

## ANTH 1470: Parenting & Childhood

**SAMPLE INFORMATION—This class may be revised, including reading choices and assignments**

### ***PROFESSOR:***

Deborah E. Blom, Ph.D.  
University of Vermont  
Department of Anthropology  
Williams Hall 508  
Deborah.Blom@uvm.edu

### ***COURSE OVERVIEW AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES:***

Is there a “best way” or a “natural way” to raise a child? Should a child sleep alone? Will “boys be boys”? Should you pick up the baby every time it cries? Is conflict between adolescents and parents inevitable? Parents and other caregivers are bombarded with conflicting theories about “proper” childrearing. Anthropologists can provide a unique perspective to these questions, helping us see both childhood and parenting as products of a dynamic interaction between biology and culture.

In this course, we will explore child-rearing through a variety of anthropological lenses to understand the diverse approaches to parenting. We will critically examine scholarly and popular views on child-rearing to assess their scientific credibility and relevancy for any given situation. By engaging deeply with the question of whether aspects of parenting and childhood are universal, we aim to develop a nuanced and contextual understanding of humanity.

### ***ASSIGNED WORK***

The course is organized into ten modules which roughly correspond to one module per day. All the materials (including reading quizzes) for each section can be found in the **Course Materials** link and a detailed schedule with deadlines and specific assignments can be found in the **Course Schedule**. Class discussion will take place in the **Discussion Board** and some additional assignments will be turned in under **Class Blogs**. Your grades will be assigned through the following work (see **Course Schedule** for a breakdown of the due dates):

#### **Reading Guides [10% of final grade]**

Short reading guides/quizzes serve to spot-check your reading comprehension. The guides/quizzes correspond to each of the ten modules. They will be comprised of five to twenty multiple-choice/true-false questions each. The guides are open book. Your best nine of ten quiz grades will go towards calculating your final grade. Quizzes must be completed within 24 hours of the date for which the material appears in the Course Schedule in order for you to get credit.

#### **Class Discussion [45% of final grade]**

The Discussion Board is essentially our learning community. It will be used extensively in the course and will be the major part of your grade (note: this is unlike a face-to-face class, where you can often be fairly passive and still earn a solid grade). For each module, I will post one or two questions or topics for you to discuss. **Your Discussion task for every module (i.e., basically every weekday) will be to answer the questions I have asked and to post at least**

**two responses to your classmates' contributions. I estimate that your posts and comments might sum to approximately 150-300 words per day.** I will be grading you on the quality of your answers to the assigned questions, but also on how well you respond to your classmates and engage them in further conversation. In your responses, you should fully answer all parts of the question asked. You should also demonstrate that you have thought about the course readings and materials in some detail (referencing specifically and with page numbers ideally) and that you are listening carefully to what your classmates are saying and considering their views. Discussion grades will be assigned at midterm and at the end of the semester following the rubric in the Grading Criteria link to the left (see Participation below).

### **Participation [10% of final grade]**

It's entirely possible, of course, to make well-thought-out contributions to the discussion board, but also to do so and participate infrequently. To receive full marks for participation, you need consistently to write several posts a day and to show that you are actively participating in the conversations that will no doubt ensue. See the Grading Criteria link to the left for a rubric describing how these grades will be assigned. Participation grades will be assigned at midterm and at the end of the semester.

### **Module Summaries [5% of final grade]**

In order to synthesize your work, **one class member will be responsible for summarizing the discussion(s) for each module** (sign up for the module/group that you will summarize for the class under the **Sign up for Summary Wiki** [link to left]). These summaries will be clear and concise, consisting of 150-200 words. They should be posted on the Class Blog (link to left) for all class members to see. Summaries should be posted by midnight on the date following the date assigned for the module (but can be modified by noon the date following your post if something radical changes after the summary is posted).

### **Paper Proposal [10% of final grade]**

This is a proposal for a paper on an area that you would like to explore in more depth. You are asked to write **an ~800-1000 word proposal for a research paper** that is worthy of research. The proposal should be clear, concise, and grammatically correct and include a focused **research question** and **justification** for why this would be an interesting paper within the field of anthropology. The justification should be made by using **scholarly, anthropological** articles on your topic. Grades will be assigned based on the quality of anthropological literature research and proposal. You will be asked to turn in a draft plan and then a final proposal. See the **Paper Proposal** link to the left for more information. See the *Grading Criteria* link to the left for a rubric describing how these grades will be assigned.

