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ABSTRACT

Because our world is changing in important ways, animals and humans both have to adjust their behaviour to unfamiliar situations. Whether they are successful depends on what is changing and how, but also on the individual itself. The development of coping behaviour is strongly influenced by the early-life environment, by means of developmental processes such as parental effects, imprinting and social learning. Each of these are vulnerable to insufficient or harmful influences, especially from habitat, parents, nutrition and social environment.

A study on sticklebacks illustrated that small differences in early-life environment can already lead to visible differences in coping behaviours such as exploration, sociality and neuroticism. A subsequent study indicated that the environments which animals experience during development, housing and experiments all very strongly affect coping behaviour. This can be a problem for researching animal behaviour. Human behaviour was also studied, to understand cause and consequence of intergenerational transmission of coping behaviour – i.e. how people come to resemble their parents in personality, and if this is helpful.

Father’s rejection at age eleven related to less resemblance with both parents at age sixteen. Youth who resembled their parents more at this point, experienced more wellbeing and less depressive symptoms at age nineteen. Parental depression did not change this relationship. Although some environmental effects are reversible, this is not always the case. Both animals and humans appear to be limited by the early-life conditions they experience in their ability to develop the most adaptive behaviour for the world they live in.