

The Roles of Children in Transitioning from Gatherer-Hunter to Agricultural Society

Tad Johnson

Few shifts in human evolution have had as dramatic an impact as the Neolithic Revolution. The human race owes the origins of civilization to the transition to agricultural societies. As such, it is natural that the event has been extensively studied. The switch from gatherer-hunters to agricultural farmers undoubtedly affected the population. Yet, little research has been done on how this affected the most impressionable demographic: children, responsible for carrying society from generation to generation. Many things can be inferred about a culture based solely on their children. So how did the Neolithic Revolution change and shape the lives of children? Although the transition to agriculture allowed the human population to increase and adapt, the difference had massive adverse effects on children's lives, most notably in their responsibilities to their families, social development, and food consumption—to the point where children would be better off in gatherer-hunter societies.

Information on the social structure and community of gatherer-hunter societies pre-Neolithic period is scarce. Therefore, experts generally use modern gatherer-hunter peoples to glean knowledge of their lifestyle.¹ In this essay, most information on the lives and habits of gatherer-hunters comes from such cultures. Although they may not reflect perfectly gatherer-hunters' livelihoods before the Neolithic Age, these modern groups still adhere to their old customs and face minimal interactions with the modern world.²

Children's roles, responsibilities, and functions changed significantly from the time of gatherer-hunters to early agricultural societies. In most gatherer-hunter communities, the children were treated alike and played a similar role.³ From the day they are born to age ten, apart from stopping nursing at age three, children of both genders practice foraging with their mothers. Older children are responsible for watching over their younger counterparts staying in the camp.⁴ In the book *The Nature of Play: Great Apes and Humans*, authors Anthony D. Pellegrini and Peter K. Smith even go as far as to remind their readers that in primitive cultures, children are responsible for taking care of younger children. They write, "It is common to see children 3 or 4 years old carrying small babies," showing some of the responsibilities of older children is caring for infants.⁵

¹ Alyssa N. Crittenden and David A. Zes, "Food Sharing among Hadza Hunter-Gatherer Children," *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 7 (2015): 1-2.

² Sheina Lew-Levy, *et al.*, "Gender-Typed and Gender-Segregated Play Among Tanzanian Hadza and Congolese BaYaka Hunter-Gatherer Children and Adolescents," *Child Development* 91, no. 4 (2020): 1.

³ Bonnie L. Hewlett, *Adolescent Identity: Evolutionary, Cultural and Developmental Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 28-32.

⁴ Crittenden and Zes, "Food Sharing among Hadza Hunter-Gatherer Children," 2.

⁵ Anthony D. Pellegrini and Peter K. Smith, *The Nature of Play: Great Apes and Humans* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 218.

In *Adolescent Identity: Evolutionary, Cultural and Developmental Perspectives*, Bonnie L. Hewlett points out that children foraging for themselves cannot fully provide for themselves, so other members of society chip in and help feed them. This period during which juveniles cannot yet fully feed themselves lasts until they turn at least ten (for females) and twelve (for males).⁶ These roles and responsibilities are comparable across most modern gatherer-hunter cultures, and experts believe they were also similar during the pre-Neolithic Age.

In early agricultural societies, children's roles were much more varied than simple food production. Of course, in most communities, children's primary role was aiding in food production. Yet their tasks were much more diverse and exciting in some early Neolithic cultures. For example, the early Neolithic people of Stonehenge relied on children to transport oversized loads and stones—to the point that many children had spinal deformities. Rodney Castleden provides commentary saying, “Children as young as 6 developed osteoarthritis in their spines, presumably as a result of carrying heavy loads. It comes as something of a shock to realise that the monuments were largely built by children.”⁷ Not even playtime was spared of change: children's toys from this period show a clear intent to teach kids about farming and chores.⁸ Yet, children were not always more valuable alive. At a Neolithic settlement in what would now be considered the Czech Republic, numerous graves show signs of the human sacrifice of children (non-native children, to be more precise). Experts believe these children were sacrificed to the gods in the hope of obtaining a good crop yield.⁹ While the shift to greater responsibility was not always negative, it is impossible to ignore the rise of human sacrifice, child labor, and barbaric behavior exhibited by some cultures in the Neolithic Age.

Another aspect of children's lives that changed monumentally due to the switch to agriculture was their social lives. The group often moved and acted as one large family in gatherer-hunter societies. They shared food, slept, and played with each other. They raised the children together, resulting in a multi-pronged parenting style that kept the group's children in line. There was little in the way of relations with one's family that existed outside of being part of the same society. In fact, some communities were so densely populated (by choice) that today they would be considered by many to be too condensed.¹⁰ Another social component of gatherer-hunter lifestyles occurs when children reached the age they would venture out and gather independently.

⁶ Hewlett, *Adolescent Identity*, 29-30.

⁷ Rodney Castleden, *The Stonehenge People: An Exploration of Life in Neolithic Britain 4700-2000 BC* (London: Routledge, 1992), 198.

⁸ “Neolithic Figurines” pictured in “Children, Play, and Learning Tasks: From North African Clay Toys to Neolithic Figurines,” by Argyris Fassoulas, Jean-Pierre Rossie, and Haris Procopiou, *Ethnoarchaeology* 12 (2020).

⁹ Václav Smrčka, Tomáš Berkovec, Vojtěch Erban, “‘Children as Plants.’ Analyses of Skeletal Remains of Suspected Children Sacrifices on a Neolithic Settlement in Vedrovice, Czech Republic,” *Anthropologie* 57, no.1 (2019): 79.

