

# WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE CHILDBREARING PRACTICES OF AMERICAN INDIAN TRADITIONALISTS

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New research studies by child psychologists suggest that the child-rearing practices of ancient hunter-gatherers promoted better child development than our typical parenting practices today. Considering that 99% of our history as a species was spent in hunter-gatherer bands, it is not surprising that such groups would have had a very long time to figure out which practices produced the most well balanced young people.

Three new studies by Psychology Professor Darcia Narvaez of Notre Dame University show a strong relationship between childrearing and adult mental health. She reports "Our research shows that the roots of moral functioning form early in life, in infancy, and depend on the affective quality of family and community support.... The way we raise our children today in this country is increasingly depriving them of the practices that lead to well being." [Citation: University of Notre Dame (2010, September 22). "Child rearing practices of distant ancestors foster morality, compassion in kids." *ScienceDaily*, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/09/100921163709.htm> Retrieved September 24, 2010, ]

Narvaez' report cites numerous research studies which show that both the physical health and the mental health of children in the United States is worse than it was fifty years ago. Anxiety and depression are more common, childhood obesity is rising, as is aggressive behavior and delinquency rates. "All of these issues are of concern to me as a researcher of moral development," Narvaez says. "Kids who don't get the emotional nurturing they need in early life tend to be more self-centered. They don't have available the compassion-related emotions to the same degree as kids who were raised by warm, responsive families."

The following are the main lessons that research shows about which childrearing practices are most likely to produce a child who has high levels of intelligence, compassion, empathy, good mental health, a relaxed unstressed attitude, and an unselfish cooperative nature. In all of these cases, the research shows that childrearing practices that were typically practiced by hunter-gatherer

societies are the most beneficial for child development. Ten of the most prominent factors are discussed below.

### 1. YOUNG CHILDREN ARE CONSTANTLY HELD AND TOUCHED

Hunter-gatherer bands are small, typically from about 20 to 100 people, depending on the amount of food resources that are available. Given their small number, hunter-gatherers cannot afford to waste anyone. Every single person must be utilized to their maximum benefit for the group. Effective childrearing is therefore extremely important for the long-range survival of the band. Those who are elderly depend entirely on the younger generation, now grown up, to support them in their old age. Hunter-gatherers invest quite a bit of time and energy in caring for children. A child is never left alone. Infants are constantly carried, passed around from one band member to another, cuddled with, and given much love and attention.

Today, in contrast, infants spend more time in a stroller, carrier, or carseat than they do being held. Holding a baby close to the heart has a soothing effect on the child, especially when the infant hears the regular beating of the heart. What is needed is lots of positive human touch. According to Narvaez, babies need prompt response to their fusses and cries. "You can't 'spoil' a baby. This means meeting a child's needs before they get upset and the brain is flooded with toxic chemicals. Warm, responsive caregiving like this keeps the infant's brain calm in the years it is forming its personality and response to the world." More than anything else, babies and young children in our society need to be held.

### 2. INFANTS SLEEP WITH OTHERS

Hunter-gatherers sleep together as a band, or in small groups. Seldom does any person sleep alone, and babies especially are never put into a separate place to sleep. Most often the baby sleeps with its mother or other relatives.

Recent studies show that babies sleep more soundly when there is noise and activity going on around them, than when they are left isolated in a dark separate room. Infants naturally fear isolation and silence, and those who spend much of their infancy like this grow up nervous and tense. Professor Narvaez cautions, "Ill advised practices and beliefs have become commonplace, such as the use of infant formula, the isolation of infants in their own rooms, or the belief that responding too quickly to a fussing baby will 'spoil' it."

### 3. CHILDREN ARE BREASTFED FOR SEVERAL YEARS

Hunter-gatherer mothers typically breastfeed their infant until the child is about five years old. Medical research shows that a child's immune system is not

fully formed until age six, and breast milk provides important building blocks for full development of an individual's immune system.

