









of the Royal Society, takes off from the biological concept of “life history.” An animal’s life history includes how long it lives, how much it invests in its young and how long it takes those young to mature.

A long, slow life history goes with a big, smart brain. The smartest mammals and birds, like chimps and crows, also have a particularly long childhood, and adults put a lot of work into caring for the young. We humans are particularly brainy, with an especially long childhood and large caregiving investment.

Different species have different life histories, but different individual animals also may develop different life histories. Some will mature more quickly, while others stay young for longer. Early experiences can influence these individual life histories. After all, what happens when you’re young tells you about the sort of world you will face when you get older.

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A “live fast, die young” life history makes more evolutionary sense when resources are scarce and life is predictably harsh. Extensive learning may not do much good in that case, so it’s better for young creatures to quickly zero in on a few effective survival techniques. In a rich, supportive, varied world, on the other hand, there is lots to learn and time and resources to learn it, so keeping an open mind and flexible brain is more valuable. Early adverse experiences may be cues that the life to come will be harsh and short, while a nurturing preschool signals a richer set of possibilities.

All of this should be reassuring to middle-class parents worrying about “the American question.” The most important part of caring for young children is in some ways the easiest. Loving your children and giving them space to learn and explore is more important than crafting a particular curriculum. A longer, slower childhood may be better, at least if you believe that the adult environment will also be rich and varied.

But as the research on adverse experiences shows, far too many children and parents don’t have the resources they need to allow that sort of childhood to unfold. The recent studies all tell the same story when it comes to policy. Whether through child tax credits,

