

MIND & MATTER

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Humans Evolved to Love Baby Yoda



LIKE MANY PEOPLE with children or grandchildren, I spent December watching the new Star Wars TV series

"The Mandalorian." Across America, the show led to a remarkable Christmas truce among bitterly competing factions. Rural or urban, Democrat or Republican, we all love Baby Yoda.

In case you spent the last month in a monastic retreat, Baby Yoda is the weird but irresistibly adorable creature who is the heart of the series. (He isn't actually Yoda but a baby of the same species.) The Mandalorian, a ferocious bounty-hunter in a metal helmet, takes on the job of hunting down Baby Yoda but ends up rescuing and caring for him instead. This means finding snacks and sitters and keeping the baby from playing with the knob on the starship gear shift.

Why do the Mandalorian and the whole internet love Baby Yoda so much? The answer may tell us something profound about human evolution.

Humans have a particularly long and helpless infancy. Our babies depend on older caregivers for twice as long as chimp babies do. As a result, we need more varied caregiving. Chimp mothers look after their babies by themselves, but as the great anthropologist Sarah Hrdy pointed out in her 2009 book "Mothers and Others," human mothers have always been assisted by fathers, grandparents and "alloparents"—people who look after other folks' children. No other animal has so many different kinds of caregivers.

Those caregivers are what anthropologists call "facultative," meaning that they only provide care in certain circumstances and not others. Once they are committed to a baby, however, they may be just as devoted and effective as biological mothers. The key factor seems to be the very act of caregiving itself. We don't take care of babies because we love them; instead, like the Mandalorian, we love babies once we start taking care of them.

In a new paper forthcoming in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, Dr. Hrdy and Judith Burkart argue that this led to the evolution of special social adaptations in

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Baby Yoda in 'The Mandalorian.'

human babies, since they have to actively persuade all those facultative caregivers to love them. Studies show that babies have physical features that automatically attract care—those adorable, "awww"-inducing big eyes and heads and fat cheeks and little noses, all of which are exaggerated in Baby Yoda. Drs. Hrdy and Burkart think that fat cheeks may be particularly important: A baby's plumpness may be a signal that it's especially worth investing in.

The way a baby acts is just as important as the way it looks. Even though babies can't talk, they gesture and make eye contact. Studies show that human infants already understand and react to the emotions and desires of others. Drs. Hrdy and Burkart argue that these very early abilities for social cooperation and emotional intelligence evolved to help attract caregivers.

They also suggest that once these abilities were in place in babies, they allowed more cooperation between adults as well. All those mothers and fathers and alloparents had to coordinate their efforts to take care of the babies. So there was a kind of benign evolutionary circle: As babies became more socially skilled, they were better at attracting caregivers, and when they grew up they became better caregivers themselves.

So the story arc of the Mandalorian is also the story of human evolution. He rescues Baby Yoda, but Baby Yoda also rescues him. For adults, taking care of adorable babies together lets us escape from isolation and conflict so we can care for each other, too.