Feral children

Feral children, also called **wild children**, children who, through either accident or deliberate isolation, have grown up with limited human contact. Such children have often been seen as inhabiting a boundary zone between human and animal existence; for this reason the motif of the child reared by animals is a recurring theme in myth. In the modern era, feral children have been seen as providing a window for the scientific study of fundamental human traits such as language use. During the 20th century, as psychologists endeavored to distinguish between behaviorism and biological nature, wild children—a designation including children in isolation as well as those who survived among animals—again seemed to provide a key to the puzzle.

Before the 17th century, outside of myth and legend, only scattered and fragmented stories of feral or wild children appear in European history. Suddenly, during the 1600s, several accounts emerge; there are descriptions of a wolf boy in Germany and children abducted by bears in Poland; and, in 1644, the first story appears in English of John of Liège, a boy lost by his parents in the woods who took on animal-like behaviors to survive on his own for years. Early descriptions of such children detailed their nonhuman qualities: running on all fours, foraging and hunting for food, exceptional hearing, and absence of language. As several such children were rescued from the wild and brought back into human society, their continued animalistic behavior coupled with a seeming inability to master language fascinated philosophers, who began to wonder if such children actually belonged to a different species from the human family.

This question was taken up with great seriousness in the 18th and 19th centuries as science attempted to name, classify, and understand the intricacies of the natural world and human development. The most widely known feral child of the early 18th century was a boy found near Hanover in 1725. Peter the Wild Boy—as the famous physician John Arbuthnot named him—became a fascination of the English royalty, living for the next few years with both King George I and the Prince of Wales. Like earlier children found in the wilderness, Peter's unbreakable silence and unique ability to survive much as an animal would compelled scientists to address this animal-human divide. Within a decade of Peter's discovery, Carolus Linnaeus, the hugely influential natural historian, actually included feral man, *Homo ferens*, as one of six distinct human species. Notably, *H. ferens* is the only classification listing individuals—rather than whole races—as examples.

In the 1792 translation of Linnaeus's *Natural Systems* into English, however, a note was added that such children were probably "idiots" who had been abandoned or had strayed from their families. It was this conflation of feral nature and disability that was taken up by Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard in his project of civilizing one of the most famous cases in Europe, Victor of Aveyron, a wild boy caught in 1800 in the forests near Lacaune. Philippe Pinel, the foremost physician in France, dismissed Victor as an "idiot," but to Itard, the boy was a living artifact—an atavistic body on which to test the notion espoused by John Locke and later by Étienne Bonnot de Condillac that human knowledge was constructed rather than inborn. After several years of training, however, Victor was still unable to use language, a failure that further solidified an understanding of feral children as mentally "infantile" and "inferior."

Presently, most psychologists attribute the inability of such children to master language to their unique histories of survival outside of human society—as a behavioral mechanism specifically adapted to their

environment and circumstances rather than a biological inability. Fascination with wild children, however, remains, and the fates of such children become deeply tied to the doctors, teachers, and caregivers who, through measurement, diagnosis, training, and compassion, inevitably attempt to resocialize these children and return them to the fold of human interaction.

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