In 2008, Bill Crain, a professor of psychology at The City College of New York, and his wife Ellen, a pediatrician, opened Safe Haven Farm Sanctuary in Poughquag, New York. The sanctuary provides a permanent home to over seventy animals rescued from slaughter and abusive situations, including goats, sheep, chickens, turkeys, ducks, and a mini-horse. It also has afforded Bill a tremendous opportunity to observe animals in all manner of emotional states and consider how their behavior casts light on the emotions of human children.

In today’s world, it is easy for us to forget how important contact with nature is for children’s emotional and spiritual development. This profound and beautiful book reminds us.

—John Robbins, author, The Food Revolution

Divided into two parts, this book first discusses six emotional behaviors that are shared by children and animals: fear, play, freedom, care, spirituality, and resilience. Part two considers children’s place in a society that so often devalues animals.

Children do not set themselves apart from animals, but rather experience them with an instinctive empathy. They have to be taught to detach themselves from animals and view them as inferior to humans. Bill urges us to give children more opportunities to develop their spontaneous feelings for animals and nature.

Whether you are a parent, a caregiver, a teacher, or an animal lover, you’ll find a gentle and reassuring truth throughout these pages: the connection between the natural and human world is not illusive—it is instinctive—and it still exists within all of us.

“Bill Crain takes us on a moving personal journey into the territory of our thoughts when we were young, a territory which most of us have not since taken the time to explore.”

—Roger Hart, professor, Graduate Center, The City University of New York

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Advance Praise

“When we pay close attention to who nonhuman animals really are we can learn valuable lessons from them about friendship, respect, empathy, trust, compassion, and love. However, many cultures tend to devalue other animals, and when differences are noted the animals are usually deemed to be inferior to humans. In this wonderful and most important book, William Crain, a prominent developmental psychologist, who, with his wife Ellen, founded Safe Haven Farm Sanctuary, shares with us stories and data that show many similarities between the emotional lives of rescued farm animals and human children. I came away with a new appreciation of human childhood and I highly recommend this easy to read and inspiring book to a broad audience.”

—Marc Bekoff, Professor Emeritus, University of Colorado, and co-founder, with Jane Goodall, of Ethologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Author, Rewilding Our Hearts: Building Pathways of Compassion and Coexistence

“When William Crain reminds us that human beings share deep bonds with nonhuman animals and illustrates how our lives can be enriched through reawakening this connection. How we treat other animals is a reflection of who we are.”

—Gene Baur, President and cofounder of Farm Sanctuary and author, Farm Sanctuary: Changing Hearts and Minds about Animals and Food
“In today’s world, it is easy for us to forget how important contact with nature is for children’s emotional and spiritual development. This profound and beautiful book reminds us and shows how contact with animals can foster children’s compassion and enlarge their humanity.”

—John Robbins, author, *The Food Revolution* and *Diet for a New America*

“Bill Crain is a leading animal activist. Now he has written a delightful book on his experiences caring for animals. From Mattie the goat to Katie the hen, each story is fascinating and endearing. Readers will empathize with the animals and see why children love them so much.”

—Angi Metler, Executive Director, Animal Protection League of New Jersey

“Bill Crain takes us on a moving personal journey into the territory of our thought when we were young, a territory which most of us have not since taken the time to explore. He has now cleared a path for broadening our thinking about our place on this planet.”

—Roger Hart, Professor, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York

“Children can teach us about how to relate with innocence and empathy to the animated world. Magisterial yet modest in tone, Bill Crain’s guide is filled with meditations, anecdotes, photographs, and scientific data that manifest our neglected powers to live fully.”

—Elizabeth Goodenough, editor, *Secret Spaces of Childhood*
“There is much here of importance to those interested in child development, animal behavior, animal rights, and possible spiritual connections between the human, animal, and physical worlds.”
—Jan Drucker, Professor, Sarah Lawrence College

“The surprise and delight of a child meeting an animal at a farmed animal sanctuary reveals the evolutionary bond of kinship between humans and other animals through the lens of these innocent, but not childish, encounters. That children are enchanted by a chicken or a pig, and the reciprocity that may spring up between them, shows that our interspecies connections go far beyond just keeping a ‘pet.’ This prospect is vitally explored, with significant implications, by William Crain in this new book.”
—Karen Davis, President, United Poultry Concerns and author, A Home for Henny, a children’s storybook.

