Media Release
Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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Study finds infant mammals prefer to stay on the right side of mum, literally

Human and primate mothers prefer to cradle their babies in their left arms, a strong bias explained by the dominance of the right hemisphere of the brain in social processing.

Signals from the left eye are received by the right half of the brain, so the left side bias allows for the most effective monitoring of visual cues such as facial expressions and supports mother-infant bonding.

This left side preference has now been studied for the first time in the mother-infant interactions of 11 different species of free ranging marine and terrestrial mammals.

Infant whales, reindeer, kangaroos, walrus, muskox and antelope, among others, were found to have a preference for keeping their mothers on their left side, rather than the right, while moving forward or suckling.

In contrast, the mothers showed a preference only in times of high stress, such as when fleeing from a disturbance. In these situations, the majority of mothers chose to have their infants on their left side.

Both types of mother-infant interactions support the processing of visual cues by the right brain hemisphere.

Wildlife ecologist, University of Tasmania PhD student and study co-author Janeane Ingram, said all of the mammals observed for the study were wild animals at risk of predation.

“In the wild, infants need to know where their mother is at all times and when there is danger present, a mother must closely monitor her infant,” Ms Ingram said.

“The left bias we observed supports the processing of visual cues by the right hemisphere of the brain, and is an advantage for individuals in terms of survival.”
Ms Ingram said the research indicated how widespread the left side bias was beyond humans and primates, and contributes to our understanding of the evolutionary origin of right hemisphere dominance for social processing.

The paper, *Lateralization of mother-infant interactions in a diverse range of mammal species*, was published online today in the scientific journal *Nature Ecology and Evolution*. The full article is available [here](#).

The research was led by Karina Karenina, Andrey Giliov and Yegor Malashichev from Saint Petersburg State University in Russia with data collected over 11 research expeditions across several continents between 2012 and 2016. More than 10,000 observations were made of 175 infant-mother pairs.

Ms Ingram said the research was supported with funding from the National Geographic Society and the Russian Science Foundation.

You can read more about [Ms Ingram’s work](#) online.

**For interviews with Ms Janeane Ingram** contact Ben Wild on 0438 510 616.

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