

Growing Up in the Ice Age: Were Children Drivers of Human Cultural Evolution?

Abstract:

It is estimated that in prehistoric societies children comprised at least forty to sixty-five percent of the population, yet by default, our ancestral landscapes are peopled by adults who hunt, gather, fish, knap tools and make art. But these adults were also parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles (however they would have codified these kin relationships) who had to make space physically, emotionally, intellectually, and cognitively for the infants, children and adolescents around them. The economic, social, and political roles of Paleolithic children are often understudied because they are assumed to be unknowable or negligible. Drawing on the most recent data from the cognitive sciences and from the ethnographic, fossil, archaeological, and primate records, this talk challenges these assumptions. By rendering the “invisible” children visible, a new understanding will be gained not only of the contributions that children have made to the biological and cultural entities we are today but also of the Paleolithic period as whole.