



Are Peers More Important than Parents during the Process of Development?

YES: Judith Rich Harris, from "How to Succeed in Childhood,"

Wilson Quarterly (Winter 1991)

NO: Howard Gardner, from "Do Parents Count?" *New York Times Book Review* (November 5, 1998)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Developmental psychology writer Judith Rich Harris presents a strong and provocative argument suggesting that parents do not influence child development to any significant degree, while peers and social groups have a primary influence.

NO: Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner reviews Harris's work and suggests her argument is overstated and misleading—parents do matter.

If you ask people about their personal development—why did you turn out the way you have—most will tell you about their parents. In contrast, when you ask researchers and scholars about the role of parents in personal development their answer tends to be a little more complicated. Many years of research have focused on estimating and understanding the influence of parenting, but the results have not been as clear as you might expect.

In fact, many scholars now feel the influence of parental "socialization" (the forming of behavior and personality by parenting behaviors) may be much less than most people think. It may be that parents are simply an easy target for child rearing "experts" because most parents want to make sure they are doing the best for their children. Instead of only focusing on parents, however, researchers are devoting significant attention to at least two alternative explanations for what influences lifespan development. One explanation is based on increased attention to biological and genetic influences on behavior, finding high levels of significance for our inherited predispositions. The other

explanation is based on the role of culture and society, beyond individual parents, that shapes norms and expectations for children.

That being the case, perhaps it was inevitable that someone would turn the tables on all of the parenting experts by drawing on developmental research to suggest that parents may not really matter much at all. That person turned out to be Judith Rich Harris, who had been writing textbooks about developmental psychology for years before realizing that there was very little evidence for all of the emphasis on the influence of parents in development. She eventually turned this realization into a provocative and award-winning article for psychologists and a controversial book for a popular audience. Her basic argument, stated simply as "parents don't matter nearly as much as we think, and peers matter a lot more," went against both popular wisdom and academic trends. Harris's work instigated a flurry of debate.

One of the prominent psychologists to respond was Howard Gardner, most well known for his influential theory of multiple intelligences. While appreciating Harris's ability to challenge conventional wisdom, Gardner asserts that she significantly overstates her case by massaging data. Gardner is relatively certain that parents do matter, and that the problem with research is simply that personality and character are too difficult to measure. He suggests that the lack of evidence for parents' direct influence derives from an over-reliance on crude surveys, which creates an impression of development that is not true to its complex nature.

COUNTERPOINT

- Most research finds a very modest correlation between parenting behaviors and developmental outcomes.
- The idea that parents matter is really a cultural myth based on invalid aspects of Freudian theory.
- Children do not want to be like their parents and other adults; children want to be like other children.
- Much of what we assume to be parenting effects is actually based on parents sharing genetic material with their children.
- Harris is selective in what evidence she attends to; there is more evidence than she acknowledges suggesting that parents do matter.
- While Harris claims that our ideas about how parents matter is a cultural myth, she assumes that what happens to children in American society is a true representation of development everywhere.
- It is a disservice to children to assume that they do not take direction from parents, who do most of the explicit care-giving for children.
- Most research on the influence of parents relies on methods that are too crude and general to pick up the nuances of personality development.

How to Succeed in Childhood

Every day, tell your children that you love them. Hug them at least once every 24 hours. Never hit them. If they do something wrong, don't say, "You're bad!" Say, "What you did was bad." No, wait—even that might be too harsh. Say, instead, "What you did made me unhappy."

The people who are in the business of giving out this sort of advice are very angry at me, and with good reason. I'm the author of *The Nurture Assumption*—the book that allegedly claims that "parents don't matter." Though that's not what the book actually says, the advice givers are nonetheless justified in their anger. I don't pull punches, and I'm not impressed by their air of benevolent omniscience. Their advice is based not on scientific evidence but on prevailing cultural myths.

The advice isn't wrong; it's just ineffective. Whether parents do or don't follow it has no measurable effect on how their children turn out. There is a great deal of evidence that the differences in how parents rear their children are not responsible for the differences among the children. I've reviewed this evidence in my book; I will not do it again here.

Let me, however, bring one thing to your attention: the advice given to parents in the early part of this century was almost the mirror image of the advice that is given today. In the early part of this century, parents were warned against damaging their children's self-esteem; they were warned against "spoiling" them. Too much attention and affection were thought to be bad for kids. In those days, spanking was considered not just the parents' right but their duty.

Partly as a result of the major recoiling in the advice industry, child-rearing styles have changed drastically over the course of this century. Although abusive parents have always existed, run-of-the-mill parents—the large majority of the population—administer more hugs and fewer spankings than they used to. Now ask yourself this: Are children turning out better? Are they happier and better adjusted than they were in the earlier part of the century? Less aggressive? Less anxious? Nicer?

