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Creativity

# What Artists Can Teach Us about Parenting

• Marina Cashdan Sep 8, 2017 2:20pm



Parenting is never easy. There are days where you feel like you've figured it out, only to realize you don't have a clue. And there are a million methods, approaches, tips; every friend, family member, and psychologist has his or her theory, every culture has its own approach—the French way, the Danish way, the Eskimoan way, the borderless way.

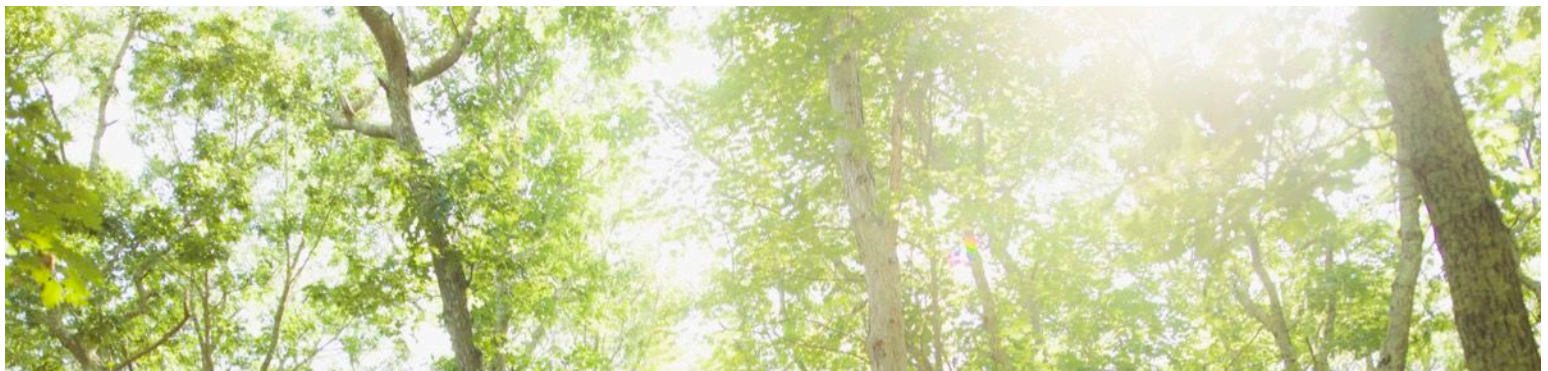
But what can we learn from *artists* about parenting? I've been surrounded by the offspring of creative people all of my life and, in my line of work, by fine artists and their children. What I've found is that there's often an underlying commonality in the way artists parent. Obviously, not every child is the same, not every parent is the same, and there is no one right way to raise a family. Parenting, like making art, is a process.

Through my conversations with artists and their children, a few consistent themes and behaviors arose that seemed to align closely with Resources for Infant Educators (RIE), a specific parenting philosophy developed in 1978 by infant specialist and educator Magda Gerber and pediatric neurologist Tom Forrest.

The process of making art can be both profound and at times profoundly frustrating—much like parenting.

Deborah Carlisle Solomon, former executive director of RIE and author of the book *Baby Knows Best: Raising a Confident and Resourceful Child the RIE Way* explains the basic philosophy, founded on the idea of “respecting a young baby and child of any age as a unique individual with a point of view and competencies, and responding to them in such a way that they develop a confident and loving sense of self.”

The process of making art can be both profound and at times profoundly frustrating—much like parenting. And process is a tricky subject for artists. Some refuse to discuss it altogether; others embrace process as the very foundation of their practice—a journey that is, in some ways, the work itself. Like creating a work of art, a child’s development relies on a similar process of discovery and learning, all while navigating biological, intellectual, and emotional changes.







A treehouse at Rashid Johnson and Sheree Hovsepian's Long Island home, built for their son Julius. Photo by Antony Crook for Artsy.

