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Anthropology

Lecture Essay – Margaret Bentley

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“The Role of Care for Optimal Growth and Development of Infants and Toddlers: Data from North Carolina and India”

Dr. Margaret Bentley is a professor at the University of North Carolina whose research focuses on child development in correlation with how they are fed and taken care of during infancy. In her lecture she focused on children between three to fifteen months old in both North Carolina and India. The question Bentley poses for anthropologists is: how do parents care for infants in such a way to promote optimal growth? This diverts back to the reason why we study infancy. We study infancy because there is such a large variability in infant growth. Her studies looked at breast-feeding, transmission of diseases, health conditions of children.

Reproduction is a part of evolution. In many developing nations couples produce far more children than those in developed nations, even though they may not be able to afford to feed and support children. The mentally of the parents is that children are an investment; the more they have, the more chance there is that one of them will be successful and be able to take care of them when they are older. How children are raised is largely dependent on the environment and socio-cultural setting in which they are raised.

Her research in the United States showed that the primary method of feeding infants for the first six months of life is breastfeeding, however up to one in three infants between 7-24 months consume no vegetables or fruits. Obesity in children is beginning to start at earlier and earlier ages and this has a lot to do with socio-cultural status of many Americans. In India, breastfeeding was also the main method of infant feeding, but because the economic status of many poor people was so dire many infants went without proper nutrition. This greatly stunted the development of children in India.

Bentley says that what is needed to solve the problem of stunted child development is a greater understanding internationally about infant feeding, diet, and growth. In the future she wishes to study whether infant obesity will become a greater threat in the future, and what can be done to improve the development of children in developing nations.