

HUMAN NATURE REVIEW

ISSN 1476-1084
<http://human-nature.com/>

Book Review

Kids: How Biology and Culture Shape the Way We Raise Young Children by Meredith Small, Anchor Books 2001

Reviewed by

Mark Daims

In her latest study of how children are raised in different cultures, Meredith F. Small, a Cornell anthropologist, picks up where she left off in her previous book *Our Babies, Ourselves*, at the same time giving the parent, not the anthropologist, a stronger voice, one that welcomes and invites readers to participate in the process of understanding their own parenting by examining how parents around the world raise children. Just as we might discuss parenting with a neighbor, Ms. Small invites us to listen to what some more distant neighbors are saying and doing. Indeed, she demonstrates that much of what we accept as only "natural" in raising children is nothing but natural considering what is done in the rest of the world. She offers her book as a different kind of parenting book, noting that the recent flood of parenting books from a host of experts is based on scant scientific evidence (see <http://human-nature.com/nibbs/03/hulbert.html>) and that all these books are from "experts" with a particular culture bias who like pediatricians accept the same cultural maxims as the rest of us do. By examining other cultures, the author states, parents can discover which beliefs they have about raising children are cultural and which are their own. They can also explore what values and practices held to be good for children in this culture might be good in a larger, more universal sense.

Ms. Small's exploration is fascinating and challenging; for example, the concept of "milestones," she explains is culturally defined. One Western milestone centers on the child feeling safe away from his or her parents (overcoming separation anxiety). This milestone does not even have a meaning in most cultures as children are never far away from their parents. Much of what we do as we raise our children (a theme of her previous book as well) is in defiance of biology, defiance of what babies and young children were biologically

designed to have happen to them as they grow to be adults.

In fact, in parenting as in all human behaviors, the dictates of biology are often ignored, denied, or overridden for all sorts of social or cultural reasons. The way we bring up children, in fact, often reflects more about our social history and our folkways and our traditions than what babies and children might need and expect.

Another norm in the West, schooling, which is in essence the practice of strangers or nonfamily-adults watching and instructing children is an unacceptable idea to most of the world's parents. "American kids also differ from other cultures in that they are institutionalized early." Family members, especially older siblings, are the people who take care of the children all day with adults always close at hand. As Ms. Small weaves her own experience as a parent with a young daughter through the discussions of parenting in other cultures, day care and preschool trouble her. She finds that here are few parallels for these either in history or in other cultures. What will come of these two experiments, she asks? Noting that all institutions have agendas she states, "We have to live with the socialization process that the institution provides." She also notes that in those few other cultures that do have preschools, the schools are not competitive learning centers. In Japan she writes, "the national guidelines for preschool include both autonomy and cooperation as moral goals, and downplay individual achievements."

How children learn is different as well. Pointing to a body of research showing that language skills cannot be accelerated, the author discusses the Kaluli culture where mothers do not discuss things with their uncomprehending babies as we do in the West. Kaluli mothers talk for their children as they speak to others. Kaluli babies are not invited into a dyad, or conversation between mother and child. They learn to speak by listening as somebody speaks for them. The way American mothers interact with their children, says the author, is a key to understanding what is important to Americans.

American mothers chat endlessly with their babies, for example, unconsciously giving the message that the baby is an individual and worthy of such attention. Gusii mothers of western Kenya feel that such verbal attention produces an adult that will be self-centered and selfish and will not fit into the family system.

This focus Americans put on the individual appears often in Ms. Small's book as it stands in contrast to the more community and family-centered practices

in the rest of the world. Indeed, according to the author, intelligence itself, as perceived in some cultures, has a lot to do with the individual's level of self-control and sophistication of social behavior. Other cultures are also more child-centered than our own.

In many ways we live in an antichild culture. I recognize it because when we travel to other countries, more child-friendly places, the difference is amazing. In countries where the birth rate is higher, there are simply more children around. They play in the road, they accompany their parents everywhere, and no one seems to make a fuss that children are about. They are part of life, part of what adults do--have and raise children. But in Western culture, children are the oddities.

Ms. Small justly states that her book is not simply a "How To" parenting book. It is, just as she implies, much more because she allows us to consider the child raising practices of other cultures. The ideas of others and the priorities of others give us a better understanding of our own parenting.

Author

Mark Daims, DVM, Hudson, New York, USA.