

The Work of Gaming

The definition of a game, the golf example, the Bernard Suits quote, and all of Jane McGonigal's quotes are from her book, *Reality is Broken* (2010).

It appears that the term “hard fun” originated with Seymour Papert, author of the timeless book, *Mindstorms* (1980). See “A Tribute to Seymour Papert” by MIT Press (August 3, 2016). <https://mitpress.mit.edu/blog/tribute-seymour-papert>. Also see “Hard Fun” by Seymour Papert (2002). <http://www.papert.org/articles/HardFun.html>

Keith Stuart's quote is from “Fortnite Is so Much More Than a Game” (August 17, 2018). <https://medium.com/s/greatescape/fortnite-is-so-much-more-than-a-game-3ca829f389f4>

For parents with kids who are truly, passionately involved with gaming (in the 40 or more hours-a-week sense), Penelope Trunk offers some helpful insight: “Commitment is essential for doing something that matters” (February 15, 2018). <http://blog.penelopetrunk.com/2018/02/15/commitment-is-essential-for-doing-something-that-matters/>. Also see “Video games provide a genuine happiness that we find very few other ways” (March 30, 2015). <http://education.penelopetrunk.com/2015/03/30/video-games-provide-a-genuine-happiness-that-we-find-very-few-other-ways/>

The Magic of Intrinsic Motivation

For more on self-determination theory, see the website of the Center for Self-Determination Theory (<https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/>) and the 1995 book *Why We Do What We Do* by Edward L. Deci and Richard Flaste.

How to Engage a Teenager

Browse all the Adventure Semester challenges—and watch some high-quality (and hilarious) videos—here: <https://blakeboles.com/adventuresemester>

Marc Gallivan's quote is from “Give Kids Real Jobs” (June 25, 2018). <https://www.alpinevalleyschool.com/blog/2018/6/25/give-kids-real-jobs>

The Carl Rogers quote is drawn from Will Richardson's blog post, “On Learning and Common Sense” (October 11, 2017). <https://willrichardson.com/on-learning-and-common-sense/>

4: YOU HAVE LESS CONTROL THAN YOU THINK

Welcome to the Minefield

How To Be A Mom in 2017: Make sure your children's academic, emotional, psychological, mental, spiritual, physical, nutritional, and social needs are met while being careful not to overstimulate, understimulate, improperly medicate, helicopter, or neglect them in a screen-free, processed foods-free, GMO-free, negative energy-free, plastic-free, body positive, socially conscious, egalitarian but also authoritative, nurturing but fostering of independence, gentle but not overly permissive, pesticide-free two-story, multilingual home preferably in a cul-de-sac with a backyard and 1.5 siblings spaced at least two year[s] apart for proper development also don't forget the coconut oil.

How To Be A Mom In Literally Every Generation Before Ours: Feed them sometimes.

- Bunmi Latidan

When the 29-year-old novelist Kim Brooks first became pregnant, she held two firm convictions about parenting: “I knew it was important, and I knew that I wanted to get it right.”

The best way to guard against failure, she assumed, was to do her homework. She dove into the literature on the

emotional, social, physical, psychological, and nutritional needs of babies and children, a process not unlike choosing a college major but with actual human lives at stake.

Brooks developed nuanced opinions about “breast-feeding, breast pumps, midwifery, baby-wearing, tummy time, screen time, infant massage, playgroups, hand sanitizer, private versus public school, self-weaning, sleep training, day care, toddler enrichment, and child safety.” And while this research helped her feel confident that she was doing her best for her kid, it also left her feeling increasingly self-conscious, uncertain, and overwhelmed. The more she learned about parenting, the less she felt she understood herself and her children.

A turning point came on a spring day in 2011, when Brooks allowed her 4-year-old son to wait in the car while she ran into a store to buy him headphones so he could use his iPad on a flight they were about to take. It was a mild, 50-degree day. Brooks locked the car, child-locked the doors, left the windows cracked open, and returned in five minutes. Unbeknownst to her, a bystander had filmed the entire incident and sent it to the police, who tracked the license plate number. Nine months later, her cell phone rang, and a police officer asked Brooks if she was aware that there was warrant out for her arrest.

In the legal troubles that followed, Brooks reached out to Lenore Skenazy, the prominent spokesperson for free-range parenting who had gained international notoriety as the “world’s worst mom” for letting her 9-year-old ride the New York City subway alone. Brooks started telling her story when Skenazy interrupted and offered to finish the story for her:

OK, so, you were running errands with your kid when you decided to leave her in the car for a couple minutes while you ran into a store. The surrounding conditions were perfectly safe, mild weather and such, but when you came out, you found yourself blocked in by a cop car, being yelled at by a nosy, angry onlooker, being accused of child neglect or endangering your child. Is that about right?

