



Child Survival: Anthropological Perspectives on the Treatment and Maltreatment of Children (Culture, Illness and Healing)

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of older children, adults, and the family unit as a whole. These moral evaluations are, in turn, influenced by such external contingencies as population demography, social and economic factors, subsistence strategies, household composition, and by cultural ideas concerning the nature of infancy and childhood, definitions of personhood, and beliefs about the soul and its immortality. MOTHER LOVE AND CHILD DEATH Of all the many factors that endanger the lives of young children, by far the most difficult to examine with any degree of dispassionate objectivity is the quality of parenting. Historians and social scientists, no less than the public at large, are influenced by old cultural myths about childhood innocence and mother love as well as their opposites. The terrible power and significance attributed to maternal behavior (in particular) is a commonsense perception based on the observation that the human infant (specialized as it is for prematurity and prolonged dependency) simply cannot survive for very long without considerable maternal love and care. The infant's life depends, to a very great extent, on the good will of others, but most especially, of course, that of the mother. Consequently, it has been the fate of mothers throughout history to appear in strange and distorted forms. They may appear as larger than life or as invisible; as all-powerful and destructive; or as helpless and angelic. Myths of the maternal instinct compete, historically, with myths of a universal infanticidal impulse.

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