

Child-rearing Goals, Methods and Results:
What we can learn by studying two very different cultures

by Maureen E. McCarthy

© McCarthy 2011

First, we must ask: *What kind of people do we want our children to become?*

This is a question we should ask before having children, if at all possible, so that we set only *achievable* goals and have time to learn positive and effective methods for getting the results we want.

Do we want our children to become caring, confident and competent adults? Or selfish, violent and materialistic adults?

There are other combinations of qualities, of course. A person could be caring but timid. Another could be selfish but competent. But if we want our children to become caring, confident *and* competent adults, we will need to use a different set of methods from those that will produce selfish, violent and materialistic adults. **We cannot use harsh infant-rearing methods and expect our children to become kind and caring adults.**

Neuroscientific research has shown us the mechanisms through which infant-rearing methods have long-term effects. We have learned that early experiences affect the body and all its systems, “wiring” the brain and nervous system for either prosocial or antisocial behavior, for either easily-triggered anger, anxiety and fear or for calmness and enjoyment of life and relationships, and for other life-enhancing or stress-producing patterns of feeling, thinking and behaving.

The brain *can* be “re-wired” to a certain extent, through supportive, loving relationships that provide many positive and attuned experiences over a long period of time. However, remediation never produces the results prevention would have. It makes much more sense, and is much kinder, to provide children with attuned, empathetic and loving responses and interactions from the beginning, from the moment of birth. We should also strive to provide a nurturing environment for the mother-baby dyad while the baby is still in the womb, as stress and/or inadequate physical or emotional support not only harm the mother but negatively impact the development of the baby.

Are there research findings from fields besides neuroscience that support respectful and kind methods?

Absolutely. Much research from the fields of psychology, anthropology, child development and health sciences supports attuned, empathetic and responsive methods of caregiving. For example, many studies of parents and infants sleeping apart or together, of attachment formation, and of the foundations of moral development support attuned, empathetic and responsive methods of caregiving because of their positive impact on child development, which in turn affects the kinds of adults these children become.

The rest of this document will focus on research from the field of cultural anthropology that supports respectful and responsive child-rearing methods. Decades ago, two anthropologists examined the child-rearing methods of two very different hunter-gatherer-gardener societies and found a correlation between these practices and the kind of adults each culture produced. I will describe and comment on their observations and then discuss the implications of these studies for modern American child-rearing methods, goals and long-term results.

The Mundugumor of New Guinea, when studied in the early 1930’s by anthropologist Margaret Mead, consistently treated their infants and children harshly, holding them as little as possible and expressing no tenderness at all. Children were an inconvenience; they “caused trouble” with their needs, illnesses and

accidents. Consequently, they were frequently pushed away, screamed at, punished, ridiculed and hit. What kind of adults did children treated this way become? As reported by Mead, they became selfish, aggressive, contentious, materialistic, power-seeking and violence-loving adults.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the childrearing methods used by the South Fore people of New Guinea when observed in 1963 and 1964 by anthropologist E. Richard Sorenson. Their methods were empathetic, responsive and respectful of individual needs, interests and preferences, and children in that society became teens and adults that were empathetic, responsive and respectful of individual needs, interests and preferences.

The descriptions above are only meant to give a quick overview of the two cultures. The chart below compares and contrasts the two cultures in much more detail, focusing on how infants and children were treated and the kind of adults they became.

Note: The phrases and passages in quotation marks are the exact words of the anthropologists. Complete information about the sources can be found at the end of this document. The pronoun “it” is sometimes used when referring to a baby or a child, not because of a lack of respect, but to avoid frequent and awkward “he/she” and “his/her” constructions.

