

## BOOK REVIEW

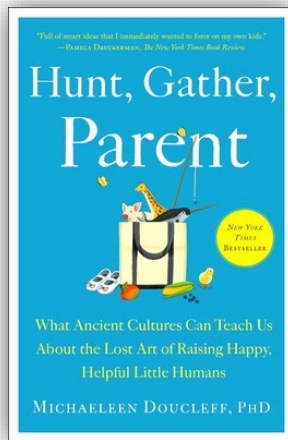
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# Hunt, Gather, Parent: What Ancient Cultures Can Teach Us About the Lost Art of Raising Happy, Helpful Little Humans

*By Michaeleen Doucleff*

Reviewed by Genevieve A. Perkins

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In the ever-present search for a perfect disciplinary method, Michaeleen Doucleff's parenting approach is not easily classified with any one trendy parenting camp, and yet her book *Hunt, Gather, Parent: What Ancient Cultures Can Teach Us About the Lost Art of Raising Happy, Helpful Little Humans* is a best-seller on different parenting styles book suggestion lists. With her PhD in chemistry and a successful career as a journalist and NPR radio host, Doucleff charismatically articulates her adventure and ready opinions. I admire her dedication to traveling the world with her toddler to solve our contemporary parenting puzzles, though I admit I have more questions than answers.

Doucleff's honest struggles connect with readers as the book is heavy in her personal experiences from depression to self-blame. I'm glad by the end she seemed in a much better place!

The book begins by calling out Western parents as “WEIRD”, with many side-comments throughout her casually delivered content. Her writing style reveals her feelings for any matter at hand. For example, she lauds extended family systems for raising children, and proceeds to outline how the Catholic Church destroyed that. Though she states that one can't *actually* blame the Catholic Church, it is evident by her exclusion of other possible causations or correlations that we might as well blame church authority (27-30).

In this way, she often points out interesting thoughts. It would be difficult to miss how she really feels about having four kids in six years, stay-at-home motherhood, or that she thinks highly of ancient cultures despite her disclaimer that we should not romanticize them or criticize them (11). One cannot easily trust an author who is thus relativistic, and I often found myself enjoying and learning, then critiquing and questioning, all in the matter of one page. If a reader prefers to skip the opinions and distracting side-comments, Doucleff's chapter summaries are extremely succinct and helpful.

Though Doucleff notes that science can't solve everything (43), her epistemological viewpoint remains empirical throughout her analysis. Her parenting formula includes the Maya Method for togetherness (section 2), Inuit Emotional Intelligence to encourage (section 3), Hadzabe Health seeking autonomy (section 3), and Western parenting 2.0 that seeks minimal interference (section 5). This book's insights mostly focus on Doucleff's own child, Rosy, who is a toddler, though includes some how-to hints for older ages.

The most insightful parts were the stories she relates of interactions and conversations with these societies. A few things she learns are: to incorporate

purpose into daily life through chores, the power of storytelling, waiting a bit rather than being bossy, building a network of support to combat the isolation caused by our individualistic society, and to seek multi-age playgroups.

Interestingly, I notice, homeschool co-ops in America have multi-age playgroups while full-time school students miss this normally. Also, story-telling is something our popular culture too often uses to infuse their own contemporary ideals rather than listen to the older tales and learn from them. I wonder, do we Western parents have the right tools already and choose to ignore them? Is it really only the West that's WEIRD or can we check the rest of the world's parents in "modern" areas?

Because of her style of delivery, I have more questions than answers—mostly about her opinions and which Americans she bases her comparative assumptions on. (She is based in Silicon Valley.) Her situation is not every American's situation or story, and it is unjust to overgeneralize such a large section of the world.

Our empirically minded culture seeks the exactness of brushing teeth precisely two minutes and changing car oil at certain milage. We enjoy the certainty of if A then B. (I admit that I have been there while sleep training a child, wondering why the poor babe won't calm down if I did all the 'right' things.) But, human persons are not cars. Children, most certainly, are not lab rats for parents to experiment on with empirical behavioral tests, and I am not suggesting that this author means for us to do this! It is a way almost any parenting book can, unfortunately, be read—as a manual and with the assumption that if the child doesn't respond, clearly the child must be broken. The child is *not* malfunctioning, though perhaps in need of more understanding or family bonding.

Sometimes going far outside our normal to another land helps us see more clearly in the mirror. It took Doucleff a trip to Tanzania to connect the darkness with helping calm bedtimes (305). If that's what it takes, so be it! But, just like Doucleff learns that Rosy was always kind, she just hadn't seen it before, we might not be seeing what's right in front of us here among the wise parents around us. In reality, we might not need so many parenting books!

This book is not quite what one would expect from an *anthropologically* trained ethnographer, at least not what I would expect a theological and cultural

anthropologist would have presented in her place. I admit, the title misled me into thinking it was more objective than it is! Her interlocuters are less in the spotlight than she and Rosy are.

While worth a critical reader's time, I neither fully recommend nor discourage this book. Doucleff focuses on keeping the peace and making parenting more enjoyable for parents (and child), digging at some root causes of why WEIRD Western parents struggle. But, I wonder, what is the real telos of parenting?

What matters to me is the subtle difference between treating children like humans in training and treating children like persons with souls needing good habits and guidance. Despite what this reader thinks verged on prejudice against her own society, Doucleff's attempt to find answers for Western parents is not without credit. The author's tone and assumptions towards all of us WEIRD Western parents is not wholly out of place, but wouldn't an anthropologist have dug into the similar WEIRD happening in other parts of the world?

I think anthropologists trained—and I recognize my bias here openly—in more holistic research and analytical methods would catch some understandings that Doucleff missed.

Personally knowing many parents of various family sizes and stages of life, I do not think it evident that all Western parenting is WEIRD. Many are thriving. I think a generational ethnographic research project is needed, especially because I see many of the author's suggestions lived by my grandparents' generation who have likely *never* read a parenting book (e.g. saying, "Who is being disrespectful?" rather than accusing a child outright, 200; or designating chores/help at any age, 65-73).

The West has a history of ruptured families and disrupted enculturation because of the vast changes in technology that ironically bring us together *and* separate us. As a parent, I find this book's parenting reminders, which echo what wise Western parenting mentors have modeled for me, refreshing. As an anthropologist, I am left wondering why all Western parents don't fit the WEIRD profile and if other cultures might suffer a loss of parental enculturation throughout a few generations. Can our global community contribute to a mutually edifying parent culture of support?



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