It was Sigmund Freud who gave us the idea that parents are the be-all and end-all of the child's world. According to Freudian theory, children learn right

from wrong—that is, they learn to behave in ways their parents and their society deem acceptable—by identifying with their parents. In the calm after the storm of the oedipal crisis, or the reduced-for-quick-sale female version of the oedipal crisis, the child supposedly identifies with the parent of the same sex. Freud's name is no longer heard much in academic departments of psychology, but the theory that children learn how to behave by identifying with their parents is still accepted. Every textbook in developmental psychology (including, I confess, the one I co-authored) has its obligatory photo of a father shaving and a little boy pretending to shave. Little boys imitate their fathers, little girls imitate their mothers, and, according to the theory, that's how children learn to be grownups. It takes them a while, of course, to perfect the act.

It's a theory that could have been thought up only by a grownup. From the child's point of view, it makes no sense at all. What happens when children try to behave like grownups is that, more often than not, it gets them into trouble. Consider this story, told by Selma Fraiberg, a child psychologist whose book *The Magic Years* was popular in the 1960s:

Thirty-month-old Julia finds herself alone in the kitchen while her mother is on the telephone. A bowl of eggs is on the table. An urge is experienced by Julia to make scrambled eggs. . . . When Julia's mother returns to the kitchen, she finds her daughter cheerfully plopping eggs on the linoleum and scolding herself sharply for each plop, "NoNoNo. Mustn't dood it! NoNoNo. Mustn't dood it!"

Fraiberg attributed Julia's lapse to the fact that she had not yet acquired a superego, presumably because she had not yet identified with her mother. But look at what was Julia doing when her mother came back and caught her egg-handed: she was imitating her mother! And yet Mother was not pleased.

Children cannot learn how to behave appropriately by imitating their parents. Parents do all sorts of things that children are not allowed to do—I don't have to hit them, do I—and many of them look like fun to people who are not allowed to do them. Such prohibitions are found not only in our own society but everywhere, and involve not only activities such as making scrambled eggs but patterns of social behavior as well. Around the world, children who behave too much like grownups are considered impertinent. Sure, children sometimes pretend to be adults. They also pretend to be horses and monsters and babies, but that doesn't mean they aspire to be horses or monsters or babies. Freud jumped to the wrong conclusions, and so did several generations of developmental psychologists. A child's goal is not to become an adult; a child's goal is to be a successful child. What does it take to be a successful child? The child's first job is to learn how to get along with her parents and siblings and to do the things that are expected of her at home. This is a very important job—no question about it.

and serene peer relationships. Most telling, the child who follows the rules at home, even when no one is watching, may lie or cheat in the schoolroom or on the playground, and vice versa.

Children learn separately how to behave at home and how to behave outside the home, and parents can influence only the way they behave at home. Children behave differently in different social settings because different behaviors are required. Displays of emotion that are acceptable at home are not acceptable outside the home. A clever remark that would be rewarded with a laugh at home will land a child in the principal's office at school. Parents are often surprised to discover that the child they see at home is not the child the teacher sees. I imagine teachers get tired of hearing parents exclaim, "Really? Are you sure you're talking about *my* child?"

The compartmentalized world of childhood is vividly illustrated by the child of immigrant parents. When immigrants settle in a neighborhood of native-born Americans, their children become bicultural, at least for a while. At home they practice their parents' culture and language, outside the home they adopt the culture and language of their peers. But though their two worlds are separate, they are not equal. Little by little, the outside world takes precedence: the children adopt the language and culture of their peers and bring that language and culture home. Their parents go on addressing them in Russian or Korean or Portuguese, but the children reply in English. What the children of immigrants end up with is not a compromise, not a blend. They end up, pure and simple, with the language and culture of their peers. The only aspects of their parents' culture they retain are things that are carried out at home, such as cooking.

Late-20th-century native-born Americans of European descent are as ethnocentric as the members of any other culture. They think there is only one way to raise children—the way they do it. But that is not the way children are reared in the kinds of cultures studied by anthropologists and ethnologists. The German ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt has described what childhood is like in the hunter-gatherer and tribal societies he spent many years observing. In traditional cultures, the baby is coddled for two or three years—carried about by its mother and nursed whenever it whimpers. Then, when the next baby comes along, the child is sent off to play in the local play group, usually in the care of an older sibling. In his 1989 book *Human Ethology*, Eibl-Eibesfeldt describes how children are socialized in these societies:

Three-year-old children are able to join in a play group, and it is in such play groups that children are truly raised. The older ones explain the rules of play and will admonish those who do not adhere to them, such as by taking something away from another or otherwise being aggressive. Thus the child's socialization occurs mainly within the play group. . . . By playing together in the children's group the members learn what aggravates others and which rules they must obey. This occurs in most cultures in which people live in small communities.

