

## *Education Ethics Selections*

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### *Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior*

By Amy Chua

*Can a regimen of no playdates, no TV, no computer games and hours of music practice create happy kids? And what happens when they fight back?*

A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. They wonder what these parents do to produce so many math whizzes and music prodigies, what it's like inside the family, and whether they could do it too. Well, I can tell them, because I've done it. Here are some things my daughters, Sophia and Louisa, were never allowed to do:

- attend a sleepover
- have a playdate
- be in a school play
- complain about not being in a school play
- watch TV or play computer games
- choose their own extracurricular activities
- get any grade less than an A
- not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama
- play any instrument other than the piano or violin
- not play the piano or violin.

I'm using the term "Chinese mother" loosely. I know some Korean, Indian, Jamaican, Irish and Ghanaian parents who qualify too. Conversely, I know some mothers of Chinese heritage, almost always born in the West, who are not Chinese mothers, by choice or otherwise. I'm also using the term "Western parents" loosely. Western parents come in all varieties.

All the same, even when Western parents think they're being strict, they usually don't come close to being Chinese mothers. For example, my Western friends who consider themselves strict make their children practice their instruments 30 minutes every day. An hour at most. For a Chinese mother, the first hour is the easy part. It's hours two and three that get tough.

Despite our squeamishness about cultural stereotypes, there are tons of studies out there showing marked and quantifiable differences between Chinese and Westerners when it comes to parenting. In one study of 50 Western American mothers and 48 Chinese immigrant mothers, almost 70% of the Western mothers said either that "stressing academic success is not good for children" or that "parents need to foster the idea that learning is fun." By contrast, roughly 0% of the Chinese mothers felt the same way. Instead, the vast majority of the Chinese mothers said that they believe their children can be "the best" students, that "academic achievement reflects successful parenting," and that if children did not excel at school then there was "a problem" and parents "were not doing their job." Other studies indicate that compared to Western parents, Chinese parents spend approximately 10 times as long every day drilling academic activities with their children. By contrast, Western kids are more likely to participate in sports teams.

What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you're good at it. To get good at anything you have to work, and children on their own never want to work, which is why it is crucial to override their preferences. This often requires fortitude on the part of the parents because the child will resist; things are always hardest at the beginning, which is where Western parents tend to give up. But if done properly, the Chinese strategy produces a virtuous circle. Tenacious practice, practice, practice is crucial for excellence; rote repetition is underrated in America. Once a child starts to excel at something—whether it's math, piano, pitching or ballet—he or she gets praise, admiration and satisfaction. This builds confidence and makes the once not-fun activity fun. This in turn makes it easier for the parent to get the child to work even more.

Chinese parents can get away with things that Western parents can't. Once when I was young—maybe more than once—when I was extremely disrespectful to my mother, my father angrily called me "garbage" in our native Hokkien dialect. It worked really well. I felt terrible and deeply ashamed of what I had done. But it didn't damage my self-esteem or anything like that. I knew exactly how highly he thought of me. I didn't actually think I was worthless or feel like a piece of garbage.

As an adult, I once did the same thing to Sophia, calling her garbage in English when she acted extremely disrespectfully toward me. When I mentioned that I had done this at a dinner party, I was immediately ostracized. One guest named Marcy got so upset she broke down in tears and had to leave early. My friend Susan, the host, tried to rehabilitate me with the remaining guests.

The fact is that Chinese parents can do things that would seem unimaginable—even legally actionable—to Westerners. Chinese mothers can say to their daughters, "Hey fatty—lose some weight." By contrast, Western parents have to tiptoe around the issue, talking in terms of "health" and never ever mentioning the f-word, and their kids still end up in therapy for eating disorders and negative self-image. (I also once heard a

Western father toast his adult daughter by calling her “beautiful and incredibly competent.” She later told me that made her feel like garbage.)

Chinese parents can order their kids to get straight As. Western parents can only ask their kids to try their best. Chinese parents can say, “You’re lazy. All your classmates are getting ahead of you.” By contrast, Western parents have to struggle with their own conflicted feelings about achievement, and try to persuade themselves that they’re not disappointed about how their kids turned out.

I’ve thought long and hard about how Chinese parents can get away with what they do. I think there are three big differences between the Chinese and Western parental mind-sets.

First, I’ve noticed that Western parents are extremely anxious about their children’s self-esteem. They worry about how their children will feel if they fail at something, and they constantly try to reassure their children about how good they are notwithstanding a mediocre performance on a test or at a recital. In other words, Western parents are concerned about their children’s psyches. Chinese parents aren’t. They assume strength, not fragility, and as a result they behave very differently.