I'm at the home of Rashid Johnson and his wife Sheree Hovsepian, the artist-parents of five-year-old, Julius. He's a bubbly, outgoing kid; when I meet him he's wearing a stark white t-shirt with "Emerging Artist" printed across the chest, and proudly flaunting bracelets from various recent activities, fairs, and camp groups.

We're on Long Island, where the Johnson-Hovsepians spend their summers, and Julius and I are in his treehouse, a beautiful, minimalist structure made from bare planks of wood.

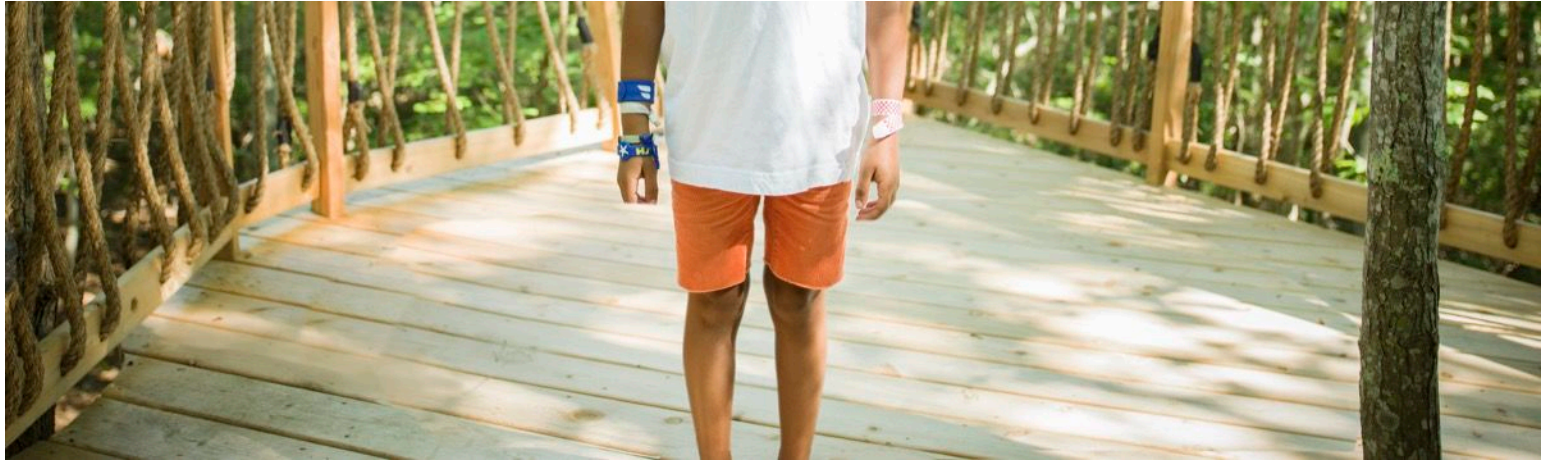


“What’s the coolest thing about being an artist?” I ask him.

“You can sell your art and make money,” he says without hesitation.

Julius’s awareness of art as a commercial enterprise isn’t surprising, given how much exposure to the upper echelon of the art world he’s already had. As a result, this five-year-old is comfortable talking about art, without pretension, as naturally as he might discuss bugs or planes or his favorite science experiments (many of which he stages in his father’s studio). But Julius has had an otherwise normal, albeit upscale, New York City upbringing. He goes to school with kids from all backgrounds and enjoys normal kid things: jungle gyms, swimming, board games, and that treehouse.





Portrait of Rashid Johnson and Sheree Hovsepian's son, Julius, at their Long Island home by Antony Crook for Artsy.

I ask Johnson if there might be any parallels between his art practice and raising a child. “In my work, I know that I’m not going to get everything right and I have to accept that certain things are going to be flawed, and those flaws are actually the things that sometimes make the work interesting,” he muses. “And as a parent, I can’t get everything right, and the things that I don’t get right may add color to his life and experience in ways that are productive and actually good.” Hovsepian chimes in, noting that she’s come to “understand that things aren’t perfect, and there’s room for growth and change” as both an artist and a parent.

