



The Wisdom of Aztec Parents

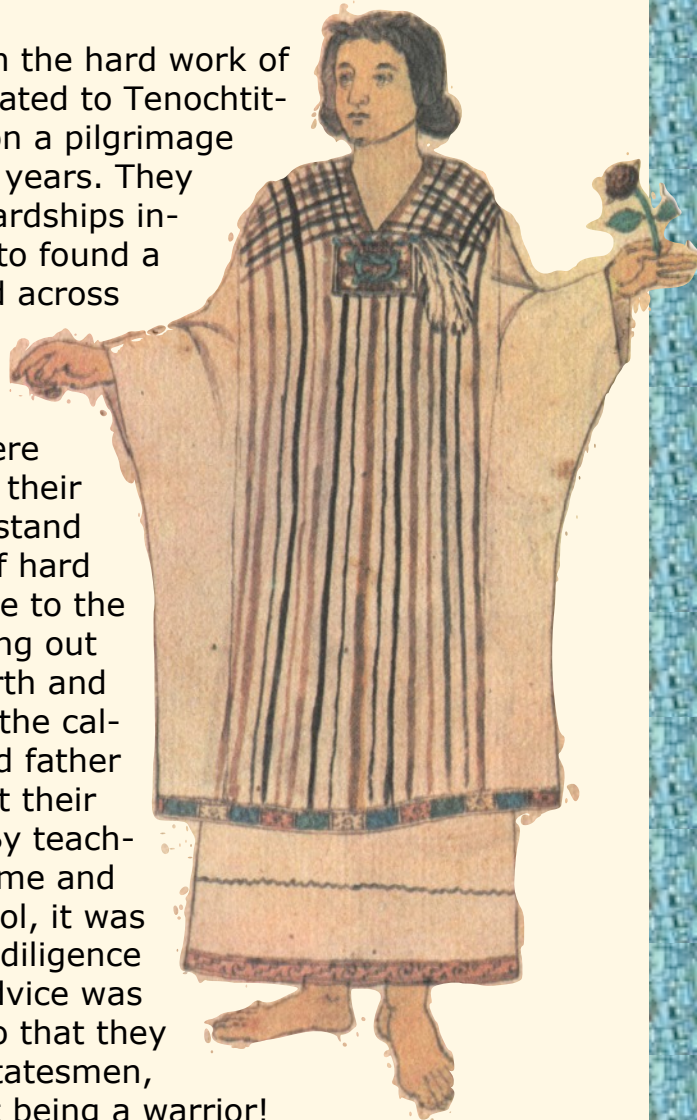
Likened to precious jade stones and Quetzal feathers, the Aztecs valued their children incredibly. But although sons and daughters were held in high esteem, they had to earn the respect of their neighbours and society. How did their parents help them do this?



Nezahualpilli,
Codex Ixtlilxochitl, fol.108

Aztec civilization was built on the hard work of its tribal ancestors who migrated to Tenochtitlan from Northern Mexico on a pilgrimage that took them hundreds of years. They went through countless hardships including hunger and war to found a great empire that spread across Mexico and into Central

America. Ever industrious, the Aztecs were careful to make their children understand the meaning of hard work and penance to the gods. By carrying out special rituals at birth and paying attention to the calendar, a mother and father could try to protect their child from danger. By teaching them skills at home and educating them at school, it was hoped they would learn diligence and enterprise. Good advice was showered on children so that they could hone their skills, become statesmen, priests or even take a stab at being a warrior!



Aztec woman, Codex Tudela, fol.02

Responsible from the day of birth

It was no easy thing to bring up an Aztec child...parents had to protect their souls from the forces of the universe! Responsible for their fate at the hands of the gods, parents had to make sure their child had a good horoscope. Born on a 'bad' day of the calendar, a girl or boy could be destined for destruction. It was the mother and father's responsibility to make sure the right people were employed to turn a bad lot into a great one. But, who could they trust to do this?



