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Review

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About the Author

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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.

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Gopnik has written yet another wonderful, wise book about children.

By Graham H. Seibert

Gopnik's gardener/carpenter metaphor goes to the heart of the way children are seen in modern America, epitomized by the recent coinage "parenting." A gardener supports animate objects as they grow according to their own internal nature. A carpenter shapes inanimate objects entirely according to his own will. In Gopnik's words:

"In the parenting model, being a parent is like being a carpenter. You should pay some attention to the kind of material you are working with, and it may have some influence on what you try to do.

"But essentially your job is to shape that material into a final product that will fit the scheme you had in mind to begin with. And you can assess how good a job you've done by looking at the finished product. Are the doors true? Are the chairs steady? Messiness and variability are a carpenter's enemies; precision and control

are her allies. Measure twice, cut once.

"When we garden, on the other hand, we create a protected and nurturing space for plants to flourish. It takes hard labor and the sweat of our brows, with a lot of exhausted digging and wallowing in manure. And as any gardener knows, our specific plans are always thwarted. The poppy comes up neon orange instead of pale pink, the rose that was supposed to climb the fence stubbornly remains a foot from the ground, black spot and rust and aphids can never be defeated."

The objective of parenting is to produce straight-A students, lawyers and other such well-defined products. She argues that the objective should be to produce successful, self-reliant adults.

She is equally critical of school systems, with their emphasis on standardized testing and achievement measured by grades. She notes that school is a recent invention. Well into the 19th century most children learned through apprenticeship, and much of that apprenticeship was home on the farm or in the workshop, with two parents. She observes that children simply do not learn basic life skills such as cooking, cleaning, and basic carpentry. They are not in any way apprenticed to their parents, and don't pick these things up. I add that they do not learn how to get along with the opposite sex. Sex education is no substitute for unsupervised or lightly supervised play. Gopnik provides a lovely example. The schools never teach the rhyme "John and Mary sitting in a tree K I S S I N G." Nonetheless, kids of every generation she has inquired about know the rhyme, and in the process of learning it they probably learned more than the tab A goes into slot B kind of information they pick up from sex education.

Gopnik is rather defensive of modern technology. She is not scared that children are increasingly preoccupied with their electronic devices. I am more of a skeptic – my five-year-old does not have them. As a parent of grown children and a long time substitute teacher I observe that this generation simply does not read as much as mine did. This would not be bad if some better technology had supplanted it. Video has simply not done that. Material delivered via video is slower, and an oral vocabulary generally somewhat diminished. From my observation, the chief benefit of video and computers is in the presentation of graphic images accompanying a lecture. Even at that, pictures in books usually work better, and PowerPoint is seldom done well. I would challenge her to inquire deeply as to how many of her undergraduate students at Berkeley actually read her books, or any of the assigned books in the depth that she did as a student.

She attributes many modern problems such as the ADHD epidemic to the attempt to force kids to perform tasks for which they are not temperamentally or intellectually prepared. Her advice would be to have faith - let them follow their own paths.

Gopnik's area of expertise is early childhood development. Several chapters of this book recount the findings that she describes in more detail in The Philosophical Baby. The core message is that children are very alert and are doing their own thinking from an early age. They are not whatsoever the passive, receptive vessels that the reigning paradigms of "parenting" and teaching would assume. They learn all the time, especially through play. They will learn in any case, and that process may be stultified my parents and teachers who impose too much structure on the process.

Gopnik places herself at the intersection of two major streams of contemporary thought. Her setting in Berkeley, and her Jewish roots incline her to believe that all children are born more or less equal and must be treated equally. On the other hand, her experience as a scientist and as a mother and grandmother goes the other way. Even though all children may have an equal right to the good things of this world, her children and grandchildren are special. Isn't that the way we all are? She is honest enough to admit the dilemma. She writes:

"The very idea of a law, for example, is that some principle applies equally to all. But I care about and am responsible for my own specific children, far more than children in general. And so I should be."

One of the best bits of learning to fall out of this book has nothing to do with children. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin promoted the notion of value pluralism. This is the idea that our fundamental values are and will always be in conflict with one another. We have to have the humility to recognize it. Whenever somebody has a plan to end all human misery – think Robespierre and Karl Marx – look out!

Her discussion of the evolution of motherhood gives a great deal of credit to Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, the books of whom I have read, Mother Nature and Mothers and Others, are strong in the position that the human race has been as successful as we are precisely because families and tribes are so involved in supporting the mother and raising children. We are the only primates to undergo menopause. Why? Because the grandmother's genetic interest is served by supporting grandchildren, not bearing more children herself.

I am somewhat surprised that she does not cite Judith Rich Harris' books, No Two Alike: Human Nature and Human Individuality and The Nurture Assumption on the importance of their genetic inheritance, caregivers and peers relative to parents in influencing the way a child develops. A less surprising oversight is Joel Paris' Myths of Childhood which also stresses the resourcefulness and resilience of children when they are simply given guidance and support and trusted to grow more or less on their own.

Gopnik spends a vast number of words on the topic of why we have children, but seems yet to miss the point. She is right to say that they represent a tremendous expense. She is right again to say that they are a gamble – you can't count on them to be successful or to be grateful. She slides over the most fundamental point. We are self replicators. That's what we do. The single thing we can say with certainty about our ancestors is that they all reproduced successfully. Our family, clan, tribe and nation historically pushed us to reproduce. It was altruistic to the extent that those groups belonged to a tight gene pool. It was not whatsoever altruistic in the recognition that the gene pools were in competition.

She comes closest as she writes that "figuring out why being a parent is worthwhile isn't just a personal or biological question, but a social and political one. Caring for children has never, in all his human history, just been the role of the biological mothers and fathers. From the very beginning it's been a central project for any community of human beings. This is still true." She might add that our religion and tribal identity still push in this direction. That is what is so frightening about the immigrants pressing on the United States and Europe. They still have their religion and tribalism – and it is effective.

Reprising a theme from her earlier books, she devotes a lot of space to the topic of love. She discusses the aspects of conjugal love - lust, romantic love and companionship - and the commonalities between conjugal love and love for children. She is very strong in describing her own feelings about her children and grandchildren, but does not make it as convincing of a case for people in general. My own sense is that love and affection are parts of temperament that vary from population to population as well as from person to person, and that she may be overgeneralizing from her own experience and her own culture.

To wrap up, this is an important book on a theme that deserves more attention than it gets. Gopnik is right on the big points, and is open enough as a scientist and intellectual to consider alternative points of view. She is what a scientist should be, and she is also a very readable and entertaining author. Five stars.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Great read even if you aren't raising children By MWH Thoughtful book, clearly talking about how children explore and learn. We don't shape children (the carpenter) but provide the environment (gardener) that supports them as they develop the tools to flourish in the future, unpredictable world. The author also writes about society, caregiving, and aging. I'm not directly involved with children, or grandchildren, yet I found this a fascinating book to read. I highly recommend it.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

A new book that is a significant achievement

By Susan Solomon

This is an excellent book, one that has implications not only for caregivers but also for school boards, teachers, parks departments. Gopnik's writing is clear, accessible, and witty. She supports all of her conclusions with strong and recent data. Many people who work with children and spaces for children have been hoping for a long time that a scientist would write a book like this.

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