For example, if a child comes home with an A-minus on a test, a Western parent will most likely praise the child. The Chinese mother will gasp in horror and ask what went wrong. If the child comes home with a B on the test, some Western parents will still praise the child. Other Western parents will sit their child down and express disapproval, but they will be careful not to make their child feel inadequate or insecure, and they will not call their child “stupid,” “worthless” or “a disgrace.” Privately, the Western parents may worry that their child does not test well or have aptitude in the subject or that there is something wrong with the curriculum and possibly the whole school. If the child’s grades do not improve, they may eventually schedule a meeting with the school principal to challenge the way the subject is being taught or to call into question the teacher’s credentials.

If a Chinese child gets a B—which would never happen—there would first be a screaming, hair-tearing explosion. The devastated Chinese mother would then get dozens, maybe hundreds of practice tests and work through them with her child for as long as it takes to get the grade up to an A.

Chinese parents demand perfect grades because they believe that their child can get them. If their child doesn’t get them, the Chinese parent assumes it’s because the child didn’t work hard enough. That’s why the solution to substandard performance is always to excoriate, punish and shame the child. The Chinese parent believes that their child will be strong enough to take the shaming and to improve from it. (And when Chinese kids do excel, there is plenty of ego-inflating parental praise lavished in the privacy of the home.)

Second, Chinese parents believe that their kids owe them everything. The reason for this is a little unclear, but it’s probably a combination of Confucian filial piety and the fact that the parents have sacrificed and done so much for their children. (And it’s true that Chinese mothers get in the trenches, putting in long grueling hours personally tutoring, training, interrogating and spying on their kids.) Anyway, the understanding is

that Chinese children must spend their lives repaying their parents by obeying them and making them proud.

By contrast, I don't think most Westerners have the same view of children being permanently indebted to their parents. My husband, Jed, actually has the opposite view. "Children don't choose their parents," he once said to me. "They don't even choose to be born. It's parents who foist life on their kids, so it's the parents' responsibility to provide for them. Kids don't owe their parents anything. Their duty will be to their own kids." This strikes me as a terrible deal for the Western parent.

Third, Chinese parents believe that they know what is best for their children and therefore override all of their children's own desires and preferences. That's why Chinese daughters can't have boyfriends in high school and why Chinese kids can't go to sleepaway camp. It's also why no Chinese kid would ever dare say to their mother, "I got a part in the school play! I'm Villager Number Six. I'll have to stay after school for rehearsal every day from 3:00 to 7:00, and I'll also need a ride on weekends." God help any Chinese kid who tried that one.

Don't get me wrong: It's not that Chinese parents don't care about their children. Just the opposite. They would give up anything for their children. It's just an entirely different parenting model.

Here's a story in favor of coercion, Chinese-style. Lulu was about 7, still playing two instruments, and working on a piano piece called "The Little White Donkey" by the French composer Jacques Ibert. The piece is really cute—you can just imagine a little donkey ambling along a country road with its master—but it's also incredibly difficult for young players because the two hands have to keep schizophrenically different rhythms.

Lulu couldn't do it. We worked on it nonstop for a week, drilling each of her hands separately, over and over. But whenever we tried putting the hands together, one always morphed into the other, and everything fell apart. Finally, the day before her lesson, Lulu announced in exasperation that she was giving up and stomped off.

"Get back to the piano now," I ordered.

"You can't make me."

"Oh yes, I can."

Back at the piano, Lulu made me pay. She punched, thrashed and kicked. She grabbed the music score and tore it to shreds. I taped the score back together and encased it in a plastic shield so that it could never be destroyed again. Then I hauled Lulu's dollhouse to the car and told her I'd donate it to the Salvation Army piece by piece if she didn't have "The Little White Donkey" perfect by the next day. When Lulu said, "I thought you were going to the Salvation Army, why are you still here?" I threatened her with no lunch, no dinner, no Christmas or Hanukkah presents, no birthday parties for two, three, four years. When she still kept playing it wrong, I told her she was purposely working herself into a frenzy because she was secretly afraid she couldn't do it. I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic.

Jed took me aside. He told me to stop insulting Lulu—which I wasn't even doing, I was just motivating her—and that he didn't think threatening Lulu was helpful. Also, he

said, maybe Lulu really just couldn't do the technique—perhaps she didn't have the coordination yet—had I considered that possibility?

“You just don't believe in her,” I accused.

“That's ridiculous,” Jed said scornfully. “Of course I do.”

“Sophia could play the piece when she was this age.”

“But Lulu and Sophia are different people,” Jed pointed out.

