

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

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 [\[\[ASIN:0312429843 The Philosophical Baby\]\]](#). 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 by 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, [\[\[ASIN:0345408934 Mother Nature\]\]](#) and [\[\[ASIN:0674060326 Mothers and Others\]\]](#), 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, [\[\[ASIN:0393059480 No Two Alike: Human Nature and Human Individuality\]\]](#) and [\[\[ASIN:068488409 The Nurture Assumption\]\]](#) 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' [\[\[ASIN:B00DL1NFPW Myths of Childhood\]\]](#) 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 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.

The gardener in the carpenter – comments

Although this is an excellent book, I have a few quibbles that are worth noting in a comment if not review itself.

She gets a little bit gushy talking about mother love. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, whom she quotes extensively, seems to be a little bit closer to the mark in [\[\[ASIN:0345408934 Mother Nature\]\]](#) and [\[\[ASIN:0674060326 Mothers and Others\]\]](#). Hrdy says that human mothers are unique among primates in that they did not immediately and instinctively love their child. It takes a week for the mother's milk to come in and the bonding to form. During that time the child is at risk. If the baby is defective or the parents cannot take care of it, they will simply abandon it. Hrdy says that this is the reason that human babies are born with more fat than other primates and do their best from the moment of birth to be endearing.

I note from my own observation that maternal love in other cultures does not express itself the way it does in European culture. Northeast Asians are more dedicated parents than we are, in general, but they do not express as much affection either way, child to mother or vice versa. It seems to be an inherited temperament. It has served them well throughout the generations as their great sense of obligation to community has led them to marry and raise children. It is a problem now that they too have gone to neo-local, nuclear families the way the West has done. Without a Western sense of love, men and women simply do not come together. The fertility rates in China and Japan are devastatingly low.

Gopnik talks extensively about the monogamy as a human trait in both our modern industrial societies and among hunter gatherers. Among others, James Q. Wilson in [\[\[ASIN:0066209838 The Marriage Problem\]\]](#) describes monogamy based on romantic love as a more recent development. Specifically, he traces it to medieval Europe, especially England, a time and place in which men and women were first free to choose one another rather than enter arranged marriages. His account agrees with that of Carle Zimmerman, who wrote in [\[\[ASIN:1933859377 Family and Civilization\]\]](#) that the father has a greater interest in which kids are his, and thus in enforcing monogamy, in a patriarchal, agricultural society where there is property to protect and inherit. In a sop to political correctness (de rigueur for a Cal Berkeley author) she notes that pair bonds for the sake of raising children can be among any consenting pair, whatever their sex.

The tribal Indians I spent time with in the Americas were not much concerned about monogamy. They were vastly interested in children – Indian tribes historically suffered greatly from disease and warfare – but they are not concerned about whose kids they are. Everybody in a tribal group is so closely related that each adult has a genetic interest in every child. That is what you see. The grandfathers show a great deal of affection to all of the children in the village, some more than others of course, but this is truly a situation in which it takes a village to raise a child. Inasmuch as the chief can decide who should be married to whom, and the Indians themselves can decide to have liaisons on the side, this arrangement only makes sense. What I read about tribal Africa leads me to believe it is the same there.

She marvels in several passages about the fact that Guatemalan Indian children would learn by paying attention as siblings were being instructed in origami even if they were not being directly taught themselves. I observe and read that this intense communalism is a characteristic of Indian societies. The lack of individualism frustrates Brazilian educators. They write that if you give one kid a test, his brother will come and help him despite instructions that they are to do it alone. Doing things alone is not their style.

Gopnik talks about intelligence rising through the generations, as much as 30 points over 100 years. It is true that intelligence tests have had to be re-centered because scores crept up over the years. There has been a great deal of discussion among psychometricians about this so-called Flynn effect. The consensus is that it is not broadly rising intelligence, but rather an artifact of the way the tests are constructed.

Psychometricians find that IQ test items that are more highly loaded for mathematical and spatial intelligence have not changed, but those for verbal and logic intelligence have. They posit that changes in the environment, such as more schooling and more exposure to media, may have some impact.

Other tests show school performance dropping over the course of time. The major longitudinal study of student ability is the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the NAEP. It shows a gradual decline in average achievement over the past half-century. SAT tests have to be re-centered just like IQ tests in order to keep the average at 800. They have been dumbed down, due in some measure to the fact that more children take the tests. Nonetheless, the fraction of children scoring at the upper extremes seems to have shrunk. I offer an anecdote. I took the GRE test when I entered grad school in 2004, the first standardized test I had taken since the SATs in 1959 when I was at Berkeley. I scored 150 points more in 2004. If the competition had gotten stronger, my score should've gone down instead of up. As a second anecdote, I can not name nearly as many world-class scientists active today as I could when I was in college, and those I can name are mostly my peers. This is not an age of emerging Einsteins or Feynmans.

I offer one other anecdote. I was a substitute teacher in expensive Washington DC private schools from 1998 until 2006. I was surprised that that lack of rigor they asked of children studying Spanish and French. I asked what their objective was. They said that it was to "prepare the children to take foreign language when they got to college." When I studied high school French in the 1950s the objective had been to teach us to speak French, and despite my failure to achieve A's in many of those classes I still speak French. Flynn effect notwithstanding, my classmates in those days were just as smart as kids today. And the teachers more demanding.

It is ironic to me that Gopnik can on the one hand be highly critical of the public schools for their obsession with testing and their failure to let children grow naturally, and yet say she vigorously supports public schools and prefers them in general to private schools. This is at the heart of a fundamental dilemma. As altruists, we want the best possible education and life outcomes for all children. As parents, we want the best possible outcome for our own children. As taxpayers and voters, if we see things clearly, we will observe that schools have a demonstrated ability to absorb infinite amounts of funding without improving even the results they measure – standardized test scores - one iota. They have totally given up on the arts, shop and most extracurriculars that would help kids socialize and pair off. It appears clear that concerned parents need to take charge of their children's formation, quite possibly without public schools or even without formal schooling at all. In doing so they should give up the parenting books and go back to relying on common sense. I'll close here with a wonderful three paragraphs from Gopnik:

"Evolutionary scientists argue that cooking is as crucial to human survival as child-rearing. And yet, both evolutionary considerations and scientific research show that conscious decisions to "diet," to control what we cook or eat, have a marginal effect at best. In fact, the explosion of dieting and nutrition advice coincided with an explosion in obesity. The fundamental paradox is similar.

"Cooking and caring for children are both essentially and distinctively human— we couldn't survive as a species without them. But the more we intentionally and deliberately cook and eat in order to become healthy, or raise children in order to make them happy and successful adults, the less healthy and happy we and our children seem to become.

"The preponderance of parenting books, like the preponderance of diet books, should, just by itself, be a sign of their futility; if any of them actually worked, that success ought to put the rest of them out of business. And the gap between private goals and public policy, vivid enough in the case of food, is a yawning chasm in the case of caring for children. A society that is obsessed with dieting has the highest obesity rate— a society obsessed with parenting has the highest child poverty rate."