Today, in contrast, many infants are never breastfed at all in our society, but survive only on manufactured commercial infant formula. A recent U.S. study showed that, of those mothers who did breastfeed, only 15% breastfed their infant longer than one year. And breastfeeding beyond two years is almost unheard of in this society. This is a completely preventable tragedy, depriving infants who greatly need human milk, not animal milk or chemically-produced manufactured liquids. Babies should be breastfed for at least four years, and preferably until age six.

#### 4. CHILDREN ARE FED ONLY NATURAL FOODS

Since hunter-gatherers lived in nature, natural foods were the only sustenance available to them. Except for mother's breastmilk human beings drank only water, a substance to which the human body is totally adjusted. Water is the perfect drink for our species.

Today, manufactured soft drinks are a huge percentage of the liquids drunk by many children. These drinks typically have some form of sugar as their main ingredient. All too often, that ingredient is hidden in deceptive labeling which manufacturing companies fool parents into buying for their children. "Non-fat, healthy, natural, slimming" are only a few of the terms that are used vaguely but deceptively by corporations to sell processed foods. Soft drinks are the single biggest cause of childhood obesity, and many mood swings as well. The human body is not designed to process so much sugar. Coffee, tea, alcohol, and other manufactured products all too often are drunk, with sugar added, when thirst can be better met by water. Even fruit juices are best ingested by eating the fruit itself rather than squeezing the juice out of it.

Except for bands which lived in extremely cold climates, where plants could not grow, about 80% of the foods eaten by hunter-gatherers were wild plants. Foraging bands would travel around in the forests or through meadows, gathering a wide variety of edible leaves, nuts, fruits, and roots. Hunters killed a wide variety of animals to eat, from insects and shellfish, to birds, reptiles, and mammals. While hunter-gatherers did not know about the chemical makeup of foods, or about vitamins, they did know from direct experience that a more varied diet produces healthier children.

Today, the diet of many children is restricted mainly to a few plants, like wheat, rice, potatoes or corn. And these plants are prepared in unhealthy ways like deep frying. The ancient variety of eating is gone. Americans today consume more beef than any people in history, and this concentration of beef-eating is even less healthy because the cows themselves are fed an unnatural diet and are pumped full

of chemicals to prevent massive illness among the crowded herds of animals. The popular American kid's meal of a beef hamburger, French fries, and a soft drink could not be more consciously designed to destroy the health of a growing child. Add to that a typical breakfast cereal that is packed full of sugar, a steady supply of sugar-loaded soft drinks during the day, and processed snack foods like candy and deep-fried potato chips in the evening, add up to a toxic dose of overly processed and unhealthy foods. Balanced behavior is threatened when the brain is supplied by such an unbalanced diet.

## 5. THERE ARE SEVERAL ADULTS IN CLOSE ONGOING LOVING RELATIONSHIPS WITH A CHILD

Since hunter-gatherer bands are organized around kinship, this means that a child growing up has many relatives to associate with closely. Adults of reproductive age are often gone away from the band's camp, including both males and females, so childrearing is often done by elderly people who are too old and frail to go out into the wilderness in search of wild plants, birds eggs, shellfish, fish or meat. For example, among traditionalist American Indians, grandparents and great aunts and uncles are often the main childcare providers. Children thrive in close loving relationships with more than one or two adults.

Today, in contrast, because of geographical mobility extended families seldom live together. Children tend to grow up living their entire childhood with only one or two parents. Pundits often decry the single-parent household, but a two-parent household is not that much better. What is needed is for children to live with more adults. Ideally this could be grandparents or other relatives, but that is often not possible in contemporary society where parents and grandparents live so far apart. Therefore, what is needed is to create "fictive relatives" that is additional adults who will make a commitment to have a close ongoing relationship with a child to live with them within or close by to the parental household. Failing that, the child could live part of the time with a fictive kin. The more adults in close intimate relationships with a child, the better that child's psychological and mental development.

## 6. CHILDREN ARE GIVEN EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

Hunter-gatherers tend to be small groups that are in periodic contact with other neighboring groups, which often speak different languages. Hunter-gatherers tend to be multilingual. This is a great advantage to a child's mental development.