“Oh no, not this,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Everyone is special in their special own way,” I mimicked sarcastically. “Even losers are special in their own special way. Well don't worry, you don't have to lift a finger. I'm willing to put in as long as it takes, and I'm happy to be the one hated. And you can be the one they adore because you make them pancakes and take them to Yankees games.”

I rolled up my sleeves and went back to Lulu. I used every weapon and tactic I could think of. We worked right through dinner into the night, and I wouldn't let Lulu get up, not for water, not even to go to the bathroom. The house became a war zone, and I lost my voice yelling, but still there seemed to be only negative progress, and even I began to have doubts.

Then, out of the blue, Lulu did it. Her hands suddenly came together—her right and left hands each doing their own imperturbable thing—just like that.

Lulu realized it the same time I did. I held my breath. She tried it tentatively again. Then she played it more confidently and faster, and still the rhythm held. A moment later, she was beaming.

“Mommy, look—it's easy!” After that, she wanted to play the piece over and over and wouldn't leave the piano. That night, she came to sleep in my bed, and we snuggled and hugged, cracking each other up. When she performed “The Little White Donkey” at a recital a few weeks later, parents came up to me and said, “What a perfect piece for Lulu—it's so spunky and so her.”

Even Jed gave me credit for that one. Western parents worry a lot about their children's self-esteem. But as a parent, one of the worst things you can do for your child's self-esteem is to let them give up. On the flip side, there's nothing better for building confidence than learning you can do something you thought you couldn't.

There are all these new books out there portraying Asian mothers as scheming, callous, overdriven people indifferent to their kids' true interests. For their part, many Chinese secretly believe that they care more about their children and are willing to sacrifice much more for them than Westerners, who seem perfectly content to let their children turn out badly. I think it's a misunderstanding on both sides. All decent parents want to do what's best for their children. The Chinese just have a totally different idea of how to do that.

Western parents try to respect their children's individuality, encouraging them to pursue their true passions, supporting their choices, and providing positive reinforcement and a nurturing environment. By contrast, the Chinese believe that the best way to protect their children is by preparing them for the future, letting them see what they're capable

of, and arming them with skills, work habits and inner confidence that no one can ever take away.

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Source: *The Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 2011.

## *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*

By John Locke

§ 1. A sound mind in a sound body, is a short, but full description of a happy state in this world; he that has these two, has little more to wish for; and he that wants either of them, will be but little the better for any thing else. Men's happiness, or misery, is most part of their own making. He whose mind directs not wisely, will never take the right way; and he whose body is crazy and feeble, will never be able to advance in it. I confess, there are some men's constitutions of body and mind so vigorous, and well framed by nature, that they need not much assistance from others; but, by the strength of their natural genius, they are, from their cradles, carried towards what is excellent; and, by the privilege of their happy constitutions, are able to do wonders. But examples of this kind are but few; and I think I may say, that, of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education. It is that which makes the great difference in mankind. The little, or almost insensible, impressions on our tender infancies, have very important and lasting consequences; and there it is, as in the fountains of some rivers, where a gentle application of the hand turns the flexible waters into channels, that make them take quite contrary courses; and by this little direction, given them at first, in the source, they receive different tendencies, and arrive at last at very remote and distant places.

§ 2. I imagine the minds of children, as easily turned, this or that way, as water itself; and though this be the principal part, and our main care should be about the inside, yet the clay cottage is not to be neglected. I shall therefore begin with the case, and consider first the health. of the body, as that which perhaps you may rather expect, from that study I have been thought more peculiarly to have applied myself to; and that also which will be soonest despatched, as lying, if I guess not amiss, in a very little compass.

§ 3. How necessary health is to our business and happiness; and how requisite a strong constitution, able to endure hardships and fatigue, is, to one that will make any figure in the world; is too obvious to need any proof.

§ 43. This being laid down in general, as the course ought to be taken, it is fit we come now to consider the parts of the discipline to be used a little more particularly. I have spoken so much of carrying a strict hand over children, that perhaps I shall be suspected of not considering enough what is due to their tender age and constitutions. But that opinion will vanish, when you have heard me a little farther. For I am very apt

to think, that great severity of punishment does but very little good; nay, great harm in education: and I believe it will be found, that, *ceteris paribus*, those children who have been most chastised, seldom make the best men. All that I have hitherto contended for, is, that whatsoever rigour is necessary, it is more to be used, the younger children are; and, having by a due application wrought its effect, it is to be relaxed, and changed into a milder sort of government.

