

Section two, “Law and Single Parents” considers the legal framework that hinders single parents, notably mothers, from overcoming obstacles that negatively impact on their lives and opportunities for their children. Here, Dowd presents a balanced view of the strengths of the single parent family and the unique resources that single parents can offer to all parents. The laws of the United States (and through inference, other industrialized Western countries) foster the negative stigmatization of all single parent families. Dowd, however, recognizes that single parents can be positive role models for children and society. Utilizing the historical, cultural, and situational realities of black single mothers, she describes alternative family structures, not as deviant but as valuable.

In the section on “Law Reform,” Dowd offers alternative policies for single-parent families and legal strategies to challenge the limitations imposed on single-parent families. Here she writes, “Although we have shifted away from this [traditional] model, we have not yet articulated an alternative model. Our notions of equality no longer allow for presumed gender-based assignment of family roles, nor for the limitation of workplace opportunities.”

As a family therapist and researcher who examines parental roles, I was hopeful but wary when reading this book. Dowd writes, however, with remarkable precision as she details the realities of the single parent experience. This she does without glamorizing, demonizing, martyring, or vilifying single parents or traditional families. She recognizes that the traditional two-parent family, like society, has changed – it is time we looked at our structures, laws, and attitudes that, through omission or commission, have ignored these changes. *In Defense of Single-Parent Families* is a thoroughly researched work that defends single-parent families. I strongly recommend it.

Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy
New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

Reviewed by Anna Beauchamp

The past few decades have witnessed a long, pointless, and ill-informed debate over whether or not women have “maternal instincts.” Given the historical context, the battle lines were understandable. The early literature on the biology of motherhood was built on patriarchal assumptions introduced by earlier generations of moralists. What was essentially wishful thinking on their part was substituted for objective observation. It has taken a long time to correct these errors and revise old biases, to “raise Darwin’s consciousness” and widen the evolutionary paradigm to include both sexes. (Blaffer Hrdy, 535)

In *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy sets out an expansive account of the current state of research in anthropology, psychology, and sociobiology, about why mothers do what they do. Studies in the behaviour and biochemistry of both humans and animals, as well as historical assessments of mothering behaviour in distinctive social and cultural situations, point to a fresh understanding of the state of motherhood. Blaffer Hrdy goes one step further and examines new evidence surrounding the behaviour of infants that suggests that the child actually plays a significant role in molding the mother's actions to suit its needs. In effect, "Babies are geared to making sure that maternal care is forthcoming and ongoing" (536). Importantly, babies appear, in the long run, to be more interested in the quality of the care they receive than they are in who provides it. Blaffer Hrdy writes extensively about the crucial role of "alloparents," individuals other than the child's parents who provide care. In modern human society we call these individuals daycare workers, babysitters, grandparents, and so forth. It is refreshing to see, however, that alloparenting is not an exclusively human phenomenon. She cites primate studies in which data from groups, who practiced infant sharing, are compared with groups who did not. "Babies born to infant-sharers grow at a faster rate, and ... their mothers give birth again after much shorter intervals without compromising their own health or infant survival. Crudely put, mothers with good daycare had the highest fertility rates" (448).

Mother Nature is a dense, academic work which covers a vast array of research in careful, footnoted prose. At the same time, however, Blaffer Hrdy succeeds in presenting a readable text that is comfortably accessible to the layperson, and often highly entertaining. Blaffer Hrdy models capably the feminist academic paradigm of placing the person of the researcher visibly in the work without compromising the scientific validity of the work. Sometimes reading a book will make me want to teach a course in which I could use it as a textbook. Other times reading a book will make me want to rush out and buy more copies so I can give them to friends for their reading enjoyment. *Mother Nature* is the first book that has ever made me want to do both.

Childhood in America

Paula S. Fass and Mary Ann Mason, editors
New York: New York University Press, 2000

Reviewed by Sarah V. Young

The editors of the text, *Childhood in America*, have made a superb contribution to the area of children's history, a field of research which generally has been