



The Evolution of Childhood: Relationships, Emotion, Mind

By Melvin Konner

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This book is an intellectual tour de force: a comprehensive Darwinian interpretation of human development. Looking at the entire range of human evolutionary history, Melvin Konner tells the compelling and complex story of how cross-cultural and universal characteristics of our growth from infancy to adolescence became rooted in genetically inherited characteristics of the human brain.

All study of our evolution starts with one simple truth: human beings take an extraordinarily long time to grow up. What does this extended period of dependency have to do with human brain growth and social interactions? And why is play a sign of cognitive complexity, and a spur for cultural evolution? As Konner explores these questions, and topics ranging from bipedal walking to incest taboos, he firmly lays the foundations of psychology in biology.

As his book eloquently explains, human learning and the greatest human intellectual accomplishments are rooted in our inherited capacity for attachments to each other. In our love of those we learn from, we find our way as individuals and as a species. Never before has this intersection of the biology and psychology of childhood been so brilliantly described.

"Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution," wrote Dobzhansky. In this remarkable book, Melvin Konner shows that nothing in childhood makes sense except in the light of evolution.

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Editorial Review

Review

It's been a long time coming but it was worth the wait. Mel Konner's wonderful new book shows that you simply must think about our biological past to understand our psychological present. *The Evolution of Childhood* offers an extraordinary new foundation for all knowledge of human development. (Michael Ruse, co-editor of *Evolution: The First Four Billion Years*)

Ever since his pioneering studies of infancy among Kalahari hunter-gatherers, anthropologist and physician Mel Konner has illuminated anthropology with knowledge from ethnography, sociobiology, neuroscience, and social psychology, in a search for a deep understanding of what it means to be human. This monumental book contains the best description of what play is all about that I have ever read, as well as the most comprehensive guide anywhere taking a reader through different phases of infancy, middle childhood, and adolescence. The book is the culmination of Konner's lifelong quest. It will transform the way that human development is understood and taught. (Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, author of *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*)

This monumental book--more than 900 pages long, 30 years in the making, at once grand and intricate, breathtakingly inclusive and painstakingly particular--exhaustively explores the biological evolution of human behavior and specifically the behavior of children. Melvin Konner, an anthropologist and neuroscientist at Emory, weaves a compelling web of theories and studies across a remarkable array of disciplines, from experimental genetics to ethnology...To read this book is to be in the company of a helpful and hopeful teacher who is eager to share what he's found. (Benjamin Schwarz *The Atlantic* 2010-05-01)

[Konner] covers almost every topic imaginable in anthropology, biology, and psychology that involves child development. Moreover, since the book is on evolution, there's a lot about other animals, from the platypus to the great ape...If you want to know the latest scholarly information on child development, you can buy this book for \$40 or get a new scholarly encyclopedia of child development for \$1500. Odds are that this one will be more thought-provoking and better written--and probably almost as extensive. (Mary Ann Hughes *Library Journal* 2010-04-15)

Why do we love watching [babies]? Perhaps because we recognize parts of ourselves in them but still find something mysterious about the behavior of those tiny human beings. *The Evolution of Childhood*, Melvin Konner's massive and massively researched new book, goes a long way in dispelling a lot of that mystery. Konner gives a detailed and expansive overview of what the fields of anthropology, evolutionary biology, psychology and genetics have taught us about human childhood. The book, in fairly accessible language, explains the evolutionary purpose of everything from babies' expressions (humans, apparently, are the only animal who can pull off the "relaxed friendly smile") to crying, early childhood outbursts and juvenile delinquency. (Thomas Rogers *Salon* 2010-05-31)

Magisterial. (Rebecca Mead *New Yorker* 2010-07-05)

Anthropologist-physician Melvin Konner's *The Evolution of Childhood* is a masterwork of scholarship. Even at over 900 pages, it should entice anyone keen for knowledge about human infancy, childhood, and adolescence and the evolution of these life stages...Konner marries biology and psychology, adds a firm grasp of our primate past, and guides our understanding of children's lives in various social contexts.

(Barbara King *Bookslut* 2010-07-01)

This book is not a weekend read...If you plan to read this book through, take a little each day and savor the delights it bestows. Well worth the read. (D. Wayne Dworsky *San Francisco Book Review* 2010-09-23)

This book is undeniably a tour de force. Indeed, Konner is perhaps the only scholar who is as comfortable describing cultural change, or evolution in its broad quasi-philosophical outlines, as he is defining the complex biochemical and statistical correlates of behavior. One of his writerly charms is that he is ever seer and scientist. He marvels as he describes. He also renders the boundaries among disciplines porous. He scurries from one to another, insisting on their enmeshment, whether it be ethology, cognitive neuroscience, evolutionary or developmental psychology, endocrinology, or cultural anthropology. He draws on all these fields to address the story of our inordinately long, and, compared to those of other species, "strangely-shaped" childhoods, and to discover how our childhood evolved to make us what we are. (Michele Pridmore-Brown *Times Literary Supplement* 2010-10-01)

Konner places childhood firmly within an evolutionary framework in his magisterial book...Konner is an excellent tour guide to the sacred lands of childhood. He has produced a scholarly, detailed and beautifully written study...*The Evolution of Childhood* shows that the pleasures of life are linked to the evolutionary imperatives of reproduction and survival, and that we are starting to understand their underlying neural mechanisms. (Morten Kringelbach *Nature* 2010-10-21)

The Evolution of Childhood is one of the most remarkable books I have read. Melvin Konner is a neuroscientist and anthropologist who shows how human childhood evolved over the last 200,000 years to make us what we are...Konner re-enchants child's play, for instance, by explaining its molecular and evolutionary backstory. That he is able to do this in a lively, accessible manner is no mean feat. Along the way, he makes a compelling case for how humans came to acquire complex culture. (Michele Pridmore-Brown *Times Literary Supplement* 2010-12-03)

[Konner's] goal is...ambitious: to synthesize all the literature bearing on the evolutionary emergence of our species, and especially on the ways in which humans came to raise their children. The breadth of vision he displays is extraordinary. Konner summarizes a considerable body of research on human evolution, beginning with paleontological and archaeological work on the emergence of life-forms and continuing through evidence regarding the emergence of mammals, primates, hominids and early humans, until finally *Homo sapiens* enters the scene. The volume is a singular achievement, not least because it encompasses, and describes accessibly and eloquently, many fields of endeavor and scholarship, ranging from molecular biology and interpretation of the geological record, to the interpretation of bone fragments found in archaeological sites, to observational research on the behavior of contemporary humans in a wide variety of ecological niches. Furthermore, Konner does not limit himself to secondary sources, as many might do when attempting to place their own research in broader context. Instead, he lucidly discusses a vast range of primary sources. The book's 753 pages of text are accompanied by 159 pages of references. The goal may be extraordinarily ambitious, but the exercise must be deemed a remarkable success. Konner achieves a readable and persuasive synthesis more inclusive than anything ever before attempted. His account of human evolution, and especially of the evolution of childhood, is coherent and compelling...This magisterial book is assuredly the most important analysis of the evolution of childhood yet attempted. It summarizes 40 years of observation, analysis and synthesis by one of the most profound thinkers of our generation. Whoever follows intellectually will necessarily build on this magnificently eloquent and integrative edifice. (Michael E. Lamb *American Scientist* 2011-01-01)

About the Author

Melvin Konner is Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Program in Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology at Emory University.

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