§ 67. Manners, as they call it, about which children are so often perplexed, and have so many goodly exhortations made them, by their wise maids and governesses, I think, are rather to be learned by example than rules; and then children, if kept out of ill company, will take a pride to behave themselves prettily, after the fashion of others, perceiving themselves esteemed and commended for it. But, if by a little negligence in this part, the boy should not put off his hat, nor make legs very gracefully, a dancing-master will cure that defect, and wipe off all that plainness of nature, which the à-la-mode people call clownishness. And since nothing appears to me to give children so much becoming confidence and behaviour, and so to raise them to the conversation of those above their age, as dancing; I think they should be taught to dance, as soon as they are capable of learning it. For, though this consist only in outward gracefulness of motion, yet, I know not how, it gives children manly thoughts and carriage, more than any thing. But otherwise I would not have little children much tormented about punctilios, or niceties of breeding.

Never trouble yourself about those faults in them, which you know age will cure.

§ 135. I place virtue as the first and most necessary of those endowments that belong to a man or a gentleman, as absolutely requisite to make him valued and beloved by others, acceptable or tolerable to himself. Without that, I think, he will be happy neither in this, nor the other world.

§ 148. When he can talk, it is time he should begin to learn to read. But as to this, give me leave here to inculcate again what is very apt to be forgotten, viz. that great care is to be taken, that it be never made as a business to him, nor he look on it as a task. We naturally, as I said, even from our cradles, love liberty, and have therefore an aversion to many things, for no other reason, but because they are enjoined us. I have always had a fancy, that learning might be made a play and recreation to children; and that they might be brought to desire to be taught, if it were proposed to them as a thing of honour, credit, delight, and recreation, or as a reward for doing something else, and if they were never chid or corrected for the neglect of it.

§ 149. Thus children may be cozened into a knowledge of the letters; be taught to read, without perceiving it to be any thing but a sport, and play themselves into that which others are whipped for. Children should not have any thing like work, or serious, laid on them; neither their minds nor bodies will bear it. It injures their healths; and their being forced and tied down to their books, in an age at enmity with all such restraint, has, I doubt not, been the reason why a great many have hated books and learning all their lives after: it is like a surfeit, that leaves an aversion behind, not to be removed.

§ 157. The Lord's prayer, the creed, and ten commandments, it is necessary he should learn perfectly by heart; but, I think, not by reading them himself in his primer, but by somebody's repeating them to him, even before he can read. But learning by heart, and learning to read, should not, I think, be mixed, and so one made to clog the other. But his learning to read should be made as little trouble or business to him as might be.

§ 160. When he can read English well, it will be seasonable to enter him in writing. And here the first thing should be taught him, is to hold his pen right; and this he should be perfect in, before he should be suffered to put it to paper: for not only children, but any body else, that would do any thing well, should never be put upon too much of it at once, or be set to perfect themselves in two parts of an action at the same time, if they can possibly be separated.

§ 162. As soon as he can speak English, it is time for him to learn some other language: this nobody doubts of, when French is proposed. And the reason is, because people are accustomed to the right way of teaching that language, which is by talking it into children in constant conversation, and not by grammatical rules. The Latin tongue would easily be taught the same way, if his tutor, being constantly with him, would talk nothing else to him, and make him answer still in the same language. But because French is a living language, and to be used more in speaking, that should be first learned, that the yet pliant organs of speech might be accustomed to a due formation of those sounds, and he get the habit of pronouncing French well, which is the harder to be done, the longer it is delayed.

§ 178. At the same time that he is learning French and Latin, a child, as has been said, may also be entered in arithmetic, geography, chronology, history, and geometry too. For if these be taught him in French or Latin, when he begins once to understand either of these tongues, he will get a knowledge in these sciences, and the language to-boot.

Geography, I think, should be begun with; for the learning of the figure of the globe, the situation and boundaries of the four parts of the world, and that of particular kingdoms and countries, being only an exercise of the eyes and memory, a child with pleasure will learn and retain them: and this is so certain, that I now live in the house with a child, whom his mother has so well instructed this way in geography, that he knew the limits of the four parts of the world, could readily point, being asked, to any country upon the globe, or any county in the map of England; knew all the great rivers, promontories, straits, and bays in the world, and could find the longitude and latitude of any place before he was six years old. These things, that he will thus learn by sight, and have by rote in his memory, are not all, I confess, that he is to learn upon the globes. But yet it is a good step and preparation to it, and will make the remainder much easier, when his judgment is grown ripe enough for it: besides that, it gets so much time now, and by the pleasure of knowing things, leads him on insensibly to the gaining of languages.

§ 179. When he has the natural parts of the globe well fixed in his memory, it may then be time to begin arithmetic. By the natural parts of the globe, I mean several positions



of the parts of the earth and sea, under different names and distinctions of countries; not coming yet to those artificial and imaginary lines, which have been invented, and are only supposed, for the better improvement of that science.