“With a powerful combination of tenderness and keen professional insight, William Crain peels back the veneer of social norms to explore how children and animals share a number of fascinating behavioral traits. A series of poignant vignettes shows how the author’s personal experiences have changed his own outlook. If you have children or animals in your life, you’ll appreciate Crain’s superb ability to explain the clinical underpinnings of their complex personalities in a way anyone can easily understand. Now let’s hope we can heed his timely wisdom and better protect those entrusted to our stewardship.
—David Robinson Simon, author of Meatonomics: How the Rigged Economics of Meat and Dairy Make You Consume Too Much—and How to Eat Better, Live Longer, and Spend Smarter
In 2008, my wife Ellen and I founded Safe Haven Farm Sanctuary. It provides a permanent home to animals rescued from slaughter and abusive conditions. We have over seventy animals, including goats, sheep, chickens, turkeys, ducks, partridges, and a mini-horse. This book describes what I have learned about the animals’ emotional lives. In addition to my farm work, I am a professor of child psychology, and I also have found that the animals cast light on the emotions of human children. But before I talk about animals and children, I would like to tell you how my efforts to support animals and create a farm sanctuary came about.

It was many years before I took any action on animals’ behalf. As a child and teenager, I sometimes worried about the source of the meat I was eating, but these concerns were fleeting.

The occasion that gave me the longest pause occurred when I was fourteen years old. The year was 1958, and I was training for the upcoming high school track season. My teammates and I heard about sensational new track shoes made by Adidas. The shoes were said to be exceptionally light and made of genuine kangaroo leather. We all thought it would be impossible to win without
them. I wanted to purchase a pair, but I worried about the kangaroos. I asked a group of teammates, “Do you think they’re killing kangaroos just to make these shoes?” They laughed and said they had no idea. My worries lasted a few days, and then I thought to myself, It couldn’t be possible that all the adults in charge could let something so cruel happen. So I bought a pair of the shoes, concentrated on my running, and for the most part stopped thinking about the kangaroos.

During the next several years, my thoughts about animal welfare remained largely in the background. My focus was on other things—not just track, but my studies and social life. I went to college and graduate school, began a career as a psychology professor, and started a family. I was interested in animals, and I wondered why young children were so interested in them, but these were academic concerns. I still didn’t take any action on animals’ behalf.

Things began to change one afternoon in the 1970s, when I was thirty-six years old. I was sitting with Ellen and our children in a Burger King restaurant. As I looked at my hamburger, I was suddenly shaken by the thought that I was about to eat an animal. I tried to comfort myself by thinking, The government wouldn’t let people just kill animals for hamburgers whenever people wanted. They probably kill the animals in their old age, after a good life. I sensed that I was fooling myself, but I pushed the worry out of my mind.

About a year later, I was standing in our suburban backyard, looking at the grass, and decided to become a vegetarian. No specific event or information precipitated my decision. I knew nothing about the awful treatment of animals on factory farms, which supply nearly all the
meat Americans eat. The thought just came to me that I would be a more peaceful person if I didn’t eat animals. At that moment, an odd sensation came over me: I felt a bit taller.

Eight years later, at the age of forty-five, I added a dimension to my adult life. In addition to my academic work, I began to engage in political activity. I first helped save most of a parcel of woods in my hometown of Teaneck, New Jersey. This was followed by election to the Teaneck school board and civil rights activities.

But despite my increasing political activism, I was slow to act in defense of animals. It wasn’t until I was fifty-four years old that I did so. I read a short newspaper article about a proposal to introduce black bear hunts in northern New Jersey, an hour and a half from our home. I thought, *I’d better do something to try to protect the bears,* and I drove upstate to testify at a public hearing.

Why did it take so long for me to act on behalf of animals? One reason was that it took time to separate myself from the mainstream society. Even as a young adult in the Burger King restaurant, I wanted to trust social authority; I wanted to believe the authorities wouldn’t tolerate rampant cruelty to animals. I suspect that such trust in authority is widespread, and stems from our species’ long childhood. We are dependent on adults for many years, and we need to believe in adult guidance, otherwise we would feel helpless and adrift. It often takes a while to question authority and to form our own judgments. It wasn’t until a year after the Burger King experience that I decided to trust my own feelings and stop eating meat.

