

Alison Gopnik, PhD — Developmental Psychologist

WHAT BABIES CAN TEACH

Do you ever have trouble seeing the big picture when you are trying to solve a problem? If so, you're not alone. In fact, psychologist Alison Gopnik, PhD, has found that when it comes to problem-solving, adults are wired to find a solution rather than create a solution.

Gopnik, author of "The Philosophical Baby," has found that "grownups are more focused on making things happen and getting things done, so we tend to have a somewhat narrow, focused view. We weed out everything else."

Because of this emphasis on efficiency, she argues, babies and young children sometimes have the advantage when it comes to discovery and creativity. Unlike adults, babies and young children are not as focused on planning or decision-making; instead, "they're figuring out everything that is going on around them," Gopnik says. "Kids are much, much smarter than you think."

"There are times when it's very helpful to put yourself in that baby mode of being open to lots of possibilities and not being so focused on the thing you need to do next," she says.

BROCCOLI VS. GOLDFISH

Gopnik's findings are challenging traditional beliefs about the minds of babies and young children, for example, the notion that very young children do not understand the perspective of others — an idea philosophers and psychologists have defended for years.

Gopnik and colleague Betty Repacholi, PhD, conducted an experiment more than 10 years ago to counter this belief.

In the "broccoli-goldfish study," the psychologists gave 14- and 18-month-old babies bowls of raw broccoli and Pepperidge Farm® goldfish crackers. The babies tasted the food and made faces or gestures indicating whether they liked or did not like the vegetable or crackers.

The psychologists then tasted food from each bowl and made either a disgusted or happy face. Half of the time the researchers matched the babies' reactions to the food; the other half of the time, the experimenters demonstrated opposite reactions. Gopnik and Repacholi found that when the experimenter put her hand out to the babies and asked for some, the 18-month-old babies would give her the food that the experimenter liked, rather than the food that the babies liked.

According to Gopnik, this simple experiment demonstrated that these children were capable of doing something difficult even for adults — recognizing that someone else has a different perspective and taking that perspective into account when deciding how to deal with them.

CHANGING THE FRAMEWORK

Babies and young children have a very different way of interacting with the world than adults. They're much worse at focusing on just one thing and better at paying attention to new or unexpected things. While this broad view of the world may not be the most efficient approach to getting things done, Gopnik's research suggests there are times that adults should change their framework — during brainstorming sessions, for example — and enter into baby mode and open up to new possibilities.

Whether or not adults begin to take in the world through the perspective of young children, Gopnik suggests that society should give babies more credit for their intelligence.

"Parents should appreciate that babies and young children are incredibly smart, but the way that their intelligence expresses itself is through their everyday exploration and interactions with the people around them and with everyday objects, not through being in structured classes or having explicit kinds of teaching," says Gopnik.



"Children can teach us that if we really want to learn about the world, we need to open ourselves up to new possibilities."

DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

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