### **Paper [25% of final grade]**

Here you write the research paper you proposed. The paper should be clear, concise, and grammatically correct and be approximately 5 single-spaced pages, including in-text citations. It should elaborate a bit upon your **justification** for why this is an interesting paper within the field of anthropology and answer the focused **research question** from your proposal. The sources should be **scholarly, anthropological** articles in addition to the class readings. Grades will be assigned based on the quality of research and paper.

### **Extra Credit [up to 5% toward final grade]**

Over the semester, you may post on the blog devoted to extra credit links on items on parenting and/or childhood that you have seen in the popular press. There also may be extra credit items at some point in the Course Materials. Each item is will boost your final grade by 1% each (for a maximum of 5%).

### ***COURSE READINGS***

You have been asked to obtain two books for this course:

Small, Meredith

2002 Kids: How Biology and Culture Shape the Way We Raise Our Children.

Anchor Books (Doubleday). ISBN-10: 0385496281 or ISBN-13: 978-0385496285

Small, Meredith

1999 Our Babies, Ourselves: How Biology and Culture Shape the Way we

Parent. Anchor Books (Doubleday). ISBN-10: 0385483627 or ISBN-13: 978-0385483629

These books are especially helpful because they are readily accessible, give a good overview of what anthropology is for those of you who have not been exposed to it, and provide both biological anthropological and cultural anthropological perspectives on the subject.

Other assigned materials will include articles, film clips, and websites that are available through links on Blackboard or through your exploring of the internet or UVM library resources. These sources will bring in additional or updated perspectives and/or content, present the material in different ways (written, audio and video), and provide opportunities to think critically and explore the representation of anthropology in popular media. In some cases, you will be asked to absorb and understand information, but I will often ask you to step back and analyze the sources, rather than take them at face value.

### ***COURSE SCHEDULE***

See link

### ***MODULE GOALS***

#### *Module 1*

Your objectives for this section are to get to know the course and each other as much as possible and to begin thinking about the material. The first half of this class will be focused on the parenting of infants. Anthropologists who have studied babies and their parents have taken various approaches, but all agree that while cultural differences are extreme, universal biological variables are important factors in determining how these dependent creatures are raised.

Therefore, it is most fruitful to approach this from the subdisciplines of biological anthropology and cultural anthropology. This is a strength of Meredith Small's book *Our Babies, Ourselves* from which you will complete your first readings. In this section, Small introduces the field of *ethnopediatrics* and how this can be viewed within anthropology (please see the supplementary material if you want more information on anthropological thinking).

The major goal of this first module is to examine biases and assumptions regarding parenting and childhood. I encourage you to think about your particular worldview and history and how it

shapes your opinions about childrearing and your approach to this material. In his book, *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattels and Changelings*, David Lancy (2008) argues that societies vary widely in the way that they think of children, whether that be as individuals to be cherished and protected or as commodities or even as [changelings](#). What influences are affecting you? Like all of us, Small also has her perspectives, which we may agree with or not. We can see some of them emerge in the introduction to her book, such as these two examples:

*Let's face it - mothers and fathers are molded by millions of years of evolution to do the right thing in raising babies* (Small 1999:xxii)

*...all parents want what is best for their children...* (Small 1999:xvii) [note that she also acknowledges the existence of “bad parents” etc. on pg xiv]

In the class discussion, I'll ask you to explore your assumptions and those in the readings. I encourage you to continue this reflection and critical analysis as we move through the class and as you go about your daily life.

### *Module 2*

A major goal of this module is to consider babies from an evolutionary perspective (please see the supplementary material if you need a refresher on evolutionary thinking or anthropology). First, we need to understand why human babies are born dependent and immature, especially neurologically, and the consequences of that. While infant rearing practices are varied worldwide, all people are constrained by this aspect of infant biology. We also consider parents' reactions to their children from an evolutionary perspective. In your discussion, I'll ask you to continue your reflection and critical analysis regarding your assumptions, those of your society, and those in the literature.