My decision to testify on behalf of the bears, which came much later, felt more daring. When I became a vegetarian, I knew a few people who were vegetarians,
and they seemed to be ordinary folks, so I didn’t feel I was entering an entirely new social world. But prior to my decision to testify for the bears, I had never met an animal rights activist—the kind of person whom I imagined to see at the public hearing. I didn’t know what they would be like. Would I be joining the ranks of eccentrics or outcasts? It helped enormously that Ellen voiced her support. Ellen simply said, “Do what you think is right. If you want to help the bears, go; there’s nothing wrong with that.” When I did go to the hearing, I saw that the animal rights activists, like vegetarians, were actually ordinary people.

New Jersey wildlife agencies held several more public hearings on proposed bear hunts. I testified at as many as I could, and was happy that public opposition to the hunts seemed to grow. Many people thought the hunts would be cruel. But the wildlife agencies, whose memberships are dominated by hunters, wanted the hunts. The agencies cited the threats the bears posed. Actually, black bears are shy animals who have never killed a human in New Jersey’s recorded history. But new homeowners in rural areas were often afraid of the bears, and hunting advocates kept raising the possibility of a tragedy waiting to happen. Finally, in 2003, New Jersey introduced the first of several six-day hunts. Each year I joined the protest rallies and sometimes engaged in civil disobedience.

In the early 2000s, Ellen, too, was becoming increasingly concerned about animals. Her approach to the issues was more scientific than mine. She did much more reading, gathering factual information on the treatment of animals. I suspect that her objective approach stemmed from her professional life. She was a pediatrician in charge of the emergency department in a large
public hospital, where decisions had to be made on the basis of data. She decided, pretty much on the basis of facts alone, that the treatment of animals in modern societies was abysmal.

At this time, we both became concerned about deer hunting in Montauk, a small town on Long Island where our family vacationed. Deer hunting was largely justified as a means of reducing an overabundance of deer. Ellen pointed out that contraception could provide a scientifically sound alternative, and we formed a group to pursue this possibility.

Starting the Sanctuary

Ellen was also reading a good deal about factory farming, and sharing materials with me. She told me how each year in the United States alone, nearly ten billion land animals spend their lives crowded together in huge, windowless sheds, until the day of their slaughter. Most of the animals experience painful illnesses and injuries. Their misery is difficult to even imagine.

Ellen and I frequently discussed what we could do. We donated money to animal welfare organizations, but we wanted to do more. Ellen was interested in farm sanctuaries, which rescue animals that somehow escape factory farms and slaughterhouses—as when a truck derails and the animals run free. Even though the sanctuaries only save a tiny fraction of factory farmed animals, the sanctuaries host visitors and inform them about the conditions of the animals. Could we create one ourselves?

It would be a daunting task. Ellen and I were both busy with our professional lives. But we kept thinking about starting a farm sanctuary, and in 2006 we decided
to take the first step. We purchased a broken-down farm with a few acres of pasture in lower Dutchess County, New York. The farm included a barn and two small houses, all in such dilapidated condition that contractors recommended that we tear them down and start over. Then one contractor said he could restore them, and we hired him.

Construction took two years. When it was finished, we named the place Safe Haven Farm Sanctuary and were ready to open it to animals. Because Ellen and I couldn’t live permanently at the farm yet, we hired a caretaker, a young woman named Stacy. Stacy, who had been living in Connecticut, drove to the farm with her beautiful mare and a chicken she had named Miss Plucky. The chicken had been abandoned in a pasture with a broken leg. She was our first rescued animal.

A Chance to Learn

I wish I could say my own motive for starting the farm sanctuary was purely altruistic, but I had another goal: I wanted to learn more about animals. I was interested in animals in their own right, and I hoped they also might help me better understand human behavior, especially that of children.

Hearing this last goal, many psychologists will raise their eyebrows. “You cannot generalize from animals to humans” is a long-standing adage in psychology. True, not all psychologists have gone along with this adage. For example, neuroscientists who perform surgical operations on animals’ brains hope their findings apply to humans. But such research has largely been motivated by expediency. Researchers have performed operations on animals because it would be difficult or deemed unethical
to perform the same operations on human beings. And, in any case, few psychologists would recommend that we look at animals’ *natural* behavior, outside the laboratory, for insights into humans.