Stages and Dimensions of Development	The <u>South Fore</u> of New Guinea (Report on studies done by E. Richard Sorenson in 1963 and in 1964)	The <u>Mundugumor</u> of N. Guinea (Report on 2-year study by Margaret Mead, beginning in 1931)
<p>INFANCY: Physical and social contact with others</p>	<p>Infants were in continuous bodily contact with their mothers or women in their mothers’ social circles.</p> <p>Babies spent hours in mothers’ laps while mothers worked. Babies would sleep, nurse and play there. They were not set aside if they fell asleep while in mothers’ laps or if a heavy load needed to be carried. This “close, uninterrupted physical contact” allowed babies’ basic needs of rest, nourishment, stimulation, comfort and security to be “continuously satisfied without obstacle.” Babies were also able to learn about people and their activities by constantly being involved with them.</p> <p>Mothers carried babies under their arms or on their backs in soft net bags that allowed them to curl up in natural positions and feel their mothers’ warmth.</p>	<p>Babies were touched and held as little as possible, and never with gentleness or tenderness.</p> <p>Infants spent almost all their time in stiff, harsh baskets with only narrow slits for light at each end. Babies in baskets were hung up in their homes; mothers only carried baskets when necessary, usually for short trips. Babies could not feel the warmth from their mothers’ bodies while in the baskets.</p>

<p>INFANCY: Crying</p>	<p>Babies almost never cried. They communicated their needs, feelings, interests and wants through body language and vocalizations. i.e. touch, posture, eye contact, babble, movement, facial expressions and gestures. If they did begin to cry, they were instantly comforted.</p>	<p>If a baby started to cry, the mother or other caregiver would scratch the side of the basket with the hope that this meager attention would be enough to make the baby stop crying. If it kept crying, it was eventually taken out and fed, but only enough for it to accept being put back in its basket.</p>
<p>INFANCY: The breastfeeding process/relationship</p>	<p>Mothers allowed babies to nurse as often as they wanted for as long as they wanted.</p>	<p>Babies were removed from the breast the moment they paused in their sucking. Consequently, they learned to suck as vigorously and quickly as possible, which often caused them to choke, angering the mother and frustrating the baby. The whole feeding session was unpleasant, characterized by struggle and anger.</p> <p>Mothers never nursed a baby to provide comfort or relieve pain.</p> <p>Only the strongest babies survived. <i>Comment from M. McCarthy: Abundant evidence indicates that high infant mortality rates are caused not only by inadequate nutrition but by a lack of touch, affection and love. (As well as other factors.)</i></p>
<p>TODDLERHOOD: Physical and social contact with others</p>	<p>Toddlers spent some of their time on the laps of mothers and other caregivers. (Sometimes nursing.) They were sometimes carried on the hips of their mothers, where they might sleep, and on the hips and backs of older children, who would move around and play.</p> <p>Toddlers also walked around to explore.</p> <p>Toddlers were allowed to accept or reject efforts by children or adults to interact with them; they did not have to submit to unwanted touch or interactions.</p>	<p>Toddlers were sometimes carried on mothers' backs. Mostly, however, they were set down as soon as they could walk and left to fend for themselves. Mothers did watch to keep toddlers away from the river, since it became taboo for drinking purposes for months if someone drowned in it. If a toddler wandered close to the river, the mother would yell, snatch it violently away from the riverbank and sometimes beat it.</p> <p>Mothers did not tolerate toddlers' crying or clinging to them; they usually slapped them if they did either of these things.</p>

	<p>Toddlers' aggressive acts were considered a sign of immaturity that they would outgrow. These acts were viewed with amusement and ignored or responded to by distracting the toddler, usually through affectionate play. If the attack was painful, the recipient sometimes moved away. Toddlers were not reprimanded or instructed as to proper behavior.</p> <p><i>Comment from M. McCarthy: Toddlers did eventually give up aggressiveness, as they did not see it being modeled by older children or adults.)</i></p>	
<p>TODDLERHOOD: Exploratory play and Steps toward competence and maturity</p>	<p>Toddlers were allowed to play and explore as they chose, with minimal supervision. Without being told to, toddlers stayed close to their caregivers so they could occasionally look in their direction and observe their body language. If a caregiver gave a nod of encouragement, the toddler would continue with its explorations. If a caregiver seemed alarmed, toddler would run back to him or her. No words or commands were necessary to ensure toddler's return to safety.</p> <p><i>Comment from M. McCarthy: Having a secure human "base" to whom they could turn for reassurance, comfort and protection gave them the security they needed to learn and explore and to master the skills they needed.</i></p> <p>While on the backs of older children, toddlers were responsible for hanging on as they moved around or played, so they developed heightened body awareness and balance as well as muscular strength.</p> <p>By the time they could walk, toddlers confidently handled fire, knives, axes, machetes, etc. (No one "instructed" them on the proper use of tools. They learned by participating in all aspects of adults' daily lives.)</p> <p><i>Comment from M. McCarthy: The great amount of sensory input and social contact received in pleasurable ways, through touch, motion, pressure, skin-to-skin</i></p>	<p>Toddlers were limited in where and how they could explore, and quickly learned that the world beyond their houses was a dangerous place. (Though home was no sanctuary, either. There they were likely to be hit or verbally abused by family members.)</p>