§ 180. Arithmetic is the easiest, and consequently the first sort of abstract reasoning, which the mind commonly bears, or accustoms itself to: and is of so general use in all parts of life and business, that scarce any thing is to be done without it. This is certain, a man cannot have too much of it, nor too perfectly;

§ 184. As nothing teaches, so nothing delights, more than history. ...

§ 194. Though the systems of physics, that I have met with, afford little encouragement to look for certainty, or science, in any treatise, which shall pretend to give us a body of natural philosophy from the first principles of bodies in general; yet the incomparable Mr. Newton has shown, how far mathematics, applied to some parts of nature, may, upon principles that matter of fact justify, carry us in the knowledge of some, as I may so call them, particular provinces of the incomprehensible universe. And if others could give us so good and clear an account of other parts of nature, as he has of this our planetary world, and the most considerable phænomena observable in it, in his admirable book "*Philosophiæ naturalis principia mathematica*," we might in time hope to be furnished with more true and certain knowledge in several parts of this stupendous machine, than hitherto we could have expected. And though there are very few that have mathematics enough to understand his demonstrations; yet the most accurate mathematicians, who have examined them, allowing them to be such, his book will deserve to be read, and give no small light and pleasure to those, who, willing to understand the motions, properties, and operations of the great masses of matter in this our solar system, will but carefully mind his conclusions, which may be depended on as propositions well proved.

§ 216. Though I am now come to a conclusion of what obvious remarks have suggested to me concerning education, I would not have it thought, that I look on it as a just treatise on this subject. There are a thousand other things that may need consideration; especially if one should take in the various tempers, different inclinations, and particular defaults, that are to be found in children; and prescribe proper remedies. The variety is so great, that it would require a volume; nor would that reach it. Each man's mind has some peculiarity, as well as his face, that distinguishes him from all others; and there are possibly scarce two children, who can be conducted by exactly the same method. Besides that, I think a prince, a nobleman, and an ordinary gentleman's son, should have different ways of breeding. But having had here only some general views in reference to the main end and aims in education, and those designed for a gentleman's son, who being then very little, I considered only as white paper, or wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases; I have touched little more than those heads, which I judged necessary for the breeding of a young gentleman of his condition in general; and have now published these my occasional thoughts, with this hope, that, though this be far from being a complete treatise on this subject, or such as that every one may find what will just fit his child in it; yet it may give some small light to those, whose concern for

their dear little ones makes them so irregularly bold, that they dare venture to consult their own reason, in the education of their children, rather than wholly to rely upon old custom.

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Source: *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* [1690].

## *Sulzer and Kant on Obedience in Education in 1700s Germany*

In Britain and America in the 1700s, the most influential philosopher of education was John Locke, with his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. In France, it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau with his *Émile*.

But in the German states, it was Johann Georg Sulzer, with his 1748 *An Essay on the Education and Instruction of Children*. Sulzer's fundamental thesis:

“Obedience is so important that all education is actually nothing other than learning how to obey.”

He elaborates: “It is not very easy, however, to implant obedience in children. It is quite natural for the child's soul to want to have a will of its own, and things that are not done correctly in the first two years will be difficult to rectify thereafter. One of the advantages of these early years is that then force and compulsion can be used. Over the years, children forget everything that happened to them in early childhood. If their wills can be broken at this time, they will never remember afterwards that they had a will, and for this very reason the severity that is required will not have any serious consequences.”[1]

To which I add from Immanuel Kant's lectures on education, first delivered in 1776/77: “Above all things, obedience is an essential feature in the character of a child, especially of a school boy or girl.”[2] Much of Kant on education reads like a gloss on Sulzer, with its emphasis on obedience, duty, discipline, and punishment.

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Sources: [1] Johann Georg Sulzer, *An Essay on the Education and Instruction of Children*, 1748. Quoted in Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good*. [2] Immanuel Kant, *On Education*. Translated by Annette Churton. University of Michigan Press, 1960. In Ozmon and Craver's *Philosophical Foundations of Education*, 7th ed.

