FAMILY

Abandon Parenting, and Just Be a Parent

In her new book, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, Alison Gopnik offers up a more organic approach to raising children.

KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS SEPTEMBER 23, 2016

ARBEN CELI / REUTERS

Could a 4-year-old possess better instincts for scientific discovery than a college student?

In one experiment, researchers showed preschoolers and undergraduates a variety of blocks, some of which made a machine light up and play music. The children turned out to be more open to the notion that unusual combinations of blocks could turn the machine on, whereas the college students got hung up on the most obvious solution—that the shape of individual blocks affected the machine—ignoring evidence that it was wrong. As surprising as the finding might seem to the

layperson, it's consistent with other research showing that children are better at exploring unlikely possibilities, while adults tend to build on our existing knowledge. In a sense, young children are superior innovators and scientists, open to novel hypotheses.

This is just one of the many fascinating studies described in Alison Gopnik's latest book *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, which makes a compelling case that parents should get out of the way of children's natural drive to learn through play and observation of the world. The book explains how young children decide whom to believe; why they categorize; and how their intuitive understanding of statistics, mass, and gravity operates. Especially compelling are the sections on the role of experimentation and playing pretend in learning. Gopnik even explains the incessant "why" questions common in 3-year-olds.

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ALISON GOPNIK

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ARTHUR C. BROOKS

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JOE PINSKER

Gopnik musters all this evidence in an attempt to persuade parents and educators to stop trying to mold children into adults with some desirable mix of characteristics, the way a carpenter might build a cabinet from a set of plans. Instead, we adults should model ourselves on gardeners, who create a nurturing ecosystem for children to flourish, but accept our limited ability to control or even

predict the outcome of. Rather than viewing parenting as an activity or skill to be mastered, adults should simply be parents.

As she did in previous books *The Philosophical Baby* and *The Scientist in the Crib*, Gopnik combines her work in philosophy and psychology to explain cognitive science and delve into broader life questions related to child raising and the future of our species. I talked to Gopnik about child development, ideal learning environments, and the impact of technological change. An edited and condensed transcript of our conversation follows.

Katherine Reynolds Lewis: Your book challenges the notion of parenting as an activity with a goal and makes the case for a very different view of the parent's role. What's wrong with the mainstream conversation about what makes a good parent?

Alison Gopnik: The prevailing picture just doesn't fit what we know from science about how parents and children relate to each other. In addition to that, it's made things miserable for parents and children.

It's interesting that the very word "parenting" is so recent. It only showed up as a word in 1960 and became common in the 1970s, even though, of course, the words "mother" and "father" and "parent" have been around for as long as English has. The rise of that particular word came with the rise of a particular cultural picture of being a parent: that your job as a parent is to get expertise, information and tips that will help you shape children.

There's not very much evidence that any of the intentional minor variations in what you do as a parent make much difference in how children turn out in the long run. What ends up happening is parents are so preoccupied with this hopeless task of shaping their children to come out a particular way that their relationships with children at the moment become clouded over with guilt and anxiety and worry and the need for expertise. Of course, children feel some of that hovering anxiety as well.

Lewis: I understand your argument that tactical choices, such as letting a baby cry it out or co-sleeping, may not make a huge difference in the child's outcomes. But on the other hand, there is powerful evidence that our attention and care and responsiveness to children make a huge difference in their development. Can you

help reconcile that paradox about the importance of parents and yet the limits of parents' power?

Gopnik: I think this is the most interesting thing in the book. You might think from what I just said, "Okay, well, being a parent doesn't matter." That goes against lots of evidence that parents are absolutely crucial. In the most simple, straightforward way, human children would die if they didn't have parents to take care of them. Having a parent, someone who's committed to you, loves you, takes care of you, and provides you with a rich environment—all that is really important and necessary. That unconditional commitment to a child provides a framework and environment that allows children to develop in all kinds of ways, ways we couldn't ever have predicted.

If you're a gardener like me, what you do is try to create an ecosystem where many, many different plants can thrive and create a system that's resilient enough that when things change, the garden can adjust in very unpredictable ways.

This extended childhood that we have—twice as long as chimpanzees, our closest primate relatives—gives human beings a chance to explore, develop new ways of being in the world, find new social relationships, and figure out new technologies. It's the protection and love of the parents that let the children do unexpected things. It's not that the parents do certain things and that leads the children to come out with a particular kind of technology or social structure or personality or way of being in the world.

The whole human trick of culture depends on this very fine balance of innovation and imitation. Parents have to embody the values and knowledge of their generation but they don't do it so the children will end up having exactly those values or knowledge. They do it so the children will then remix it, do something different and make it come out a way you never could have anticipated.

Even if you could do the thing that the parenting model suggests, which is have a bunch of techniques and come out with a child who has the characteristics you want, you'd be defeating the whole evolutionary purpose of childhood by doing it. That's the basic idea of the book.

It should be fundamentally both reassuring and liberating for parents to know that children are doing most of the work. All the research that shows how incredibly

sensitive and intelligent and powerful and good at learning children are and that they do it by observing and watching the people around them doing the things they do every day and by playing spontaneously. Children learn much more from using their own brains to just observe and play than they do by having someone sit down and teach them.

