

The Wisdom of Hunter-Gatherers

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For hundreds of thousands of years, up until the time when agriculture was invented (a mere 10,000 years ago), we were all hunter-gatherers. Our human instincts, including all of the instinctive means by which we learn, came about in the context of that way of life. And so it is natural that in this series on children's instinctive ways of educating themselves I should ask: *How do hunter-gatherer children learn what they need to know to become effective adults within their culture?*

In the last half of the 20th century, anthropologists located and observed many groups of people—in remote parts Africa, Asia, Australia, New Guinea, South America, and elsewhere—who had maintained a hunting-and-gathering life, almost unaffected by modern ways. Although each group studied had its own language and other cultural traditions, the various groups were found to be similar in many basic ways, which allows us to speak of “the hunter-gatherer way of life” in the singular. Wherever they were found, hunter-gatherers lived in small nomadic bands (of about 25 to 50 people per band), made decisions democratically, had ethical systems that centered on egalitarian values and sharing, and had rich cultural traditions that included music, art, games, dances, and time-honored stories.

To supplement what we could find in the anthropological literature, several years ago Jonathan Ogas (then a graduate student) and I contacted a number of anthropologists who had lived among hunter-gatherers and asked them to respond to a written questionnaire about their observations of children's lives. Nine such scholars kindly responded to our questionnaire. Among them, they had studied six different hunter-gatherer cultures—three in Africa, one in Malaysia, one in the Philippines, and one in New Guinea.

What I learned from my reading and our questionnaire was startling for its consistency from culture. Here I will summarize four conclusions, which I think are most relevant to the issue of [self-education](#). Because I would like you to picture these practices as occurring now, I will use the present tense in describing them, even though the practices and the cultures themselves have been largely destroyed in recent years by intrusions from the more “developed” world around them.

1. Hunter-gatherer children must learn an enormous amount to become successful adults.

It would be a mistake to think that education is not a big issue for hunter-gatherers because they don't have to learn much. In fact, they have to learn an enormous amount.

To become effective hunters, boys must learn the habits of the two or three hundred different species of mammals and birds that the band hunts; must know how to track such game using the slightest clues; must be able to craft perfectly the tools of hunting, such as bows and arrows, blowguns and darts, snares or nets; and must be extraordinarily skilled at using those tools.

To become effective gatherers, girls must learn which of the countless varieties of roots, tubers, nuts, seeds, fruits, and greens in their area are edible and nutritious, when and where to find them, how to dig them (in the case of roots and tubers), how to extract the edible portions efficiently (in the case of grains, nuts, and certain plant fibers), and in some cases how to process them to make them edible or increase their nutritional value. These abilities include physical skills, honed by years of practice, as well as the capacity to remember, use, add to, and modify an enormous store of culturally shared verbal knowledge about the food materials.

In addition, hunter-gatherer children must learn how to navigate their huge foraging territory, build huts, make fires, cook, fend off predators, predict weather changes, treat wounds and diseases, assist births, care for infants, maintain harmony within their group, negotiate with neighboring groups, tell stories, make music, and engage in various dances and rituals of their culture. Since there is little specialization beyond that of men as hunters and women as gatherers, each person must acquire a large fraction of

the total knowledge and skills of the culture.

2. The children learn all this without being taught.

Although hunter-gatherer children must learn an enormous amount, hunter-gatherers have nothing like school. Adults do not establish a curriculum, or attempt to motivate children to learn, or give lessons, or monitor children's progress. When asked how children learn what they need to know, hunter-gatherer adults invariably answer with words that mean essentially: "They teach themselves through their observations, play, and exploration." Occasionally an adult might offer a word of advice or demonstrate how to do something better, such as how to shape an arrowhead, but such help is given only when the child clearly desires it. Adults do not initiate, direct, or interfere with children's activities. Adults do not show any evidence of worry about their children's education; millennia of experience have proven to them that children are experts at educating themselves.[1]

3. The children are afforded enormous amounts of time to play and explore.

In response to our question about how much time children had for play, the anthropologists we surveyed were unanimous in indicating that the hunter-gatherer children they observed were free to play most if not all of the day, every day. Typical responses are the following:

- "[Batek] children were free to play nearly all the time; no one expected children to do serious work until they were in their late teens." (Karen Endicott.)
- "Both girls and boys [among the Nharo] had almost all day every day free to play." (Alan Barnard.)
- "[Efé] boys were free to play nearly all the time until age 15-17; for girls most of the day, in between a few errands and some babysitting, was spent in play." (Robert Bailey.)
- "[!Kung] children played from dawn to dusk. " (Nancy Howell.)