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# experience in ways that are productive and good.”

*Baby Knows Best...* author and RIE practitioner Solomon, who consults for the Hollywood set and a number of other creative industries, has her own observations about artists and their parenting techniques. “That acceptance of struggle and mistakes is part of the creative or the learning process,” she says. “A lot of artists have a much easier time letting their children own that process themselves without interfering.”

She explains that, especially in early development—with children under the age of two—many adults don’t give their children the time and patience to create and develop. They have a tendency to jump in and immediately to offer help or problem-solve, which she says negatively impacts the child’s sense of self. “Maybe it’s because of the relationship to the process of creating art, but [artists] seem able to give their children the time to create *themselves*, and develop.”

When I talk to 19-year-old Zora Casebere—an aspiring actress, Columbia University sophomore, and daughter of artists Lorna Simpson and James Casebere—she tells me about the upbringing she had in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. As a child, her parents kept the creative-class version of a nine-to-



five: They'd go to their studio every day after she left for school, and be home when she got back. While many of her classmates' parents were involved with the arts, not many were actually artists. "And what I realized is that because my parents worked for themselves," she says, "they could walk in and out of the 'office' on their own time."



Portrait of Zora Casebere in her New York home by Antony Crook for Artsy.



While her parents were considered stricter, compared to her friends’—

Casebere remembers being one of the few in her circle to have a curfew—she says that her interactions with them were always incredibly open. Zora felt comfortable talking about topics most teenagers wouldn’t dare discuss—yet alone hint at—with their parents, like drugs and hook-up culture.

This balance—between openness and independent thinking and an overarching sense of structure—is a thread that emerges throughout my conversations. “I now look back at things I did or said and I’m horrified. I don’t know why my parents didn’t interrupt me constantly,” recalls Casebere. “They definitely left me to figure out a lot of things on my own.” She adds: “They were always really welcoming to what I was interested in or what I wanted to pursue. But they also taught me that the work has to be the reward, versus working toward acknowledgment or an award as an end result.”

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Casebere's experience jibes with RIE's emphasis on *authenticity*—being true to oneself, “to support the child to express who *they* really are, rather than what we hope them to be,” Solomon says. In her 1998 book *Dear Parent: Caring for Infants With Respect*, RIE co-founder Magda Gerber explained: “If we could observe and see infants as completely competent for the stage at which they are, we would learn from and about them, rather than teach them. Being around infants reminds us how to be real, genuine, and authentic.”

But the theory goes way beyond infancy, as Gerber mentee, parenting advisor, teacher, and author of *Elevating Child Care: A Guide to Respectful Parenting*, Janet Lansbury, discusses in her popular blog: “When we begin with trust, our children have opportunities to *show* us that they are able to figure out life's challenges like walking, talking, how toys work, climbing, toilet learning, reading, homework, eventually applying to college, etc. Through these autonomous struggles and accomplishments our trust in their abilities grows along with their self-confidence.”

This belief in children as competent human beings is at the core of RIE; it's also a commonality shared by the artist-parents and artists' children that I spoke to for this story, and others I've met over the years.



Portrait of Zora Casebere with her mother Lorna Simpson at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, April 1999. Photo by Glenn Halvorson. Courtesy of Zora Casebere.



Portrait of Mara McCarthy as a child. Courtesy of Mara McCarthy.

Mara McCarthy, founder and director of L.A. gallery The Box and daughter of artist Paul McCarthy and Karen McCarthy, expressed a similar sentiment. “When I was a kid, there was an appreciation of me as a young energy, a young thinker. My parents wanted my opinion. There was a genuineness to it that felt really supportive—this idea of embracing different people’s ideas, childrens’ included.” McCarthy credits this openness and inclusion with pushing her to launch her own gallery, hoping to make art more inclusive. “I do what I do because there are so many people in the world that think art is an elitist world that is not available to them.”