While formal education should not be forced on a child who is too young to grasp concepts, many studies show that pre-school gives a child a significant advantage over children who do not go to pre-school. Children should be given the maximum chance to learn new things as they experience life. The idea of "hiding

things from children because they are too young” is foolish and harmful. The best way for young children to learn is to see and do. What is particularly valuable for an infant is to be exposed to more than one language. Being bilingual from infancy promotes more mental development as the brain struggles to learn to communicate differently with different individuals. Infant brains are particularly susceptible to learning languages, and there is more flexibility than in later years. But a child who is bilingual is able to learn still other languages later on, more easily than a monolingual child. Monolingual parents who want to give their child a great benefit would do well to hire a childcare giver, domestic worker, or professional, just so long as they are in close association with the child on a daily basis, who will agree to speak their own native language exclusively with the child. Considering the reality of the world today, in which the two most widely spoken languages around the world are English and Spanish, these two languages will be the most valuable for a child of this era to know. Learning from a native speaker, not by formal training but by simple listening and responding on a daily basis, is the way babies learn their natal language, and this applies equally to a second or third language. Just in terms of numbers alone, the language that is spoken by more people than any other is Mandarin Chinese. It would be ideal for a baby to learn all three of these languages. The learning by each native speaker should be supplemented by recorded songs in that language which can be played over and over again, cartoon videotape shows in that language, and other easily repeated stimuli in that language.

## 7. INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN ARE NOT PHYSICALLY PUNISHED

Anthropologists who have observed hunter-gatherers have found spanking or other physical punishment of children to be virtually unheard of. Children are much loved, indulged, and treated permissively. If an adult gets tired of dealing with a child, they merely pass on the child to another person in the band. Because there are so many other people in close association with each child, a youngster is not frustrated with being left alone or unattended, and an adult is not frustrated by being stuck for long periods of time only with a needy child. There is much more intergenerational interaction on a daily basis.

While American Indian traditionalists did not commonly spank an infant or young child, they did discipline them. A common way to discipline a child who was uncooperative was simply to isolate them. Many Indian societies kept an infant wrapped securely in a wood-backed cradleboard. If the infant was crying without reason or acting out, the caregiver simply hung the cradleboard from a tree branch and then hid out of sight of the infant. As soon as the infant stopped crying, the adult reappeared and lavished praise on it for being quiet. It did not take many of these repeated incidents for an infant to associate crying with being isolated, and

being cooperative with adult love and attention. In dealing with an older child who acted selfishly or uncooperatively, the adult response was simply to stop talking to the child and deliberately ignore them. Consequently, children raised with such practices tended to be acutely aware of adult attitudes, and constantly striving for ongoing interaction and communication. Isolation was the great fear of a child raised like this. Physical punishment was not necessary.

Today in our society, spankings, slapping, and violent shaking of children is all too common. If an infant is shaken sharply, the fragility of a baby's neck can cause it to be broken or severed, resulting in paralysis or death. While our society makes much noise about the sexual abuse of children, a much more common danger for children in our society is physical abuse. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" is an old belief that is transferred from one abusive generation to the next. Parents who are responsible for a child by themselves can become frustrated and take out their frustrations on the child. This is not likely to happen when there are other adults nearby. Either the parent is scolded for mistreating their child, or the child is shamed into obedience.

## 8. CHILDREN ARE ENCOURAGED TO PLAY AND HAVE FUN

When anthropologist George Devereux did intensive ethnographic study of the Mohave Indians in the 1930s, he found them to have exceptionally low levels of mental illnesses and neuroses. He sought to understand how Mohave culture promoted mental health and psychological balance. Adult Mohaves told him that the secret to a good life was based on having a happy childhood. Childhood was, they told him, the time of life to have fun. Adolescence was the time to learn, and adulthood was the time to work, to support both the elders and the next generation of children. The elder years were the time to relax and enjoy life, to take care of the young and teach them from their years of experience and the wisdom gained from living. Their emphasis on having fun was, according to Devereux, a major part of their lifestyle during all stages of life, but this was especially emphasized for children. [citation: George Devereux, *Mohave Ethnopsychiatry* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1969.)]

