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MIND & MATTER:
ALISON GOPNIK

What Made Us Human? Perhaps Adorable Babies



WE'VE ALL seen the diorama in the natural history museum: the mighty cave men working together to bring down the mastodon.

For a long time, evolutionary biologists pointed to guy stuff like hunting and warfare to explain the evolution of human cooperation.

But a recent research symposium at the University of California, San Diego, suggests that the children watching inconspicuously at the back of the picture may have been just as important. Caring for children may, literally, have made us human—and allowed us to develop our distinctive abilities for cognition, cooperation and culture. The same sort of thinking suggests that human mothering goes way beyond mothers.

The anthropologist Sarah Hrdy argued that human evolution depends on the emergence of “cooperative breeding.” Chimpanzee babies are exclusively cared for by their biological mothers; they’ll fight off anyone else who comes near their babies. We humans, in contrast, have developed a caregiving triple threat: Grandmothers, fathers and “alloparents” help take-care of babies. That makes us quite different from our closest primate relatives.

In my last column, I talked about the fascinating new research on grandmothers. The fact that fathers take care of kids may seem more obvious, but it also makes us distinctive. Humans “pair bond” in a way that most primates—indeed, most mammals—don’t. Fathers and mothers develop

close relationships, and we are substantially more monogamous than any of our close primate relatives. As in most monogamous species, even sorta-kinda-monogamous ones like us, human fathers help to take care of babies.

Father care varies more than mother care. Even in hunter-gatherer or forager societies, some biological fathers are deeply involved in parenting, while others do very little. For fathers, even more than for mothers, the very fact of intimacy with babies is what calls out the impulse to care for them.

Unlike our chimp relatives, we have developed a caregiving triple threat.

For example, when fathers touch and play with babies, they produce as much oxytocin (the “tend and befriend” hormone) as mothers do.

Humans also have “alloparents”—other adults who take care of babies even when they aren’t related to them. In forager societies, those alloparents are often young women who haven’t yet had babies themselves. Caring for other babies lets these women learn child-care skills while helping the babies to survive. Sometimes mothers swap caregiving, helping each other out. If you show pictures of especially cute babies to women who don’t have children, the reward centers of their brains light up (though we really didn’t need the imaging studies to conclude that cute babies are irresistible to just about everybody).

Dr. Hrdy thinks that this cooperative breeding strategy is what let us develop other distinctive human abilities. A lot of our human smartness is social intelligence; we’re especially adept at learning about and from other people. Even tiny babies who can’t sit up yet can smile and make eye contact, and studies show that they can figure out what other people want.

Dr. Hrdy suggests that cooperative breeding came first and that the extra investment of grandmothers, fathers and alloparents permitted the long human childhood that in turn allowed learning and culture. In fact, social intelligence may have been a direct result of the demands of cooperative breeding. As anybody who has carpoled can testify, organizing joint child care is just as cognitively challenging as bringing down a mastodon.

What’s more, Dr. Hrdy suggests that in a world of cooperative breeding, babies became the agents of their own survival. The weapons-grade cuteness of human babies goes beyond their big eyes and fat cheeks. Babies first use their social intelligence to actively draw dads and grandmoms and alloparents into their web of adorableness. Then they can use it to do all sorts of other things—even take down a mastodon or two.