

Mother Nature
Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

This book has remained in my memory for fifteen years - it makes a profound impression

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy is a sociobiologist. She looks at motherhood from an evolutionary perspective, enriched by her own life's experience. Human mothers have a lot in common with ape mothers, but several major differences have given humans a significant evolutionary advantage.

The first is menopause, part and parcel of the extended family. Human mothers usually have the support of their own mothers, often aunts and sisters as well. The whole tribe pitches in to support a fertile female, making them more fruitful. The uniquely human gift of language helps immensely in this.

Support from the family and tribe means that human children can take more time to grow up. They receive more cultural knowledge from others around them. They can put intelligence to good use, and hence they have grown to be smarter.

Counterintuitively, human mothers do not bond with their babies, says Hrdy, for about a week after birth... when mom's milk comes in, and nursing begins in earnest. This gives the mother, and her tribe, time to reject the baby if it is badly formed, or if the family simply cannot take care of it. This frees the mother up to take care of the children she already has, or to conceive and raise a healthy child.

Following up this very successful book, Hrdy wrote *Mothers and Others*, which significantly expands her hypothesis. It is gratifying to note that, somewhat rare for a follow-on book, the latter is almost entirely original.