The Soothsayer

When they were born, babies were seen by a priest or soothsayer, called a Tonalpouhqui. This priest was charged by the parents with an important mission: fixing the baby's naming ceremony on a day that would bring it good luck.

The Aztec lunar calendar was used, among many things, for divination and predicting a child's character traits, much like horoscopes are used now. Parents could find themselves in hot water if a child was born on an inauspicious day!

The image to the right is from the Florentine Codex. A Tonalpouhqui is advising the mother on the right day to name her baby. The presence of 'scrolls' leaving his open mouth means that his words are important.



Florentine Codex, Book IV, Chapter XXXV

Happy birthday to you...or not.

Below is a picture of the Aztec Calendar Stone. Once of its circles displays the 20 day signs used in Aztec calendars. The lunar calendar featured each day sign 13 times before completing its full cycle of 260 days. The day signs were combined into 20 periods, which we refer to as weeks or 'trecenas'. Have a look at some examples of the lunar cycle's terrible birthdays!



9 Alligator (Chiconahui Cipactli)
Born under this sign, a man would sow discord, be rebellious and lie easily. He would tell everyone's secrets and live a life of poverty.

2 Rabbit (Ome Tochtli)

Someone predisposed to enjoying too much alcohol would be born under this sign! He would drink pulque, which is like a beer made from the Maguey plant.



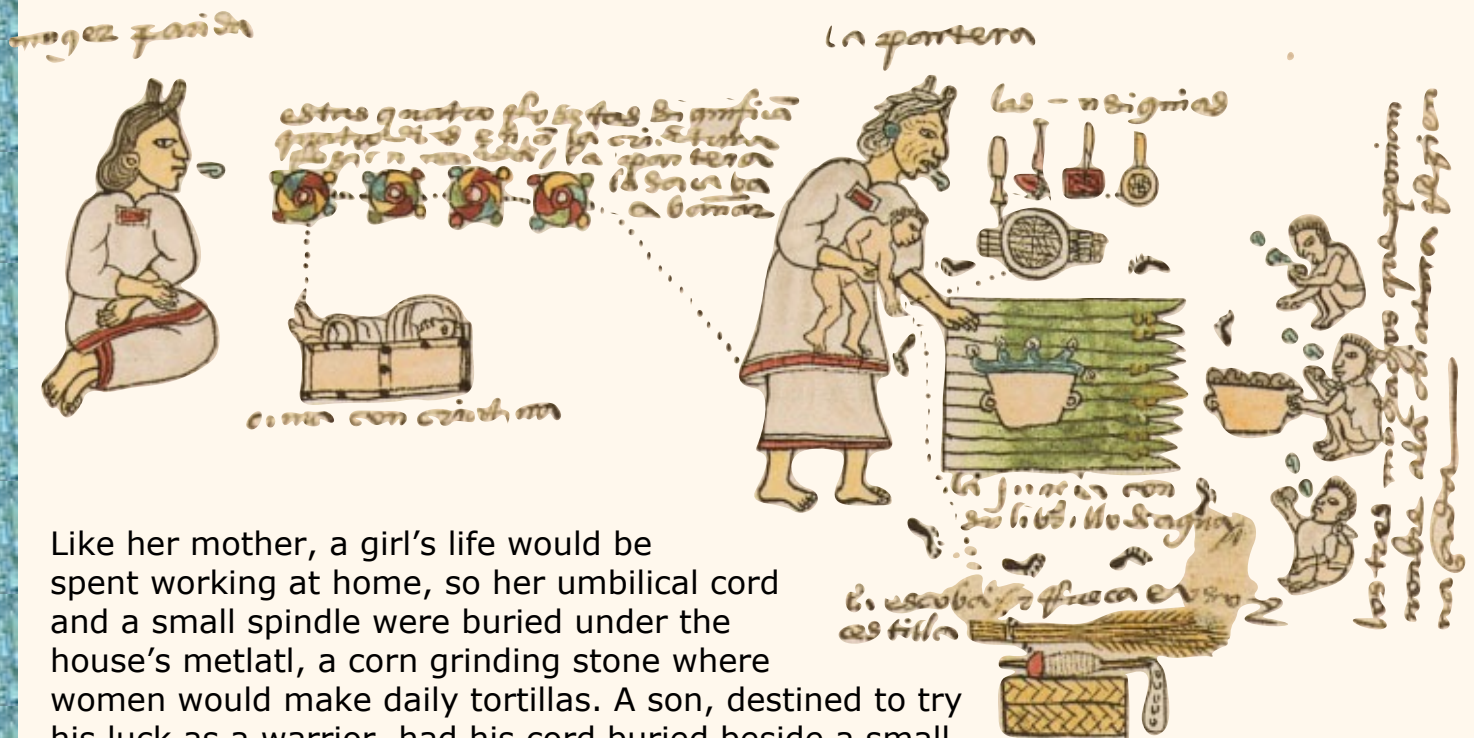
1 Rain (Ce Quiahuitl)
This was a terrible sign in which Cihuateteo (the spirits of women who had died in labour) would descend to earth. No children were safe from these creatures. If caught by them, they would be struck down by terrible illnesses. New-borns were particularly vulnerable to their influence.



