

[#HOWTORAISEAHUMAN](#)

What Kind Of Parent Are You: Carpenter Or Gardener?

May 28, 2018 7:00 AM ET

SASHA INGBER



The "carpenter" parent thinks that a child can be molded, writes Alison Gopnik. The "gardener," on the other hand, is less concerned about who the child will become and instead provides a protected space to explore.

Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

There are two kinds of parents in modern America, says Alison Gopnik in her recent book, [The Gardener and the Carpenter](#).

The "carpenter" thinks that his or her child can be molded. "The idea is that if you just do the right things, get the right skills, read the right books, you're going to be able to shape your child into a particular kind of adult," she says.

The "gardener," on the other hand, is less concerned about controlling who the child will become and instead provides a protected space to explore. The style is all about "creating a rich, nurturant but also variable, diverse, dynamic ecosystem."

[Gopnik](#), a psychology and philosophy professor at the University of California, Berkeley, says that many parents are carpenters but they should really be cultivating that garden. She spent decades researching children's development and found that parents often focus too much on who their children will be as adults. The harm in that approach, she says, is that parents and their offspring may become anxious, tense or unhappy.

"We're so concerned about how these children are going to turn out that we're unwilling to give them the autonomy that they need to be able to take risks and go out and explore the world," she says.

Ironically, the less that mothers and fathers worry about outcomes, she says, the better their children may fare in life.

Gopnik spoke with NPR's *Hidden Brain* about her book and her view of the flaws in modern parenting.

Interview Highlights

On the changing role of parents

For as long as we've been human, the whole village has been involved in caring for children. By the time you were ready to have children yourself, you'd had lots of practical experience in caring for children.

In the 20th century, families got smaller. People got to be more mobile and people had children at a later age. For the first time, people were having children who hadn't had much experience of caring for children but had lots of experience of going to school and working. It was kind of natural for people to think, "OK, this is like going to school and working. And if I can just find the right manual or the right secret handbook, I'm going to succeed at this task the same way that I succeeded in my classes or I succeeded at my job."

On the uniquely long childhood of humans

We sort of take it for granted that children need to be taken care of for a long time. Having that long period of childhood gave you this protected period where you could move from one village to another. And childhood gave you a chance to master that new environment. A lot of the things that seem kind of strange about children — the fact that they're simultaneously so creative, so imaginative, so exploratory and yet so bad at taking care of themselves — kind of fit that picture.

On the benefits of not instructing toddlers

[An experiment] was done by [researchers] Elizabeth Bonawitz and Laura Schulz. What they found was that if you gave a complicated toy to a 4-year-old, they find all the things that it could do. It could squeak, had a mirror, it had a light. But when the experimenter said, "This is my toy, I'm going to show you how it works," and did one thing, like squeak the squeaker, children were much less likely to explore. What they did, rationally, was squeak the squeaker — what the adult had demonstrated.

On what we can learn from robots that are built to "play"

It turns out that a very good way of getting a machine to learn is to give it an early period where it can just play. If you gave a robot a chance to just dance around, figure out what its limbs could do and then you gave it a specific job, like, 'Go and pick up this piece of cloth,' the robot was more resilient.

That's a good model for the things that play can do in general. If you want someone to be flexible, to say, "OK, I didn't learn how to do this particular thing, but now can I apply what I did to something else," then play really seems to play a deep role.

On how Silicon Valley gets it

Famously, Google gives their employees a day off to do whatever they want and Pixar has playhouses as part of their environment. I think the value of that kind of playful exploration is something that people in the tech world get.

On making pancakes with her grandson

One of the great joys of life is cooking with 2- and 3-year-olds. But of course they're extremely inefficient. So when [my grandson] Augie's whipping egg whites, [we] end up having egg white fresco all over the walls, and he's doing it in a way that is not nearly as efficient as it would be for me to do it myself. But it's interesting that if you look across cultures, what caregivers often do is not give their child instructions on what to do but let them participate. So let them take on a piece like whipping the eggs.