¹⁰ Patricia Draper, “Crowding among Hunter-Gatherers: The Kung Bushmen,” *Science* 182, no. 4109 (1973): 302.

They did this with one person of the same gender and formed a tight bond with that person.¹¹ Social life in gatherer-hunter societies focused primarily on community and on bonds formed beyond the immediate family.

While social development in the Neolithic Age looked different, not everything changed. The previously mentioned Stonehenge peoples had a social system that functioned similarly to that of gatherer-hunters. This system allowed the adults to parent unitedly, which resulted in well-disciplined and quickly punished children.¹² That said, there were still differences, most notably in societal structures that left children playing more with their families than with other kids. This no doubt exerted a significant impact on the social development of children.¹³ Still, it is not as if children were alone. Paintings on the walls of houses promote the idea that children were still as sociable as they are now.¹⁴

By and large, most agree that the shift to agriculture that occurred with the Neolithic Revolution negatively impacted children's social health and development. The commonsense idea demonstrates that time spent with one's own age group is beneficial for growth. Surviving evidence suggests that children of gatherer-hunter societies, in contrast to those of agricultural communities of the Neolithic era, had more opportunities to play within their age group and with kids from other tribes.¹⁵ Agricultural communities had children playing with the same few people that lived around them.

Another point of comparison for children of gatherer-hunter and Neolithic societies is their health. Once again, reference to Hewlett's *Adolescent Identity* highlights the Grandmother Hypothesis (GH). The GH says that living with "grandmothers" (post-menopausal women) has huge evolutionary benefits in terms of lifespan and mortality. The number of grandmothers is a factor of influence, as well. While it was rare for women to live to menopause in the early world, it was not unheard of. In gatherer-hunter societies, such women were less common but more accessible to children due to their living style. Beyond a longer life expectancy and lower mortality rate having more grandmothers present in society is suitable for children's life skills development.¹⁶ These traits are ideal for children, regardless of the time period in which they are living.

Castleden's book, *The Stonehenge People: An Exploration of Life in Neolithic Britain 4700-2000 BC*, promotes the idea that Neolithic peoples were overall healthier than their gatherer-

¹¹ Crittenden and Zes, "Food Sharing among Hadza Hunter-Gatherer Children," 2.

¹² Castleden, *Stonehenge People*, 220.

¹³ Stephen Shennan, "Evolutionary Demography and the Population History of the European Early Neolithic," *Human Biology* 81, no. 2 (2009): 349.

¹⁴ "Antique Drawings," pictured in "A Neolithic Childhood: Children's Drawings as Prehistoric Sources," by Barbara Wittmann, *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 63 (2013).

¹⁵ Draper, "Crowding among Hunter-Gatherers: The Kung Bushmen," 302.

¹⁶ Hewlett, *Adolescent Identity*, 26.

hunter counterparts. The book claims that people were less likely to go hungry, a significant factor in health. Furthermore, the book highlights that animal-borne illness was likely to have run rampant in urban settlements in the years immediately following the domestication of animals. Castleden also recognizes an uptick in infant mortality.¹⁷ While children were less likely to go hungry in the age of agriculture, there were some significant drawbacks.

Children represent humanity's future; as such, it is the job of adults to raise children in the best possible environment and way. While people's overall health increased thanks to the Neolithic Revolution, it came with drawbacks to their social development and massive changes in their roles and responsibilities. These changes ultimately led to a net decrease in the quality of life for children. While over time these differences and drawbacks either vanished or diminished, the immediate impacts of switching from gatherer-hunter societies to agricultural ones in large part appear to have been negative. For all of these reasons, children were more prone to thrive under the conditions of gatherer-hunter societies than in Neolithic agricultural settlements.

¹⁷ Castleden, *Stonehenge People*, 191.

WORKS CITED

PRIMARY SOURCES

“Antique Drawings,” pictured in “A Neolithic Childhood: Children’s Drawings as Prehistoric Sources.” by Barbara Wittmann *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 63 (2013).

“Neolithic Figurines,” pictured in “Children, Play, and Learning Tasks: From North African Clay Toys to Neolithic Figurines,” by Argyris Fassoulas, Jean-Pierre Rossie, and Haris Procopiou. *Ethnoarchaeology* 12 (2020).

SECONDARY SOURCES

Journal Articles

Crittenden, Alyssa N., and David A. Zes. “Food Sharing among Hadza Hunter-Gatherer Children.” *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 7 (2015).

Draper, Patricia. “Crowding among Hunter-Gatherers: The Kung Bushmen.” *Science* 182, no. 4109 (1973).

Shennan, Stephen. “Evolutionary Demography and the Population History of the European Early Neolithic.” *Human Biology* 81, no. 2 (2009).

Smrčka, Václav, Tomáš Berkovec, Vojtěch Erban, “‘Children as Plants.’ Analyses of Skeletal Remains of Suspected Children Sacrifices on a Neolithic Settlement in Vedrovice, Czech Republic.” *Anthropologie* 57, no.1, (2019).

Lew-Levy, Sheina, *et al.* “Gender-Typed and Gender-Segregated Play Among Tanzanian Hadza and Congolese BaYaka Hunter-Gatherer Children and Adolescents.” *Child Development* 91, no. 4 (2020).

Books

Castleden, Rodney. *Stonehenge People: An Exploration of Life in Neolithic Britain 4700-2000 BC*. London: Routledge, 2016.

Hewlett, Bonnie L. *Adolescent Identity: Evolutionary, Cultural and Developmental Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Pellegrini, Anthony D., and Peter K. Smith. *The Nature of Play Great Apes and Humans*. New York: Guilford Press, 2005.