
Book Reviews

The Evolution of Childhood: Relationships, Emotion, and Mind

Melvin Konner

Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. 2010.

Contents, references. 943 pp. \$39.95

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A volume culminating a distinguished career is a rare event. Enter Melvin Konner, whose *The Evolution of Childhood: Relationships, Emotion, and Mind* represents a synthesis of his four decades studying childhood. Konner attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of childhood from phylogenetic origins through the development of the child as a cultural being. The book both benefits and suffers from Konner's efforts to expand the scope of the work beyond the traditional child-development perspective. He introduces and explains alternative and competing theoretical frameworks with mixed results. The overall effect leaves the reader wondering if this very large book consists of several smaller, more focused books trying to express themselves.

Konner organizes the book into four main sections, transition chapters between the sections, and a conclusion. The organization reflects Konner's perspective on the psychosocial development of children.

The first section covers the evolutionary foundation of ontogeny and behavior. The second section examines the genetic basis of maturation and the direct physiological processes underlying maturation. The third section looks at socialization as both endogenous and exogenous process. The fourth section brings cultural context into play. The substantive portion of the book concludes with Konner's synthesis and theory development.

The sections vary widely in scope, currency, and depth. The first section has solid reviews of evolutionary approaches to development, focusing on eight paradigms that Konner has identified. Here we first gain insight into Konner's propensity for categorization. For instance, I would imagine many readers will not see life-history theory, allometry, and evo-devo, among others, as such discrete approaches. Overall, however, the discussion is valuable and comprehensive, especially for readers new to the subject matter. The second section, focusing on maturation, is the least successful. While in some ways Konner seems to be segregating "ultimate" perspectives into the first section and "proximate" into the second, many current approaches using life-history theory would see continual relationships between the

evolutionary and ontogenetic processes. The third section reflects Konner's comfort zone, and he very effectively displays his mastery of the literature in an inclusive and synthetic treatment of socialization. The fourth section, on enculturation, is less well developed, and it is sometimes unclear why certain chapters are in this section rather than the third, such as the segments on middle childhood. Konner's brief fifth, and concluding section, presents his theory of generative variation, which emphasizes self-organization and selection. Essentially, Konner argues that self-organization is a step between the production of new variants and the action of selection, which he has broken into two parts, challenge and selection. Certainly the ideas Konner presents here are stimulating and thought provoking, as they were clearly intended to be.

Konner's treatment of play appears in several chapters, beginning with a brief discussion of the ontogeny of sex differences in aggression. He concentrates his material on play in a chapter titled "Play, Social Learning, and Teaching," professing the central premise that play is a defining characteristic of juvenile activity while acknowledging the problematic nature of defining play itself. Konner clearly explicates the paradox that play is energetically costly, but it benefits multiple functions and currencies, even though the benefits may be temporally defused or delayed. This chapter follows the pattern of the book in microcosm, beginning with the phylogenetic foundations of play, proceeding to the neuroanatomy and physiology, then the social and cultural context. Konner writes most convincingly when discussing play in infancy and early childhood, and

he includes brief reviews of the literature on the neurobiology of play and social learning among nonhumans, especially primates. Later, in the section on enculturation, the author offers a brief review of cross-cultural references to the putative role of play in the development of foraging skills.

Konner sees play through a functional lens, yet he does not much consider the direct costs of play or of a delay of its benefits. My other concerns with Konner's treatment of play are not unique—that possibly unrelated activities are categorized as "play," that costs and benefits may be decoupled in currency or time, and that the possible functions are changing throughout the ontogenetic process. Konner clearly sees childhood as a preparation for the future; he places far less emphasis on the necessity of successfully navigating the present.

While the massive reference section reflects the comprehensive nature of Konner's efforts, the sheer magnitude of the work invariably leads to issues. In many instances, the review of literature seems less than exhaustive. In a more focused work, a reader might forgive an incomplete literature review, but here one expects completeness. The lack of an author index hinders the book's usefulness. With 159 pages of references, the book makes finding pertinent references to authors in the text difficult, and at the very least, this hugely limits its utility as a teaching resource.

Konner has produced a work of great breadth that will draw interest widely across disciplines. The emphasis on childhood as the product of evolution and the thorough deemphasis of the nature-ver-

sus-nurture construct advances our understanding of childhood as an adaptation. The wide-ranging review of the literature from animal behavior, psychology, and anthropology as well as the cross-species, cross-cultural comparisons add richness to Konner's discussion. There is no doubt that those interested in any aspect of childhood, including play, will find rewarding reading.

—John Bock, *California State University, Fullerton, CA*

Playing to Learn: The Role of Play in the Early Years

Sandra Smidt

Routledge, New York, 2011. Contents, images, bibliography, index. 141 pp. \$31.95. paper. ISBN: 9780415558822

Playing to Learn: The Role of Play in the Early Years by Sandra Smidt, presents theory, research, and application about play with detailed, cross-cultural case studies. Smidt writes well and supplies many examples that will resonate with both students and practitioners. The author includes more theory than offered in many cursory textbooks of child development and early-childhood education, which are typically limited to the "big" theories minus details concerning sociocultural context in which these theories were created. While *Playing to Learn* presents the ideas of classic theorists, Smidt identifies important, yet not widely taught, theoretical concepts that help us better understand play.

The research Smidt cites includes some classic studies, but she also inte-

grates recent contributions of Tina Bruce, Corinne Hutt, Janet Moyles, and others. The work of these contemporary researchers provides the reader with an understanding of what children's play is and is not, as well as what play specifically means for children's growth and development.

Smidt draws on a range of authors for insights into how different cultures view children. For example, excerpts from Vivian Paley's writing exemplify the reflective teacher who truly listens to children. Readers will encounter familiar names across a range of disciplines (like Barbara Kingsolver and William Wordsworth), and the inclusion of these diverse viewpoints supports the notion that children's play is not limited to early-childhood education. Smidt makes clear that play not only influences today's children, but that it has done so throughout history and across cultures.

I envision using *Playing to Learn* in a 400-level capstone for early-childhood education majors. These students will have completed their required methods courses, in which they prepared thematic units, author studies, and other teaching tools, but most of them completed these assignments without making play the basis of the curriculum. This capstone course is the students' final step before student teaching. *Playing to Learn* will remind them that play has a critical role in early-childhood education. The sound research and vivid examples in Smidt's book will undoubtedly result in some students saying, "Yes, I've seen that!" My students in Maine, the least racially diverse state in the United States, also will appreciate Smidt's case studies of diverse groups, as these will heighten cultural sensitivity and appreciation. I