

Essay

Are parents trying too hard with their children?

We may think we can shape our offspring's futures by micromanaging their childhoods, but history — and neuroscience — show that taking a loving step back could be more productive



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by: Isabel Berwick

The Gardener and the Carpenter: What the New Science of Child Development Tells Us About the Relationship Between Parents and Children, by Alison Gopnik, *The Bodley Head*, RRP£18.99/*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*, RRP\$26, 320 pages

The End of American Childhood: A History of Parenting from Life on the Frontier to the Managed Child, by Paula Fass, *Princeton University Press*, RRP\$29.95, 352 pages

Parents are struggling, it seems. We are obsessed with the job of “parenting”, trying to mould our children so that they are happy, garlanded with top grades and achievements,

and ready to take on the future — even though that future is unknowable to us. Meanwhile, the frightening wider world lurks, chaotically, beyond our control. And to minimise our own fear and worry, we try to protect our young people so that a middle-class childhood now lasts until college, and often beyond.

There is an impossible mismatch between modern micromanagement inside the home and the unknowables outside. To assuage this crisis, parents (meaning, in my experience, anxiety-prone middle-class mothers) lap up advice from books telling us how to fix our family life so as to engineer more successful futures for our kids.

The standout among these manuals in capturing the parenting zeitgeist was Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (<http://next.ft.com/content/2ebc6d28-1f56-11e0-8c1c-00144feab49a>)(2011). This memoir by a Chinese-American mother of bringing up two high-achieving girls details how a traditional Asian regime can work wonders. Its key mantras include: be very strict, enforce music practice, don't allow free expression through drama, sport — or sleepovers. Overnight, “tiger mother” became shorthand for a woman who turns parenting into a high-stakes management career.

Two new books, however, suggest that over-scheduling and controlling our children when they are young — including “snowplough parenting” where every obstacle to the child's success is cleared from their path; then being a “helicopter” parent hovering over college-age adults — may be a waste of time. It may even be downright damaging for our children's future and society's economic prosperity.

Alison Gopnik's *The Gardener and the Carpenter* (<http://www.alisongopnik.com/TheGardenerAndTheCarpenter.htm>) should be required reading for anyone who is, or is thinking of becoming, a parent. It might also offer comfort to any adult who feels that their life has been blighted by their own parents. (And at £20, it is cheaper than therapy.)

“From an empirical perspective, parenting is a mug's game,” is one of Gopnik's startling early assertions. Instead of using “parenting” as a verb, she argues for a far more flexible way of being a parent, with caring for children at its heart: “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.” It is essentially a nurturing role, rather than shaping and constructing: the parent as “Gardener”, rather than “Carpenter”. And as Gopnik goes on to show, attempting to shape children's outcomes is useless as well as time-consuming and potentially damaging.

Gopnik is a professor of psychology and philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, where she runs a cognitive science laboratory. Hers is a rare erudition: scholarly, yes, but accessible and rooted in her experience as a mother and grandmother. Her toddler grandson Augie, in particular, makes frequent appearances. As Gopnik notes,

“Grandmother scientists and philosophers have been rather thin on the ground in the past.” It is, of course, only since more women have become involved in science that “we’ve learned that gathering is as important as hunting, and the complexities of childcare are as interesting as the politics of competition and deception.” It is all very cheering and puts “women’s work” in its proper place: utterly central to humanity’s continued success.

And we do need to consider the future our children will inhabit. It is not one we can control, or even imagine. “Parents are not designed to shape their children’s lives. Instead, parents and other caregivers are designed to provide the next generation with a protected space in which they can provide new ways of thinking and acting that, for better or worse, are entirely unlike any that we would have anticipated beforehand. This is the picture that comes from evolutionary biology, and ... from empirical studies of child development.”

One of the most striking aspects of Gopnik’s book is the way she guides readers into an understanding that love and security, rather than control and a narrow educationally focused approach, is the best foundation children need to flourish. Hardest, perhaps, for the goal-oriented parent to accept is that we have to allow children to make their own mistakes. “You come to make better decisions by making not-so-good decisions and then correcting them.” While we may have been told this before, Gopnik’s science-based assertion is a welcome corrective to the prevailing culture of coaching and tutoring children — often at great expense — to avoid failure.

Where though, does this leave parents who know that a talented child should, for example, persevere with a musical instrument, which, although often a slog for all concerned, will one day surely give them pleasure? Gopnik is not prescriptive about this. Children, after all, have always learned by repeating what they see adults doing over and over. Music and sports are both learned this way, and as we know, repetition can eventually lead to mastery.

She does, however, highlight that the way we educate children in the west is often not best suited to how young brains learn. A “one size fits all” approach isn’t going to suit everyone. In the classroom children are expected to learn by being taught, often a passive experience, and one which requires a very narrow focus and close attention.

