

## Autonomy, reciprocity and respect: cultural values and their impact on indigenous children's development

Child development is currently a topic of concern for scientists, teachers and governments. Ethnography, Cultural Psychology and Human Ecology have contributed to criticize the idea of universal pathways of human development, stressing the intimate relationships between children's development and specific environments in which children participate in. Contrary to conventional mechanic approaches to children development, based on the idea that environment *influences* the child, interdisciplinary and cross cultural research have emphasized that the unit of analysis is the *child-in-its-environment* as a whole, not as separate entities. In that framework, "environment" includes all those contexts in which children live and have an impact on their health outcomes and the development of physical, emotional, cognitive and social skills.

Building off these ideas and based on the results of my ethnographic study about Mbya Guarani Indigenous Peoples, I argue that children's development must be understood within the framework of local cosmologies and daily practices, because they define and shape appropriate relationships between people and their environment and their consequences in children's health and wellbeing. The Mbya Guarani are one of the Indigenous Peoples living in the forest areas located in the South of Paraguay and Brasil and the Northeast of Argentina. As many Indigenous Peoples, they consider themselves – together with other living beings - *part* of the forest. The results coming from this research allowed me to recognize three main cultural values guiding daily childrearing practices: autonomy, reciprocity and respect.

According to Mbya perspective, in the forest, "everything has a spirit"; this means that "natural" entities (species) have will, desire, and intention. The interactions between all of these entities are affected by specific rules having to do with *reciprocity* and *respect*. As children participate in collective activities, such as hunting and gathering, they take part in the actions that are deemed necessary in order to be respectful to the spirits or "*dueños*" (guardians) of other species, in order to avoiding risks for people's wellbeing. Regarding this, Mbya narratives provide several examples of children's illness which are explained and justified based on lack of *respect* and *reciprocity* with other forest inhabitants.

Mbya perspective on children's development emphasizes the balance between interdependence and autonomy as complementary goals and values. These values allow children to participate in community endeavors, and through this, to develop physical, cognitive and social skills associated with particular ways of *inhabiting* the forest, including *learning to walk* in it and developing "*entendimiento*" (understanding). Learning to walk is not merely a physical skill; is a mechanism of learning to interact with the environment and to gain knowledge relevant for their subsistence. It implies a complex learning process that includes putting into play a variety of motor, sensory and cognitive skills such as keen observation, active listening, smell and taste.

On the other hand, as children grow, they gradually develop “entendimiento” (understanding) and parents show greater concern to educate children in the self-control of extreme emotions like anger, temper, or senseless crying. These behaviors are not only associated with serious illnesses, but also limit children’s opportunities to participate in community endeavors. This kind of education promoting self-control and awareness of other’s needs allows children to collaborate in activities that require *reciprocity* and *responsibility* such as care of siblings and older relatives.

Parents’ narratives about goals and values of childrearing fit with practices observed that demonstrate respect for children’s initiative and autonomy. For example, in the allotment of household chores to them based on their preferences and the respect for their initiative in collaborating. By doing this, they promote the learning of specific skills (to be a skillful hunter or to know about medicinal plants).

In conclusion, Mbya childrearing is not based in instruction, but in allowing children to be part of the community endeavors and learning to develop valuable skills that are considered crucial to growing up in the forest. Mbya parents see children’s development as a process of *transformation* by participation in routine activity settings which requires a balance between interdependence and respect for children’s autonomy, in a framework of adult guidance and holding.

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## **Publication**

[Learning to Inhabit the Forest: Autonomy and Interdependence of Lives from a Mbya-Guarani Perspective.](#)

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*Adv Child Dev Behav. 2015*