Lewis: Your book delves into the science showing the importance of play in children's emotional and cognitive development, which Hanna Rosin wrote about for *The Atlantic* and is actually quite a subject of debate. Academics like the Boston College psychology professor emeritus Peter Gray advocate completely unstructured, free-range play while researchers including the Temple University psychology professor Kathy Hirsh-Pasek recommend guided play. Where do you fall along that continuum? And do you see any sign that the message is getting through to obsessive middle-class parents to drop the flashcards already?

Gopnik: It's fairly clear from the science that play gives you this scope for exploration, this scope for novelty. It gives you scope for flexibility. The thing that leaps out from the animal literature is that having play doesn't get you to be better at doing any one thing in particular, but it gives you more flexibility in doing many different things. If you're in a school situation where you completely justifiably want to teach one thing, like understanding geometry, shapes or math, the kind of guided play Kathy Hirsh-Pasek talks about turns out to be a very effective way of teaching specific things, partly because it's so involved and engaging for children.

The context in which we evolved to have children learn by play and observation was one where there was a big extended family in the proverbial village: lots of grownups around, lots of opportunities to see what grownups were doing, lots of grownups who were committed to caring for each particular child. We're not in an extended family or a village where parents can learn how to care give because they're caring for their younger siblings or cousins and they can watch their aunts and uncles care for children. For the first time in history, we have parents caring for a child when they've never done it before but have spent a lot of time going to school and working.

The social challenge is how can we recreate—especially for very young children—those conditions that seemed to be so powerful for learning, having not just one person but a village of people who are invested in you and who are engaging you in

their everyday activities, and for older children, having ways you can have apprenticeship opportunities?

Early-childhood education could be that kind of institution if we were a civilized country that had universal preschool, like Finland or Denmark, where they have a freeform preschool right up to age 7. That very institution—which could be the place where this happens—is under increasing pressure from parents and policymakers to be more and more like school, which is a very different place.

Lewis: What key messages would you like educators and policymakers to take from your book?

Gopnik: The push to make preschool more like school is really misguided from a scientific perspective. For policy makers it comes because they feel they have to justify their investment in preschool by having school-readiness measures, as if the most important thing about early childhood is how well you're going to do later in school.

The things that come out of play and free exploration, which are things like capacity for creativity and innovation, those are things that we need more than ever in the adult workforce. It's a bit ironic that we're taking a school system that was designed for 19th-century factory workers to be able to do the same thing over and over again—it was to try to develop human robots. In the 21st century, what we need is innovation and creativity, but we're extending the robot model to younger and younger ages and more and more children.

Children are more sensitive, more subtle, and more accurate in learning than we ever would've thought. Even the youngest children are very good at picking out complicated patterns of statistics and data in the environment and complicated information about what people are trying to do and drawing accurate conclusions.

One of the morals that comes from the science is to expose children to lots of different caregiving, lots of different grownups functioning in different ways. This model that the ideal caregiving situation is a young mother at home in a suburb far away from other people with her child, doing parenting—we have lots of reasons to believe that's not going to be a model where children's learning capacities are going to be at their best.

Lewis: You have a different take on the danger of personal electronics and social media than some people, like the MIT professor Sherry Turkle or those behind the documentary *Screenagers*. There's all this fear around the addictive nature of technology and its impact on brain development and empathy in children. Can you explain why you're so sanguine?

Gopnik: The first thing to say is we don't know what the effects of new technology are going to be and we won't until the current generation of children are grown up.

Generational changes in technology: That's what it means to be human. Each generation of children takes the knowledge, takes the tools their parents had, and changes, adopts them, develops a new set. If you're on one side of that technological change, the changes that happened before you were born always seem like they're just nature. If you're in the midst of the technological change it always seems that the new thing is threatening and disruptive and dangerous. The day before you were born always looks like Eden, and the day after your children were born always looks like *Mad Max*.

Each time in human history we have the same story: People are scared and panicked and worried about the new technology. They're right—the new technology, in some ways it does change people. The technology of reading made people more isolated, less collective. The technology of train meant people moved faster, and they were less integrated into their local communities. The technology of the internet is also changing the way people interact. We have no guarantee that the future is going to be like the past. But the general picture is that the new technology's advantages have outweighed their disadvantages.

Lewis: Was it hard to write a book aimed at parents that departs from the parenting advice genre and says, instead, that there is no formula for getting kids to turn out a certain way?

Gopnik: The most amazing thing on the planet is that every single one of these children with these brains goes into the world, and from tiny scraps of information figures out how that world works and changes the world. There's nothing we know of that's as amazing as that. Every parent gets to be part of that process. If parents could pull away a little bit and see that broader perspective, it would make their experience of caregiving less anxious and richer and more reassuring and more liberating.

I don't have to transform myself into this other professional-parent person. For a lot of parents and especially a lot of mothers, that's a positive. The message is not: "You're parenting wrong." The message is if you do the things that come naturally to you, that's the best formula for being a successful parent.