



The Gardener and the Carpenter: What the New Science of Child Development Tells Us About the Relationship Between Parents and Children

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One of the world's leading child psychologists shatters the myth of "good parenting"

Caring deeply about our children is part of what makes us human. Yet the thing we call "parenting" is a surprisingly new invention. In the past thirty years, the concept of parenting and the multibillion dollar industry surrounding it have transformed child care into obsessive, controlling, and goal-oriented labor intended to create a particular kind of child and therefore a particular kind of adult. In *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, the pioneering developmental psychologist and philosopher Alison Gopnik argues that the familiar twenty-first-century picture of parents and children is profoundly wrong--it's not just based on bad science, it's bad for kids and parents, too.

Drawing on the study of human evolution and her own cutting-edge scientific research into how children learn, Gopnik shows that although caring for children is profoundly important, it is not a matter of shaping them to turn out a particular way. Children are designed to be messy and unpredictable, playful and imaginative, and to be very different both from their parents and from each other. The variability and flexibility of childhood lets them innovate, create, and survive in an unpredictable world. "Parenting" won't make children learn—but caring parents let children learn by creating a secure, loving environment.

The Gardener and the Carpenter: What the New Science of Child Development Tells Us About the Relationship Between Parents and Children Details

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Sara says

With insights from evolutionary biology, the latest work in child development, philosophy, and personal biography as a mother and grandmother, Gopnik has created a beautiful book about being a parent, as opposed to "parenting". Gopnik argues that being a parent is about love and care, and not about shaping a certain kind of future adult - being a gardener who creates an environment for things to grow rather than a carpenter who builds something from a plan (her metaphor that became the title of the book).

I found the science fascinating, and Gopnik's writing style engaging, so despite the density and ambitious scale of this book I never felt it was a heavy lift as a read. And the conclusion she comes to is so very spot on for me: essentially that we need to value care and love as things that are valuable in their own right, despite all the pressures of an outcomes obsessed culture.

Daniel Palevski says

This book was a great read. Off of a strong foundation of recent significant findings about childhood development, Alison Gopnik makes an enjoyable book filled with historical context and her own personal anecdotes about being a daughter, mom and grandmother.

My main takeaway from this book is that kids are meant to be flexible and we shouldn't be trying to constrain them into some idea of what we think is best for them. Our world is unpredictable, and the one reason humans have outlasted all other animal species has been our ability to adjust, adapt, experiment, and learn from others.

In fact, this idea of human development and cultural learning perfectly carries over from a recent book I had read - *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter*. For me, this was convenient because it took some of the findings and learnings from this previous book and made them into more practical implementations for me at home.

Sally says

A scientist of childhood learning refutes the current trend of parenting, that is, deliberate parental interventions aiming to produce a child of a particular character or one who will succeed in certain worldly affairs. She calls this the carpenter approach because you are following a plan to produce a specific product. Instead she promotes parents giving children a safe and loving environment in which they can explore,

discover and realize their potentials, whatever those may be - like a gardener providing soil, water, etc, not to make bonsai or topiary plants but to let the plants thrive and bloom according to their nature.

I agree with her critique of modern parenting, but some of the scientific material did not hold my interest, especially that from evolutionary psychology which features quite a bit. After a while I found myself just reading the first sentences of paragraphs, then slowing down when something interested me. The book would have been better as a long article.

Paul L'Herrou says

Written with authority by an academic (UC Berkeley) and grandmother, but does not read at all like an academic writing. It was a joy to read. She writes about such things as tip-toeing through her dark garden hand-in-hand with her grandson so as to not awaken the tiger in the avocado tree. She explains child development and the need to let children develop in their own ways rather than trying to shape them into a parent's vision of who they should be. Confirmed my experience with our 2-year-old grandson and gave me insights to my own development in childhood. Highly recommend this book to all parents, grand-parents and other relatives of children as well as anyone who teaches or works with children. Informative and fun to read!

Steve Solnick says

Exceptionally lucid and humane overview of a vast amount of scientific research on learning and cognitive development. The subtitle and cover are a bit of a misdirection - this is not a gauzy parenting how-to book. Instead, it's a thought provoking, richly detailed and well-written exploration of how we learn by imitating, by listening, by playing, and how learning changes in schools (not usually for the better) and is changed by technology (not so much for the worse as you might think). The implications for parents are there - and the final chapter attempts to tie the preceding chapters together with an elegiac meditation on parenting. For me, though, the meatier earlier chapters were the real revelation, delivering without being too heavy handed, the message of the title: As parents and caregivers we should seek to nurture our young and accept they'll be different from our imagined progeny; we should not think our job is to build replicas of ourselves guided by our, or society's, blueprint.

