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Pudgy dads and grannies who care



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Humans live longer than other primates because pudgy, older men and grandmothers played crucial evolutionary roles

In the past, the average lifespan was only about 30 to 40 years and most people did not survive beyond their reproductive years.

A percentage of both men and women did live to old age. How was this useful from an evolutionary point of view?

Why did men live long after their prime, when their physical strength, fertility and potency had waned? The reason is that men can produce offspring throughout their lives, even after their testosterone levels fall.

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However, to be able to procreate at an older age, they had to compete with younger men who were physically stronger and more virile.

Older men had to compete with younger men who were physically stronger and more virile.

Older men had to develop new reproductive strategies through their experience and guile. They could demonstrate the advantage of their longer hunting experience even though they were less nimble.

Also, with decreasing testosterone, the fat around the middle increases and this adiposity makes men look more cuddly and softer.

The associated metabolic changes promote a nurturing outlook in these older men and this was recognised by younger women who were, therefore, willing to have children with them as they were still considered good providers.



Even when grandparents are not playing a direct role in the care of their grandchildren, they are still important in the lives of the young ones as historians, mentors and role models. These relationships benefit the adults and children both emotionally and mentally.



and can have more babies.

This evolutionary role of grandmothers has not been forgotten. The Singapore Government recognises and supports the role of grandparents as caregivers for grandchildren because they are important in helping promote birth rates.

The grandparent caregiver relief is part of a procreation tax relief package. It provides a tax relief of \$3,000 to working mothers (Singapore citizens with children aged 12 and below), who engage the help of their unemployed parents, grandparents, parents-in-law or grandparents-in-laws (including those of ex-spouses) to take care of their children.

A 2005 survey from Singapore Children's Society has shown that 40 per cent of children in Singapore from birth to three years old are cared for by their grandparents.

A more recent Lien Foundation survey shows that grandparents make up 13 per cent of all caregivers of children with special needs. Grandparents also help by picking the children up from school and caring for them during the school holidays.

Studies have shown that grandparents who occasionally help out in the care of their grandchildren live longer than those who do not do this. This link could be a mechanism

These pudgy dads lived longer than their testosterone-driven younger counterparts, who were prone to taking more risks and ended up with shorter lifespans.

Thus, pudgy older men have continued to father children since time immemorial and passed on their longevity genes to both sons and daughters.

Natural selection must then have favoured these long-lived individuals. This could be one reason why humans live much longer lives than other primates.

From a biological point of view, let us now ponder the fact that one-third of a woman's life is spent in the post-fertile period.

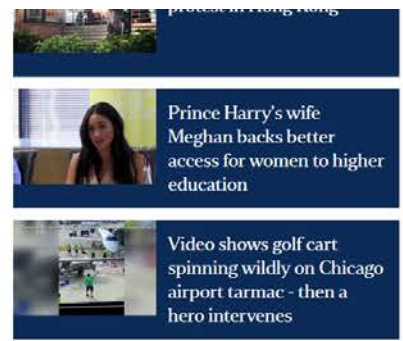
What evolutionary purpose or relevance does this have? One rationale for this phenomenon is explained by the "grandmother hypothesis".

In all primates and mammals, the young, after weaning, collect food for themselves.

Human babies do not do this. Instead, grandmothers gather food to feed the babies and little ones, and it has been shown that having grandmothers around reduces child mortality quite considerably and gives the babies a long-protected time to grow large brains.

Thus, because of grandmothers, humans have had the opportunity to develop smarter brains.

Also, because grandmas look after the little ones, young reproductive females are freed of this chore



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grandchildren live longer than those who do not do this. This link could be a mechanism deeply rooted in our evolutionary past when help with childcare was crucial for the survival of the human species.

Even when grandparents are not playing a direct role in the care of their grandchildren, they are still important in the lives of the young ones as historians, mentors and role models. These relationships benefit the adults and children both emotionally and mentally.

Grandparents also affect the lives of their grandchildren indirectly with the support and help they give to the parents. They play an important role in creating and protecting the family's social capital. In times of conflict and family disruptions, grandparents can be a major pillar of support and act as stress buffers and arbitrators.

In the recent past in Singapore, there has been some debate on the subject of generational equity - about the flow of public transfers to the older generation from the taxes of the younger workers, especially pertaining to healthcare funding.

Some politicians and academics have presented these generational transfers as a potential cause of generational conflict.

However, the focus in these discussions has been on public transfers, while economic and social exchanges between generations in the family have been overlooked.

In the private sphere, there is often transfer of wealth and resources from the older generation to the younger generation, and this is usually not accounted for in the generational equity debate.

In intergenerational relationships, the focus should be on interdependence and not dependence of one generation on the other.

We all need and depend on one another. That is the essence of life.

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