

A Conversation with Dr. Alison Gopnik

Dr. Alison Gopnik has been doing exciting research for more than 20 years. She is professor of psychology and affiliate professor of philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley. From her studies, we know that children are intellectually more skilled and far more sophisticated in their thinking than we ever imagined. For example, we once thought *cause and effect* was beyond a young child's understanding. Dr. Gopnik's research, however, has proven otherwise (see Gopnik 2009).

TYC: *How might your research influence the work of preschool teachers?*

Dr. Gopnik: Preschoolers are extremely well designed for learning. They are naturally curious. We now have evidence that actually confirms what I think a lot of preschool teachers already know intuitively: that children learn through exploring and playing. Our research base provides a rationale for the kinds of activities you see in Reggio Emilia and other progressive preschool education programs.

TYC: *Could you elaborate on what your research shows about the value of play?*

Dr. Gopnik: One of the things we've learned is that when children engage in pretend play, have imaginary friends, or explore alternative worlds, they are learning what people are like, how people think, and the kinds of things people can do. This helps children learn to understand themselves and other

people. We also have evidence that this kind of understanding leads to social adjustment in school and social competence in life.

TYC: *You talk a lot in your work about the fact that children learn naturally from interacting with materials in their world and don't need so-called enrichment materials. What advice would you give to teachers in selecting materials?*

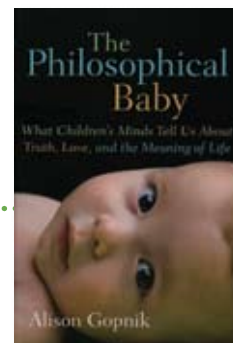
Dr. Gopnik: We're discovering that children know a lot more about the biological world than we ever thought. Even 3- and 4-year-olds are very interested in how the natural world works. Yet, in [U.S.] culture there's not typically a lot of exposure to the biological world. In a study where children received goldfish to care for and watched them live and die, children developed a sophisticated understanding of the way the natural world works. Likewise, other studies have shown that children on Indian reservations in Wisconsin—because of their environment and lifestyle—have deep understandings of the workings of the world and an intuitive sense of biology. So my somewhat joking conclusion is that children need more exposure to mud, livestock, and relatives.

TYC: *If they don't need "enrichment materials," what do preschoolers need to help them learn?*

Dr. Gopnik: Children learn by playing with everyday objects and by pretend-

ing. The old standbys of water, sand, mixing bowls, and cardboard boxes are still the most effective ways for babies and young children to learn about the physical world while the whole world of pretend—dolls and costumes and toy dishes—is the most effective way to learn about the social world. From an evolutionary point of view, the ideal enriched environment would include more mud and relatives than most of us can manage nowadays. But a bean plant





Alison Gopnik's most recent book, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* (2009; Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), is available from retailers.

and a goldfish are still excellent teaching materials; and in lieu of great uncles and cousins, well-paid and unstressed teachers who pay attention to children's interests and help them to play are the most important thing of all.

TYC: *What advice would you have teachers give to parents about these things?*

Dr. Gopnik: I hear more and more from teachers that parents are in a state of panic over academic preparedness. It's hard for both parents and teachers to resist this pressure, which is coming from everywhere. What teachers can say to parents, though, is: "Play is not just some touchy-feely activity.

And it's not just that you want to leave children alone and not rush them. There's hard evidence that children learn more things through play than they would in some academic setting."

Children are eventually going to learn to recognize letters. But learning how people work and what's in others' minds is a much deeper and more profound learning. Ironically, parents who think they are helping their children by exposing them to flash cards with letters on them are doing less to help their children than parents who expose their children to pretend play, read to them, and talk with them.

TYC: *You write that children under 5 do not focus on goals the way adults do; they have trouble focusing on one thing and shutting out everything else. Yet, we know that teachers who are held accountable for children mastering curriculum goals and state standards have to be goal-oriented. How can teachers reconcile these differences?*

Dr. Gopnik: I think this is an extremely difficult challenge. If you're looking at standards, think of them in context. Do children have opportunities to explore and play? Are adults talking with them? And, when discussing preschoolers, it is important to remember that in any group there is tremendous variability in development.

TYC: *Do you have any specific guidance for teachers on setting up their programs to promote the kind of play and learning you've been talking about?*

Dr. Gopnik: One area that I think has been overlooked is outdoor play. It needs to do more than just offer

children opportunities for physical exercise. Children also need opportunities to explore. They need places to investigate. They need stairs to climb. And they need trees to hide behind. Children need to have a sense that they are discovering something new going on around them.

TYC: *Do you have any final messages for preschool teachers?*

Dr. Gopnik: Preschool is part of a great evolutionary story. The preschool years may be the most important time of learning we ever have. The preschool years, from an evolutionary point of view, are an extended period of immaturity in the human lifespan. But it is during this period of immaturity that exploration and play take place. Ultimately, exploration and play during preschool turns us into adults who are flexible and sophisticated thinkers. If you look across the animal kingdom, you'll find that the more flexible the adult is, the longer that animal has had a chance to be immature.

I think that even the term *preschooler* is a bit misleading. It implies that our job is to get children ready for school and that school is where the important things happen. But preschool isn't just about readiness. It's an important entity in its own right. Indeed, what preschool teachers do is arguably more important than what occurs in the elementary school. And I think we have lots and lots of evidence of that now.



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