

How 'alloparenting' can be a less isolating way to raise kids ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Mommy Wars -- the alleged battle between working moms and stay-at-home moms -- rests on a number of fictions. One is the myth that working moms neglect their children. In fact, many of today's working moms spend more time with their children than moms from previous generations who didn't work outside their home.

Another misconception fueling those "wars" was that a mom, and only a mom, staying at home all day with her children was a product of evolution and therefore the natural order of things. Deviating from this norm denied our children what was promised to them by the slow march of time. Not true, either.

"It takes a village" can sound like a platitude, but, evolutionarily speaking, it is serious business. Despite the fictions surrounding contemporary motherhood, humans, supermoms included, did not evolve to care for our children on their own. Evolutionary biologists and anthropologists believe we wouldn't have survived, or thrived, as a species if we didn't rely on others to help care for our kids.

We all need alloparents

In 1975, socio-biologist Edward Wilson coined the term "alloparenting" to describe the practice of individuals other than a mother or father caring for an offspring. Since then, researchers from a variety of backgrounds have investigated our cooperative breeding style, or the way young humans require a group of caregivers, as primatologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy puts it, and how that shaped us as a species.

Our need to trust others with our babies helped us learn how to trust, Hrdy says. Also, we didn't just learn how to cooperate in order to compete for resources in nature-at-large, she adds, we also learned how to cooperate in order to be able to provide adequate care.

"Think of the intensity of caring for our offspring. We have to put a ton of energy and investment into our children. This is very different from, say, salmon, who spawn offspring upspring and then die," said Robin Nelson, associate professor of anthropology at Santa Clara University.

Human children are born very demanding and stay very demanding for a very long time. Many animals walk hours after birth; humans can take one to two years to gain that skill. In the meantime, they can't do much to help feed themselves, clean themselves or communicate.

Once they nail these basic skills, human parents are still required to stick around for a decade or longer. Teaching our kids the emotional skills and knowledge required to be an independent, functioning member of our society is no small act.

"Mothers have to carry our children, give birth to them, and then lactate and breastfeed, and who is going to help them during this time?" Nelson said.

Mothers have always and will always need alloparents, be it family members, friends, or paid help, to watch kids so that the parents can work, rest and prepare food in the home without a crying baby getting in the way. Without them, parents would not be able to adequately care for their babies, as well as themselves and any else they care for.

Would we have survived as a species without these shared caregiving networks?

"I am absolutely convinced that we wouldn't have," Nelson said. "It is a fundamental part of our humanity, as fundamental as walking on two feet. It is what makes us human."

Psychological benefits of alloparenting

Many parents in the United States still abide by that 1950s fantasy that nuclear families should be self-sustaining units and feel bad when they can't meet all of their family's needs on their own. Or they'd like to rely on a village, but modern lifestyles make it too difficult.

This individualized approach is toxic, and, as research on alloparenting tells us, out of step with most of history.

"Contemporary mothers feel a lot of guilt about sending kids to preschool, daycare or having nannies. This is despite the fact that these are much more normative arrangements, historically speaking, than being with a child 24/7," said Darby Saxbe, associate professor of psychology and director of the Center for the Changing Family at the University of Southern California.

Saxbe said caring without support often leads to burnout for parents, which, in turn, can lead to negative outcomes for the whole family.

"We are a social species living in an isolated, distanced society, which has been compounded by the pandemic," Saxbe said. "This leads to heightened rates of maternal depression and anxiety, postpartum depression, and anxiety and depression among children."

This is uncomfortable for many parents to stay out loud, but parenting full-time and on one's own, isn't always satisfying. Thinking this doesn't make one a bad parent, experts say, but someone whose needs and desires were shaped by a long history of alloparenting.

"I think a lot of moms have this feeling that they should want to spend all their time with their children, but children can be boring a lot of the time because kids like repetition," Saxbe said. "This can be a trap in which parents try to make parenting more interesting for themselves," by, say, forcing their preschooler to listen to stories about Greek mythology when they just want to read the same book about a pig making a pizza night after night, "but then they are not parenting in the way the child wants."

Kids benefit from alloparents

While alloparents were traditionally grandparents, aunts, uncles and other close community members, today others can fill that role. Alloparents can come from formal, paid relationships, like nannies, babysitters, teachers, camp counselors and child care workers. They can also be informal, including neighbors, friends and anyone else who interacts with your children on a regular basis.

These interactions can strengthen our children, by exposing them to different points-of-view, approaches to life and expectations.

"Kids have lots of buckets that need to be filled, just like we all do," said Amanda Zelechowski, associate professor of psychology at Valparaiso University. "The more people they meet, the more experiences they have, the more likely they are to have a chance to fill all these buckets."

"Parents think they should be the main person filling their kids' buckets, but this isn't what kids need or benefit from."

A large body of research shows that kids benefit from having multiple attachments, Zelechowski said.

When kids are exposed to different caregivers, they have a chance to shed the labels they acquired at home -- the "smart" one or the "athletic" one -- and explore different parts of their personalities. "It's so good for kids to be seen in different ways by different people," Zelechowski said.

Seeking out alloparents

Finding alloparents requires a mix of creating your village and recognizing the village you already have and what they give you.

When being near grandparents, aunts and uncles or old friends isn't possible, Zelechowski suggests trying to connect with local families through schools and neighborhoods. Community and faith groups are also a good place to start.

"You are looking for people who are authentic and non-judgmental," she said, and not necessarily someone who parents exactly the same as you do.

Sometimes, alloparents are hiding in plain sight.

"I used to feel guilty about our kids going to an afterschool program and staying until 5:30 or 6," Saxbe said. "And then the pandemic came and I saw how lonely and sad they were because they weren't getting that anymore. It was a really good antidote to the guilt. I realized they were getting something so valuable during that time."

There is a limit to how many caregivers a child should experience. A revolving door of caregivers with no steady attachment figures would likely make them anxious, Saxbe said. But as long as they have consistency, and a core one or few people they can rely on, then exposing them to a mix of alloparents should be fine.

"No one person should ever do it all when it comes to parenting," she continued. "Someone who is a great companion for play isn't necessarily the best person to support learning or the same person to provide physical care. Those skills can come from different people and complement each other, and ultimately the child is getting more attention and more support."

Region: United States [3]

Tags: care work [4]

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