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When parents genuinely acknowledge and value their children’s point of view, those children tend to develop a sense of competency and confidence in themselves. And artists who give their children the chance to talk about what they’re seeing and observing provide an additional skillset, given how visual culture continues to become such a vital part of daily life. “It was such a gift,” says McCarthy. “The way that I view the world has a lot to do with the way I grew up talking about art, because art has so many connections to the world and has so much to do with people processing the world.”

“The arts are a way for all human beings to express their deeper emotions, to express something inner-mind that’s difficult to verbalize,” observes Solomon. “For a young child who doesn’t have as many words, or even for

an adult who isn't as confident expressing themselves orally, it can be a way for them to concretize what otherwise might be more abstract or hidden.” However, she cautions against parents *pushing* their children into the arts: “Start with what the child is curious about and trust that if there is art present in the child’s life, that it’s about exposing them to it and giving them opportunities to participate when they want to.”



Portrait of Chiara Clemente in her New York home by Antony Crook for Artsy. Artwork pictured by Clemente’s daughter Alice Rose Thompson.

For many artist-parents, this exposure is casual, a simple matter of sharing what they love and create. Filmmaker and mother Chiara Clemente—daughter of painter Francesco Clemente and actress and costume designer Alba Clemente—recalls an early memory from when her family moved to their first loft in downtown Manhattan. “My father’s work was always on the floor,” she says. “It wouldn’t be put away when we came out. We learned to walk around and be careful, or joined in at times. But that’s something that early on opened up the idea of creativity for me, because all these visual elements were a part of our daily life.”

Clemente adapted her own practice when her now three-year-old daughter, Alice, was born. “As a creative person, you’re used to a certain amount of freedom in your life,” she admits. “And it’s hard having a child because that freedom disappears; they become your nine-to-five. But you also don’t waste time anymore.” However, Clemente and her husband Tyler Thompson, a writer, also instinctively included their daughter in their life without making dramatic changes to their work or lifestyle. “Alice was immediately put into the equation and it was a way of keeping our conversation open. She’s very open and curious with people. She calls our friends *her* friends. And I see how early children take it all in and store it, and how important those early years are.”

There’s a common misconception that artists lack structure. In her own



household growing up, Clemente remembered her very consistent home life—a common thread among the children I spoke to. “We had dinner every night together at 7 p.m.; even if my parents had a crazy night the night before, my dad took us to school every morning; and we took family trips together,” Clemente said.



Chiara Clemente with her younger sister Nina in their father's studio. Courtesy of Chiara Clemente.



Chiara Clemente with curator and art critic Henry Geldzahler. Courtesy of Chiara Clemente.

Solomon stresses that such uninterrupted family time is critical to a child's development. “It's not about the amount of time, but the quality of undivided attention. Even if it's 15 minutes: Be focused. Turn off the cell phone. Make the commitment, to yourself and your child, that you're going to be fully present,” she says. “For a very young child, it's for the bathing or the feeding. With an older child, it can be a meal or a conversation—some time to give undivided attention, to really connect. When there has been an emotional connection, then it's going to be much easier for them to let go

and sleep.”

Artist-parents have to finely balance the self-awareness (and at times, selfishness) needed for one’s own practice with the selflessness required for parenting. This balance can be challenging for artists, who not only have to structure their own time in the studio but for whom lifestyle has, to some degree, become equated with their work and brand.

And artists are often uniquely sensitive to the importance of the childhood development process; they have the patience, experience, and trust to allow that development to take place naturally, without overtly dictating or forcing it. And they know that—whether they’re wrestling with a challenging sculpture or a precocious three-year-old—allowing for openness, trust, and failure can lead to breakthroughs.

**Marina Cashdan is Artsy’s Head of Editorial and Creative Director.**

*Header video: Rashid Johnson and Sheree Hovsepian’s son, Julius, at their Long*

ILLUSTRATION BY MARINA CASHDAN

*Islana home by Antony Crook for Artsy.*

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