

Books & arts



Fathers are increasingly involved in their children's care.

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How men evolved to care for babies

An exploration of the evolution of male nurturing shows why, unlike males of other great apes, men are meant to be hands-on parents. **By Kermyt G. Anderson**

Primatologist Sarah Hrdy never questioned the idea that hands-on childcare was mainly women's work – until her first grandchild was born. Then, while watching her son-in-law willingly care for his baby, she began to wonder whether the trend of fathers getting more involved with their children was merely down to cultural change in the decades since she had kids, or whether it could be explained by biology.

In *Father Time*, Hrdy takes us on a quest through vertebrate evolution and history to discover when and how men – unlike other male great apes – began to nurture their

young. Ultimately, Hrdy finds that the idea of men caring for babies is not as evolutionarily unusual as she had initially surmised. She surprises herself by concluding that men can

be every bit as protective and nurturing as the most committed mother.

Hrdy's preconceptions of parenting stemmed from half a century studying the reproductive strategies of primates. Her graduate studies were steeped in Darwinian logic, which emphasized that male behaviour is driven by the need to outcompete rivals for mates – a way of being that requires little direct contact with infants. Her early fieldwork in India on Hanuman langur monkeys (*Semnopithecus entellus*) reinforced this view. Resident male langurs, she observed, paid little to no attention to the young in their



Father Time: A Natural History of Men and Babies

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy
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group, but incoming males deliberately killed the babies of other males to hasten mating with resident females. Similarly, male apes generally shun infants, and are more likely to kill a newborn than nurture it.

A rare mammal

To explore what makes humans different, Hrdy begins her book by going back to our vertebrate origins. Parental care among fish and amphibians is just as likely to be done by males as by females. But in only 5% of mammalian species do males care for their young. Despite the differences in behaviours between fish and mammals, the hormonal and neurological mechanisms that promote parental care in the two groups are similar.

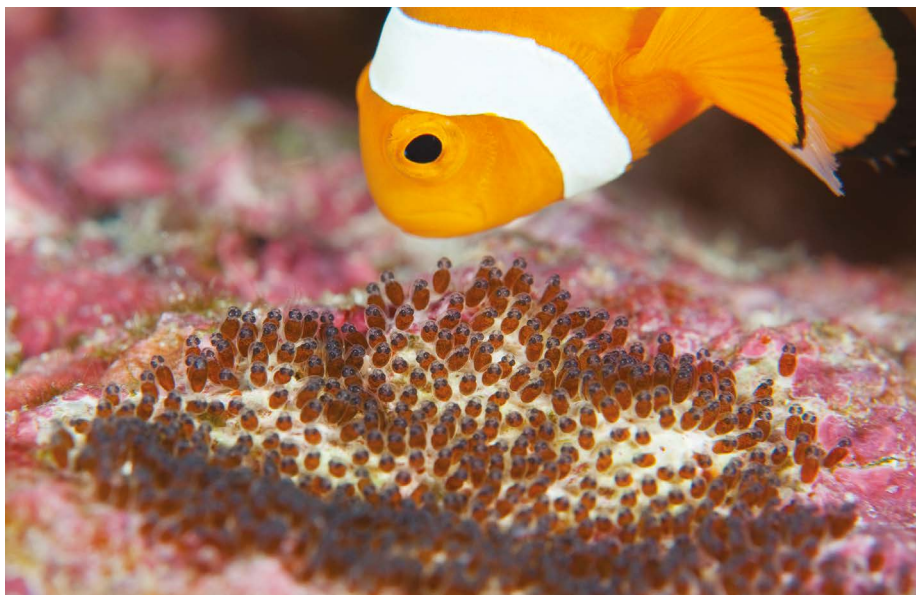
In mammals, pregnancy and feeding babies trigger the release of hormones, such as prolactin and oxytocin, in the mother's brain. In humans, these then encourage nurturing behaviours and produce a feeling of bonding towards the infant. But, as Hrdy notes, historically it did not occur to scientists to study how caring for babies might affect male biology.

The author's summary of the scant literature reinforces her argument that male nurturing is, like female care, a product of biology. In humans, men who care for infants experience profound biological changes. In the weeks before their baby is born, men experience a surge in prolactin. In the months after birth, their levels of testosterone levels drop and those of the bonding hormone oxytocin rise. Nurturing can also produce changes in the brain: scans of men who are the primary carer of an infant show that their brains light up in response to a crying baby, in much the same way as do the brains of mothers who are the main carers.

Cultural changes

Next, the author investigates the evolutionary events that set humans apart from other great apes. At the time of our last common ancestor with chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) and bonobos (*Pan paniscus*) – around five million to six million years ago – most other ape species had gone extinct, owing to cooling global temperatures and shrinking forests. Yet our hominin ancestors persevered, despite the fact that their large-brained offspring were weaned off milk earlier than those of other great apes, and required more food than mothers alone could provide through foraging. Male hunters, evolutionary anthropologists reason, must have learnt to share resources with children.

Some researchers have argued that this responsibility-sharing behaviour relied on



Male clownfish are the main carers for their eggs.

males being sure of which children were theirs. But Hrdy points out that, among living hunter-gatherers, most of the meat is shared widely – it does not go directly to a hunter's children. She posits that our ancestors became cooperative breeders, with groups of parents providing support, care and food for growing children together. And she argues that social selection – the subset of natural selection influenced by the behaviour of other individuals – had a central role in this change

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in parenting, with selection favouring men who had a reputation for cooperation and sharing food, making them more attractive as partners and group members.

The final chapters of the book focus on the cultural context of human fatherhood, and the ways in which men's relationships with children have changed over the past few millennia. Hrdy argues that men were more involved in childcare before the invention of agriculture, and the ethnographic data from contemporary hunter-gather populations support her conclusion. Once agriculture was adopted – bringing with it the need to protect resources such as land and livestock – men tended to remain near their kin, whereas women moved away from their families when they married.

This led to patriarchal systems, increased

segregation of men and women in domestic and social spheres, and thus fathers spending less time near their children. The trend continued in market economies, in which men adopted the role of breadwinner and worked outside the house. The most recent generation has seen some erosion of gender barriers, and men have actively been taking on childcare duties. But, as Hrdy discusses, those preferring more conventionally defined roles for mothers and fathers have been pushing back against these changes.

As always, Hrdy's writing is a joy to read. Her previous books have focused on female care of offspring and on the broader role of non-parental (typically female) caretakers in shaping human evolution, some of which is rehashed in *Father Time*. But the focus on fatherhood and men's biological responses to babies is new. And her model for how male care evolved in humans is plausible (if necessarily speculative).

Father Time will be valued by anyone interested in male care of infants and children. Hrdy's broad, accessible writing will appeal to non-scientists, but her peers will appreciate her summary of current research on the hormonal and neurobiological aspects of male care. As a biological anthropologist focused on fatherhood and men's investments in children, I certainly learnt a great deal.

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