

The Good Enough Parent

*How to raise contented, interesting and
resilient children*

The School of Life

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3. Lessons in Curiosity

One of the things it is easiest to forget about children is that they are aliens recently descended from another planet. In the way they look at everything around them, in the wide-open stares they give to ways of living and being that have grown familiar and therefore invisible to our eyes, they may as well have just stepped off a galactic craft in an unobserved corner of a wheat field. Coming from so far away, everything on our Earth is to them new, interesting and worthy of examination. Nothing is to be taken for granted. There are so many questions to ask. The whole world is, via their as yet unmarked minds, born anew.

In a more limited way, we know from our experiences of travelling how much, in an unfamiliar country, we suddenly notice and are stimulated by. A scene that leaves the locals unimpressed will appear to us filled with wonder and surprise. Shortly after landing in a

new place, we might head out into the bustling streets of the capital. We might spot a man in a barbershop and reflect on how extraordinary the shaving ritual looks here, staring at it in fascination from a traffic island and being almost run down by a family on a scooter in the process. There might be a cave-like shop displaying hundreds of different sorts of nuts and spices of a variety we had never guessed existed. Across a stall, two women might be engaged in a passionate discussion about a famous local singer whose stellar career and colourful love life we had never suspected. By a pomegranate juice stand, a man might be reading a newspaper and we can imagine what roiling political events might have provoked the flowing, curling words of the headline splashed across the front.

A little time in this new realm hints at priorities and concerns completely detached from our own. The foreign land is a symbol of a basic idea: that the world is so much bigger and more mysterious than we suppose day to day, that what we know comprises only a tiny part of what there is, and that there is hence never a good excuse for feeling overly bored or imagining that we understand much of anything.

Travellers aside, the other group who cannot forget how surprising, beautiful and worthy of deep examination everything is, are artists. The basic precondition of being an artist is not so much that one knows how to draw, sculpt or photograph; it's that one insists on being amazed. Think of Albrecht Dürer at the start of the 16th century, already 35 years old, but looking at hands as though he had never seen any before. He



Albrecht Dürer, *Study of Three Hands*, c. 1490–1494

display on a table. A small bottle of Tabasco illuminated by a shaft of light reveals itself as a near-transcendent object around which more pious societies might have chosen to found a new religion; a bottle of pickles emerges from his lens as no less awe-inspiring than a specimen jar containing the limbs of a long-deceased leviathan of the deep in the vaults of a natural history museum.

Like artists and travellers, only more so, small children cannot see anything as 'normal'. They spot the button on our jacket and ask themselves: what is this dazzling object (easily as interesting as a light switch or my toes)? What enables it to stay where it is? What would it taste like? What would happen if one struck it with a knife? How would it respond to being coated in apple sauce? Might it make a noise if one blew through the four little holes at its centre? How strongly might it resist a tug? Then there is a pencil: by what mysterious combination of elements does this contraption appear to leak out a grey line when pressed against paper, but lets out very little when pushed against a blanket or a sister's cheek? Does it matter what direction one holds it up in? What would happen if one threw it across the room or dropped it quietly in the sink?

All the great scientific discoveries and works of art have been made by people who looked at things with the naïvety of children; conversely, all the world-weariness has been the result of decades-old humans allowing habit to get in the way of astonishment.

The problem with children is that their curiosity can be too rampant, undisciplined and at odds with what we're trying to get done, so we might end up wishing there was less of it and a bit more apathy and muteness. We're also quite tired. Irritated, we say that it is just the way it is and has always been and could you please, please get a move on. It can feel more important to make it to the shops to pick up a magazine than to stay rooted in one spot for over four minutes, staring at a weed growing out of a wall as if we were a 19th-century explorer investigating the flora of Ecuador's Chimborazo volcano. But we thereby send out a message that being curious and poking at the apparent 'normality' of things is not a particularly estimable activity. If a child wants to be like us one day, a respectable impressive adult, they should be rather less amazed and rather keener to get on with their day.

The tension often comes to the fore around vacuuming. The child is, understandably, dazzled. A machine the

size of two pillows is letting out a thunderous sound. At the end of a slightly squashy hose, something is sucking in air with terrifying but also mesmerising force. You can put some car keys thirty centimetres away from the hose and they'll start to move across the carpet and promptly disappear with a fascinating

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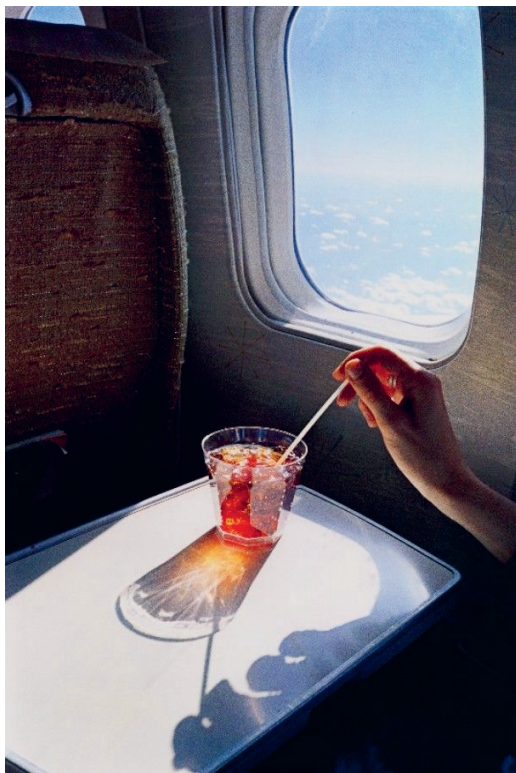
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Hoover advertisement, 1950s

clink-clunk-clink-boom sound into the bowels of the machine. Then there's a button you can press and the entire tangled cable to which the beast is fixed to the wall goes taut and yanks back the contraption as if it were a furious dog on a leash. The child is as transfixed as the most beatific early customer in an advert from the 1950s – an era when wonder was still allowed, in this domain at least. However, this is hardly the state of mind of the busy parent, cursing housework, without much energy to contemplate young Alexander von Humboldt or Michael Faraday tinkering on the carpet beside them.

Much the same dynamic is likely to be repeated around aeroplanes. How bored we are of these dirty machines and how revolted we are by airports. How weary we've become of cabin announcements and moving maps, of inflight trays and safety cards; how cold our hearts are to the sight of the engines slung beneath those long flexible wings, powering us over small puffy clouds like those in the backdrop of a Piero della Francesca altarpiece. But the child has correctly apprised that nothing up here is normal and isn't about to let go of their fascination, even if it means letting out a scream or two. From an opposing window seat, William Eggleston understands only too well.



William Eggleston, *Untitled*, 1971–1974

We sometimes ask ourselves what the Romans might have made of our modern bathrooms, or what a medieval knight might have made of a shopping centre or a telephone. We can more accurately ask ourselves what the first man or woman to emerge from Africa's Rift Valley would have thought of our lives – because

we have our own version of this early hominid right to hand in the cot.

Every new human provides our species with a chance to return to first principles and rethink everything from the ground up. We should allow the child to ask its questions and to pop as many things as safely possible into its mouth. And when one can't say why or how, rather than look cross or bored, we should say that we'll find out together. We could keep a list of topics of enquiry somewhere in the kitchen: how car indicators make that sound, why trees bud in spring, how clouds move, how long it would take for sheep to grow back their wool and why Granny looks a bit cross whenever Dad is in the room. A child's greatest gift to us is to keep insisting that nothing is ever normal.