

TEACHER'S CORNER: BABIES IN TWO CULTURES

The Teacher's Corner features a unit from Generations: A Study Guide, written by Priscilla Rachun Linn. This self-contained study guide (for ninth and tenth grades), with readings and activities, was produced in conjunction with "Generations," a Smithsonian exhibition that looks at the rituals of birth and the enculturation of children the world over. The exhibition inaugurates the Smithsonian's International Gallery in the new Quadrangle Building on the National Mall and will run until March 31, 1988.

Generations: The Study Guide contains three units: childcare and socialization, health, and family aspirations for a child's future. Selections from the guide's unit on childcare and socialization are reproduced here. Anyone interested in obtaining a free copy of the guide can write to: Evelyn Reese, OESE, A & I 1153, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560. The exhibition catalog, Generations: A Universal Family Album, edited by A. R. Cohn and L. A. Leach, contains photographs and essays and is published by Pantheon Books and SITES, 1987, (\$18.95 paper).

Reading I: Introduction

In 1950, American anthropologist Laurence Wylie, with his wife and children, aged three and five, went to live in the French village of Peyrane in southern France. Here people own small, prosperous farms, bathed in sun much of the year, and grow a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. Babies are much loved, but a mother with work in the fields may have to leave childcare to another family member or someone in the village. Wylie did not realize before he left for France that the way he had brought up his children in America would come under so much criticism.

As you read the following passage,

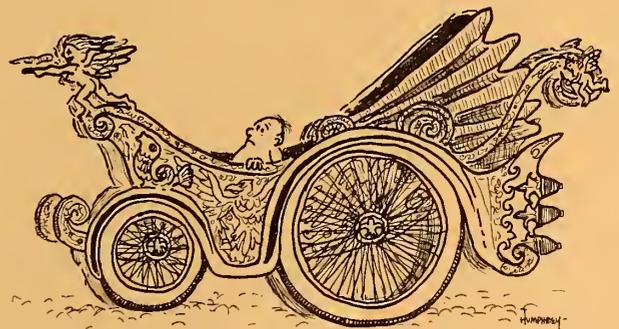
as they grow older--from being indulged and "shown" off by their families to becoming cooperative and obedient children.

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"Time for Babies in Peyrane"
[pronounced Pay - Ran]

For the babies of Peyrane, no attempt is made to adhere rigorously to a schedule. Generally they eat and sleep when they like. If they cry, they are cleaned and offered food. If they continue to cry [when surrounded by a group of people]...then someone tries to pacify them by cuddling them. They may be picked up, held, walked to the accompaniment of singing, or cradled...kissed, and talked to constantly.

At home the babies are left to themselves as much as possible except when...being shown off to guests. Their mothers are too busy to pay much attention to them unless...they have a



valid reason for demanding care. When babies are taken out in their carriages ...they are on parade. No matter what may be the dimensions of the family purse, every effort is made to acquire an elegant carriage which will do honor to the family when the baby is pushed through the village.

The villagers greet babies with great shows of affection and cordiality. Infants are taken from their carriages, kissed and cuddled, passed from lap to lap. People poke them gently on the chin or in the stomach and make soft, hissing noises. They tell them in baby talk how beautiful and healthy they are. They jiggle them on their knees or in their arms. The people of Peyrane love babies.

[A mother who works in the field must] find someone to care for the child while she is away. Usually a grandmother or an older sister...will assume this responsibility. Normally the father is not expected to help much in the care of children, even when he is not working. He obviously loves his children and exhibits tenderness for them openly, but it is not his responsibility to care for them. Only in unusual circumstances will he be asked to keep half an eye on his children. However, when a child is old enough to walk, his father may be willing to take him to the cafe to show him off to friends. Here the father is not sharing responsibility for his child, [but] instead displaying feelings of pride...and a sense of companionship.

No matter who cares for a child in Peyrane, the treatment received is sure to be tender and indulgent even by brothers and sisters. Discipline of tiny babies is gentle and usually consists of a scolding delivered with mock harshness in baby talk. Caring for a baby is considered a pleasure rather than a chore by everyone, except the mother on whose shoulders rests the basic responsibility.

Even though children are indulged as babies, one lesson they learn at an early age is that fatigue and physical discomforts are not excuses for failing to accomplish what is expected of them. As soon as children are able to walk steadily, they are expected to walk at all times and never be carried. If a child capable of walking is seen being carried by a parent, people look at him or her with surprise and concern. They assume the child must be hurt or sick.

When we went for a walk and our three-year old boy complained of being tired, I usually picked him up and carried him on my shoulders. If, upon inquiry, people learned that he was not physically disabled, they smiled indulgently and said, "So the little fellow wants to be spoiled!" When I defensively explained that he was simply tired, because I did not like to admit that I spoiled my children, the response was a skeptical "Ah?" Then, so as not to hurt my feelings, "Well, he will soon get used to walking around these hills."