Brooks’ story wasn’t unique after all. It was all too common.

A juvenile court eventually charged Brooks with 100 hours of community service and mandatory parenting education. Brooks didn’t actually mind the charges, but she did mind how her son now feared that the police would take him away if he was left alone for only a moment.

Her son’s fear mirrored something else that Skenazy had said to her in their conversation:

There’s been this huge cultural shift. We now live in a society where most people believe a child cannot be out of your sight for one second, where people think children need constant, total adult supervision. This shift is not rooted in fact. It’s not rooted in any true change. It’s imaginary. It’s rooted in irrational fear.

Brooks began to realize that the kind of parenting that she had been practicing—the normal, modern strain of seemingly research-backed child-rearing—was a factor in this cultural shift. In her quest to become a responsible mother, she had unwittingly contributed to the same culture that prompted a stranger to report her to the police.

What is this culture? Where did it come from? How

grounded is it in reality? And how does it influence your decisions about trusting children, letting them take risks, and sending them to school?²²

Parenting in the Twenty-First Century

Sometime around 1958, the word “parent” first entered the Merriam-Webster dictionary. Not “parent” as a noun, but “parent” as a verb—a verb that takes an object. Parenting was transforming from an identity to an action. This was a curious shift in language, as the psychologist Alison Gopnik observed, because “to be a wife is not to engage in ‘wifing,’ to be a friend is not to ‘friend’. . .and we don’t ‘child’ our mothers and fathers. Yet these relationships are central to who we are.”

This linguistic transformation was just one of the dramatic changes in child-rearing that took place over the past half-decade. Middlebury professor Margaret Nelson neatly described the heart of these changes in her 2010 book, *Parenting Out of Control*:

22 A few years ago, I told my friend Tessa, a young adult who had previously joined a few of my adventure programs, that I was writing about parenting. She laughed. “Blake, you don’t have kids. Why would anyone listen to you about parenting?” Fair question, Tessa—and perhaps one that passed through your head too, dear reader. Here’s the best answer I can offer. Despite the fact that I’m not yet a dad, I have served as a sort of temporary “crazy uncle” to hundreds of teenagers since 2003 through my work at camps and travel programs. This, I believe, has granted me a detached, birds-eye view of youth that lets me make general observations in a way that parents may struggle to do, considering the natural bias toward one’s own children. John Holt, the father of unschooling, didn’t have any kids himself, but he spent enough time around kids and listened to enough parents to give him an informed opinion on parenting. I’m no John Holt, but I do aspire to follow a similar path—at least until I have a kid of my own.

When I was raising my children in the 1970s, there were no baby monitors to help me hear them cry in the middle of the night, no cell phones to assist me in keeping track of their whereabouts at every moment, and no expectation that I would know any more about their educational success than they, or a quarterly report card, would tell me. Indeed, although I thought of myself as a relatively anxious parent, I trusted a girl in the third grade to accompany my five-year-old son to and from school, and when he was in first grade, I allowed him to walk that mile by himself...In retrospect, and from the vantage point of watching my younger friends and colleagues with their children today, my parenting style seems, if not neglectful, certainly a mite casual.

When Nelson was raising her children in the 1970s, parenting had begun its transformation into a full-blown industry and a highly technical field dominated by scientific experts. The central idea of this field was that “parents can learn special techniques that will make their children turn out better,” as Gopnik puts it. In the ‘80s and ‘90s, parenting matured again, much like your kid’s favorite Pokémon, into its contemporary, fire-breathing version: something called *intensive parenting*.

Intensive parenting is a tricky thing to define. Sociologist Sharon Hays describes it as any parenting approach that is “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive.” Another sociologist, Annette Lareau, considers it a form of “concerted cultivation” in which “parents spend much more time talking to children, answering questions with questions, and treating each child’s thought as a special contribution.”

But it was Alison Gopnik, again, who found the perfect analogy in her book *The Gardener and the Carpenter*. Modern parenting is goal-oriented parenting, Gopnik observes, much like carpentry is goal-oriented. A gardener, on the other hand, tends to her crops with the hope that they will grow strong, but also knowing that specific outcomes are outside her control.