But it is only the first of the child's jobs, and in the long run it is overshadowed in importance by the child's second job: to learn how to get along with the members of her own generation and to do the things that are expected of her outside the home.

Almost every psychologist, Freudian or not, believes that what the child learns (or doesn't learn) in job 1 helps her to succeed (or fail) in job 2. But this belief is based on an obsolete idea of how the child's mind works, and there is good evidence that it is wrong.

Consider the experiments of developmental psychologist Carolyn Rovee-Collier. A young baby lies on its back in a crib. A mobile with dangling doodads hangs overhead. A ribbon runs from the baby's right ankle to the mobile in such a way that whenever the baby kicks its right leg, the doodads jiggle. Babies are delighted to discover that they can make something happen; they quickly learn how to make the mobile move. Two weeks later, if you show them the mobile again, they will immediately start kicking that right leg. But only if you haven't changed anything. If the doodads hanging from the mobile are blue instead of red, or if the inner surrounding the crib has a pattern of squares instead of circles, or if the crib is placed in a different room, they will gape at the mobile cluelessly, as if they've never seen such a thing in their lives.

It's not that they're stupid. Babies enter the world with a mind designed for learning and they start using it right away. But the learning device comes with a warning label: what you learn in one situation might not work in another. Babies do not assume that what they learned about the mobile with the red doodads will work for the mobile with the blue doodads. They do not assume that what worked in the bedroom will work in the den. And they do not assume that what worked with their mother will work with their father or the babysitter or their jealous big sister or the kids at the daycare center.

Fortunately, the child's mind is equipped with plenty of storage capacity. As the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker put it in his foreword to my book, "Relationships with parents, with siblings, with peers, and with strangers could not be more different, and the trillion-synapse human brain is hardly short of the computational power it would take to keep each one in a separate mental account."

That's exactly what the child does: keeps each one in a separate mental account. Studies have shown that a baby with a depressed mother behaves in a subdued fashion in the presence of its mother, but behaves normally with a caregiver who is not depressed. A toddler taught by his mother to play elaborate fantasy games does not play these games when he's with his playmates—the and his playmates devise their own games. A preschooler who has perfected the delicate art of getting along with a bossy older sibling is no more likely than a first-born to allow her peers in nursery school to dominate her. A school-age child who says she hates her younger brother—they fight like cats and dogs, their mother complains—is as likely as any other child to have warm

of their own sex. This preference grows steadily stronger over the next few years. School-age girls and boys will play together in places where there aren't many children, but when they have a choice of playmates, they tend to form all-girl and all-boy groups. This is true the world around.

The brain we won in the evolutionary lottery gave us the ability to categorize, and we use that skill on people as well as things. Our long evolutionary history of fighting with other groups predisposes us to identify with one social category, to like our own category best, and to feel wary of (or hostile toward) members of other categories. The emotions and motivations that were originally applied to real physical groups are now applied to groups that are only concepts: "Americans" or "Democrats" or "the class of 2001." You don't have to like the other members of your group in order to consider yourself one of them; you don't even have to know who they are. The British social psychologist Henri Tajfel asked his subjects—a bunch of Bristol schoolboys—to estimate the number of dots flashed on a screen. Then half the boys were privately told that they were "overestimators," the others that they were "underestimators." That was all it took to make them favor their own group. They didn't even know which of their schoolmates were in their group and which were in the other.

The most famous experiment in social psychology is the Robber's Cave study. Muzater Sherif and his colleagues started with 22 eleven-year-old boys, carefully selected to be as alike as possible, and divided them into two equal groups. The groups—the "Rattlers" and the "Eagles"—were separately transported to the Robber's Cave summer camp in a wilderness area of Oklahoma. For a while, neither group knew of the other's existence. But the first time the Rattlers heard the Eagles playing in the distance, they reacted with hostility. They wanted to "run them off." When the boys were brought together in games arranged by researchers disguised as camp counselors, push quickly came to shove. Before long, the two groups were raiding each other's cabins and filling socks with stones in preparation for retaliatory raids. When people are divided (or divide themselves) into two groups, hostility is one common result. The other, which happens more reliably though it is less well known, is called the "group contrast effect." The mere division into two groups tends to make each group see the other as different from the other group. The result is that any pre-existing differences between the groups tend to widen, and if there aren't any differences to begin with, the members create them. Groups develop contrasting norms, contrasting images of themselves.

