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Why Be a Parent?

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The Gardener and the Carpenter: What the New Science of Child Development Tells Us About the Relationship Between Parents and Children

by Alison Gopnik

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 302 pp., \$26.00

Alison Gopnik's *The Gardener and the Carpenter* is yet another entry among the tens of thousands of books geared to middle-class parents about raising children. But her book is different, she claims, because it distinguishes between "parenting," a word she dislikes, and "being a parent." The title of the book is meant to illustrate the distinction. A carpenter, according to Gopnik, sets out to produce a particular kind of finished product, and when parents try to do that, it is parenting—what she calls "goal-directed work."



Alain Laboile

'La Famille'; photograph by Alain Laboile from Family Photography Now, a collection of work by forty contemporary photographers. It includes essays by Sophie Howarth and Stephen McLaren, and is published by Thames and Hudson.

In contrast, says Gopnik, a gardener provides a nourishing and protected environment, where all kinds of things can grow unpredictably, including, in her metaphor, different sorts of children who will determine their own varied futures. In her words, "In the parenting model, being a parent is like being a carpenter...your job is to shape that material into a final product that will fit the scheme you had in mind to begin with." But, she says, "Caring for children is like tending a garden, and being a parent is like being a gardener." She calls this "a kind of love" instead of "a kind of work," which certainly puts a thumb on the scale. Among the many problems with the metaphor is that not many gardeners I know would agree that "our greatest horticultural triumphs and joys also come when the garden escapes our control." (When they plant tulip bulbs, they expect tulips.)

But the major problem with the comparison is that it's a straw man, or two straw men. Very few parents are either gardeners or carpenters of children. Except for the extremes, like Dora Black, who with her husband, Bertrand Russell, established a famously goal-free school in 1927, and Amy Chua, the tiger mother, they neither leave children directionless to become whatever they will, nor try to produce a specific kind of adult. Most parents lie between those two extremes, including, it seems to me, Gopnik herself.

For example, she says that gardeners of children can “help create a new generation that is robust and adaptable and resilient.” That sounds like a goal to me. She points out that talking and reading to children “really makes a difference” in their language abilities. Isn't that a goal? And “The job for school-age children is to start actually becoming competent adults themselves”—something both gardeners and carpenters would agree on. Gopnik is clearly devoted to her grown sons and their children, and seems to be...

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