The freedom that hunter-gatherer children enjoy to pursue their own interests comes partly from the adults' [understanding](#) that such pursuits are the surest path to education. It also comes from the

general spirit of egalitarianism and personal autonomy that pervades hunter-gatherer cultures and applies as much to children as to adults [2]. Hunter-gatherer adults view children as complete individuals, with rights comparable to those of adults. Their assumption is that children will, of their own accord, begin contributing to the economy of the band when they are developmentally ready to do so. There is no need to make children or anyone else do what they don't want to do. It is remarkable to think that our instincts to learn and to contribute to the community evolved in a world in which our instincts were trusted!

4. Children observe adults' activities and incorporate those activities into their play.

Hunter-gatherer children are never isolated from adult activities. They observe directly all that occurs in camp—the preparations to move, the building of huts, the making and mending of tools and other artifacts, the food preparation and cooking, the nursing and care of infants, the precautions taken against predators and diseases, the [gossip](#) and discussions, the arguments and [politics](#), the dances and festivities. They sometimes accompany adults on food gathering trips, and by age 10 or so boys sometimes accompany men on hunting trips.

The children not only observe all of these activities, but they also incorporate them into their play, and through that play they become skilled at the activities. As they grow older, their play turns gradually into the real thing. There is no sharp division between playful participation and real participation in the valued activities of the group.

For example boys who one day are playfully hunting butterflies with their little bows and arrows are, on a later day, playfully hunting small mammals and bringing some of them home to eat, and on yet a later day are joining men on real hunting trips, still in the spirit of play. As another example, both boys and girls commonly build play huts, modeled after the real huts that their [parents](#) build. In her response to our questionnaire, Nancy Howell pointed out that !Kung children commonly build a whole village of play huts a few hundred yards from the real village. The play village then becomes a playground where they act out many of the kinds of scenes that they observe among adults.

The respondents to our survey referred also to many other examples of valued adult activities that were emulated regularly by children in play. Digging up roots, fishing, [smoking](#) porcupines out of holes, cooking, caring for infants, climbing trees, building vine ladders, using knives and other tools, making tools, carrying heavy loads, building rafts, making fires, defending against attacks from predators, imitating animals (a means of identifying animals and learning their habits), making music, dancing, story telling, and arguing were all mentioned by one or more respondents. Because all this play occurs in an age-mixed [environment](#), the smaller children are constantly learning from the older ones.

Nobody has to tell or encourage the children to do all this. They do it naturally because, like children everywhere, there is nothing that they desire more than to grow up and to be like the successful adults that they see around them. The desire to grow up is a powerful motive that blends with the drives to play and explore and ensures that children, if given a chance, will practice endlessly the skills that they need to develop to become effective adults.

What relevance might these observations have for education in our culture?

Our culture, of course, is very different from hunter-gatherer cultures. You might well doubt that the lessons about education that we learn from hunter-gatherers can be applied effectively in our culture today. For starters, hunter-gatherers do not have reading, writing, or arithmetic; maybe the natural, self-motivated means of learning don't work for learning the three R's. In our culture, unlike in hunter-gatherer cultures, there are countless different ways of making a living, countless different sets of skills and knowledge that children might acquire, and it is impossible for children in their daily lives to observe all those adult skills directly. In our culture, unlike in hunter-gatherer cultures, children are largely segregated from the adult work world, which reduces their opportunities to see what adults do and incorporate those activities into their play.

See new book, [Free to Learn](#).

References

[1] See, for example, Y. Gosso et al. (2005), "Play in hunter-gatherer societies." In A. D. Pellegrini & P. K. Smith (Eds.), *The nature of play: great apes and humans*. New York: Guilford.

[2] See, for example, S. Kent (1996), "Cultural diversity among African foragers: causes and implications." In S. Kent (Ed.), *Cultural diversity among twentieth-century foragers: an African perspective*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.