## *Some Quotations on Education*

By Maria Montessori

Education should fit the child, not vice versa:

“The adult has not understood the child or the adolescent, and is therefore in continual strife with him. The remedy is not that the adult should learn something intellectually, or complete a deficient culture. He must find a different starting point ... In their dealings with children adults ... look upon the child as something empty that is to be filled through their own efforts, as something inert and helpless for which they must do everything, as something lacking an inner guide and in constant need of direction. ... But if a child has within himself the key to his own personality ... these must be delicate powers indeed, and an adult by his untimely interventions can prevent their secret realization ... .” (1936)

Cognition and movement are integrated:

“One of the greatest mistakes of our day is to think of movement by itself, as something apart from the higher functions. ... Mental development must be connected with movement and be dependent on it. It is vital that educational theory and practice should become informed by this idea. ... Watching a child makes it obvious that the development of the mind comes about through his movements. ... Mind and movements are parts of the same entity.” (1967, 141-2)

Choice:

“These children have free choice all day long. Life is based on choice, so they learn to make their own decisions. They must decide and choose for themselves all the time. ... They cannot learn through obedience to the commands of another.” (1989, 26)

Intrinsic motivation, not extrinsic:

“The prize and the punishment are incentives towards unnatural and forced effort, and therefore we certainly cannot speak of the natural development of the child in connection with them.” (1912/1964, 21)

“The secret of success is found to lie in the right use of imagination in awakening interest, and the stimulation of seeds already sown.” (1948/1967, 1-2)

Spontaneous self-development:

“By leaving the children in our schools at liberty we have been with great clearness to follow them in their natural method of spontaneous self-development.” (1912/1964, 357)

“All we have to do is set the energy free. ... When we speak of freedom in education we mean freedom for the creative energy which is the urge of life towards the development

of the individual. This is not the casual energy like the energy of a bomb that explodes. It has a guiding principle, a very fine, but unconscious directive, the aim of which is to develop a normal person. When we speak of free children we are thinking of this energy which must be free in order to construct these children well.” (1989, 12)

#### Meaningful-to-student context:

“Education, as today conceived, is something separated both from biological and social life. All who enter the educational world tend to be cut off from society. ... People are prepared for life by exclusion from it.” (1967, 10-11)

#### Social voluntarism and win-win:

“Our schools show that children of different ages help one another. The younger ones see what the older ones are doing and ask for explanations. These are readily given, and the instruction is really valuable. ... The older ones are happy to be able to teach what they know. People sometimes fear that if a child of five gives lessons, this will hold him back from his own progress. But, in the first place, he does not teach all the time and his freedom is respected. Second, teaching helps him to understand what he knows even better than before. He has to analyze and rearrange his little store of knowledge before he can pass it on. ... [So] everyone achieves a healthy normality through the mutual exchange.” (1967, 226-8)

Schools can make a “contribution to the cause of goodness by removing obstacles” (1965, 189).

#### The teacher as provider of structure, guide, and “policeman”:

“Freedom in a structured environment.” (1965)

“The children in our schools are free, but that does not mean there is no organization. Organization, in fact, is necessary ... if the children are to be free to work.” (1967, 244)

“It is true that the child develops in his environment through activity itself, but he needs material means, guidance and an indispensable understanding. It is the adult who provides these necessities. ... If [the adult] does less than is necessary, the child cannot act meaningfully, and if he does more than is necessary, he imposes himself on the child, extinguishing creative impulses.” (1956, 154)

“Do not apply the rule of non-interference when the children are still the prey of all their different naughtinesses. Don’t let them climb on the windows, the furniture, etc. You must interfere at this stage. At this stage the teacher must be a policeman. The policeman has to defend the honest citizens against the disturbers.” (1989, 16)

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Source: Stephen Hicks’s video lecture on *Objectivism and Montessori*, Part 12 of [Philosophy of Education course](#). Also at [Youtube](#).

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## *Alison Gopnik's Advice to Parents: Stop Parenting!*

*But why doesn't she tell school authorities to stop schooling?*

By Peter Gray

Alison Gopnik is a renowned developmental psychologist whose research has revealed much about the amazing learning and reasoning capacities of young children, and she may be *the* leading interpreter of such research to the general public. She is one of the best science writers I know of. In her most recent book, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, released just a few days ago, she describes the results of many clever experiments that help us understand how young children learn by watching others, listening to others, and manipulating objects in systematic ways in their play.

A persistent theme emerging from such research, as Gopnik explains, is that children learn not by passively absorbing information, but by actively engaging their social and physical environments and drawing logical inferences based on what they see, hear, and in other ways experience. Gopnik contends that children learn a great deal from other people, including from their parents, not because the others are deliberately teaching them but because those others are doing and talking about interesting things, which children are innately motivated to try to understand and incorporate into their own growing world views.

Indeed, Gopnik describes research showing that deliberate teaching can, at least sometimes, reduce the amount that children learn about an object, because the teaching tends to inhibit them from exploring the object themselves and thereby prevents them from learning any more about it than what the teacher had pointed out. The research reveals, to a far greater extent than most people would expect, that young children are quite sophisticated little scientists who bring their already acquired knowledge and theories to bear, in logical ways, as they explore the world around them to acquire new, more advanced understandings. We adults can help them best not by teaching, but by making sure that they have adequate social and physical environments and time and space in which to explore. The more that young children are integrated into the real world of other children and adults, the more they will learn about that world and discover their places in it.

