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Adverse early experiences can make young minds in lexible, while a carefree childhood has clear cognitive bene its



ILLUSTRATION: JARRED BRIGGS

By Alison Gopnik

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The great Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget used to talk about “the American question.” In the course of his long career, he lectured around the world, explaining how children’s minds develop as they get older. When he visited the U.S., someone in the audience was sure to ask, “But Prof. Piaget, how can we get them to do it faster?”

Today it’s no longer just impatient Americans who assume that faster brain and cognitive development is better. Across the globe, as middle-class “high investment” parents anxiously track each milestone, it’s easy to conclude that the point of being a parent is to

accelerate your child's development as much as possible. Both parents and policy makers increasingly push preschools to be more like schools.

A wave of new research shows, however, that this picture is far too simple. A slower, longer, more nurturing childhood may actually be the best way to prepare for adulthood. Developing grown-up skills also matters, of course, but a long childhood is itself one key to a flourishing adult life.

In 1998 a landmark series of studies at the Kaiser Permanente Medical group looked at the long-term effect of Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, on children growing up in California. ACEs include physical or emotional neglect or abuse; poverty; divorce; and violence, addiction or mental illness in the home. Since the original studies, there have been hundreds of similar ones done across the world.

It turns out that ACEs are tragically common: About 60% of children in the U.S. experience at least one adverse event, and about one in 10 experience five or more.

These early adverse experiences can have a big effect on adult life. Children with more ACEs are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression or addiction as adults, and they have a higher risk of cancer and heart disease. But how would witnessing a shooting when you're 5 years old put you at risk AMe

of the Royal Society, takes off from the biological concept of “life history.” An animal’s life history includes how long it lives, how much it invests in its young and how long it takes those young to mature.

A long, slow life history goes with a big, smart brain. The smartest mammals and birds, like chimps and crows, also have a particularly long childhood, and adults put a lot of work into caring for the young. We humans are particularly brainy, with an especially long childhood and large caregiving investment.

Different species have different life histories, but different individual animals also may develop different life histories. Some will mature more quickly, while others stay young for longer. Early experiences can influence these individual life histories. After all, what happens when you’re young tells you about the sort of world you will face when you get older.

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A “live fast, die young” life history makes more evolutionary sense when resources are scarce and life is predictably harsh. Extensive learning may not do much good in that case, so it’s better for young creatures to quickly zero in on a few effective survival techniques. In a rich, supportive, varied world, on the other hand, there is lots to learn and time and resources to learn it, so keeping an open mind and flexible brain is more valuable. Early adverse experiences may be cues that the life to come will be harsh and short, while a nurturing preschool signals a richer set of possibilities.

All of this should be reassuring to middle-class parents worrying about “the American question.” The most important part of caring for young children is in some ways the easiest. Loving your children and giving them space to learn and explore is more important than crafting a particular curriculum. A longer, slower childhood may be better, at least if you believe that the adult environment will also be rich and varied.

But as the research on adverse experiences shows, far too many children and parents don’t have the resources they need to allow that sort of childhood to unfold. The recent studies all tell the same story when it comes to policy. Whether through child tax credits,