Narvaez's studies show that the amount of time during which American children are involved in free play with other children of various ages has decreased dramatically since 1970. Her studies show that children who do not play enough are more likely to have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other mental health issues.

The main reason for this drastic reduction in unsupervised play time is due to parents' fears that a child might be kidnapped by a stranger, raped or sexually assaulted. It is no wonder that American parents feel this way, since television programs feed an almost constant diet of fear about the awful things that can

happen to a child who is left unsupervised. Laws are passed with the name of a child who suffered such a terrible fate. Children are taught in school about “stranger danger.” But actually, according to sociologist Barry Glassner, Americans put most of their emphasis on fearing the wrong things. For example, in regard to common fears about children, Glassner compiled statistics which prove that a child is statistically much more likely to die or be injured in an automobile, or by an automobile hitting them, than by being raped or assaulted. A child is much more likely to drown in a swimming pool or die as a result of an accident than to be killed intentionally by a malicious person. Of those children who are killed or injured, the perpetrator is more likely to be their own parent than a stranger. More children are seriously injured by dog bites each year than in an attack by a stranger. [Citation: Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) ]

## 9. CHILDREN ARE NOT SEXUALLY REPRESSED

Hunter-gatherers stress above all keeping harmony within their band. Their very survival depends upon good relations between band members and a lack of discord, because they survive or starve depending on their level of cooperation. With such small numbers, they cannot afford to waste anyone, and only as a last resort would any person be exiled from the band. Therefore, hunter-gatherers tend to be easy-going in personality, and less likely to get upset over numerous things that might bother urban peoples. One reality they accept is that sexual desire is virtually universal among humans, and so they try to minimize conflict by accepting virtually any kind of sexual expression. Sex is not seen as something that should be restricted to a legal marriage, or restricted by the age or sex of one’s partner. Hunter-gatherers tend to see sex as spiritual, as a special gift from the spirit world that should be appreciated and fully engaged. Accordingly, they tend to have few rules restricting sex for children.

Among the Mohave, for example, George Devereux concluded that the main reason they exhibited such low levels of psychological neuroses was because they did not attempt to repress sexual play among children. Mohaves had an “easy” culture, he explained, providing “a rational, supportive, lenient and flexible upbringing” for children. This easygoing pattern of child rearing fit in with their carefree way of life and their acceptance of sex as spiritual. Devereux wrote: “Mohave sex-life is entirely untrammelled by social restraint.” But though heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual behavior was equally accepted and enjoyed in a lighthearted way, “Even the most casual coitus implied, by definition, also an involvement of the soul; body, cohabiting with body and soul with soul.... Many children cohabited with each other and even with adults long before puberty; the [nonsexual] latency period was conspicuous by its absence. Children were much

loved, brought up permissively, and looked after at once generously and lackadaisically.” [Ibid.]

Because sex was seen as fun, Mohave people severely condemned rape or any other imposition that was done against one’s will. But if anyone of any age wished to engage in sex willingly, it was not considered proper for others to interfere. A person’s sexual desire was considered to be a message from the spirit world, and no other person would dare to interfere with such a calling. Thus, each person had the freedom to engage in sex or not, depending solely on their own inclinations. Mohaves did not like anyone who pressured someone to have sex against their will, but neither did they see restriction on sex to be a proper function of society. Because they respected individual freedom so much, they allowed each person to make their own choices about sexual expression. With regard to children, sexual play was seen as an important element in growing up and learning adult roles. Children spent their prepubertal years exploring their environment with their age mates, playing, swimming, and indulging in sex. Because Mohave society placed such high value on showing kindness to children, the Mohave child grew up liking and trusting everyone. Devereux wrote, “This explains why the adult Mohave is so highly available, both sexually and for friendship.” [Ibid., pp. viii-xiii. For examples of other Native American cultures with similar freedom-loving attitudes toward sex, see Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).]

In sharp contrast, in American society today it is virtually taboo even to discuss sexuality among children. Sex of any sort, no matter how willingly engaged in by a youngster, is labeled as “molestation, abuse, exploitation” without question. Thousands of adults sit in prison cells today in the United States, due to conviction of sexual activity with a child, even when that activity was part of a longterm loving relationship. Even children are legally being labeled as a “sex offender” for life, due to their sexual involvement with another child who is younger. This is not the way that most human societies through most of human existence have operated.