But there is a striking example of just this approach. It is the work of John Bowlby on children’s attachment to caretakers.

*Bowlby*

Until the 1950s, health professionals were puzzled by the urgency with which toddlers try to maintain proximity to parents. Why do toddlers frequently become so upset when separated from parents? Why, when they are separated for a week or two, do they go through a deep emotional crisis? There was no good theoretical explanation. Many health professionals believed that the children were simply behaving in an immature or neurotic manner. Then Bowlby, who was a psychoanalyst, drew on the observations of a group of biologists called ethologists, who focus on animals’ natural behavior.

Bowlby noted that ducklings, lambs, fawns, young chimpanzees, and numerous other young animals also stay close to their mothers. This behavior, most ethologists believe, provides the young ones with protection from predators. If a lamb or infant chimp wandered off alone—or didn’t follow the mother in time of danger—the youngster would be quite vulnerable to attack. And throughout most of human beings’ evolutionary past, Bowlby suggested, the situation was similar for our children. For millions of years, early humans lived in forests and savannas where they were threatened by predators.
A toddler who didn’t stay close to a parent figure was an easy meal for a leopard or a pack of wild dogs.

Bowlby speculated that the child’s need to stay close to caretakers might have originated an extremely long time ago—even before humans branched off from other species. This need for proximity probably emerged in our mammalian ancestors and continued to help early humans survive, when predators were still a terrifying presence.

Bowlby cast this need in a new light. When today’s toddlers desperately try to maintain contact with parents, they are not behaving neurotically or immaturity. They are driven by a natural, instinctual need. It's a need that is deeply rooted in our species’ evolutionary history. Indeed, if human children lacked this need, our species might not even exist today. True, young children don’t always cling to parents; children also venture away from them and explore the world. But the need to stay in contact with another person is strong. In fact, Bowlby argued, it is never completely lost, not even among adults.

Bowlby called the need to maintain proximity to caretakers “attachment behavior,” and he sparked a vast amount of research. The most influential work was that by his student Mary Ainsworth. Observing infants and mothers in Uganda, Ainsworth tracked the early development of attachment and proposed an attachment pattern that seems very healthy—a pattern in which infants and toddlers balance the need to maintain contact with parents and the need to explore. For example, infants and toddlers often use the mother as a secure base from which to investigate the environment. If a mother takes a one- or two-year-old to a new park, the child frequently stays near the mother a few minutes and then ventures some distance away to explore the surroundings. So long as the
child feels the mother is available if needed, the child can confidently turn his or her attention to the new and interesting objects.

This secure base behavior is part of a general pattern that Ainsworth called the secure pattern, and it describes a majority of children in a wide variety of cultures. And as these children grow up, they generally seem emotionally healthy, coping with life with confidence and energy.

Ainsworth and her colleagues also uncovered two patterns of insecure attachment. Some toddlers are so clingy that they have difficulty exploring; other children are so independent that they avoid full relationships with their parents. Children in the insecure patterns more frequently suffer from emotional difficulties as they grow up.

Today, the study of attachment is extremely popular. Psychologists’ knowledge of it is quite detailed. But the ethological perspective that started the field has faded into the background. One would hardly know that the initial inspiration came from observations of non-human animals. Moreover, there has been little effort to extend Bowlby’s work—to see how the study of animals illuminates other aspects of child development. There have been a few exceptions, but in general there has been a reluctance to follow Bowlby’s lead.

Cultural Resistance

I believe this reluctance stems from our cultural values. In Western societies, we draw a sharp line between ourselves and other animals. We speak of the “animal kingdom” as if it were completely separate from us, as if we were not members of it. And we generally consider animals to be very inferior to us. In fact, to call someone an “animal” is usually a derogatory statement.
Psychologists and other scholars are not immune from these cultural attitudes. They share the Western view that our species is special, and they have searched for the capacity that separates us from all the others. “What makes humans unique?”—this has been the great question. Over the years, scholars have proposed various answers, such as the ability to make tools, to use symbols, and to transmit culture. No proposal has held up to scrutiny; each capacity has turned out to be present in some non-human animals, at least to some degree. But the search for human uniqueness continues.

