

Does Your Baby Walk Like a Bear?

Anthropology

A hot summer evening in the Union Station at Washington, D. C.

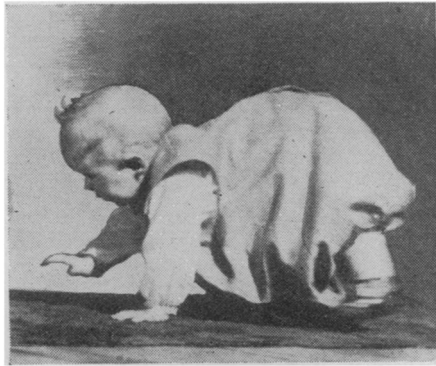
Sweaty, weary men and women were pushing and jostling before ticket windows and train gates.

A young, poorly dressed country woman, loaded down with bundles in one arm and a squalling infant in the other, sank wearily on one of the benches and tried to hush the baby. It was tired, too—and cross. Finally, in despair, she placed it on the floor at her feet.

Then something happened which may have opened a new chapter in the developing science of anthropology. The little boy didn't crawl on hands and knees like an ordinary infant. It proceeded to walk, rapidly and not ungracefully, on hands and feet just like a little bear or a little tiger—that is, it walked with the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet touching the ground.

Since the world began thousands of human infants doubtless have done the same and the behavior has passed unnoticed, or aroused comment as a childish idiosyncrasy. But near this mother was seated a gentleman with an eye for just such things and unsurpassed background of knowledge with which to interpret them. His eyes followed the child with ill-concealed curiosity which the mother obviously resented. She realized that there was something "queer" about her child and she was touchy about it. Tired as she was, she swept it into her arms and hurried away.

Dr. Ales Hrdlicka, curator of physical anthropology at the National Museum in Washington, had hoped to question her—to find out something of the little one's heredity and previous behavior. But it was obvious he would get a cool reception



if he approached her and that there was no possibility of extracting any information. Probably gossipy neighbors in some small Maryland or Virginia community already had made the most of this child's peculiarity to the poor mother's intense discomfort. Perhaps they had nick-named it "little cat" or something of the kind.

But Dr. Hrdlicka stored away the incident in his memory. This was the second case of "quadruped progression" among human infants that he had witnessed. The first was years before, among the Indians of Northern Mexico. The thought came to him now that this odd behavior of infants about one year old might be the opening for a new branch of study. He sensed the likelihood that here was an atavism—a peculiar physical throw-back to some far distant quadruped ancestry. He believed that it was rare.

Since a wide appeal has been made for information, as a result of which nearly 100 instances have now been brought to Dr. Hrdlicka's attention. Nearly all of them have come from the better-educated type of American families. The response to Dr. Hrdlicka's request for cases of quadruped progression seems to bear this out. Children in their first year, he has found, not only sometimes walk like quadrupeds, but combine with this other peculiarities of animal-like physical behavior which ordinarily are dormant in the instinctive background of the human race, but are likely to crop out every now and then in anybody's child.

Perhaps the oddest bit of behavior concerning which mothers have written him is that of a seven-year-old girl who has the ability to walk up a tree-trunk like a cat—that is she does not "shimmy" up the tree with her arms and legs partially around the

trunk, so that she had a three-sided grip, but literally "walks" up rapidly and naturally as many quadrupeds would do.

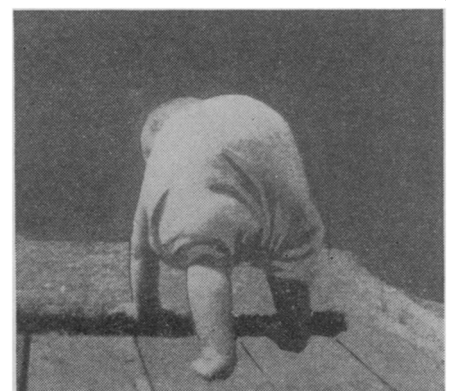
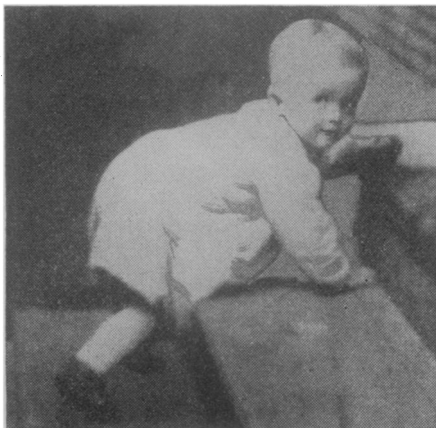
Another mother wrote of a little girl who, before she began to walk, had the habit of squatting down on her knees and holding her hands before her as a dog holds his paws. Shortly afterwards she began to walk on all fours.

