New study on hunter-gatherer moms suggests Western child care has a big problem [1]

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Excerpts

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The average mother among one Congolese foraging people has at least 10 people to help hold her baby — and sometimes as many as 20, a paper published Monday has found.

That high level of support means that mothers among the Mbendjele BaYaka people have someone else holding their baby at least half the time, according to research in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

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> "If contemporary hunter-gatherer patterns match those of ancestral populations," the researchers write, then for infants to spend substantial amounts of times without interactions from caregivers is "likely an evolutionarily novel situation."

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Current anthropological thought suggests that while their tools may be largely made of stone, wood and bone, peoples like the Mbendjele are adapting to, making use of and sometimes reacting against the high-tech world that surrounds them. To even say "peoples like the Mbendjele" conflates a human past of almost unfathomable diversity into a few highly specific examples.

But the difference between child care among hunter-gatherers and the "WEIRD" countries — those that are Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic — can still shed light on "the factors which affect children's vulnerability to adverse psychological outcomes," the researchers wrote.

These discrepancies are striking. Mbendjele infants are generally in close physical contact with caregivers — who carry them in slings on their hips or backs — for seven to nine hours of daylight hours.

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Parents in WEIRD countries can give infants more contact time by taking a leaf out of the Mbendjele book and wearing them in a sling, or by massaging their infants.

But, crucially, this level of contact is largely possible only because parents aren't the only ones called on to provide it.

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These groups are a mixed bag: a stable "core" made up of a handful of particularly trusted friends and family, surrounded by a rotating cast of more casual help — which gives kids the comfort of a network of consistent caregivers, while allowing the most committed members of that network to get some relief.

By contrast, in the comparatively wealthy nations of the West, most mothers have only their partners, parents or expensive professionals to lean on — if they are lucky.

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Researchers acknowledge that such reforms aren't cheap — at least, not on the front end. But they argued that they would likely lead to healthier children and mothers — "the reduced risk of abuse and neglect, and enhancement of maternal condition and caregiving."

Such services, they suggest, wouldn't be a new intrusion of social democracy, but the reinstatement of something very old. This

combination of consistence and high caregiver ratios, they write, “are resources that have likely been available to children for the vast majority of our species’ evolutionary history.”

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