

The Gardener and the Carpenter

By Alison Gopnik

- Parenting is what parents do or should do.
- Book was written to show “that this prescriptive parenting picture is fundamentally misguided, from a scientific, philosophical, and political point of view, as well as a personal one. It’s the wrong way to understand how parents and children actually think and act. It’s actually made life worse for children and parents, not better.” (p3-4)
- Parents goal is to produce a certain type of child
- Parenting is meant to give parents the techniques and expertise necessary to shape their children.
- There are over 60k how to parent books
- Parenting is work founded on love
- “Love doesn’t have goals or benchmarks or blueprints, but it does have a purpose. The purpose is not to change the people we love, but to give them what they need to thrive.” (p10)
- Babies start out totally dependent and parents must see them through until they’re independent
- “a lot of parenting focuses on getting children to learn more, learn better, and learn faster” (p13)
- Children learn through play
- ‘Even babies and very young children are sensitive to social norms and traditions and quickly adopt them from their caregivers.” (p15)
- “Childhood is designed to be a period of variability and possibility, exploration and innovation, learning and imagination.” (p15-16)
- “Caring for children is like tending a garden, and being a parent is like being a gardener.” (p18)
- Gardening is protecting and nurturing a plant, so they flourish in their own way.
- The parenting model most use is more like a carpenter. You work with what you have to shape the final product into what your own plans were to begin with
- Parenting came about as families became smaller, more people wait to start families, middle class spend more time working and educating themselves
- “Children are incontrovertibly and undeniably messy. (p26)
- Children learn differently. Even siblings can be completely different.
- “ironically, in a society that values creativity and innovation more and more, we provide fewer and fewer unfettered opportunities for children to explore. The caregiver’s job isn’t just to give children a protected space in which to explore, learn, and make a mess. It is also to guide the child’s transition from this exploratory disorder into a new kind of control” (p36)

- “Nowadays, when middle class people become parents, they typically have had lots of experience with schooling but little experience with caregiving. So when parents or policy makers hear from scientists about how much children learn, they often conclude that we should teach them more, the way we teach them in school. But children actually learn more from the unconscious details of what caregivers do than from any of the conscious manipulations of parenting.” (p89-90)
- Imitation lets kids learn how things and people work
- children young as 2 will watch someone do several motions that will or won’t give the desired outcome and only reproduce the effective motions
- “toddlers are more likely to take on information from a familiar caregiver than from a less familiar person.” (p117)
- Children can tell how confident people are when telling them information at 3 years. They will also look for consensus about information given before accepting it.
- “Even quite subtle details of wording can shape how children see the world.” (p137)
- “Parents and other caregivers don’t have to teach young children so much as they just have to let them learn. Young children learn from others with alacrity and ease, and they are remarkably skilled at getting the information they need and interpreting that information.” (p145)
- Children learn by observing, imitating and listening
- By listening children learn how reliable a resource is and whether they can trust them in the future
- Play only happens when all survival needs are met
- Pretending is tied to the ability to think about possibilities
- Children that pretend learn more and understand other people better
- “educators often have a scientifically inaccurate picture of learning and development. The misleading idea is that education is supposed to shape a child into a kind of adult. A school’s job becomes creating children who will score well on standardized tests. The parenting misconception not only parallels the schooling misconception, it interacts with it. In a world where schooling is the key to many kinds of success, parenting inevitably becomes focused on trying to ensure that your children succeed in school.” (p179-180)
- “from a scientific perspective, learning isn’t about test scores at all—it’s about tracking the reality of the world around you. All children are naturally driven to create an accurate picture of the world, and to use that picture to make predictions, formulate explanations, imagine alternatives, and design plans.” (p180)
- Preschoolers try to explore possibilities to determine how the world works – discovery learning
- School agers are learning to become competent adults – mastery learning
- Because schools are goal oriented, differences are not appreciated

- “Children who don’t fit the demands of school are treated as if they were ill or defective or disabled. Many of the skills that are most important for school are far removed from the natural abilities and inclinations of most children.” (p191)
- This has led to expecting children to narrowly focus their attention on one task
- Many children have difficulty focusing until much older
- There’s a large correlation between the start of school and the large number of children diagnosed with ADD.
- The number of children diagnosed with ADHD has doubled in the past 20 years. 1 in 5 boys are diagnosed in America before the hit 17 and 70% of these children are given medication (p193-194)
- “When schools are under pressure to produce high test scores, they become motivated consciously or unconsciously, to encourage ADHD diagnoses-either because the drugs allow low-performing children to score better or because ADHD diagnoses can be used to exclude children from testing.” (p194)
- Some children are highly focused while others struggle. Most children are somewhere in between these two levels.
- ADHD medications shift children’s ability to focus but cause side effects
- There are behavioral therapies that also work
- As kids age, there is peer learning that occurs that is as important as what is being taught by teachers
- Adolescence is a time when children start preparing to move from the protections of childhood to make things happen on their own. They’re looking for social rewards
- We’re worried about the effects of technology on teens, but every generation has worried about the effects of new things and how they would affect the children of the time.
- “Caring for children is an absolutely fundamental, profoundly valuable part of the human project. But it isn’t carpentry, it isn’t a goal-directed enterprise aimed at shaping a child into a kind of adult. Instead, being a parent is like making a garden. It’s about providing a rich, stable, safe environment that allows many different kinds of flowers to bloom. It is also about a specific human relationship, a committed, unconditional love, between a specific parent and a specific child. The parenting picture suggests that you can measure the value of caring for children by measuring the value of the adults those children become. We should simply appreciate that the relations between parents and children are unique.” (p233)

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