

Herbert Renz-Polster

Understanding Children

Born to be wild – Child development and parenting from an evolutionary perspective

[Kinder verstehen]

Kösel, 512 pages

8th edition, 2016

Outline



Inspired by nature – how evolution can help us truly understand our children

Raising children is more confusing than ever. Psychology has offered ample advice to beleaguered parents, yet the theories are conflicting, at best.

This popular parenting book uses a novel approach to explain childhood development – the science of evolutionary biology.

Children follow a time honoured path in their development – a path that has evolved and been honed by tens of thousands of years of evolutionary history. This heritage still guides their behaviours as they grow up in the modern world. Parents who understand this natural heritage will be able to fulfil their child's deepest needs, taking parenting beyond the latest trends.

Herbert Renz-Polster MD, PhD is a paediatrician and research scientist at the Mannheim Institute for Public Health, University of Heidelberg, who has trained both in Europe and in the USA. He is an editor and author of several popular parent advice books on child development and child health, including *Menschenkinder* (2011), *Wie Kinder heute wachsen* (2013), *Schlaf gut, Baby!* (2016)



By re-telling the story of our children from an anthropological perspective the book represents not just another guide book for parents – it provides a new paradigm for parenting.

A continuing bestseller

Kinder verstehen is a popular science book with a practical bent. Its main target group are parents and educators. Being referenced and scientifically researched, it also appeals to experts in child development such as paediatricians, psychologists and counsellors.

As of 2017, the German Publisher has sold more than 100,000 copies of *Kinder verstehen*. The book is one of the all-time bestsellers in the parenting advice literature in Germany.

Translation rights sold to: China (Questruth Press), Poland (Harbor Point), Russia (Resourse)

A brief summary

Children frequently behave in unexpected, “irrational” ways: babies cry for “no reason”, they have colics for weeks and they stubbornly refuse to fall asleep on their own. Toddlers won’t eat their greens, but sweets they can find. They won’t sleep through the night but tire as soon as asked to tidy their room. They throw temper tantrums out of the blue and take endless time to be toilet trained.

It has become accepted to view all this as a *deficiency*: children are *not yet* capable of making themselves understood. Their small bladders are still “immature”. Their brains are still a work in progress. Or they use their behaviours to stage conflicts--with themselves, with mom or with their Super-Ego. Or they are simply “spoiled”.

This book starts with a different assumption. Instead of trying to identify what a child *lacks* it unveils the *advantages* of each difficult behaviour. Why is it advantageous for a child to be the way it is, rather than the way we think it should be? In a practical vein: what benefit does a child get from NOT eating its greens? What benefit does it have from insisting on NOT sleeping alone? Which prize lurks behind a temper tantrum, what advantage does it get from crying when put to sleep alone? In short, this book assumes that children have good reasons to puzzle their parents!

Table of contents

Chapter 1	How children become good eaters
Chapter 2	Breastfeeding – the most natural business?
Chapter 3	Introducing solids, nature’s way...
Chapter 4	How children become good sleepers
Chapter 5	The co-sleeping controversy
Chapter 6	Crying – part of growing up?
Chapter 7	Temper tantrums – worth the effort?
Chapter 8	Nature’s view on toilet training
Chapter 9	Can you spoil a child? Evolution’s take on self-reliance
Chapter 10	A new view of attachment
Chapter 11	Learning from other cultures?
Chapter 18	Natural parenting?

Outline



Chapter 1: How children become good eaters

Parents agree on one thing: When it comes to eating, children are completely unreasonable. They prefer unhealthy food--from chocolate bars to French fries. And they do everything to keep their spaghettis from getting contaminated by veggies...

From the viewpoint of evolution this behaviour asks for an explanation. Food was certainly not abundant during 99% of human history. So shouldn't children eat whatever comes close to their mouth?

This chapter gives a clear answer: No! The strange eating behaviours of our children are inspired by nature. But what's behind it? Why do little kids dislike broccoli? How do taste preferences develop in childhood? Why do South American indigenous kids love fried spiders and grubs whereas Bavarian kids prefer white sausage and dumplings? And how do they finally realize that the veggies won't kill them--but may actually be quite tasty?

Chapter 2: Breast feeding--the most natural business?