1 Jaguar (Ce Ocelotl)
Any child, of noble or common birth born under this sign was likely to become a captive of war. He might also have debts and need to sell himself into slavery. A woman might be adulterous and suffer death as a consequence.

The Midwife

Also a spiritual intermediary with priest-like powers, the midwife was asked into the home to deliver an expected baby. Once the soothsayer set a naming date, the midwife carried out a cleansing ceremony in which she rid the baby of impurities, thought to be passed on by its parents, by washing the mouth, head and chest. All the while, she commended the child to the gods, especially Chalchiuhtlicue (goddess of still waters), and Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent).



Like her mother, a girl's life would be spent working at home, so her umbilical cord and a small spindle were buried under the house's metlatl, a corn grinding stone where women would make daily tortillas. A son, destined to try his luck as a warrior, had his cord buried beside a small shield and arrows on one of the battlefields where the Aztecs fought their enemies. The image above is from the Codex Mendoza, and shows the midwife performing the bathing ceremony with a newly born child. Above the bath is a boy's shield, and below, a girl's spindle. The mother (left) and midwife are using speech scrolls, which denotes their wisdom.

We have seen how parents needed the help of others in welcoming their babies into the world. However, their jobs as protectors would not end until their children married. Here are some examples of how mothers and fathers ensured the survival of their progeny.



Growing Up

The Aztecs worried about their babies' physical capacity to grow. Luckily, both lunar and solar calendars (260 and 365 days respectively) had festivals during which a parent could ensure that their child continued to flourish.

Every four years, during the month of Izcalli ('The Growing'), children were passed over a ceremonial flame and had their ears pierced. They then underwent the ceremony of Quinquechanaya ('They Stretch Them By The Neck'), in which they were lifted by the head and their limbs stretched. On the lunar date of 4 Movement (Nahui Ollin), children's fingers, toes, legs, noses, necks and ears were also pulled in order to stimulate growth. (find out more about Quinquechanaya and Nahui Ollin [here](#)).



An illustration of some flames and a shooting star. Florentine Codex, Book VII.

It's all in the eyes...

It was also thought amongst the Aztecs and Maya Tzotzils that a person's shadow acquired power over time. Therefore, young children were particularly vulnerable to the power of older people. Parents had to make sure that their children's delicate constitutions would not be harmed by the direct gaze of an aged person!



