

Leave them kids alone!

Modern parenting is stunting our kids, finds Shaoni Bhattacharya

- 1 PARENTING is a terrible invention. Spontaneous loving care, informed by tradition and human experience, has now become a "management plan". So says child developmental psychologist and writer, Alison Gopnik in *The Gardener and the Carpenter*. Alongside Gopnik's scientific new



tome comes a fascinating historical and cultural journey through American childhood by social historian Paula Fass, *The End of American Childhood*. Together the books present a view of Western parenting in crisis as we emerge from the seismic shifts of the 20th century, a world away from our evolutionary roots.

- 2 As a parent of young children, I'm often overwhelmed by advice. After reading these books, I'm no clearer on what to do. But I am clearer about what not to do: don't "over-parent" or micromanage your child. In short:
24.
- 3 Gopnik in particular stresses parents should stop stultifying their kids with endless schedules and heavy expectations, quit the helicoptering and let them get on with it. Fair enough. The idea that some parents now look over their millennial offspring's university assignments or talk through the minutiae of their kidult's work issues is mad to a Generation X-er like me. Gopnik's book seems a welcome burst of common sense.
- 4 Parents, she writes, should be like gardeners, tending young shoots and providing fertile ground. Instead, many resemble carpenters, chiselling away at them to create an image of success that has little to do with their kids' wishes, talents or needs. 'Parent' is not actually a verb, she writes, not a form of work... and shouldn't be directed toward the goal of sculpting a child into a particular kind of adult.
- 5 This model causes Western parents untold anxiety, while the kids wilt under an "oppressive cloud". Worse, Gopnik argues, it's a "poor fit to the scientific reality". We used to learn from tribes, or large extended families and communities. Now we have small, geographically scattered families, often with parents who work long hours. Some transfer skills they learned

over years in a goal-oriented job to raising their children in the hope this will give them the resources to withstand unpredictable futures.

6 "Gardening," says Gopnik, can create robust and resilient children with the resourcefulness to adapt to an unpredictable world. She draws on current research to build a view that balances the tensions inherent in growing up with intergenerational conflicts.

7 Take play, something that is fundamental to learning. By filling their time with packed schedules of enriching activities, parents may rob their kids of a vital formative window. And while 5-year-olds play-fighting may not look as valuable as ballet classes or Kumon maths, rough-housing is something many animals do. Rat experiments suggest it is vital for honing social competence.

8 If you chain children to desks, and demand focused attention in a life so different from our evolutionary past, you can expect trouble. As she writes, there's "a close connection between the rise of schools and the development of attention deficit disorder". In the US, 1 in 5 boys have an ADD label by 17.

9 It's all fascinating, but I'm left with many questions. Gardening children sounds intuitively better than chiselling, but are there risks? ADD aside, it isn't clear. Gardens can face north, too. When must you intervene? And can gardening turn into chiselling?

10 Then there's culture. What works in one place may not elsewhere. Some carpenter-like behaviours – say, the expectation of filial obedience – can work in other cultures if underwritten by love. Gopnik doesn't mention it, but a long-term study in nine countries shows this approach works in Kenya, but not Sweden, and among European Americans in the US.

11 Fass's book helps with the cultural picture science needs to fully grasp the complexities of Western childhood. She recalls the sheer brutality of the past, when there was a simple goal: child survival. Fass tells extraordinary tales of children who worked the farms, helped raise their families from the dirt, and absorbed the pain of slavery and the Civil War.

12 For her, this made American children more independent and able to hold their own with adults compared with their European counterparts. This may no longer be the case, for reasons similar to those Gopnik cites. "American parents ... (I do not exclude myself) worry too much and provide their children with too little space to grow," writes Fass. The free-spirited American childhood is no longer possible for Fass, as overparenting in the face of rapid societal change has ensured that, in a sense, childhood does not end.

13 There is still no one magnum opus floating on the ocean of books on parenting, but maybe if Fass and Gopnik got together they would be a force to reckon with.

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