A German who has eaten a lot may state he is „papp-satt“--filled as if he had eaten Pap. The word “pap” denotes a gruel that has been used widely since the middle ages as a supplemental food for

babies. In some regions of middle and northern Europe “Pap” used to be fed to infants even within the first few weeks of life.

When it comes to infant food--is it natural to cut corners like this? Isn't breast milk the only infant food endorsed by nature? But why then should mother's milk contain the enzyme amylase, which is responsible for the digestion of *starch*--certainly not a component of any mammals milk? And how comes breast-feeding is so prone to failure--shouldn't a life-saving process work automatically, or at least, intuitively?

A longer section will be devoted to a shattering event in the feeding career of any mammal--weaning. Is there a “right” moment for the withdrawal of the breast? Does weaning have to be a tearful event for the baby--or is there a way to make it a smooth, self-initiated transition?

Chapter 3: Introducing solids, nature's way...

Many a mother picking up her three month old baby to breastfeed starts to feel the glances of her in-laws: isn't it about time to give that poor creature something REAL to eat? Unfortunately science isn't really strengthening mothers' position either. The American Academy of Paediatrics does make a point that the right time for supplementing is at 6 months of age. However it adds a mushy disclaimer: “Unique needs or feeding behaviours of individual infants may indicate a need for introduction of complementary foods as early as 4 months of age, whereas other infants may not be ready to accept other foods until approximately 8 months of age.”

What exactly is going on? Can evolutionary biology offer some clearer guidance? What is nature's take on supplementary feeding?

Chapter 4: How children become good sleepers

Life with children may be paradise during daytime, but as soon as night approaches, the family trek is headed to the valley of tears... Now is the time for human drama, now is the time for parents to doubt their abilities, and now is the time to fight with a partner over the best way to teach that child how to fall asleep...

Is sleep a matter of LEARNING? Shouldn't kids be able, from the beginning, to find that button to close their eyes and drift off to slumber land?

It is striking that sleep problems run rampant mainly in western cultures. Have parents here and today become more demanding because for them a sleeping child offers nothing less than the key to the pursuit of happiness? After all, parents do want to lead some private lives apart from diaper changes and lullabies! Or have they just forgotten the ancient secrets of how to put a child to sleep? Or is the baby's night time protest directed against one of the core furnishings of modern living arrangements: the baby's own crib?

Chapter 5: The co-sleeping controversy

Different as human cultures around the globe appear--they do agree on one thing: small children belong close to their parents at night time. With ONE exception: the modern western world, which assumes that babies should sleep in their own cribs, if not in their own rooms. How else should they learn to be independent and self-reliant? And how else could they be safe in the first place? Is co-sleeping a health hazard? A developmental hazard? Or both? Or none of it?

Chapter 6: Crying – part of growing up?

When a baby cries listeners receive virtual electric shocks: women more than men, parents more than childless adults--not to mention the parents of the crying child who receive the full dose... There is a good reason why a crying baby touches our heart: the signal is important for his or her survival. No wonder that the shock receiver starts to take care of things and sets out to investigate: is the baby safe? Is it hungry? Is it hurt? Is it frightened?

There begins the quarrel: could he or she just cry like that? Let's say because he is bored or because she just wants to "act out" or play a scene? And if we respond to THAT--wouldn't this teach her the wrong lesson, i.e., that by crying she will eventually get every little thing she wants?

Cats or hamsters don't have that problem. Babies growing up in dens or nests only cry when they sense their mother nearby--the danger of being detected by predators would just not be worth it. Nature seems to factor in the costs when it comes to crying. Could a glance at the evolutionary balance sheet help in the human case to understand our crying offspring better?

Chapter 7: Temper tantrums – worth the effort?

There comes a time when distractions no longer works („look over there, what a lovely birdie!“). The fight is now fought to the last teardrop. The terrible twos--which may well include the threes or even the fours--keep many parents breathless and make them ask: what the heck is going on here?

Temper tantrums are observed in all cultures and around the globe they start at about the same age. Apes also throw temper tantrums, and they do not look much different in chimpanzees than they do in humans. The readiness to oppose seems to be a developmental constant.

But then again: why do the sweet children suddenly throw themselves into the ring and fight their parents? Shouldn't they know that charm works better on parents than anger? But does it?

