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Raising a child doesn't take a village, study finds

September 16, 2011

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The adage "It takes a village to raise a child" has gripped the imagination of many sociologists, anthropologists, writers and politicians in recent years.

But it seems nothing is further from the truth, according to an anthropologist at the University of Michigan. Or so it appears in at least one tribe in Mali.

Beverly Strassmann, a professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan and faculty associate at the university's Institute for Social Research, studied 1,700 children from the Dogon people in Mali over 25 years.

Her work is the first empirical data that shatters the two ideas behind the belief that a whole village raises a child. The first involves the grandmother hypothesis that suggests a child is more likely to survive if a grandmother is nearby and helpful.

The second has its roots in cooperative breeding theory of evolutionary biology where research shows that in many birds adults delay their own reproduction to help raise the offspring of others.

"Some researchers have suggested that humans may also be a cooperatively breeding species," she said. "But the evidence I found shows that this is not always the case and there can be quite a lot of competition and coercion within families."

The Dogon tribe that Strassmann studied live in villages along a cliff, survive on millet farming, have an indigenous religion that involves ancestor worship, practice polygyny and do not use contraception. Men can have up to four wives. And women have an average of nine children.

In a prospective cohort study, Strassmann has looked at the children, their family members and the family's wealth as well as the child's health, growth and survival year by year. About 200 children in the group have died. Some of the family groups, she studied, were large, full of extended members; others were small.

In a study that was published in a recent issue of the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#), Strassmann puts an end to the idea that a child fares better when many are involved in a child's development and parenting.

"I tested the hypothesis — it takes a village to raise a child — and found it did not," Strassmann said unequivocally in a phone interview with the *Toronto Star*. "Children are raised in family units (there). And they are not raised by a whole village."

And according to her work, there is absolutely no difference in the survival rates of children who lived in extended families and those who lived in nuclear families.

"I found children fared just as well in nuclear families as extended families in the Dogon people," Strassmann said.

"It's not true that child survival is improved by having more adults around and present. Children do just as well in smaller family structures. Adding an extra adult to the family did not improve child survival."

What's more if there is any one person that is critical to the development and survival of the child it is the mother, Strassmann said.

"If she died the child suffered. The mother was crucial for a child's survival between the ages zero to five. Children whose mothers were alive faced a risk of death that was 77 per cent lower than children whose mothers were dead," she explained.

Children whose mothers died were four times more likely to die by the age of five than those whose mothers were alive.

Ironically, it is the grandmother in the traditional society of the Dogon that can have an adverse affect on children, she said.

"There is a notion of the helpful grandmother," she said. "In the traditional society of the Dogon, grandmothers live to a point where they need care themselves and consume more resources than they produce."

In families with grandmothers the children were two times more likely to die, she said, if the grandmother was alive and present in the household.

“This goes against the notion that grandmothers are helpful. In fact, they can be harmful because they’re competing for resources.”

In a separate study in *Human Nature* published earlier this summer, Strassmann and another researcher Wendy Garrard did a meta-analysis of studies done over several centuries of various patrilineal societies in Africa, Asia, Europe and North America.

“Our analysis showed that the grandparents who actually lived with their grandchildren did not have a beneficial effect on the grandchildren’s survival,” she said in a news release.

“Grandparents who did not live with the grandchildren sometimes did have a positive effect because they were not competing for scarce resources.”