

WOLF CHILDREN

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Wolf Children (The Case of Amala and Kamala)

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Developmental Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Linguistics

1. Core Definition

The term **Wolf Children** refers to a specific, highly publicized, and often romanticized subset of **feral children**, defined as human beings who have lived isolated from human contact from a very young age, thus lacking experience of human care, language, and social behaviors. While the general concept of feral children includes individuals raised in isolation (e.g., attic children) or those allegedly raised by various animals (e.g., monkeys, bears), the archetype of the **Wolf Child** holds a unique place in popular culture and academic debate, primarily due to the 1920 case of Amala and Kamala in India.

In a strict academic context, the phenomenon provides critical, albeit ethically complex, insight into the **nature versus nurture debate**, particularly concerning the essential environmental inputs required for the development of core human competencies such as bipedal locomotion, abstract reasoning, and structured language acquisition. The specific narrative of being nurtured by wolves--predatory, highly social pack animals--contrasts sharply with the inherent fragility and dependency of a human infant, immediately raising questions about the veracity of such accounts, though the behavioral outcomes observed in such children often mirror the traits of extreme deprivation.

The children classified as "wolf children," particularly the most famous documented subjects, display profound behavioral adaptations consistent with lupine life trends, including nocturnal activity, a preference for raw or bolted food, aggressive defense mechanisms, and reliance on olfaction rather than sight for navigation. These deeply entrenched habits underscore the devastating impact of early social deprivation, suggesting that the human template for behavior remains dormant unless activated and molded by consistent human interaction during the critical early developmental windows.

2. The Discovery and Initial Account

The primary source for the case of the **Wolf Children of Midnapore** is the diary compiled by Reverend Joseph Amrito Lal Singh, the director of the local orphanage where the girls were taken. According to Singh's account, in 1920, the girls were discovered near the village of Godamuri in the Midnapore district of India, allegedly living in a den with a pack of wolves. Villagers reported seeing two spectral human figures running on all fours alongside adult wolves, prompting Singh to organize an investigation.

The discovery itself was sensational: the two girls were captured after the mother wolf and the rest of the pack were driven away or killed. Upon capture, the younger girl, named Amala, was

estimated to be about 18 months old, while the older girl, Kamala, was estimated to be approximately eight years old. They were immediately brought to the local orphanage run by Singh and his wife, where attempts at rehabilitation and observation began, documenting their entirely non-human behavioral repertoire.

Singh meticulously documented the girls' condition and subsequent behavior, asserting that they exhibited every significant lupine trend. This detailed, first-hand narrative quickly circulated globally, transforming the case into the quintessential example of feral childhood. However, it is vital to note that Singh's diary and his interpretations constitute the sole evidentiary basis for the claim that the children were literally raised by wolves, a fact that would later become the central focus of intense scrutiny and academic skepticism.

3. Behavioral Manifestations and Characteristics

Upon their relocation to the orphanage, the girls demonstrated behaviors consistent with profound isolation and the alleged adoption of animal traits, behaviors that drastically set them apart from normal human children. These characteristics highlight the extreme malleability of human behavior in the absence of cultural and linguistic scaffolding.

Locomotion: Both girls habitually ran on all four legs, often at surprising speeds. Their joints, particularly their knees and palms, were reportedly calloused and hardened from continuous quadrupedal movement. When forced into bipedalism, they adopted a half-crouch or shuffled, demonstrating immense discomfort in maintaining an upright stance.

Dietary Habits: They refused prepared human food, instead preferring to lap liquids and bolt raw or spoiled meat, often rejecting food that was not placed on the ground. They would often tear food apart with their teeth and consume it rapidly, exhibiting none of the learned etiquette associated with human mealtime.

Vocalization and Auditory Preference: Their primary mode of communication was howling, particularly during the night, a behavior strongly associated with wolf communication. They demonstrated extreme sensitivity to human noise and conversation but showed comfort with and responsiveness to sounds traditionally associated with the wild.

Nocturnal Rhythms: They were primarily nocturnal, sleeping curled up together during the day and exhibiting restlessness, alertness, and activity after sunset. This reversed circadian rhythm was a difficult habit for Singh and his staff to break.

Social Aversion: They displayed severe aversion to human interaction, preferring to huddle together in dark corners and exhibiting aggressive or defensive behaviors when approached by strangers or caregivers. Their emotional responses were limited to fear, aggression, or distress, lacking the nuanced social expressions typical of human engagement.