Another interesting case reported was that of a little boy who walked rapidly on all fours and, during his progress, reached down and picked up an apple with his teeth without pausing, just as a young quadruped might do.

Dr. Hrdlicka now is anxious to hear from persons of all races in the United States. Thus far the cases reported to him all have been from white families and, for the most part, from old American stock. He needs instances of the same thing from other races—from negroes, Indians and Asiatics. He has addressed hundreds of letters to missionaries in Africa, Asia and elsewhere among primitive people, asking them to acquaint him with any such instances of animal-like behavior among the children of the people with whom they are working.

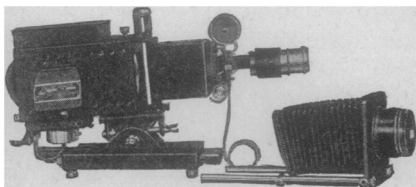
"I suppose," said Dr. Hrdlicka, "that many persons who have seen such behavior hesitate to write me about it because they feel that it might be a reflection on their children. This is borne out by the fact that the bulk of my correspondence has been from well-educated parents who appreciate the scientific value of this study.

"It is, of course, no reflection whatsoever upon the child. This behavior is purely physical and physiological, and not (*Turn the page*)



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Babies That Walk Like Bears—*Continued*



AN OCCASIONAL CHILD is found who keeps the "quadruped" ability for several years, and can use it to good advantage in climbing trees

mental, and the child does not continue it long after learning to walk naturally on its two feet. Parents have no reason to be ashamed of these manifestations, for generally the children showing them are rather above than below the average both mentally and physically, and every instance correctly reported is of great value to science. The whole subject of physical behavior atavisms is an almost untouched field which seems to have been tapped by these accidental observations, and no one can tell what may eventually come of it."

Following are a few extracts from the dozens of letters he has received, almost all of them from college or university graduates:

A graduate of the University of Chicago, now in the government service in Washington, furnished Dr. Hrdlicka with this exact description of the method of quadruped progression, as illustrated by the behavior of his own child: "His hands are placed flat on the floor with the fingers extending forward (the hands turned slightly inward at an angle to the axis of the body) nearly parallel to

each other. The thumb is held at an angle of 45 to 60 degrees to the fingers. The weight of the body is placed very largely upon the palm of the hand, the fingers supporting practically no weight.

"The way he places his feet on the floor varies somewhat with the rate of movement. If he is moving leisurely he will bring one foot forward and place it practically flat upon the floor. As his body moves forward the heel is raised from the floor and when he is ready again to carry the foot forward only the toes and ball of the foot will rest upon the floor. If his movements are rapid his heel frequently will not touch the floor when the foot is brought forward.

"His right hand and left foot go forward at practically the same time. I think this is of particular interest as it is the usual method of locomotion of most animals from the reptiles up. I believe the gill fins and posterior fins of fishes also move in this fashion. I have noticed that most men in walking swing the right hand forward at the same time as the left foot is carried forward."

"This was her regular method of locomotion," writes the mother of a junior in George Washington University, "until she was ten months of age, when she began to walk like a human being. She was exceedingly rapid in her movements."

"Our son, who is almost 20 months old, has just abandoned this means of locomotion," writes a Michigan father. "He did not learn to take steps until he was about 15 months old. After he learned to walk he reverted to the 'all-fours' method when he happened to be in a hurry. Now he occasionally goes around on all fours, though he can walk and run perfectly well."

"As a rule," Dr. Hrdlicka says once more, "the children that develop these phenomena are born strong and healthy, have ample vitality, and frequently remain above the average in strength, activity and even mentality. It is remarkable that there is not one really sickly or defective child in the whole series, and there is not one record of a child who has died. It seems safe to conclude that it is the robust and healthy child and not the weakling or otherwise defective baby that is liable to develop the peculiarity of walking or running on all fours instead of creeping."