	<p><i>contact and the constantly changing sights and sounds of people in action resulted in the development of high levels of physical and social competence.</i></p>	
<p>CHILDHOOD: Play</p>	<p>Play was not about competition or dominance, but about fun and learning about their physical and social worlds.</p>	<p>Play was competitive, about beating one's opponents.</p>
<p>CHILDHOOD: Relationships and Steps towards competence and maturity</p>	<p>Children were allowed to express their individuality and grow at their own pace.</p> <p>Through observation of others, play and experimentation, children developed a "realistic self-reliance." They knew when they were capable of doing something on their own, and when to turn to others for assistance.</p> <p>Children voluntarily interacted with babies and younger children, serving as important teachers and caregivers for them. They were always willing to provide needed help to younger children. They were very affectionate with them: hugging and kissing them, holding and playing with them.</p> <p>Children usually deferred voluntarily to younger children when they both wanted the same thing. (Adults didn't get involved.)</p> <p>Negative feelings quickly dissipated because of general ambience of caring and responsive connectedness.</p> <p>No signs of sibling rivalry were detected.</p> <p><i>Comment from M. McCarthy: The anthropologist said he tried hard to find incidents of sibling rivalry, but couldn't.</i></p> <p>Mothers and children were happy to continue the breastfeeding relationship</p>	<p>The many complex rules about "correct" behavior towards kin and others made children nervous and apprehensive. Rules for relationships were full of prohibitions, cautions and restrictions. They could seldom relax around people; they had to be on guard lest they act "inappropriately."</p> <p>As children grew, their relationships with their parents tended to become more and more tense. Children as young as seven would defy their fathers and leave home; fathers would not pursue them. Fathers preferred daughters whom they could trade for more wives. (Mothers preferred sons.)</p> <p>Based on kinship rules, pre-adolescent boys had a "license to oppress" certain members of their society. These behaviors included stealing, humiliating the elderly, insulting their parents and threatening, pinching, bullying and pushing smaller children.</p> <p>Hostile relationships developed easily between brothers. (This became more intense during adolescence, when they competed for wives.)</p> <p>Boys viewed most males in their community as enemies.</p>

	<p>for a number of years; usually till children were 4 or 5 years old. They were weaned gradually and compassionately, at a pace that was comfortable for the child.</p> <p><i>Comment from M. McCarthy: Children in most cultures around the world are typically nursed for 2 to 4 years, and have been throughout history. This extended nursing obviously does not infantilize or neuroticize the children as is commonly believed in America. The South Fore babies were able to safely handle fire, knives and machetes by the time they could walk, and had healthy relationships throughout their lives.)</i></p>	<p>Mothers weaned children by speaking to them harshly and hitting them. (The age of weaning was not given.)</p> <p>Around the age of 8 or 9, boys would be sent to another village as hostages for weeks or months. They were not treated well there. (Girls were sent, too, but rarely.)</p> <p><i>Comment from M. McCarthy: The purpose seemed to be to keep the village providing the hostages from reneging on trade agreements or plans for raids. I mention this practice to show how the adults obviously were unconcerned about what their children might experience or feel.</i></p> <p>At some point before adolescence, most boys were expected to kill a captive preceding a cannibal feast. (This was not an honor or a privilege; boys were assigned this task to prevent insult to the father, who was expected to have sons to do this duty.)</p>
<p>ADOLESCENCE</p>	<p>Patterns of individual freedom and social harmony continued from childhood.</p> <p>There was no adolescent rebellion, nor were there any signs of a “generation gap.”</p>	<p>Patterns of hostility, jealousy, rivalry, conflict, violence and power-seeking continued from childhood.</p> <p>Rebellion often occurred long before adolescence.</p> <p>In adolescence, brothers were supposed to avoid each other as much as possible, unless it was to fight each other and abuse each other publicly.</p> <p>Both daughters and sisters could be traded for wives, so fathers competed with sons for wives, and brothers competed with each other.</p> <p>When illicit sexual encounters were planned between unmarried young people, they happened in haste and in secret. Foreplay consisted of violent scratching and biting, “calculated to produce the maximum amount of</p>