Of course, if we take this approach and let children learn in their own natural ways, we are giving up the illusion that we can control what they learn and can shape them into being the particular kinds of persons that we might want them to be. We are, instead, trusting children to shape themselves. And this leads to the main point of the book.

Gopnik is not only a researcher and author, but is also the mother of three grown sons and proud grandmother to a little boy named Augie. Her book is founded on research about how children learn, but her message is directed to parents. In a nutshell, her message to parents is this: *Stop parenting*. Does that sound paradoxical?

*Parent*, according to Gopnik, is a wonderful noun, referring to a partner in a particular kind of *relationship*; but it's a terrible verb when used, as it so often is, to refer to what is

perceived as a particular kind of *work*. Here are some of Gopnik's words about this awful verb.

- *“‘Parent’ is not actually a verb, not a form of work, and it isn’t and shouldn’t be directed toward the goal of sculpting a child into a particular kind of adult (p 8) .... We recognize the difference between work and other relationships, other kinds of love. To be a wife is not to engage in ‘wifing,’ to be a friend is not to ‘friend,’ even on Facebook, and we don’t ‘child’ our mothers and fathers (p 9)”.*
- *“To be a parent—to care for a child—is to be part of a profound and unique human relationship, to engage in a particular kind of love (p 9). ... Love doesn’t have goals or blueprints, but it does have a purpose. The purpose of love is not to change the people we love, but to give them what they need to thrive. Love’s purpose is not to shape our beloved’s destiny, but to help them shape their own. It isn’t to show them the way, but to help them find a path for themselves, even if the path they take isn’t one we would choose for ourselves, or even one we would choose for them. ... Loving children doesn’t give them a destination; it gives them sustenance for the journey (p 10).”*
- *“The word ‘parenting,’ now so ubiquitous, first emerged in America in 1958 and became common only in the 1970s (p 21). ... But, in fact, parenting is a terrible invention. It hasn’t improved the lives of children and parents, and in some ways it’s arguably made them worse. For middle-class parents, trying to shape their children into worthy adults becomes the source of endless anxiety and guilt coupled with frustration. And for their children, parenting leads to an oppressive cloud of hovering expectations (p 24). ... The rise of parenting has accompanied the decline of the street, the public playground, the neighborhood, even recess (p 36).”*

The title of the book—*The Gardener and the Carpenter*—comes from two possible ways of thinking about the role of parents with respect to children’s development. Here, again, in Gopnik’s words:

- *“In the parenting model, being a parent is like being a carpenter. You should pay some attention to the kind of material you are working with, and it may have some influence on what you try to do. But essentially your job is to shape that material into a final product that will fit the scheme you had in mind to begin with. And you can assess how good a job you’ve done by looking at the finished product. Are the doors true? Are the chairs steady? Messiness and variability are the carpenter’s enemies; precision and control are her allies. Measure twice, cut once (p 18).”*
- *“When we garden, on the other hand, we create a protected and nurturing space for plants to flourish. ... And as any gardener knows, our specific plans are always thwarted. The poppy comes up neon orange instead of pale pink, the rose that was supposed to climb the fence stubbornly remains a foot from the ground, black spot and rust and aphids can never be defeated. ... And yet the compensation is that our greatest horticultural triumphs and joys also come when the garden escapes our control, when the weedy Queen Anne’s lace unexpectedly showed up in just the right place in front of the dark yew tree, when the forgotten daffodil travels to the other side of the garden and bursts out among the blue forget-me-nots, when the grapevine that was supposed to stay demurely hitched to the arbor runs scarlet riot through the trees. ... Unlike a good chair, a good garden is constantly changing, as it adapts to the changing circumstances of weather and the seasons. And in the long run, that kind of varied, flexible, complex, dynamic system will be more robust and adaptable than the most carefully tended hothouse bloom (pp 18-19).”*
- *“So our job as parents is not to make a particular kind of child. Instead, our job is to provide a protected space of love, safety, and stability in which children of many unpredictable kinds can*

*flourish. Our job is not to shape our children's minds; it's to let those minds explore all the possibilities that the world allows. .... We can't make children learn, but we can let them learn (p 20)."*

Although she doesn't say it explicitly, it seems clear that Gopnik would be fine with the verb "to parent" if it meant something like "to garden."