An old man featured in the Codex Mendoza, fol. 71r

A Parent's Advice

Historians of Aztec culture are able to identify two seminal texts that talk about parents' involvement in their children's education. These are the Florentine Codex and the Codex Mendoza, written in the sixteenth century. Both resources are different, as the Florentine Codex talks about how high-born Aztec children (pipiltin) were brought up, and the Codex Mendoza guides us through the childhoods of commoners (macehualtin). This following section allows us to see what parents of both classes taught their children...



Codex Mendoza, fol. 58r (fragment)

Pain and suffering: a parent's vision of life.

When speaking to their children, parents took pains to impress upon them the great hardships and dangers of the world. The world held no true pleasure and knew no rest. Instead, it produced work, conflict, and tiredness. For this reason, both macehualtin and pipiltin alike had to work hard to contribute to their family's good reputation and income. The image above from the Codex Mendoza shows Aztec parents telling their children how to carry out their chores. As we can see from the image, the boys (left) are carrying loads, whilst the daughter watches her mother use a spindle. Here, they are only five years old! You can tell this from the five turquoise circles above them.



Codex Mendoza, fol. 60r (fragment)

The next image (Codex Mendoza, fol.60r) demonstrates just how seriously household activities and labour were to the family. Blue speech scrolls come out of the parents' mouths as they berate their children for not working properly by holding them over the acrid smoke produced by burned chillies. We can see how the parents' strictness pays off because by the time they are 14 the children are able to carry out complex chores on their own, like weaving and fishing (see below, Codex Mendoza, fol.60r).



Codex Mendoza, fol.60r (fragment)

Although they also had to contribute to the upkeep of family lands and domestic chores, pipiltin, nobles, were expected to learn special arts during their youths. For boys, feather working was one of various crafts considered to be appropriate, whilst girls were able to pursue excellence in the weaving of fine cloth and cooking. A special type of food preparation was produced by noblewomen alone. It was called 'delicate food' and was fit only for the mouths of the privileged. Noblewomen also learnt the skill of making the bitter chocolate drink, Xocoatl. The excerpt below, shows a father telling his son about the qualities noblemen must have:



Women preparing food. Florentine Codex, Book IV, fol.69v

"And who art thou? Thou art of noble lineage; thou art one's hair, thou art one's fingernail; thou art a ruler's son, thou art a palace nobleman, thou art a precious one, thou art a nobleman; thou art to go raising this, holding this before thy gaze. Note that the humbling, the bowing, the inkling, the weeping, the tears, the sighing, the meekness – these same are nobility, the estimable, the valued:



Father advising his son. Florentine Codex, Book VI, Chapt.20

these are honour. Note that no brazen one, no vain one, no dissolute or, as it is said, shameless one hath become ruler. And no inconsiderate one, no impetuous one, no hasty one, no one untrustworthy with secrets, no rash one hath become ruler, hath been in the rulership."

Book VI of the Florentine Codex.

Prayer and worship

Sons and daughters in all Aztec households, low and high, prayed regularly. Small religious rituals were often undertaken at midnight or the early hours of the morning where youths adorned, offered incense and small sacrifices to the household altars. By doing this, youngsters knew that they would be favoured by the gods and probably receive good fortune.

Rituals

Other sacred activities involved fixing petates or grass mats, cleaning the house and keeping the body in good shape. The Aztecs regularly cleansed themselves both physically and spiritually by washing. Women had the added task of washing their mouths out.

A broom can go a long way!