Cat says

I bought this book because I loved this piece in the Wall Street Journal. Unfortunately, I think that piece boils down much of what is interesting in the book itself. I find Gopnik's persona--part enthusiastic grandmother, part knowledgeable researcher--very appealing, so I never found the book difficult to read. But it did feel, in spite of its brevity, a little meandering and somewhat meager in its central insights. The analogy that gives the book its title--parents need to be like gardeners, creating sustaining environments for their children and enjoying them for their own development, including its surprises, rather than like carpenters, who follow sets of rules to produce something according to a blueprint--is the most vivid and helpful insight here. There's a long section on play and how important play is for child development and for a number of other mammals as well. This might surprise some readers, but perhaps I am so convinced of this

point already that aside from articulating more clearly what play gives children (theory of mind, the ability to problem solve and to produce counterfactual possibilities), this section of the book was not as much of a revelation. Gopnik does point out that when we try to "teach" children things, they learn less--that they should be given open territory to explore in rather than have an adult trot out a map, and that was extremely interesting, particularly when she described some of the experiments her lab has run on this idea. Another section on technology felt riddled with truisms (we always worry about new technologies, children are always early-adopters, we have no idea what that will mean for the future, but usually, some older technologies are retained alongside the new devices that dominate culture).

I like Gopnik, and I wanted to love this book, and I did love its endorsement of caring for children as a central part in giving life meaning and also of producing an ethical engagement to society--that what seems like the selfish narrowness of caring for one child can in fact be drawn upon to foster social choices that support all children. But again, this sounds a bit platitudinous, no? Mainly, I think Gopnik is adding to the contemporary conversation about "parenting" by saying we should parent less, be available more. And that feels helpful, but it also feels like it's as far as this book really goes. Oh, wait! But maybe the best bit is the part where she describes preschoolers' unfocused attention and explains that adult brains of psilocybin are closest to preschooler brains all the time.

Kathryn Beal says

Things I love about this book:

- The scientific research and studies she presents. The research on play backs up the philosophies of RIE parenting + Magda Gerber. Giving kids lots of free and independent play time fosters creativity and investigation. Children are little scientists, and they have surprisingly sophisticated methods for figuring out the world. Loved learning more about how children learn.
- The way she breaks down the traditional "parenting" model. I've read quite a few books on parenting and raising children, and there is a plethora of contrary advice out there. I love the way Gopnik explores how children are not blank slates to be molded the way parents wish, but individuals who need consistency and security to grow and interact with their environment.
- Her thoughts on screen time. She had a fresh perspective on screens and technology that I hadn't heard before.

Things I hated:

- Her conclusions about public policy. I get that she's a scientist, and she is looking at society as a whole, but forcing everyone to pay for public daycare and elderly care is not a solution. In the final chapters, she is basically advocating for socialism! It would be better if she stuck to psychology and left economics to economists.
- Her nihilistic view on human nature.

Hamilton Carter says

If you, like I, agree with the premise of the book, (that allowing children to have free play is arguably as if not more beneficial than constantly placing them in classes), then there's little reason to read the book. Dr.

Gopnik reiterates scientific studies that lend credence to her premise, but if you're already on board, these are of little use.

David Tybor says

I was really looking forward to this book after reading her essays in the Edge.org books "This Idea Must Die" and "What Will Change Everything?" <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/...>

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Basically, humans have successfully turned kids into adults for thousands of years, but "parenting" is a relatively new concept ("to parent" wasn't a verb until the 1940s), and school isn't much older than that (~100 years).

She argues that our evolutionary history pushes back against the idea of being Carpenter parents (building/shaping kids into a certain type of adult), and instead supports the idea of being Gardeners (giving kids a safe environment and some tools, and then seeing what they grow into). Cool ideas, but unfortunately buried in a couple hundred pages of cheesy jokes and grandma anecdotes.

Mary says

I heard a great interview with this author about the difference between "parenting" and "being a parent" (I mean, think about it: Do I "wife" my husband or "daughter" my parents? What would that even look like? I'm not trying to change them.)

The book mostly hits the emphasis on child psychology with kind of a little "what parents can do" tacked on the end, which is okay, but I kept hoping for more link between theory and practice for individuals and communities. There is a nice chapter in the end where she talks about other policy implications beyond child care, but the connections to the science are, there, rather loose.

Anyway, I usually like hearing about the personal lives of the scientists, but there was a little too much Berkley here to keep my eyes from rolling (little "Augie" --I could stop there--enjoying vegan frozen yogurt at the farmers market) and to keep me from wondering how we apply these lessons to lower income, or even just not elite, families? For many kids, overscheduling would be a laugh, when parents can't even afford piano lessons, and techno-fear is less about what iPhones are doing to kids' minds and more about whether their kid can survive school without one. It's not that Gopnik doesn't ever mention other types of families, but that she seems to acknowledge them in the abstract and from afar--the anthropologist's perspective rather than the neighbor and friend's.