Those who have read my book *Free to Learn* know that I agree completely with Gopnik in essentially all she says about children's learning and the appropriate role of parents. Indeed, her research and some of the other research she describes is included in the evidence I present in my book. I do, however, have one big complaint about Gopnik's book. Gopnik fails to acknowledge that the carpenter model, with all its problems, applies doubly, or triply, or way way more than triply, to our system of schooling. I wish she would point the finger more squarely at schooling, which is largely the product of and fostered by academic institutions such as Berkeley where she works (and Boston College where I work), rather than at parents.

In fact, as I have argued elsewhere (though not with these terms), the carpenter model of schooling is what has largely driven the carpenter model of parenting. It is very hard to be a gardener parent while sending your child to a carpenter school, and all public schools today are in the carpenter mode. Your children keep getting tested to see how they measure up, according to the standard model for all children that the schooling system has set. And if they don't meet the standards, you get called in by the school authorities who do their best to make you feel that it is your responsibility to make your child conform and meet the measures that all the children are supposed to meet. Your child wants to explore one day away from school—like that beautiful grapevine that wants to run riot through the trees—and if this happens several time you will be accused of negligence and may even be threatened with having your child taken away because of the truancy laws. You continuously hear propaganda about how your child's future employability depends on getting high marks in school, doing all the right extracurriculars, and getting into a prestigious college—propaganda that places like Berkeley (and even Boston College) profit from mightily. So, how can parents maintain a gardener mentality in the face of all this pressure from the carpenters?

I was a gardener as a parent until my son started school, and then, when he started school, there was such a discrepancy between the schoolish restrictions on his life and my belief that he needed freedom to grow that I was afraid he would be crushed in the conflict. The only solution, without giving up on the gardener model and watching my wildflower wither, was to take him out of school. Fortunately, we discovered the Sudbury Valley School, a radically alternative democratic school that operates in perfect accord with everything that Gopnik says about how children learn and develop. It is truly a garden where children and teenagers can play and explore in their own chosen ways and become their own, beautiful, varied, ever-changing selves. It's a school that's been around for almost 50 years; it's one of the most fully studied schools in existence; its model has been successfully replicated by many other schools throughout the world; and yet its existence is almost never acknowledged by people in academia, even by people who believe that children learn best when they are free to explore and play in their own ways.

Much of my research, summarized in *Free to Learn* and in previous essays in this blog as well as in academic articles, has been about the ways that young people learn and

develop when they are truly free to control their own education, as they are designed by nature to do. As part of that research I've followed up graduates of Sudbury Valley and grown "unschoolers" (people who were homeschooled by a method in which they had charge of their own education). Such research, about what happens when children really do grow up free to chart their own days and destinies, in a safe and nurturing environment, is the natural real-world complement to the kinds of laboratory research that Gopnik discusses.

Gopnik clearly acknowledges that school is a problem. She writes about how schools teach children to be good at school—good at tests—but not much else. At one point she says, *"By the time they arrive in our classes, many Berkeley undergraduates are absolute Matajuros of test-taking. It's no wonder we're gravely disappointed—and they're resentfully surprised—when we ask them to actually be apprentice scientists or scholars instead. Skilled adults continue to face difficult challenges, of course, but passing exams isn't one of them. Being the best test-taker in the world isn't much help for discovering either new truths about that world or new ways of thriving in it (p 190)."*

But Gopnik does not acknowledge the scope of the problem and says nothing about how our carpenter schools interfere with parents' attempts to be gardeners at home. She offers no suggestion about what to do about schools and no acknowledgement that thousands of families are, successfully, raising their children in the gardener mode by removing them from standard schools. In fact, near the beginning of the book (p 6), she says, *"I believed—and still do—that good public schools are best for all children."* That, I'm sure, is a politically correct thing to say and makes the establishment think, "She's OK," but it contradicts everything else she says in this book. Where are these "good public schools" she is talking about? The ones that are usually called "good" are those that churn out the highest test scores and place the greatest pressures on kids. All public schools these days are judged, and the teachers are judged, by children's test scores. Every public school, by law, is in the carpenter mode; none of them are gardens.

OK, I'm a little frustrated and I guess I'm showing it. There are so many smart and good-willed people in academia who, like Gopnik, seem to get it, but who then fail to come to the logical conclusion and fail even to look at the real-world evidence that their ideas beg them to examine. The evidence has been out there for a long time that it is possible to develop learning spaces where children and teenagers can learn naturally; and the evidence has been out there for a long time that children and teenagers develop beautifully, in highly varied ways, like flowers in a garden, in those spaces; and the evidence has been out there for a long time that such learning spaces are far less expensive and less trouble to operate than are standard schools, precisely because they work with children's nature rather than against it. And yet academia continues to blind itself to that evidence. Why?

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