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We are used to this classroom-based system but Gopnik encourages us to step back from it. “It’s natural for [children] to imitate and practice the activities that are most important to the adults around them. In school, intentionally or not, that means paying attention, taking tests, and getting grades.” The results are seen in Gopnik’s lab a few years later, when the most successful of those

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master exam-takers arrive at their prestigious university and are “resentfully surprised” when they have to begin again and become “apprentice” scientists and scholars. “Being the best test-taker in the world isn’t much help for either discovering new truths about that world, or new ways of thriving in it.”

Gopnik is articulating something that many of us have struggled with all our adult lives, perhaps without fully realising our problem: we were brought up to believe that success comes from good exam results. As an expert exam-taker, it worked for me, career-wise. Outside the office,

though, I have struggled with the practical skills and risk-taking that should be part of my human heritage. It looks like I didn’t do enough “discovery” or apprenticeship learning — and certainly did not take risks. We need, Gopnik says, to avoid making the same mistakes with our own children.

While Gopnik is dealing mainly with the individual child and his or her development, another Berkeley professor, historian Paula Fass, has written a complementary and enlightening book that covers the societal picture — a sweeping history of childhood in America since that country’s revolution and how successive generations have been raised. Her introduction points out that a child is not raised in isolation: “Historians are only now catching up to what theater, opera and daily news have known for some time, as we begin to understand just how important the relations between generations are to who we are as nations and societies. Our individual histories take place in the small theaters of our personal lives, but these are deeply entwined in a larger world of politics and culture.”

In that context, the book’s rather doom-laden title, *The End of American Childhood*, is a reference to Fass’s conclusion that modern American parents, in micromanaging their children, are breaking with a long tradition of independence of thought and action that differentiated children in the New World from their European counterparts. “The American boys of the early republic grew early into independence. They were neither indulged nor coddled. They were given some say in the objects of their labor and, when possible, free time to play. But the children were also seen as ‘little citizens’ — persons with capacity as well as potential.”

Children, even the children of wealthy parents, had to work in the home or on the land in early America, something that did not happen in the more developed European nations, where well-off homes had servants and children were considered in need of protection.

Meanwhile, many young Americans needed entrepreneurial spirit — they had to make a living from an early age.

Expectations of children were simply “more fluid” in 19th-century America, Fass says. That fluidity, as she shows, created the dynamism and independence of thought that powered America’s nascent democracy and economic growth. Thomas Jefferson, for example, “was vehement in rejecting primogeniture and entail, two aspects of British property law that put land in permanent and deeply undemocratic patterns of family descent.” By 1800, sons and daughters in the US inherited equally. (Meanwhile, in the UK, primogeniture still happens in the aristocracy (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/aug/10/new-duke-of-westminster-hugh-grosvenor-inherit-fortune>) — although it was abolished for the monarchy in 2013).

With mass 19th-century immigration, American society changed again, and Fass expertly traces the tensions and shifts this created. These immigrants believed they had “crossed the ocean to survive and, if possible, to succeed, but not necessarily to change”. But their children, outside the home, were exposed to the freedom of America, often becoming the only family members who could speak English — a powerful position. Fathers often felt that their authority as head of the traditionally patriarchal European household was under threat.

After the second world war, child-rearing in Europe grew closer to that of the US, as middle classes across the continent reduced their emphasis on family hierarchy. The post-cold war spread of democracy, along with the rise of western youth culture, accelerated that change. But Fass believes that something has happened in the past couple of decades to break American families’ link with their free-spirited pioneer past. It’s a shift that resonates in Europe, too, as it is a response to global power shifts.

Fass suggests that in the 21st century “the real concern may be about how the commitment to independence can be maintained in a highly competitive world”. The stakes are higher than ever. As a result, modern parents have somehow lost the will to allow independence; parents are giving children, even older children, “only half of the traditional formula for success ... they are giving what they believe is autonomy without a real sense of responsibility.”

Our caution is understandable. The international geopolitical outlook is shaky and, as Fass points out, cultural trends include “personal memoirs [that] are often exposés of abusive parents and difficult childhoods, and child rearing advice comes more and more frequently in response to fear and anxiety.” Our instincts tell us to do more, not less, to protect our children from the cruel 21st-century world.

The End of American Childhood is a corrective to that outlook. In reconnecting us to the past, Fass reassures us of the universal truth that parents have always loved and worried about their children. And, as Gopnik points out, “To be a parent, as opposed to parenting, is to be a bridge between the past and the future.”

Fass’s and Gopnik’s work shows us that both neuroscience and history teach us that children would benefit from a little more worldly discovery and less parental cosseting. It may not be possible for most children to work in the fields, but they might take a job in their teens, or be left alone to manage their exam revision — a test of application, and of resilience if they fail.

The gift we can give our children is to stop worrying, take a long view, and allow the next generation to develop its own path. It means, heartbreakingly, that we must let go. If we fail to do that, their future may not be so bright. As Gopnik warns, “Shaping [children] in our own image, or in the image of our current ideals, might actually keep them from adapting to changes in the future.”

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