		<p>excitement in the minimum amount of time.” Passion was demonstrated by tearing off and smashing ornaments and by breaking arrows and baskets.</p>
<p>ADULTHOOD: Characteristics and Relationships</p>	<p>Adults were attuned to each other and responded quickly to subtle body language cues that indicated a need, an interest or a desire. (Direct requests were not needed and indeed would have indicated alienation.) Friendly strangers were recipients of this attuned responsiveness. Sorenson said “I’d not previously seen such on-the-mark intuitive helpfulness extend so readily to strangers. Long before we had a single word of any common language, they tuned in to my interests and my feelings, and instinctively made life easier and happier.”</p> <p>They were curious, adaptable, open-minded, innovative and flexible, and quickly accepted novel ideas and practices. e.g. They were open to learning new ways of counting and speaking, and easily split into groups to follow new opportunities.</p> <p><i>Comment from M. McCarthy: They were not unhealthily attached or excessively dependent on others. Their ease in moving away can probably be partly explained by the fact that they knew they could visit the members of the group left behind.</i></p> <p>They informally and voluntarily shared materials, affection, food, work and pleasure. This was done out of friendship and personal affection, not from a sense of obligation.</p> <p>Adults disliked fighting/warring and avoided conflict whenever possible, often by distancing themselves from the person with whom they had a conflict.</p> <p>Adults valued harmony, sociability, honesty and cooperation and were cheerful and open-hearted.</p>	<p>The “ideal” man and the “ideal” woman were harsh, arrogant, “violent, competitive, aggressively sexed, jealous and ready to see and avenge insult, delighting in display, in action, in fighting.” Tender sentiments were considered inappropriate in both men and women. Both sexes looked forward to a violent death. Men held life lightly; they did not value their own lives or the lives of others. (The value to life given by women was not reported.) Those who did not meet this ideal of aggressiveness, who were “passive” and/or nurturing, were considered deviant.</p> <p>All relationships were based on mutual distrust, with constant hostility and conflict. Everyone had to be constantly on guard; they couldn’t relax around other people.</p> <p>Food supply was plentiful, so there was little fighting over fishing rights or land. Men mostly fought over women, and women “eluded, defied and complicated” this fighting to the best of their ability.</p> <p>“The Mundugumor respect none of their own rules.” (Pertaining to marriage, observance of traditions, etc.)</p> <p>Adults were materialistic, valuing wealth, status and power. Men wanted many wives because of the status this gave them, and because of all the work they did, which increased their wealth.</p>

	<p>“Aggression and conflict within communities was unusual and the subject of considerable comment when it occurred.”</p> <p>There was no social domineering and no hierarchy—no chiefs, patriarchs, priests or medicine men. Their society was egalitarian. Social cohesion was based on rapport and affinity, not rules. Adults worked together in “synchronous cooperation.”</p> <p>Personal boundaries were respected. No one had to submit to unwanted touch, attention or affection. However, these things were given freely when recipient desired them.</p> <p>Men and women - even married couples - slept in separate houses. <i>Comment from M. McCarthy: Obviously they still found ways to have sex. They preferred doing so out in nature, such as in gardens and on trails. Many Americans feel that it is so important that couples literally “sleep together” and sleep only with each other, that they exclude babies from their beds and even their bedrooms. Babies are physically and emotionally much more vulnerable to the stress of sleeping alone. (To fears, to sudden fevers, to apnea, etc.)</i></p> <p>No one had any interest in manipulating others.</p> <p>Siblings were very close as children and as adults.</p> <p>Women were less mobile than men because of marriage agreements, but had the freedom to visit friends in other villages or return to home regions for extended visits if they wanted.</p>	<p>Ruthless individualism and competition were the norm.</p> <p>Adults enjoyed the humiliation and embarrassment of those who were the butt of jokes. (As did children.)</p> <p>Often pregnant women were beaten by their husband for becoming pregnant too quickly. They were usually accused of infidelity, the husband claiming that the child could not possibly be his.</p>
<p>ADULTHOOD: Attitude towards children</p>	<p>Though mothers focused on their work and their adult relationships, children always had access to them and were welcomed and nurtured. Infants were</p>	<p>Though each baby that was allowed to live following birth was perceived as having value, parents saw them as an</p>

