

The Primal Insight: A Question of Needs



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Two weeks ago in “Anti-Human Memes and Institutions,” I analyzed a number of cultural memes and institutions under the insight of our evolution as a species. This week, I’d like to take a different approach by using this “primal insight” to determine our *needs* as human beings, from infancy onward. My purpose is not to romanticize or “long for” simpler times, but instead to provide a framework by which we can each individually judge how well our needs and the needs of our loved ones are being met. Such a task is really no small feat. Much research and many books have been written using the primal insight in the areas of childhood development, diet and exercise, and mental well-being. Let’s see if we can condense some of that.

Human Infancy

Attachment parenting is the philosophy that says that babies and children need closeness and bonding with their caregivers, which happens through breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and baby-wearing. Our primal ancestors, hunter-gatherers (HG), were natural attachment parents. Therefore, we evolved as a species closely bonding with our children, meeting their evolution-designed needs of attachment, breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and baby-wearing. When a child today cries and whines for someone to carry them, they need to be carried. It’s their instincts to stay as close to adults as possible. They don’t need to be weened away from mom, but mom, on the other hand, has her own needs. Though we evolved on attachment parenting, we also evolved in extended family “households.” Mom can’t always be close to her babies. She has genuine needs for a break and for time to herself, both vocational and recreational. Mom and dad can do a better job meeting both their own needs of independence, and their children’s needs of attachment. But Mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, aunt, and uncle, can do an even better job of meeting everyone’s needs.

As evolutionary psychologist Peter Gray wrote, “Children are not designed, by nature, to attach just to the mother, or just to the mother and father. They are, for good biological

reasons, designed to form multiple attachments, to many of the people in a community. It is important to recognize here that the private nuclear family, living in a house apart from others in the community, is, from an evolutionary perspective, an unnatural environment.”

Childhood Development

Moving on, around the ages of three to four, children lose their need to be attached to the adults in their lives. Instead, they have a new need, a drive toward independence. They are becoming rational and reasonable and can discern that learning to do older-kid-things means they need to start following around and playing with older kids. Their secure attachment to their caregivers bolsters their confidence in themselves. Each new discovery and accomplishment likewise builds their confidence. They become unstoppable, and because they are allowed to handle the tools necessary for survival at a very early age, they become very proficient with them by the time they really need them.

Everything they need to learn they learn through *play*. They mimic adult activities and otherwise use play to make sense of all sorts of things, from conflict or disaster, to heartache and loss. Their days are filled with play, and just as important, their play takes place in a naturally age-mixed environment. Older kids can introduce them to valuable skills and knowledge, and younger kids give them an opportunity to pass it on. And as they get older, younger kids give them an opportunity to practice nurture and compassion. In other words, the primal insight tells us that we need age-mixed play, both as children *and* as adolescents.

Adulthood

Human beings evolved as social animals. We need other people around us, caring about us, showing us affection, and cooperating with us for mutual benefit. From childhood to adulthood, human beings need both independence and society. The arrangements to meet those needs were planted and cultivated in childhood. A growing child’s will to do as he pleased, so long as he didn’t hurt himself or anyone else, was respected, and as such he developed close emotional bonds with those around him. He cared for his people, which caring drove him to share his abundance and strive toward not only meeting his own needs, but making sure the needs of everyone were being met. Fraternity, in other words, was developed naturally through the mutual-respect of wills, meeting both the needs for independence and for society.

Diet and Exercise

Agriculture, and the hard labor it developed on, has only been around for the last ten thousand years. Yes, more people have been fed thanks to agriculture, but no, our bodies were not designed by evolution for either the product or the process of agriculture. HGs ate meat, fish, fruit, vegetables, nuts, and berries, and worked less than twenty hours a week,

which work consisted of building shelter, hunting game, fishing, and gathering produce. Hard labor was an unknown concept, and all the exercise HGs needed was obtain through what little work they did, and recreation. Most agriculture fails to meet our needs as human beings, as do many types of work we find today, ie. sitting at a desk and working indoors.

Final Thoughts

As I said, much has been written on these areas of human evolution. Understanding our needs can go a long way in not only determining whether or not our needs are being met, but also in how they are being violated or how we are violating the needs of others. The primal insight even gives us a lot to talk and think about in the realm of political philosophy. Voluntaryism is quite compatible with our evolutionary needs. In fact, I think it's the only philosophy that is. Voluntaryism argues for peaceful parenting, radical unschooling, and free markets. Each of these allows us to meet our needs as explained above. On the other hand, punitive parenting, compulsory education, and the state continually create strife and conflict, evidence that our needs are being violated. I plan to continue my study of the primal insight in order to better understand my own needs and the needs of my family and society, and I hope you will too.