A new field—evolutionary psychology—seems perfect for advancing Bowlby’s general approach, examining ways in which other animals might cast light on human behavior. But by and large, this hasn’t happened. I suspect the reason is that evolutionary psychologists initially encountered considerable hostility from mainstream psychology. So evolutionary psychologists have shied away from ideas that might offend people, such as the idea that humans are similar to other animals. Instead, evolutionary psychologists have confined their attention to aspects of human behavior, such as human mate selection. When they have talked about other animals at all, it has frequently been to say how humans differ from them.

**This Book**

My book is in the spirit of Bowlby. I talk about animals and draw implications for the lives of human children. True, my effort is somewhat different. Whereas Bowlby drew on vast amounts of published research, I primarily rely on my personal observations. And my effort is more modest. Whereas Bowlby launched a new field in
psychology, my main goal is to share observations and offer tentative insights. But, like Bowlby, I do want to call attention to how animal behavior can help us understand our own species.

I have made observations while performing chores or just relaxing with the animals. I have watched them as carefully as I can, and I have written notes after the animals are in bed for the night. I have also kept a small video camera with me and have taken footage whenever I have seen anything new. My approach strikes many of my professional colleagues as very informal, and I agree it is. But I believe it is useful in early phases of research. Moreover, this approach would find sympathy among ethologists, who say that our first task is simply to spend the time to get to know animals. As the pioneering ethologist Konrad Lorenz said, researchers initially need to set aside their presumptions and observe freshly and carefully—“Quite simply, to see what there is.”

Ethologists add that we should, ideally, study animals not in confinement but in the wild. We need to see how behavior patterns helped the animals survive in their natural environments. But most of our farm animals do not live in the wild; most spend their daylight hours in fenced pastures and their nights in barns and coops. I wish we could give all our animals a completely free life, allowing them to wander wherever they wish, but I doubt many would survive. If coyotes and foxes didn’t get them, human hunters and speeding cars would.

Still, we have tried to give our animals as much freedom as possible. We have extended the pastures for the goats and sheep into a wooded hillside, and we allow our chickens to wander throughout the farm. I will say more on this topic later. And, in any event, I try to follow the
ethologists’ recommendation to always think about how behavior I see might have developed in the wild.

This book is divided into two parts. Part I discusses six emotional behaviors shared by our animals and human children. Part II returns to the broader social theme of our Western culture’s disparagement of animals. I note that children do not initially share the dominant culture’s negative view, and that children are taught to detach themselves from animals and devalue them. During my discussion, I emphasize the possibility that animals and children, more commonly than adults, feel at one with nature and her peacefulness—feelings that many people would call spiritual.
PART I

Emotions in Animals
and Children
One afternoon I was out in the pasture digging up nettles. After a bit, one of our five goats, Mattie, left the others and came over to me. She put her head next to my hand, and I rubbed her neck. She tilted her head so I could rub it a few seconds more, then she left to rejoin her companions. As she walked away, I had the nice feeling you get when an old friend reaches out to you. I thought about the length of time she had been with us: four and a half years. That’s not a real long time, I thought, but we’ve been through a lot. During her first weeks on the farm she was so scared of humans that I wouldn’t have dreamt that she would ever come over to me in such a friendly way.

I first saw Mattie in a live meat market in the Bronx. Live meat markets allow customers to walk in and select the kind and size of the animal they want slaughtered and butchered. This is done on the premises, so customers can be certain their meat is fresh. In most of the markets, a majority of the animals are chickens, which are usually crammed on top of one another. Many of the markets also sell ducks, guinea hens, rabbits, goats, and sheep.
Ellen and I had driven by this particular market in the Bronx many times, and we had often seen a large sheep standing near the front door. Occasionally we saw one of the goats. Later we learned that most farm sanctuaries oppose the purchase of animals from live meat markets; the purchases, they point out, support the markets’ business. We later came to see their point. But at the time, the sight of the animals made us want to do something. So when our farm sanctuary was ready to house animals, in February 2008, we decided to save a few from this market. In particular, I had my mind on the sheep by the door. We also decided we would purchase two goats.