	<p>integrated into mothers' lives. (See "Infancy" section for examples.)</p> <p>Mothers often nursed an older child along with a newborn. Some mothers, out of concern that they wouldn't have enough milk for both a newborn and an older child, would abstain from sexual intercourse for several years so they wouldn't have to wean the nursing child before he/she was ready.</p> <p>The issue of punishment was not directly addressed except in reference to toddlers' aggressive acts, for which they were <i>not</i> punished.</p> <p><i>Comment from M. McCarthy: The concept of punishment did not fit with the attitudes of tolerance and patience that the adults demonstrated towards the children. Also, punishment did not seem to be necessary. Children learned how to behave as they matured, through observation and participation, and apparently found no reasons to seriously misbehave.</i></p>	<p>inconvenience who were constantly interrupting their preferred activities. If a woman had twins, one baby would always be adopted out, as she didn't want to have to suckle two babies at once. Even single babies were fed as little as possible at a time so mothers wouldn't have to deal with them any longer than necessary. All illnesses and accidents were seen as the baby "causing trouble" for the parent. To have to attend to sick children made mothers "sulky and resentful." If a child was inconsiderate enough to die, the whole community was "enraged."</p> <p>When parents were annoyed or angry with their children, they punished them through verbal abuse, slaps, beatings, and being left to sleep all night in the cold at the mercy of the plentiful mosquitoes.</p> <p>Parents often used their children in conflicts with each other.</p>
--	---	--

What implications do these very different infant-rearing methods have for modern day American child-rearing?

First, let's consider some of the very serious problems in American society. Many Americans physically, sexually and emotionally abuse their children and/or significant others. Many are ruthless seekers of wealth, power and status, not caring whom they hurt along the way. Many are addicted to drugs, food, sex, nicotine, pornography, alcohol, work, thrill-seeking, and/or gambling, etc. Many are sexual deviants, molesting children, engaging in sadomasochistic sex and/or raping their dates. Not all Americans have these problems, but we need to ask ourselves why so many do.

Multiple influences are involved in the creation of these problems, of course, such as consumption-driven values and the entertainment media's constant bombardment of children and adults with images/portrayals of violent acts. My focus here is on the impact early experiences have on babies' developing brains and bodies, on their relationships and personality development, and even on their survival. For example, sleep studies have found that babies who are left to sleep alone in their own rooms have *double* the risk of dying of SIDS. Neuroscientific studies have shown that leaving babies alone to "cry it out" damages their brains and anti-anxiety systems and leaves them more vulnerable to later depression, anxiety, high blood pressure, headaches, digestive disorders and other problems. Research findings from many fields point to the harsh infant-rearing methods of mainstream America as having contributed to our country's many serious

problems. For decades, mainstream American parents have been following the advice of “experts” who recommend the use of callous behavioristic methods. These methods do not concern themselves at all with what babies feel and need, only with how babies *behave*. The methods are considered a success if the baby stops the undesirable behavior, such as crying when put to bed. Many of these behavioristic methods and practices are similar to those of the intolerant, impatient and self-centered Mundugumor parents. For example, many mainstream Americans:

- Respond with “Suck it up!” messages, through actions as well as words, when babies and children communicate their frustrations, loneliness, disappointments, sadness, etc.
- Leave babies alone to cry unless they have an “acceptable” need, such as being hungry or in need of a diaper change.
- Keep their babies in containers most of the time. i.e. in infant seats, cribs, strollers, mechanical swings and playpens. Most American babies get only minimal amounts of the touch, motion and positive interactions they need for optimal emotional, moral, physical, social and intellectual development. (Mechanical swings and strollers do provide motion, but not the complete sensory and social experience that babies get when their parents are holding or rocking them, or “wearing” them in slings while they walk their “morning mile,” do housework, etc.)
- Refuse to be inconvenienced by their babies. For example, they won’t help babies transition to sleep and they won’t respond to crying when they themselves are “trying to sleep.” (These babies might be sick or in pain and in need of immediate medical attention, though being lonely or afraid are also legitimate reasons for babies to call for their parents.)
- Are more concerned with “correct behavior” than with building trusting, loving relationships with their children by respecting their feelings and meeting their needs.
- Force children to submit to hugs and kisses that they don’t want. (And then we’re surprised when they let Uncle John or their coach do other things to them? Or when they can’t say “no” in other situations?)
- Refuse to even attempt breastfeeding because they do not want to be “tied down” or inconvenienced by being their infants’ primary source of sustenance and comfort.
- Use their children to “get at” or punish their “exes.” (Ex-spouses or ex-partners.)
- Discipline their children through punitive, coercive and/or abusive methods, such as humiliation, insults, hitting, food deprivation, etc.