By the time children are four years old, they are no longer infants treated indulgently by everyone. The transformation is gradual and apparently rather painless. As tiny infants children are expected to have no control over themselves. As soon as they seem able to understand what their parents are saying to them, they are expected to try to do what is asked of them. Parents are patient and tolerant. If children show that they are trying to learn and cooperate, they will be encouraged and not punished. Once children have achieved control over one aspect of their behavior, however, they are no longer indulged in that respect.

Older children accept a new child who comes into the family. They no longer insist on being the center of everyone's attention but join with others in the family in caring for and indulging their younger sister or brother. The basic training has been accomplished.

Edited from Village in the Vaucluse by
Laurence Wylie (Harvard University
Press, 1961).

Questions

1. In Peyrane, how does the attention a crying baby receives at home with a busy mother compare with the attention he or she will get from villagers when taken out in a carriage? Why do parents in Peyrane make sure that they have fancy carriages for their baby?
2. What is the main difference between the duties of the father as the parent of a small child and those of the mother?
3. Why do you think that anthropologist Laurence Wylie did not want the people of Peyrane to believe he spoiled his children? Why did the villagers think his son was being spoiled? Do you agree with the villagers?

Reading II: Introduction

Some people might predict that the great amount of attention showered on the babies of an island village called Lesu would result in spoiled and self-centered children. Not so, said Hortense Powdermake who in 1933 was the first woman to live alone as an ethnologist in that part of the South Seas known as Melanesia. On the island of New Ireland where Lesu is located, men spent time fishing and repairing gardens and houses while women tended the gardens of taro, a staple food in their diet. Even though chores had to be done, babies captured the love and affection of the whole community.

Before you read the following passage, find on a map the island of New Ireland, where Lesu is situated. What are the island's climate and possible sources of food and shelter? Consider what it is about Lesu that makes it relatively easy for adults to devote so much of their time to babies.

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"The Babies of Lesu"
[pronounced Lay-soo]

During the first two weeks of a infant's life in Lesu, the mother's work in the garden usually is done by her mother and mother's sister if they are not too old, or by a grown-up daughter if she has one. Babies may be born, live, or die, but work in the gardens must go on all the time.

Two weeks after giving birth the mother...resumes her work in the garden, nursing the child before she goes and immediately upon return. The infant's maternal grandmother stays at home to look after the newborn.

According to the people of Lesu, babies must be tended adequately. A mother who does not come and nurse her crying infant, if she is within hearing distance, is most unusual.

The young infant is an object of deep affection, not only to [family members] but...[to] all members of the clan and of the small village. During the first few months, maternal grandmothers look after infants exclusively while mothers are away in the gardens. ...As soon as children are able to toddle about a bit their care is divided among other members of the family [most frequently the father]. A man plays with his child for hours at a time, talking pure foolishness to the baby. One father, holding an infant who could not yet walk, was telling the baby that by and by she would dance well, go into the bush, and eat fruit from the trees. These references to the infant's future were made laughingly and affectionately.

The whole village regards the youngest infant as their pet and plaything. Whenever a group of people get together...the child is tossed about from one to another, patted, jumped up and down, and kissed. Or the group may croon one of the dance songs,

for lullabies are the songs that accompany ritual dances. The music and words are handed down from generation to generation, and infants hear them from [all family members].

Although infants are fussed over by the whole community, they are remarkably unspoiled. A child cries when hungry and wants to nurse, but most of the time babies are smiling and cheerful, apparently thoroughly enjoying the fuss being made over them.

When I arrived in Lesu, the youngest infant was six months old... [and] was the center of interest in the community. Every new gesture was reported and commented on. When the baby recognized me for the first time, it was news to the community. Before I left she was just beginning to walk, and this was an event of great importance and much discussed. She had not yet started to talk but was beginning to make a few sounds, which the fond parents (like many parents the world over) insisted were intelligible words. It was reported that she spoke my name, although I never heard her utter anything even faintly resembling it.

Edited from Life in Lesu: The Study of a Melanesian Society in New Ireland by Hortense Powdermaker (reprinted in 1971. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc.)

Questions

1. Who in Lesu takes care of newborns after mothers return to their work in the gardens? Once babies begin to walk, who takes care of them?
2. Describe at least three different ways adults in Lesu entertain babies.
3. How does Hortense Powdermaker reveal that she does not seem as excited about young babies as the people of Lesu?

Childcare Interview Activity

[See the Study Guide for the more expanded version.]* You may wish to interview your parent or other relative, a neighbor, or a family friend to learn about your own culture's childcare practices.

Some recommended interview questions:

1. Who took care of your baby from birth to one year of age? What most influenced your childcare arrangements?
2. What rôle did the father play in caring for the infant?
3. Who played with your baby? How did you or others entertain your baby? What do you think your baby learned from being entertained (eg. parts of the body, household objects)?
4. Who was responsible for disciplining your baby, and what was considered appropriate punishment?
5. What do you think it means to spoil a child and do you think your baby was spoiled?
6. Based upon your interview, how do you think childrearing practices in the United States have changed from a generation or more ago?

*For information about interviewing techniques and further activities involving family folklore, write to Anthro.Notes at address on back page.

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"Generations" exhibition