Chapter 8: Nature's view on toilet training

Over the last 30 years the chapters in parenting books devoted to toilet training have shrunk considerably. One reason is that washing machines and disposable diapers have taken some urgency from the topic. But it was mainly psychology that ushered in a new era: had earlier psychologists equated sphincter control with self-control and therefore spoken out for rigorous, early training they now view the anus as what it is: the end of the intestines.

But let us not forget the medical profession: paediatricians have shown in large studies that early toilet training does not work. Children don't master their eliminations sooner if they are put on the potty earlier. The grass doesn't seem to grow faster if you pull at it ... so should we scratch toilet training from the parenting list altogether?

And what about the new trend in Europe--raising babies free of diapers? Indeed, even little babies don't just get rid of their eliminations, they sort of celebrate it with grimaces, movements and vocal signals – which enables parents around the world to pick that bundle from the back and hold it over a bush, for instance. As a matter of fact millions of women in traditional cultures carry their children on their backs all day long without getting soiled. No wonder that more and more parents in the western world ask about „intuitive potty training“ or „elimination communication“. Can baby's subtle signals be used to raise children without diapers even in the modern world?

Chapter 9: Can you spoil a child? Evolution's take on self-reliance

A spoiled child is "an unbearable creature", as Anna Wahlgren, a well-known European parenting expert puts it. The family counsellor Jesper Juul knows what lies behind the problem: spoiled children get "too much of what they like and too little of what they need".

But what exactly do they need? Couldn't some of their wishes be actual needs? And shouldn't kids by nature request more than they eventually receive? So how should parents gauge their attention? What amount of indulgence is the right amount?

Evolution answers this with a riddle: throughout human history babies had to rely on receiving a very high dose of indulgence: OF COURSE they slept with mom, OF COURSE they were carried close to the body, OF COURSE they were breastfed on demand--and for a long time... All this was non-negotiable for a young homo sapiens who was meant to survive. Yet, at the same time, the kids had to learn to be self-reliant--fast and reliably so! So with all this bodily closeness and "spoiling" going on--how do children pursue the human goal of becoming independent?

Chapter 10: A new view of attachment

Parenting is not for the feeble: a mother or father bird has to shove an insect down the gaping throats of their young every minute or so. And human parents have to change 4000 diapers before the little creature makes his first appearance on the potty throne. How does nature motivate parents to sacrifice themselves?

The answer is attachment. Attachment is the secret force that makes parents forget their own priorities and start to care for their offspring. Unconditionnally.

Unconditionnally? Nature seems to have a different view. Swallow parents first serve the gaping beaks with the most intense orange coloration--the carotene in the mucous membranes is a marker for health and viability.

There seems to be fine print even with humans. The attachment between mother and child varies in depth and intensity, and sometimes it fails altogether. What is the reason? What ingredients are needed to make attachment work? A happy pregnancy? The maternal hormones? The magic first hour after birth? But why then can parents be attached deeply and reliably to adopted children?

Chapter 11: Learning from other cultures?

A glance around the globe can leave you puzzled. All kids have the same needs, whether they live in Madison or in Manila. And all parents want the best for their children. And yet parenting looks different wherever you look. Some parenting methods make us smile--like if an infant is renamed to give her more stamina. Other methods appear repulsive to us--like if parents rub ground bone powder from baboons into the lanced skin of newborns to make them as strong and resilient as a baboon. Again other traditions stir our heart and appear so right and „natural“ that we consider them a part of our happiness lost...

So what IS natural in parenting? Couldn't we just compare all approaches in different cultures to find a universal standard? The best method to raise well adjusted, happy children?

Chapter 12: Natural parenting?

No book title could have been a better fit: "In Search of Happiness Lost". When the young American adventurer Jean Liedloff reached the Amazon basin in the company of diamond prospectors she believed she had discovered paradise. In a bestselling book she gave a moving account of how indulgently the members of the South American Yequana tribe cared for their infants and toddlers.

Jean Liedloff couldn't have presented a more contrasting picture to the parents on the other side of the globe who at the time were busy sterilizing baby bottles and selecting baby furniture for baby's own room... The Indian infants were carried in slings, had free access to mother's breast, were nursed even as toddlers, had plenty of skin contact, slept close to their parents and were never ever alone. And if they cried at all they were responded to immediately. Was this a Rousseaunian flashback of a flower-power-kid? Or did Ms. Liedloff happen across a life style endorsed by nature--and if so, can it be transplanted into the modern world?