

In Brief: Human evolution and big babies

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Ancient human ancestors (hominids) may have birthed larger babies and developed intense and shared styles of infant care--characteristics that distinguish humans from the great apes -- prior to the evolution of the human genus *Homo*, a study finds. The study is being published this week in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Jeremy DeSilva used information from a national primate research center, museum specimens, and previous studies to test the common assertion that human [babies](#) weigh proportionally more than ape infants, and to determine when in [human evolution](#) the shift toward larger babies occurred.

DeSilva found that human infants weigh approximately 6% of the mother's body mass, while chimpanzee neonates weigh closer to 3% of the mother's mass.

Because larger infants are more difficult to birth and heavier to tote around, some researchers have argued that human child-rearing characteristics such as involved infant care from fathers and other family members, may have emerged in parallel with the technological adaptations of *Homo erectus*.

However, DeSilva suggests that while the earliest hominids demonstrate infant-to-mother weight ratios similar to today's apes, females of the genus *Australopithecus*, a now-extinct hominid group that evolved approximately four million years ago, may have birthed babies larger than 5% of their [body mass](#).

The study suggests, according to DeSilva, that shared parenting may have begun earlier in human evolution than researchers previously believed.

More information: "A shift toward birthing relatively large infants early in human evolution," by Jeremy DeSilva et al., *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, January 2010.

Provided by Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences

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