How do these harsh child-rearing methods contribute to the problems of American adults mentioned earlier?

We cannot respond to our babies’ needs and feelings with callous indifference and expect them to become adults who know how to deal in positive ways with their own feelings or who care about the feelings and needs of others. Babies whose feelings and signals are ignored are more likely to later turn to substances such as drugs or behavior such as thrill-seeking as a way to escape their uncomfortable or painful feelings; they may have never learned that *human caring and support* can help them manage their strong emotions. Babies who have been left alone with their feelings of frustration, fear, loneliness and abandonment may later “act out” their pain and anger in destructive ways, or they may succumb to the “deadness” of depression. They may learn to *act* “independent” and stop crying in situations where they’ve been ignored -

which is what the parents wanted - but since they still have unmet dependency *needs*, in other situations they may be extremely clingy or “whiney.” They may also close themselves off from any kind of *trusting* relationship because they have been hurt too much by repeated “abandonments,” temporary though they may have been. In any case, they will probably acquire a generalized “learned helplessness,” believing they have no personal power to get their needs met, that they must wait and hope for their caregivers to decide to tend to them. Also, babies who have not had empathy and compassion consistently shown to them will find it difficult to show empathy and compassion to others as teens and adults. People who are dealing with a lifetime of unmet needs will usually have little to no ability to concern themselves with the needs of others. Some, however, go to the other extreme, focusing on meeting the needs of others as a way to feel good about themselves and/or to earn desperately needed love.

Children do not learn to be kind and caring by being lectured about it. They learn it by *experiencing* it, by consistently being responded to quickly and with sensitivity, not just when it’s *convenient* for the parents/caregivers. Children learn sensitivity and responsiveness when their own needs are met promptly, and when they witness all their family members caring about the needs, feelings, interests and wants of the other family members and of the wider world. They learn how to manage their emotions when their parents help them identify their feelings, validate them, give them any needed support and comfort, and model positive ways of handling strong emotions and making good decisions and choices.

In other words, we cannot use harsh methods and expect to produce emotionally literate, caring and compassionate adults. Callous methods do not “wire” the brain for pro-social behavior; warm and responsive methods do. Children learn what they live. Our methods must be congruent with our goals. Again, we cannot use harsh infant-rearing methods and expect our children to become kind and caring adults.

Beyond the immediate negative effects callous infant-rearing methods have on babies, we must consider the effects on parents of being given “permission” by behaviorists to be insensitive to their babies. How do parents know where to draw the line? What’s to keep them from continuing to be insensitive to their growing children in various situations, or even becoming more and more insensitive? The negative effects of the initial insensitivity can easily become compounded if the harsh methods are continued or even escalated during childhood and/or adolescence. This callousness could lead to what even mainstream American society would consider abuse and neglect. (Many non-mainstream parents consider “normal” American infant-rearing practices to be abusive and neglectful.)

But if we’re always comforting our babies and meeting their needs, when and how do they learn to become independent?

Independence has long been a cherished American value, not just in governing ourselves but in childrearing. Unfortunately, Americans have been taught that to produce “independent” adults, we must extinguish all signs of “dependence” in *infancy*. But babies *are* dependent: without competent nurturing received from competent caregivers, they will die. They depend on others to meet all their needs: social, physical, intellectual and emotional. Only slowly over many years do children learn how to manage their emotions, tend to their physical and other needs, and make good choices and decisions. “Infant independence” is an oxymoron. It is *not* an achievable goal. But many American parents are so afraid of raising “needy” children who will constantly be demanding their time, attention and energy that they try to “train” them to not make “demands.” They want babies to just accept what they’re given, when they’re given it. But “neediness” is a manifestation of unmet needs. Babies who are clingy and “demanding” about wanting a parent are desperately trying to get their needs met. Ignoring them or pushing them away will only make them feel even more needy, though they may “give up” and stop trying to get their needs met. Those whose needs *are* met in infancy and childhood and who have a dependable support system in adulthood will not need to invest great amounts of time and energy desperately and dysfunctionally trying to get attention, esteem, love and care from others.