These established characteristics serve as poignant examples of the **critical period hypothesis** in

action. The absence of linguistic and social models during the early years resulted in the development of highly adaptive, non-human survival traits, illustrating that biological potential alone is insufficient for achieving human behavioral norms; specific environmental triggers are indispensable.

4. Attempts at Rehabilitation and Development

The attempted rehabilitation of Amala and Kamala was a heartbreaking study in delayed human development. Tragically, Amala, the younger of the two, died less than a year after her capture, succumbing to an illness common in institutional settings. This left Kamala as the sole subject of the long-term socialization effort led by Mrs. Singh.

Kamala survived until the estimated age of 17, offering a longer, though still limited, window into the recovery capacity of a feral child. Over approximately nine years, the slow process yielded minimal but significant progress. She eventually learned to walk upright, though she never fully abandoned the half-crouch posture and required significant conscious effort to maintain bipedalism. This difficulty suggests that the neuro-muscular pathways for walking must be established early in life to become automatic.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect was language acquisition. By the time of her death, Kamala had learned only a small vocabulary, estimated to be around 40 to 50 words, and her use of syntax and grammar remained rudimentary at best. She did, however, achieve some degree of social assimilation, learning to wear clothes, carry out rudimentary chores within the orphanage, and expressing simple affection toward Mrs. Singh, who was the only person she seemed to bond with. Her ultimate inability to achieve full linguistic or cognitive development is frequently cited in psychological literature as powerful evidence supporting the notion that a definitive critical period exists for human socialization and language acquisition, after which full recovery is functionally impossible.

5. Theoretical Significance in Developmental Psychology

Despite the controversies surrounding the factual basis of their upbringing, the case of Amala and Kamala, alongside other feral children like Victor of Aveyron, holds immense theoretical significance. These cases function as "natural experiments," providing glimpses into the consequences of profound early deprivation--scenarios that ethical guidelines prohibit researchers from deliberately creating.

The girls' struggle to acquire language and bipedal movement firmly buttresses the **Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)**, popularized by linguists like Eric Lenneberg. CPH posits that the biological mechanisms necessary for language acquisition (and certain motor skills) are highly sensitive to environmental input only during a specific time frame, typically ending around puberty. Kamala's

minimal linguistic progress, despite years of intensive teaching, suggests that once this window closes, the neurological structures lose their plasticity, making fluency unattainable.

Furthermore, the case informs attachment theory and the study of social cognition. The initial inability of the girls to form emotional bonds, coupled with their preference for each other and the subsequent slow, specific attachment to Mrs. Singh, highlights the foundational role of early, consistent human interaction in establishing psychological health. Their feral state demonstrates that **human identity** is not an inherent quality that manifests regardless of environment, but is rather a construct fundamentally dependent on sociocultural immersion and interaction.

6. Debates, Skepticism, and Methodological Criticisms

The narrative of the Wolf Children of Midnapore is one of the most disputed in developmental psychology. Starting in the mid-20th century, academics began challenging the sole reliance on Reverend Singh's diary, arguing that the account is inconsistent, highly subjective, and lacks credible external verification, making it difficult to differentiate fact from sensationalism or misunderstanding.

A leading counter-argument is that Amala and Kamala were not raised by wolves but were, instead, children who had been abandoned due to severe congenital or acquired developmental disabilities, such as profound intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, or physical deformities. Their primitive behaviors--running on all fours, bolting food, and limited speech--could be symptomatic of severe cognitive impairment combined with long-term neglect, rather than successful lupine adoption. Critics point out that survival among a pack of wild wolves for multiple years, particularly for an 18-month-old infant, is biologically improbable.

The strongest criticisms center on the lack of objective, scientific methodology in the documentation. Singh was a missionary, not a trained behavioral scientist, and his observations were filtered through his own religious and cultural lens, often portraying the girls as needing "civilization" rather than clinical assessment. These methodological flaws have led many modern researchers to categorize the case not as definitive proof of feral upbringing, but as a compelling, yet unverifiable, anecdote illustrating the devastating consequences of extreme childhood neglect.

7. Further Reading

[Amala and Kamala \(Wikipedia entry detailing the case history and controversy\)](#)

[Feral Child \(General overview of the phenomenon in sociology and psychology\)](#)

[Critical Period Hypothesis \(Discussion of the sensitive timeline for language and social development\)](#)