Ellen and I rented a truck, put hay in the back, and drove to the meat market on a chilly Sunday morning. When we arrived, we were joined by our farm’s first caretaker, Stacy, and her friend Tom. We walked into the store, talked to the manager, and purchased the sheep we had seen by the door. We also bought a second sheep—a recent arrival who was the only other sheep on the premises. The sheep ran for their lives, but the workers captured them within two or three minutes.

When I turned my attention to the goats, I started feeling upset—even a little sick inside. How could we decide whom to save? Saving two meant determining that the others would die! But the manager didn’t ask us to choose. He just told his workers to capture two goats. As soon as the workers stepped into the goats’ room, all of them, like the sheep, ran for their lives. The goats were trickier and much more difficult to catch. Although the goats had almost no space to run, it took the workers at least fifteen minutes to grab hold of two of them. So we didn’t make any selection; the two goats presented to us were simply the first two the workers could capture.
Once a worker got hold of a sheep or goat, he grabbed the animal by the feet and flung the animal upside down. He then dragged the sheep or goat about thirty feet across the cement floor. When he reached the large scale for weighing, he flung the animal onto it. If the animal was very heavy, another worker helped throw the animal onto the device. We pleaded with the workers to be gentler, but they ignored us. We paid the manager, put make-shift leashes on the animals, and with some pushing from behind, guided them into the back of the truck. They were all trembling and cowering.

On the trip back to the farm, Ellen drove one car, Stacy and Tom drove another car, and I drove the truck with the goats and sheep. The trip would ordinarily take an hour and a half, but I lost contact with the cars and took a wrong turn. For another half hour, I couldn’t figure out how to get back on the correct highway. Soon I began to worry about the animals’ health. *The truck doors are all closed,* I thought. *If this trip takes longer than I planned, will the animals get enough air?* I knew nothing about such transports. Should I pull the truck over and open its back door to give the animals some air? Or might they jump out and run onto the highway? Finally, I did stop and peek in. They were huddled together and breathing okay.

After three hours of driving, I steered the truck up to the barn. Ellen, Stacy, and Tom were waiting. I sensed that they were irritated by my delay, but they didn’t say much because we all had to focus on getting the animals out of the truck and into the barn. All the sheep and goats were scared to death. Pointing to Mattie, Tom said, “This one is trembling something awful!” Tom tried to calm her by stroking her back, but to no avail. He told her, “You’re scared now, but you don’t know how lucky you are.”
Stacy named the animals, and we kept the sheep and goats in a quarantine stall for four weeks, while we had them tested and treated for parasites and other illnesses. During this period, Ellen and I had to work in the city, but we traveled to the farm several days a week. I spent most of my time sitting quietly in a corner of their stall, hoping that if I were unobtrusive, they would get used to me and become less fearful of humans. This seemed to work, but only slightly.

When we finally let the goats and sheep into the pasture, their first act was to inspect the fences. They walked to each section of fence, sniffing and examining it. All the while, the farm’s large mare (whom Stacy brought with her when she took the job of caretaker) was watching from outside the fence. Then, when the sheep and goats finished their inspection and drifted to the center of the pasture, the mare began running, jumping, and snorting. To me, she seemed to be saying, “Come on! Play!” The goats and sheep spent about thirty seconds running and jumping, too, but then stopped. They weren’t sufficiently comfortable to continue.

Silent Animals, Silent Children

Four days later I heard loud “baa” sounds. At first I didn’t know where the sounds came from. Then I saw they were from our own sheep and goats. I suddenly realized that these animals had been silent for over four weeks! And as I thought about the meat market, I didn’t remember “baa” sounds there, either. Why were the goats and sheep so silent?

Ethologists such as Konrad Lorenz say that if we wish to understand animal behavior in domestic situations, we
need to transpose our images to their natural environments. In the wild, it is highly adaptive for many mammals to be silent in times of danger. Any noise might inform a predator of their whereabouts. For over four weeks, our goats and sheep had gone through a traumatic period when they felt at great risk. So an instinctive response—silence—kicked in.