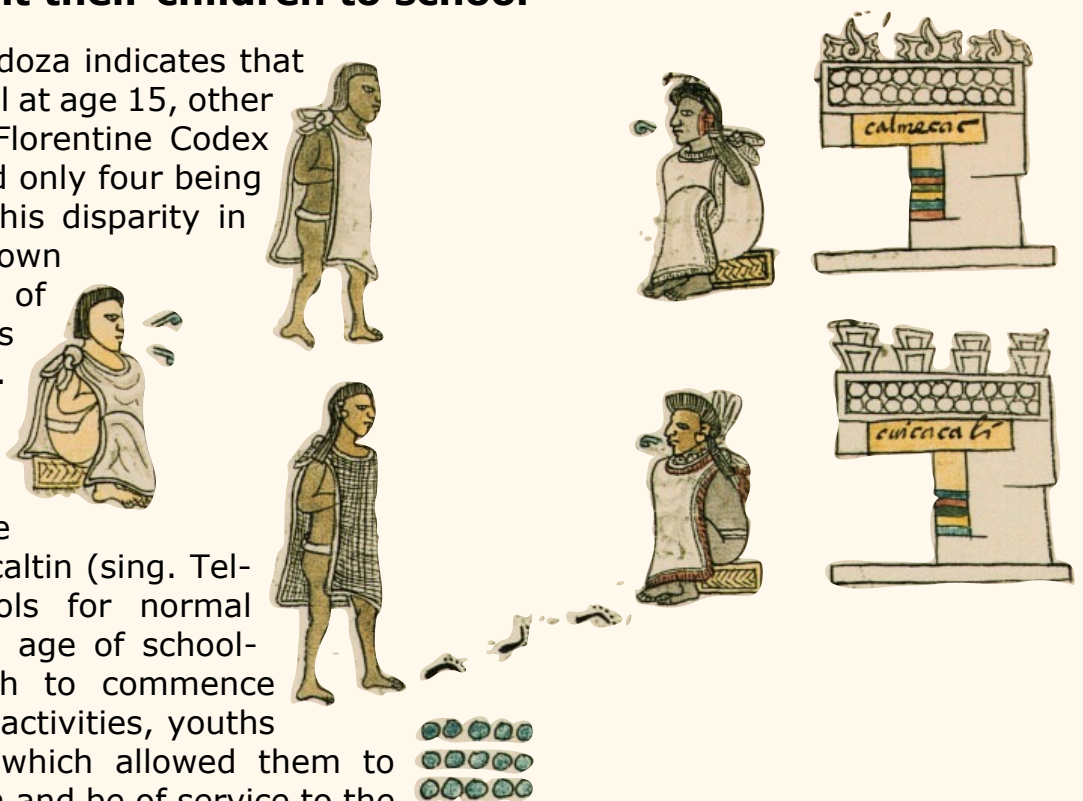
Do you dread having to sweep the house regularly? It may not be as mundane a task as you think!

Noble Aztec parents instructed their children in the purifying, religious act of sweeping from a very early age.

Sweeping was thought to cleanse sacred spaces and bring people closer to the gods. By completing this ritual act early in the morning, youths showed their piety and humility. Sweeping held an important place in Aztec national history, too. The mother of their patron god Huitzilopochtli, Coatlicue, was impregnated with her son while ritually sweeping in her home, the mythical mountain of Coatépéc.

Aztec parents sent their children to school

Whilst the Codex Mendoza indicates that children entered school at age 15, other sources such as the Florentine Codex allude to children aged only four being admitted to school. This disparity in information may be down to the different types of schools open to nobles and commoners. These institutions were called Calmecacs, religious temple-schools for noble children, and Telpochcaltin (sing. Telpochcalli) local schools for normal youths. Whatever the age of schooling, once old enough to commence spiritual and religious activities, youths experienced a ritual which allowed them to enter formal education and be of service to the wider community. During this ritual, boys had a lip plug (tétetl) inserted, and girls had small cuts made by an obsidian blade on their hips and chests (Austin, p.234). Above, we can see a seated father (left) handing over his children to a priest of the Calmecac (upper right), and a warrior who runs the Cuicacalli (Song House - part of the Telpochcalli).



The Story Continues...

Now we know how much care Aztec parents invested in their children, part 2 of this series will investigate the Aztec approach to education and the philosophy behind public education.

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Codices

Codex Ixtlilxochitl, Codex Mendoza, Codex Tudela, Florentine Codex.