Goal-oriented attitudes are certainly appropriate for some areas of life. Gopnik concedes that “[working] to achieve a particular outcome is a good model for many crucial human enterprises. It’s the right model for carpenters or writers or businessmen. You can judge whether you are a good carpenter or writer or CEO by the quality of your chairs, your books or your bottom line.” But when we approach parenting in goal-oriented terms, she warns, we end up thinking of kids as lumps of clay who we might perfectly shape with enough effort and expertise. Just as a master carpenter aspires to build a perfect chair, the intensive parent believes she can “produce the right kind of child, who in turn will become the right kind of adult.”

Today, Amazon lists over 80,000 titles in its Parenting books section, and people of all social classes believe in the intensive parenting approach. It is the new normal. How did we arrive at this moment in history? What caused this monumental shift in our attitudes toward parenting?

Plummeting child mortality rates in the late nineteenth century and the rise of effective birth control in the twentieth century led parents to have fewer children and shower more love and attention on each one. Rising prosperity, prohibition of child labor, and the slow shift toward knowledge

work nudged children away from their historic role as family breadwinners. As David Lancy observed in *The Anthropology of Childhood*, the parents of developed nations stopped looking at their kids as chattel (economic assets) or changelings (unwanted and inconvenient creatures), and started seeing them as cherubs: innocent, precious, and highly vulnerable individuals.

By the middle of the twentieth century, adults had become more aware of the various physical and emotional threats to young people, and children had gained significant legal protections. Kids were physically safer than ever before in history. Yet a multitude of historical influences conspired to drive parental anxiety. The 1980s brought a few high-profile abduction and child assault cases that were widely broadcasted, seeding the twenty-first century belief in safety at any cost. A stagnation of middle-class wages beginning in the 1970s drove parents to value conventional economic success.²³ Research on brain plasticity in the 1990s prompted parents to provide “highly stimulating” environments—an unwinnable and anxiety-provoking goal if there ever was one, as *The New Yorker* reported in 2008:

[Brain plasticity] research said that, while the infant brain is, in part, the product of genes, that endowment is just the clay; after birth, it is “sculpted” by the child’s experience, the amount of stimulation he receives, above

²³ As *The New York Times* reported in 2018, “For the first time, it’s as likely as not that American children will be less prosperous than their parents. For parents, giving children the best start in life has come to mean doing everything they can to ensure that their children can climb to a higher class, or at least not fall out of the one they were born into.”

all in the first three years of life. That finding prompted many programs aimed at stimulating babies whose mothers, for whatever reason (often poverty), seemed likely to neglect them. Social workers drove off to homes deemed at risk, to play with the new baby. But upper-middle-class parents—and marketers interested in them—also read about the brain-plasticity findings, and figured that, if some stimulation is good, more is better. (Hence Baby Einstein.) Later research has provided no support for this. The conclusion, in general, is that the average baby’s environment provides all the stimuli he or she needs.

Finally, a simple demographic shift in the twentieth century may explain much of the intensive parenting phenomenon. Since the beginning of time, most families have been large, and most parents have been young. Siblings looked after each other as a matter of necessity. As women began delaying childbirth to seize educational and professional opportunities in the twentieth century, family sizes shrank radically—from approximately seven children in 1850 to two children today. Parents became wealthier and professional childcare became commonplace. The end result was that, from the 1970s onward, children were much more likely to be raised in small families, with fewer siblings but lots of professional adult caretakers.

Fast forward a few decades, and those children are now the adults who are starting families. Because they came from small families that could afford childcare, these parents have virtually no experience in caring for children (i.e., siblings), but they have lots of experience with school and jobs, which is what they’ve spent most of their lives doing. Therefore, it’s

natural for this generation of parents to conceive of child-rearing as another goal to be tackled with the same ferocity as their first professional appointment. The internal dialogue, as Alison Gopnik puts it, goes something like this: “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.” If you’ve spent your whole life studying intensively and working intensively, then it only makes sense to parent intensively.

The end result of these broad historical and cultural shifts is what the sociologist Frank Furedi calls *parental determinism*: the belief that parents hold almost God-like powers to shape their children’s destinies. And with immense powers, of course, comes immense responsibilities. According to the dogma of intensive parenting, if your kid fails, then it’s your fault—and if your kid succeeds, it’s to your credit. Either way, the stakes are high, which means you can’t afford to mess around—especially with any wacky “alternatives.” Get your kid into the best possible school, micromanage them to ensure top performance, and make sure they don’t deviate from the prescribed path to success, no matter the cost.

Meet Judith Rich Harris

Intensive parenting is so pervasive today that it can be hard to see. Yet we must see it, and name it, because of the harm it can cause to children, parent-child relationships, and our culture at large (as evidenced by Kim Brooks’ experience leaving her kid alone for five minutes).

I see two broad ways of combatting the tide of intensive parenting. The first approach is to adopt a radically different