

Vulnerable Yet Vital

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Human beings need special care while we are young and when we become old. The 2020 pandemic has made this vivid: millions of people across the world have taken care of children at home, and millions more have tried to care for grandparents, even when they couldn't be physically close to them. COVID-19 has reminded us how much we need to take care of the young and the old. But it's also reminded us how much we care for and about them, and how important the relations between the generations are. I have missed restaurants and theatres and haircuts, but I would easily give them all up to be able to hug my grandchildren without fear. And there is something remarkably moving about the way that young people transformed their lives to protect older ones.

But this raises a puzzling scientific paradox. We know that biological creatures are shaped by the forces of evolution, which selects organisms based on their fitness – that is, their ability to survive and reproduce in a particular environment. So why has it allowed us to be so vulnerable and helpless for long stretches of our lives? Why do the strong, able humans in their prime of life put so much time and energy into caring for those who are not yet, or no longer, so productive? New research argues that those vulnerabilities are intimately related to some of our greatest human strengths – our capacities for learning, cooperation and culture.

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