The current hysteria over child sexuality in America is similar to another hysteria that occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when American public discourse was dominated by an intense fear of the bad effects of masturbation among children. Without a shred of medical evidence, such “authorities” as Dr. Sylvester Graham claimed that masturbation would result in blindness, insanity, and early death. Dr. Graham became quite rich selling a brown cracker (bearing his name, of course) that he claimed would cause children to lose the desire to masturbate. In the generation following him, John Kellogg made a fortune with his breakfast cereal designed from flakes of corn that he marketed to parents on the basis that it would



prevent masturbation. Few topics generated as much certainty among Americans of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as the belief that masturbation was harmful to health. Only years later were medical researchers brave enough to challenge this social certainty and demonstrate that not one of the claims about medical damage by masturbation was accurate. Not only has masturbation proved to be harmless, but recent medical studies have shown that on the contrary it produces good health. Medical surveys of elderly men show that those who engaged in regular ejaculation during adolescence have significantly fewer cases of prostate cancer and heart disease in their 60s and 70s, than those men who did not often ejaculate in their youth. It seems that when adolescent males do not regularly get rid of sperm through ejaculation, it coagulates in the testes and prostate, and turns cancerous in the later years of life. [Citation: James Whorton, "The Solitary Vice: The Superstition that Masturbation Could Cause Mental Illness," *Western Journal of Medicine* 175:1 (July 2001), pp.66-68; James Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp.38-131; S. Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet and Debility in Jacksonian America* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).]

Yet despite the weight of medical evidence today, the Roman Catholic Church and other religious groups still teach that masturbation is a mortal sin. By leading many children to feel that they will go to suffer in eternal hell after death, because they have masturbated, such churches have caused untold suffering and psychological stress among countless generations of youths. How much more psychologically balanced would children be if they were raised in a culture like the Mohave, in which sex is considered a moral good and a gift from the spirit world, to be appreciated and enjoyed.

## 10. CHILDREN'S INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND TEMPERAMENTS ARE RESPECTED

Among many Native American cultures, the main division between childhood and adulthood occurred at a puberty rite. Quite often a young person, with the spiritual assistance of a shaman, would retreat to an isolated area and pray for spiritual guidance. When they emerged from this vision quest, what they told their relatives and village was considered to be the direct voice of the spirits. While an outsider might look at such a practice as merely the expression of the young person's own will, the strong conviction among indigenous people was that this was the voice of the spirit itself. The young person made a statement about their

vision for what they should do in their future life, and because this was considered so sacred no other person would dare to interfere with a direct instruction by the spirits. Thus, by this mechanism each person's individuality was respected.

Today, children face so many pressures to conform, to fit in, to be normal. A child who is different in some way often feels shame or a sense of inferiority. Yet, evolutionary theory suggests that human variability is a major reason for our biological success as a species. If everyone were the same, that is if everyone were "normal," then that might well mean a smooth adaptation to our environment. However, one thing that geological history teaches us is that over the course of time the environment has changed quite drastically. The only certainty in life is that there is no certainty; change is inevitable. As new environments emerge, with different conditions the adaptation of most people may turn out to be disadvantageous. In the new changed circumstances, those who are "abnormal" could turn out to possess individual qualities that prove to be beneficial to the survival of the group. Thus, the species that produce the most variability will be the species that are most likely to survive. Human beings are remarkable for their high degree of individual differences, to a greater extent than most other species of mammals. This inclination toward difference has allowed us to expand and thrive in many different environments. There are not many species that can live both in the hottest tropical rainforests and the coldest windswept tundras near the poles. As a species we have expanded across the globe through a strategy of biological exuberance. Every generation of children results in differing personalities, inclinations, preferences, and orientations as they mature. Why are some people good at mathematical computations while others are more skilled at writing prose? Why are certain individuals inclined to be shy and protective, while others become excited by exploration and risk-taking? Why do some people engage in philosophical introspection while others want to do only physical exertion? Why do some people prefer to eat hardboiled eggs while others want only scrambled eggs? Why do some like coffee and some like tea? The answer to each of these questions is that, as a species, individual variation among *Homo sapiens* is developed to a high degree. It is how we have survived and prospered. Human differences are not a threat, but a benefit. Variation is the essence of us. Since hunter-gatherers recognized that reality, why can't we be equally intelligent?

THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE IS FROM:

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/09/100921163709.htm>

## Child Rearing Practices of Distant Ancestors Foster Morality, Compassion in Kids

ScienceDaily (Sep. 22, 2010) - Ever meet a kindergartener who seemed naturally compassionate and cared about others' feelings? Who was cooperative and didn't demand his own way? Chances are, his parents held, carried and cuddled him a lot; he most likely was breastfed; he probably routinely slept with his parents; and he likely was encouraged to play outdoors with other children, according to new research findings from the University of Notre Dame.

Three new studies led by Notre Dame Psychology Professor Darcia Narvaez show a relationship between child rearing practices common in foraging hunter-gatherer societies (how we humans have spent about 99 percent of our history) and better mental health, greater empathy and conscience development, and higher intelligence in children.

"Our research shows that the roots of moral functioning form early in life, in infancy, and depend on the affective quality of family and community support," says Narvaez, who specializes in the moral and character development of children.

The three studies include an observational study of the practices of parents of three-year-olds, a longitudinal study of how certain child rearing practices relate to child outcomes in a national child abuse prevention project, and a comparison study of parenting practices between mothers in the U.S. and China. The longitudinal study examined data from the research of another Notre Dame psychologist, John Borkowski, who specializes in the impact of child abuse and neglect on development.

The results of Narvaez' three studies as well as those from researchers around the world will be presented at a conference at Notre Dame in October titled "Human Nature and Early Experience: Addressing the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness."

"The way we raise our children today in this country is increasingly depriving them of the practices that lead to well being and a moral sense," she says.

Narvaez identifies six characteristics of child rearing that were common to our distant ancestors:

Lots of positive touch -- as in no spanking -- but nearly constant carrying, cuddling and holding;

Prompt response to baby's fusses and cries. You can't "spoil" a baby.

This means meeting a child's needs before they get upset and the brain is flooded with toxic chemicals. "Warm, responsive caregiving like this keeps the infant's brain calm in the years it is forming its personality and response to the world," Narvaez says.

Breastfeeding, ideally 2 to 5 years. A child's immune system isn't fully formed until age 6 and breast milk provides its building blocks.

Multiple adult caregivers -- people beyond mom and dad who also love the child.

Free play with multi-age playmates. Studies show that kids who don't play enough are more likely to have ADHD and other mental health issues. Natural childbirth, which provides mothers with the hormone boosts that give the energy to care for a newborn.

The U.S. has been on a downward trajectory on all of these care characteristics, according to Narvaez. Instead of being held, infants spend much more time in carriers, car seats and strollers than they did in the past. Only about 15 percent of mothers are breastfeeding at all by 12 months, extended families are broken up, and free play allowed by parents has decreased dramatically since 1970.

"Ill advised practices and beliefs have become commonplace, such as the use of infant formula, the isolation of infants in their own rooms, or the belief that responding too quickly to a fussing baby will 'spoil' it," Narvaez says.

Whether the corollary to these modern practices or the result of other forces, research shows the health and well being of American children is worse than it was 50 years ago: there's an epidemic of anxiety and depression among the young; aggressive behavior and delinquency rates in young children are rising; and empathy, the backbone of compassionate, moral behavior, has been shown to be decreasing among college students.

"All of these issues are of concern to me as a researcher of moral development," Narvaez says. "Kids who don't get the emotional nurturing they need in early life tend to be more self-centered. They don't have available the compassion-related emotions to the same degree as kids who were raised by warm, responsive families."

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University of Notre Dame (2010, September 22). Child rearing practices of distant ancestors foster morality, compassion in kids. ScienceDaily.

Retrieved September 24, 2010, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/09/100921163709.htm>