Rossdavidh says

In some ways, this is a book that is best summarized by its title. When we act as parents, Dr. Gopnik is telling us, we should think of ourselves more as gardeners than as carpenters. The relevant difference is that the gardener is focused on growth, but doesn't usually try to insure details such as exactly how many leaves grow on the plant or where, just that there be about the right amount of leaves growing. A carpenter, on the other hand, usually does a lot of rather precise measuring and cutting, insuring a certain final outcome where

all the pieces fit together. Gopnik appears to be concerned that modern "parenting" (she dislikes the verb, by the way, preferring the noun "parent") is becoming too similar to carpentry in its aspirations, and not enough like gardening.

The devil is in the details, though, and that is why the book is worth reading, even if you already know (and in my case, agree with) the thesis suggested by the title. Gopnik has spent decades, now, studying the mental processes of small children, and how those change over the first few years of life. She's also been a mother and a grandmother, which may seem only to provide anecdotal information but which I think may serve as a useful reality check on her theorizing. Unlike, say, Freud or Skinner, her theories on child psychology pass the test of contact with reality.

Gopnik is a person of strong opinions, for example believing that much of the "mess" of childhood, and the apparently purposeless play, is not just an inevitable but a productive part of human psychology. I believe it was Gopnik who I first heard voice the idea that children are society's R&D department, and that even if it were possible to teach them the "right" way to do things more quickly than we do, it would at least sometimes be unwise to. This contributes to, for example, her dislike of the trend in modern schools of nixing unstructured play in recess time, in favor of study of the topics likely to be covered in standardized testing. But beyond opinions, and even beyond her own research, she is thoroughly familiar with everything that has been discovered about child psychology in the last few decades, and she maintains a good mix of personal anecdote and reference to rigorously controlled scientific study.

A larger question is why more of that science doesn't find its way into how we raise and educate children today. I suspect it is because a lot of what has been discovered, would suggest that more of our children's education should resemble apprenticeship or vocational training, and that is exactly the opposite of what most of the education sector of our country has been pushing for. As the percentage of the population who go on to 16 years or more of schooling before doing "real work" goes up, and the percentage of our economic and financial sector which is reliant on that goes up (student loan debt is now bigger than credit card debt in the U.S.), any indication that we should be backpedaling on that in favor of education methods outside of the classroom (and standardized tests) is struggling against some pretty big industries (and their lobbyists). It will probably take a student loan crisis on the level of the 2008 mortgage crisis to cause any serious reappraisal of the goals and methods of education in this country.

However, just because you can't change the way the nation educates its children, doesn't mean you can't tweak how you educate your own child (or what you look for when choosing others to help do it). Whether the topic is play vs. study, how worried we should be about electronic devices and social media, or how to deal with adolescents being the way they are, she helps us to bring the immense amount of scientific study in the last few decades to us, in a way that we can understand and apply.

Siim Maivel says

The underlying ideas are presented in a convincing manner with evidence from the recent academic studies. The author introduced many causal relationships how the conditions in the environment influence human development. However, it would have been more impactful to provide examples on how to create such environments in the first place.

Having listened to the audio book version of this title, it was at times difficult to follow as I noticed that my mind switched off even though the ideas were interesting.

Perri says

I loved this book which shows how being a parent has changed over the years, what we have learned from studies, and how caretakers and their young ones can best take advantage of what we now know. Essentially, we can stop the constant teaching, shaping, pushing children (carpenters) and allow them to explore, thrive and interact in a safe environment (gardeners). This seems enormously freeing not to be responsible for the fairly recent overwrought, angst-filled drive to PARENT the kids. I especially liked Gopnik's perspective as a grandmother and their importance historically, biologically and their relevancy still today for healthy development. There's a thoughtful, even-handed approach to how technology might affect the young generation with the reminder of how technology usually feels to the older generation. There's many wonderful philosophical discussion points such as the tension between the unique love your own magnificent human creation and the philanthropic love for all children. I just found this a very hope filled book.

Cindy says

Title belies what it is - an interesting look at evolution and development of humans

L. Lawson says

The premise of this book can be distilled from its title (which makes it a great title): there are two parenting styles--the gardener (who gives kids fertilizer, space, and a reason to grow and lets them do it) and the carpenter (who exactly measures every facet of the kid's life with the intention of making him/her grow up a certain way). I already fell into the gardener space before reading this book, but the argument presented in the book helped steady me in my choice. Only through play, experimentation, trial, error, and messiness will a person grow into who they are. My job as a parent isn't to fit my child to my measurements (or anyone else's); my job is to give them the tools, time, and space to find their own measurements and grow into them.
