

Parenting in Different Cultures

Anthropologist Finds a World of Methods for Parenting Babies

by Paul Cody, Cornell News Service, January 22, 1998. Reprinted with permission.

"When Gusii mothers in southwestern Kenya were shown a videotape of middle-class American mothers with their babies," said Meredith Small, an associate professor of anthropology at Cornell, "the Gusii mothers were shocked."

Why did that American mother on the tape ignore her baby's cries? Gusii mothers asked. Why do American babies sleep alone in small beds with bars, in their own rooms?

And if American mothers saw a newborn Gusii baby cared for by a 6-year-old sibling, they might be equally shocked.

"Cultural ideology, tradition and personal experience, rather than what is best for babies, often drives parenting," Small said.

In her new book, *Our Babies, Ourselves*, published by Anchor Books/Doubleday in April, Small takes a fresh and lively view of how different cultures do that old human thing—raise babies.

"Parents readily accept their society's prevailing ideology on how babies should be treated," wrote Small in the cover story of the October issue of *Natural History*, "usually because it makes sense in their environmental or social circumstances. In the United States, where individualism is valued, parents do not hold their babies as much as in other cultures, and they place them in rooms of their own to sleep. Japanese infants are held more often, not left to cry and sleep with their parents. Efe parents in the Congo believe even more in a communal life, and their infants are regularly nursed, held, comforted by any number of group members, not just parents."

Kung San parents in Botswana, in south-central Africa, respond to a crying or whimpering baby in 10 seconds on average. In the West, parents wait

60 seconds. "If you ask an Italian mother about her baby's eating," Small said, "she'll be able to tell you in great detail. But she won't know nearly so much about her child's sleep. In the United States, the opposite is very often true."

Small was trained as a primate behaviorist at the University of California at Davis and came to Cornell in 1988. She has won both the Russell Award and a Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellowship for excellence in teaching.

In addition to her scholarly work in the biological anthropology field, Small writes widely for such broader-appeal magazines as *American Scientist*, *Scientific American*, *Discover*, *The Scientist* and regularly for *Natural History*.

"We have a great deal to learn from other cultures about raising babies," Small said. "More and more studies seem to show that breast-feeding is good for mothers and babies—for immunologic reasons, for lower rates of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, even for lower rates of breast cancer. And some experts in the field say there is strong evidence to suggest that babies who sleep with adults do much better than those who do not. Babies are not designed to be by themselves."

"I always more or less assumed that the way we raised babies in this country was the best way," Small said, but research for her book opened her eyes.

So what's the best way to raise a baby?

In *Natural History*, Small writes, the only reasonable way to raise a child is in a "Kung-San-Gusii-Efe-American-Japanese-Australopithecine-chimpanzeemacaque way."