### *Module 3*

During this section, we review the basics of anthropological thought as it applies to the study of children and parenting (much of this will be a review for anyone familiar with anthropology). In this section, you will be introduced to the “Culture and Personality” approach to the study of society and how it has shaped much of the anthropological study of parenting and childhood, as well as the explanation of adult behavior. The field of ethnopediatrics will also be explained, in which the environment in which babies evolved is taken into account and the environment in which one develops is seen as a complex mix of biological and cultural factors (in fact, the dichotomy of “biology” and “culture” is rejected). Finally, we explore diverse parenting styles with a cultural relativistic and adaptive approach by considering how parental goals are specific to particular social and, especially, economic environments.

### *Module 4*

In this section, we will explore something parents in the US are obsessed about -- Babies and Sleep -- from a biological and cultural perspective. After completing this module, you should have a better understanding of infant sleep and how science and culture (not necessarily two mutually exclusive categories!) impinge upon our views regarding sleep practices.

### *Module 5*

In this section, we will explore what many parents (and non-parents) think about -- infant crying. If we look from a cross-cultural perspective, what do we see? Do all babies cry and in the same way? What causes it? What purpose does it serve? Do we need to solve it? If so, how?

This material provides a fascinating case study in natural selection. By all accounts, babies' crying evolved as a very specific adaptation to the Paleolithic environment (EEA) and lifestyle. Presumably, babies that could communicate about an imbalance in their bodies and/or could cajole adults to hold them more were more likely to survive. It is a wonderful example to remind us that all adaptations are specific to particular environments, in this case, a fairly nomadic lifestyle in which babies were carried most of the time. Small argues that in "industrial societies," where babies' biological needs are not met as definitively-- they are not held as much and even left alone --, the mechanism is not as adaptive. This disjuncture can result in crying of long duration ("colic"), where parents may become so irritated as to harm the baby or reduce care. As with other aspects of this material, we can see here the challenges of dealing with a creature biologically adapted to one environment attempting to live in another. This topic is also interesting from a natural selection perspective because we can see how what is most evolutionarily adaptive for a baby (get as much care as you can even at the expense of your siblings) can be at odds with what is most adaptive for a parent (have as many babies as you can that go on to pass on your genes).

The readings also cover the question of whether personality and temperament are genetic, which is interesting, but we won't focus on that here [one general question on the reading quiz] (feel free to search out some research for your extra credit or research proposal).

### *Module 6*

This section delves into the topic of infant feeding with a focus on breast and bottle feeding of breast milk and artificial milk ("formula"). a significant amount of detail is presented on the readings in terms of the evolution of lactation and breast biology, which will not be on the exam but should be skimmed (it is pretty interesting stuff and it is important *in general* to understand the other material). Small finishes her book with a conclusion designed to put together the material and get us thinking about the trade-off that parents face in making decisions and the social constructs of normality that shape how we parent (not to mention so many other aspects of life). In this module, I ask you to apply the material that you learn from anthropology to critically analyze the messages that might be hidden in what we read and hear about infant feeding.

### *Module 7*

In this section, we will briefly review the tenets of anthropology that are important in studying this material, with an emphasis on childhood (i.e., beyond the infant years from birth to one year of age). We will also begin to think about the context in which childhood evolved and what childhood might have looked like for our ancestors, specifically how different parenting strategies may adaptive for different environments. You will only have a reading quiz on Chapter 1; however, the discussion assignment for the next module will use some of the ideas from this module.

### *Module 8*

While other animals go through a juvenile stage after infancy, humans alone have an actual childhood, a time after weaning when they are still physically dependent on older individuals for food and protection (anywhere from 1-3 to 7-10, depending on the source). You need not get bogged down in the details of these readings. The majority of the reading quiz is drawn from Ch. 2, with Ch. 3 coverage including only pp. 65-75 with four true/false and one multiple answer question.

#### *Module 9*

The major objective of this section is to explore children's learning as it pertains to language and in general. The quiz will weigh more heavily (but not exclusively) on learning and language and the assignment will focus on learning in general.

#### *Module 10*

In this section, we consider how anthropologists can approach the study of children's socialization in general and specifically in terms of sex-specific roles.