But adult independence is a good and achievable goal, right?

It depends on how we define independence. Encarta Dictionary defines “independence” as: “Freedom from dependence on or control by another person, organization, or state.” This definition includes words that mean a great deal to Americans: “freedom” and its opposite, “being controlled.” American parents want their children to become free adults, not controlled by anyone or anything, which is a good goal.

Unfortunately, this traditional definition of independence implies that dependence is a bad thing, whereas it is only *excessive* dependence that is undesirable. It is a *good* thing for adults to sometimes depend on people for support and assistance, as long they also allow others to sometimes depend on them and as long as they can still function competently, making their own choices and decisions. So by making two small changes to Encarta’s definition, we can change our understanding of independence and choose it as a realistic and desirable goal. Our revised definition of independence reads like this: “Freedom from control by or excessive dependence on another person, organization, or state.” Using this revised definition, we can say that independence is a good goal to have in mind as we raise our children. However, we must keep in mind that it is only when we meet children’s needs for security and supportive relationships that they will have the deeply-felt confidence needed to become truly “independent” adults.

Isn't it hard to know just how much dependence to allow?

Excessive dependence is another way of describing “neediness,” which arises only if we do *not* meet our babies’ and children’s needs. So as long as we meet their needs, we won’t have to worry about neediness or excessive dependence.

So they'll become independent on their own, without us having to teach them independence?

You can only teach children to “act” as though they are independent, you can’t teach true independence. Feelings of competence and independence develop naturally when we meet their needs and allow them to set their own pace as they take steps towards maturity. They’ll tell us when they’re ready to do something on their own and when they need us to be there for them. The South Fore trusted their children to do this, and they did.

In South Fore culture, individuality was appreciated and fully expressed, freedom of choice was respected and coercion was unheard of, yet they functioned smoothly and cooperatively as a group, cooperating together in an environment of caring and social harmony. In fact, the attunement and empathic responsiveness of adults with children and with other adults was so automatic and constant as to make words like “harmony,” “intuitive rapport” and “unity” seem weak and inadequate. The anthropologist who studied them still struggled, many years after publishing his initial observations, to find appropriate words with which to describe the reality of their lives and relationships. A phrase he eventually offered was “individualistic unified at-oneness,” which I believe is an excellent articulation of the South Fore reality, though some might object to the mystical-sounding language. To the mainstream American mind, the phrase is a contradiction in terms. Mainstream Americans have been raised in a culture that believes “independence” and “oneness with others” are mutually exclusive conditions. But the Fore showed us that they are not. As Sorenson said, “Moving about at will and being with whom they liked, even the very young enjoyed a striking personal freedom.” And, though free to choose, the Fore chose empathy and caring cooperativeness. In reality, this sharing, support and harmonious cooperativeness did not seem to require any thought or decision-making. Rather it seemed to be an automatic action, because their brains had been “wired” for attuned responsiveness and because they had had a lifetime of experiences in which adults and children immediately and empathetically responded to each other’s body language. For example, Sorenson observed that “even fleeting expressions of interest, desire and discomfort were quickly and

helpfully acted upon by one's associates. A spontaneous urge to share food, affection, work, trust and pleasure characterized the daily life."

But modern day society is very different from hunter-gatherer-gardening societies. Don't we need to adapt some of these methods to our industrialized society?

Of course. The *application* of the methods and principles of cultures like the South Fore's - and there are many like theirs - *should* vary from culture to culture and even from family to family. For example, I do not recommend letting modern American babies handle axes and machetes; American life does not prepare them to handle these tools safely. What's important is that *our methods be responsive to the needs and feelings of our babies*. Our choices should be based not on our own personal convenience, but on what our babies need, as the South Fore did.

How can we know what babies need? Sometimes they just want things.

