years ago conditions favored the development of agriculture and domestication of animals in certain parts of the world. The results were impressive. Population densities increased, social stratification emerged, and the varieties of economic and cultural forms became much greater. In some cultures children began to bear more of the burdens of baby care, herding, cultivation, and other responsibilities.

Family forms, too, became much more varied. In many cultures a man could marry more than one woman, and in a few cases the reverse was also possible. Households might consist of an extended family of relatives, including uncles, aunts, cousins, and others – as among the Iroquois of the Northeastern Woodlands. Or, as in several East African societies, a household might consist only of a woman with her children – one of several such women married to a single man, who might visit her in rotation but not be with her constantly. In a number of Polynesian societies, a woman with many children might

give one up for adoption to a childless relative. And almost all conceivable types of child rearing practices have occurred in some culture or other, ranging from indulgent to punitive, loving to neglectful, easy-going to demanding. In some societies, such as traditional Jewish and Islamic villages, schooling of a complex and sophisticated type has been routine for many centuries.

Obviously, few simple generalizations can be made about so wide a spectrum of variations in family and child life. Still, it is possible to say that in all traditional societies the extended family has been important in providing support for the nuclear family; and that the pace of change in social life was much slower than it has now become. On the negative side, loss of loved ones to illness and death was common at all ages in all pre-modern societies without exception, and the psychological stresses of such losses, including being orphaned, must have been great.

But whether we rely on generalizations or on specific examples, these findings about other cultures can lead to insights about our own. Here are some examples of the way anthropological facts about childhood and the family have helped to shape our own current cultural practices:

Birth as a rite of passage. In the 1980's we have come to take it for granted that women are conscious and have companions present during birth. But only thirty years ago we considered drug-induced unconsciousness ideal and fathers in the delivery room an outrage. Our "new" method is of course really ancient. Primitive societies throughout the world consider birth itself a critical moment in the life of a family, and they accord it high social and cultural significance – as we are once again beginning to do.

Breast-feeding. As with natural childbirth, medical advice went against this form of feeding until quite recently. It is universal in primitive societies, who often breast-feed their infants more often and until a later age

than even the most indulgent mothers in our society. Nevertheless, we must recognize that their parents had no other choice, and that they were often able to integrate work and mothering with an ease that is not possible for us. Our current pediatric recommendation – breast-feeding for all babies – may therefore go too far, putting too much pressure on some working mothers.

Male and Female. Our culture has preserved rigid notions of sex roles over the centuries, and we have raised our boys and girls accordingly. But studies of non-Western societies showed that many of our stereotypes are very much a matter of choice. When we find a New Guinea society, for example, where men primp, fuss with their hair, and gossip about their clothes, while women are down-to-earth and businesslike, we start to ask ourselves just what we do to our children that makes them fulfill *our* stereotypes.

And here are some ways in which other insights from anthropology may influence our practices in the future:

Sleeping arrangements. Universally among primitive societies, infants and young children sleep in the same rooms and usually in the same beds with their mothers. This is still the common practice in modern Japan. In fact, we in the industrialized West are unique among human societies in placing our infants alone in a separate room at night. But some recent studies have shown that, in spite of professional advice to the contrary, some American parents often share their beds with children for at least part of the night. There is no evidence that this is harmful in any way. In fact, as work separates modern parents of both sexes from their infants for more and more daytime hours, some families are finding nighttime intimacy a crucial component of “quality time.”

The social context of learning. For most of the human past, our ancestors lived in small, informal groups. Large groups of children

coming together for formal education were unlikely. Especially unlikely were large same-age peer groups, in which many children exactly the same age would be brought together. In contrast, most children’s groups were made up of children of both sexes and a wide range of ages. Cultural knowledge was passed down from older to younger child as much as from adult to child. More important, there was often no separation between learning and play, so that self-directed learning in natural contexts among friends would probably have been the main way culture was transmitted through most of history. The movement over the past two decades toward open classrooms, non-graded schools and, most recently, cooperative learning is consistent with this broad cross-cultural experience.

School-age sexuality and pregnancy. Contrary to a common misconception, primitive societies were not characterized as a rule by early teenage childbearing. This was because the age of puberty was markedly higher than it is in our society today. Improvements in nutrition and health care over the past century have lowered the age at first menstruation from about fifteen to about twelve and a half. Because of the later age of the capacity for childbearing, a more gradual pattern of emergence of adolescent sexuality without the risk of pregnancy was possible in primitive societies. The stringent moral expectations some groups in our society have imposed on teenagers fail to take into account the fact that the risk of pregnancy is a new phenomenon for them. Perhaps we can achieve some compromise in which we teach teenagers enough about the risks, and about how to protect themselves, so that they will be able to acquire sexual knowledge slowly, in a forgiving environment close to that experienced by teenagers among our ancestors.

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world we face well-known problems. We have an unprecedented number of children growing up in single-parent families, a high divorce rate, a high rate of school-age pregnancy, drug abuse, and children growing up in poverty. Some of these problems cannot be addressed in any logical way from the base of knowledge of anthropology. Others, however, can: when we consider divorce and its disruption in the lives of children, we can think about the fact that for most of human history, “til death do us part” meant about fifteen years; when we consider single-parent families, we can think about the great variety of forms the family has taken in the anthropological universe; and when we think about the stresses our children experience, we can remind ourselves that most children throughout history have endured much worse stresses, and their resilience has allowed them to survive and even thrive.

We can perhaps mitigate some of these stresses by trying to provide a sense of community that will in part replace the extended family that supported children almost universally until recent times. In this effort, school communities – the collections of parents and teachers that form the context in which our children spend most of their lives – can play a very important role. The poet Apollinaire once said, “It seems to me that we must return to nature, but not by imitating it like photographs. When man set out to invent a machine that would walk, he invented the wheel, which does not really resemble a leg.” That lesson should not be lost on us. By studying the anthropology of childhood and the family, we may be able to invent a context for children's development that will return us indirectly to nature, so that we can benefit fully from the advances of civilization as well as from the knowledge of our past, in all its immense variety and richness. 