

Justice for Children Leads to Societal Wellbeing

Evolved Nest Position Paper

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Contact: EvolvedNestInitiative@gmail.com



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Child mental and physical wellbeing have been on the decline for over 50 years in the USA, the wealthiest nation on earth. People under the age of 60 score at or near the bottom on multiple health indicators than citizens in 16 other advanced nations.[1] The USA has heightening epidemics of depression, anxiety, psychosocial and health problems at all ages.[2] Because humans are holistic creatures, attachment, sociality and moral capacities have also been declining (e.g., empathy, moral reasoning).[3] Avoidant attachment has been increasing along with narcissism, both of which undermine social and citizenship capacities.[4] **Sociopathy has become a cultural phenomenon.**[5]

Although there are likely multiple causes, we can surely point to one basic cause with converging evidence from across the human sciences. Early life toxic stress.[6] Recent research is tempering views that deficits from poor early care can be easily outgrown; many cannot be.[7] In fact, an increasing amount of converging evidence across animal, human psychological, neurobiological and anthropological research demonstrates the later vulnerability of brain and body systems among those with poor early care.[8]

What is needed for healthy child development? The Evolved Nest.

Converging research is demonstrating that human development is biosocial: healthy bodies, brains and sociality are formed from early experience provided by family and community. Every animal has an **evolved nest** (evolved developmental niche; EDN) for its young that forms part of an extra-genetic inheritance corresponding to the needs and maturational pace of offspring.[9] Humans evolved to have the most helpless newborns and the longest maturational schedule of any animal.[10] Human child-raising practices, rooted in social mammalian parenting over 30 million years old, evolved to accommodate these factors and were practiced for over 99% of human genus existence and still are in some indigenous cultures.[11] The evolved nest in early life includes soothing perinatal experiences, extensive breastfeeding and positive touch, free play with multi-aged peers and nature connection. Human variations observed among hunter-gatherer societies also include positive social support for the mother-child dyad and multiple responsive adult caregivers.[12] All these caregiving practices are correlated with health outcomes, but also with social and moral development.[13]

Justice for Children, Societal Wellbeing

Our concern for young children and their caregivers is rooted in our concern for justice. To *not* receive the Evolved Developmental Niche (EDN), Evolved Nest, in early life can be perceived as an injustice to a child, with serious ramifications for the child's future. **If brain and body system thresholds are established suboptimally in early years—not by trauma, but simply by not providing care that children evolved to need, then children may not reach their potential or become cognitively and socially underdeveloped.** For example, children who do not receive supportive parenting early are less likely to behave prosocially.[14] They are more likely to be self-centered and uncooperative.[15] While such children may sometimes function well enough as adults, holding down jobs and raising families, we are interested in caregiving environments that foster optimal development. Specifically, we are interested in the development of proactive

concern for others—an orientation that includes a sense of social responsibility, global citizenship and prioritizing care for others, including the natural world.

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