If they just want YOU, your physical presence, your touch, your soothing words or playful interactions, you're dealing with an important need that you should do your best to meet. Babies don't need candy or every toy they see, but they do need security, affection, connectedness, attuned and loving interactions and the safe exploration of their physical and social worlds. If, from birth, they know that someone "has their back," they can confidently launch themselves into learning about the world and becoming competent in many areas. Otherwise, they'll likely be timid or "clingy." If, from birth, they've experienced relationships as being sources of positive feelings and events, they will be more likely to turn to people for good feelings and for support and assistance, and will be less likely to turn to alcohol, drugs, food, etc., for stress relief or good feelings. If, from birth, they are allowed to be individuals, to grow at their pace and make many choices for themselves, they will have the confidence, independence and "freedom from control" that we want for them. Otherwise, they will likely be easily persuaded to give in to others' wishes, demands or expectations.

Are any American parents using the attuned and responsive infant-rearing methods of the South Fore?

Yes. Many American parents have rejected the advice of behavioristic "experts" and have listened to their hearts, which tell them that letting a baby cry uncomforted is just plain *wrong*. Many of them have also informed themselves about relevant research findings and found support there for their goals and their responsive, loving methods.

Many American parents are:

- Refusing to leave their babies to cry alone and uncomforted
- Responding quickly and with sensitivity to their babies' signals and needs
- Holding their babies a lot and sometimes wearing them in slings or other soft carriers
- Refusing to leave their babies to cry themselves to sleep, but rather nursing them, rocking them, walking around with them, holding them or lying down with them till they fall asleep
- Giving their babies many opportunities to explore and develop skills in varied and safe environments

- Focusing on respecting their children's feelings, on meeting their needs and having healthy, nurturing relationships with them, as opposed to focusing on the controlling and managing of behavior (However, good relationships generally result in good, cooperative behavior)
- Getting help for breastfeeding concerns and problems so they can provide their babies with the best nutrition, significant protection against disease, and the security and physical and emotional closeness that breastfeeding naturally facilitates
- Weaning children from the breast gradually and compassionately, preferably when both child and mother are ready.
- Keeping babies within arm's reach at nighttime while they sleep, and allowing older children to sleep in the same bed with them or at least in the same room
- Using positive discipline methods that:
 - take into account the needs, wants and feelings underlying misbehavior
 - help children learn better strategies for meeting their needs
 - and
 - preserve the dignity of all involved.

For decades, parents have been sharing, in publications such as La Leche League International's monthly magazine, the results they've gotten by using these respectful, attuned, empathetic and responsive methods. No one has ever expressed regret for using these respectful, responsive and loving methods. However, many deeply regretted using callous behavioristic methods with their first child or children. Parents who used loving and responsive methods with their children all expressed great joy at seeing the positive values and characteristics of their adult children and the responsive and empathetic methods they used as parents with their own children.

To conclude, our child-rearing methods must be congruent with our parenting goals, and our goals must be realistic. *Healthy* independence is a realistic goal. This exists when individuals feel free and able to make their own decisions and also feel free and able to *depend* on others for occasional assistance or support. This kind of independence is achieved most effectively through attuned, empathetic and responsive child-rearing methods that allow children to become adults that are secure, confident and competent and know how and when to turn to others for support and assistance. Attuned, empathetic, loving and responsive methods also facilitate the development of *caring* adults, who will *want* to allow others to turn to and depend on *them* for needed support and assistance. Caring, competent and independent adults will be *happier* than self-centered, insecure and needy adults, and so will their families.

Bibliography

Mead, M. (1963). *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*. New York, NY: Wm. Morrow.

Sorenson, E.R. (1976). *The edge of the forest*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.

Sorenson, E.R. (1978). Cooperation and freedom among the Fore of New Guinea. In A. Montagu (Ed.), *Learning Non-Aggression* (pp. 12-30). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Sorenson, E.R. (1996). Sensuality and Consciousness IV: Where Did the Liminal Flowers Go?: The Study of Child Behavior and Development in Cultural Isolates. *Anthropology of Consciousness*. 7(4), 9-30.

Sorenson, E.R. (1997). Sensuality and Consciousness V: Emergence of the "Savage Savage": The Study of Child Behavior and Human Development in Cultural Isolates. *Anthropology of Consciousness*. 8(1), 1-9.

Sunderland, M. (2008). *The science of parenting*. New York, NY: DK Publishing.