My thoughts then turned to a human childhood symptom. I had long been puzzled by the fact that young children sometimes stop talking when they lose a parent. For instance, a four-year-old boy who came to my college’s mental health clinic became mute for several months after his father left the family and died. The boy didn’t exhibit other symptoms; he simply didn’t speak. Some of the clinic staff offered a psychoanalytic interpretation. Perhaps, they said, the child unconsciously believed that his words expressed bad thoughts that killed his father. But there was no evidence to support this interpretation. At the farm, it struck me that children who lose parents suddenly feel unprotected, somewhat like our goats and sheep, and this vulnerability triggers an instinctive silence. Children’s silence, that is, might be part of our mammalian ancestry, a survival mechanism developed in our evolutionary past.

Other children exhibit “selective mutism.” They typically speak at home but not in other situations, such as school. In these cases, too, children might feel unprotected, and the instinctive response of silence, shared with other animals, is activated.

If this speculation has merit, support for it might emerge in children’s play therapy. For example, a mute child might hide a child doll when large, “bad” toy figures are near, indicating that the doll feels unprotected. And

Fear

7
the therapist’s timely acknowledgement of this feeling might help the child feel understood. The child’s symptom wouldn’t be expected to suddenly disappear, but chil-
dren do appreciate being understood, which often allows them to become more relaxed and active in the therapy.

**Freezing**

An evolutionary perspective also might cast light on perplexing behavior in an experimental situation created in the 1960s by Mary Ainsworth. In order to understand toddlers’ attachment to their mothers, the mothers are asked to bring their one-year-olds to an unfamiliar room. After a few minutes, the mother briefly leaves her child alone with a research assistant. The mother’s departure is distressing to most children. Even children who have developed basic trust in their mother sometimes cry, and they happily greet her when she returns.

This experimental situation has proved to be a very productive research tool. It has enabled researchers to classify children’s patterns of attachments to their mothers in consistent and meaningful ways. However, for a long time, some behaviors struck researchers as odd and difficult to classify. The two most common behaviors occur when the mother re-enters the room. In one case, the child approaches the mother, but the child’s head is averted. In the second case, the child freezes. The child looks like he or she is in a trance. In 1990, psychologists Mary Main and Judith Solomon concluded that children exhibiting such odd behaviors “lack a strategy” for dealing with the stressful situation, and Main and Solomon created a new attachment category for such behavior, calling it “Disorganized/Disoriented.” Studies
have found that this general category fits about 14 to 24 percent of toddlers.

Main and her colleagues suspect that the children in this general category are frightened by their mothers. Main’s speculation is supported by other research, which suggests that such mothers can fly into unpredictable outbursts of rage. It is understandable, then, that a child in the strange situation might approach her mother for security but also avert her head in case she might be hit.

But why would a child freeze?

When the children freeze, they are not just silent. Their immobile behavior seems more drastic. It strikes many researchers as outright bizarre.

Freezing is more understandable when we consider our evolutionary past. Numerous species of mammals freeze when predators pose an immediate threat. Freezing is adaptive because predators rarely, if ever, attack anything that is perfectly still. It’s quite possible that our own distant mammalian ancestors employed this defense, and that it remained adaptive for early humans, after they branched off from other primates. It was an effective defense for the early humans in the forests, open woodlands, and savannas, where leopards and other predators roamed.

My speculation, then, is that the toddlers who freeze are so terribly frightened that an ancient, innate response comes to the fore. If this speculation has merit, the label “disorganized/disoriented” is misleading, as is the conclusion that the toddler “lacks a strategy.” Freezing is not just aimless behavior. It’s a primordial physiological reaction that evolved because it served a purpose. It enabled our ancestors to survive. It might not seem strategic in modern circumstances, but it was effective...
for millions of years and is therefore something to which the organism resorts.

By analogy, imagine a group of soldiers who run out of ammunition and must rely on early human weapons—rocks and sticks. The soldiers don’t have much chance of victory, but the rocks and sticks do have a purpose. The soldiers’ use of them is not merely “disorganized/disoriented” activity. Similarly, in an overwhelmingly frightening situation, some toddlers automatically fall back on one of the organism’s early survival mechanisms, freezing.

Therapists and parents might discover that an unexpected benefit accrues when they try to understand seemingly bizarre and disorganized behavior more positively, as an effort to cope and survive. Because children often pick up on adult attitudes, children might feel a new respect, and the overall tone of the adult-child interactions might improve.