In the Robber's Cave study, it happened very quickly. Within a few days of their first encounter, the Eagles had decided that the Rattlers used too many "cuss-words" and resolved to give up cussing; they began to say a prayer

Once their tenure in their mothers' arms has ended, children in traditional cultures become members of a group. This is the way human children were designed to be reared. They were designed by evolution to become members of a group, because that's the way our ancestors lived for millions of years. Throughout the evolution of our species, the individual's survival depended upon the survival of his or her group, and the one who became a valued member of that group had an edge over the one who was merely tolerated.

Human groups started out small: in a hunter-gatherer band, everyone knows everyone else and most are blood relatives. But once agriculture began to provide our ancestors with a more or less dependable supply of food, groups got bigger. Eventually they became large enough that not everyone in them knew everyone else. As long ago as 1500 B.C. they were sometimes that large. There is a story in the Old Testament about a conversation Joshua had with a stranger, shortly before the Battle of Jericho. They met outside the walls of the beleaguered town, and Joshua's first question to the stranger was, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?"

Are you one of us or one of them? The group had become an idea, a concept, and the concept was defined as much by what you weren't as by what you were. And the answer to the question could be a matter of life or death. When the walls came tumbling down, Joshua and his troops killed every man, woman, and child in Jericho. Even in Joshua's time, genocide was not a novelty: fighting between groups, and wholesale slaughter of the losers, had been going on for ages. According to the evolutionary biologist Jared Diamond, it is "part of our human and primate heritage."

Are you one of us or one of them? It was the question African Americans asked of Colin Powell. It was the question deaf people asked of a Miss America who couldn't hear very well but who preferred to communicate in a spoken language. I once saw a six-year-old go up to a 14-year-old and ask him, "Are you a kid or a grownup?"

The human mind likes to categorize. It is not deterred by the fact that nature often fails to arrange things in convenient clumps but instead provides a continuum. We have no difficulty splitting up continua. Night and day are as different as, well, night and day, even though you can't tell where one leaves off and the other begins. The mind constructs categories for people—male or female, kid or grownup, white or black, deaf or hearing—and does not hesitate to draw the lines, even if it's sometimes hard to decide whether a particular individual goes on one side or the other.

Babies only a few months old can categorize. By the time they reach their first birthday, they are capable of dividing up the members of their social world into categories based on age and sex: they distinguish between men and women, between adults and children. A preference for the members of their own social category also shows up early. One-year-olds are wary of strange adults but are attracted to other children, even ones they've never met before. By the age of two, children are beginning to show a preference for members

This has nothing to do with whether they like their teachers personally. You can like people even if they're members of a different group and even if you don't much like that group—a conflict of interests summed up in the saying, "Some of my best friends are Jews." When groupness is salient, even young children contrast themselves with adults and collide with each other in defying them. And yet some of their best friends are grownups.

Learning how to behave properly is complicated, because proper behavior depends on which social category you're in. In every society, the rules of behavior depend on whether you're a grownup or a kid, a female or a male, a prince or a peon. Children first have to figure out the social categories that are relevant in their society, and then decide which category they belong in, then tailor their behavior to the other members of their category.

That brief description seems to imply that socialization makes children more alike, and so it does, in some ways. But groups also work to create or exaggerate differences among their members—differences in personality. Even identical twins reared in the same home do not have identical personalities. When groupness is not salient—when there is no other group around to serve as a foil—a group tends to fall apart into individuals, and differences among them emerge or increase. In boys' groups, for example, there is usually a dominance hierarchy, or "pecking order." I have found evidence that dominant boys develop different personalities from those at the bottom of the ladder.

Groups also typecast their members, pinning labels on them—joker, nerd, brain—that can have lifelong repercussions. And children find out about themselves by comparing themselves with their group mates. They come to think well or poorly of themselves by judging how they compare with the other members of their own group. It doesn't matter if they don't measure up to the standards of another group. A third-grade boy can think of himself as smart if he knows more than most of his fellow third-graders. He doesn't have to know more than a fourth-grader.

According to my theory, the culture acts upon children not through their parents but through the peer group. Children's groups have their own cultures, loosely based on the adult culture. They can pick and choose from the adult culture, and it's impossible to predict what they'll include. Anything that's common to the majority of the kids in the group may be incorporated into the children's culture, whether they learned it from their parents or from the television set. If most of the children learned to say "please" and "thank you" at home, they will probably continue to do so when they're with their peers. The child whose parents failed to teach her that custom will pick it up from the other children: it will be transmitted to her via the peer group, from the parents of her peers. Similarly, if most of the children watch a particular TV show, the behaviors and attitudes depicted in the show may be incorporated

before every game. The Rattlers, who saw themselves as tough and manly, continued to favor scaratology over eschatology. If an Eagle turned an ankle or skinned a knee, it was all right for him to cry. A Rattler who sustained a similar injury might cuss a bit, but he would bear up stoically.

The idea for group socialization theory came to me while I was reading an article on juvenile delinquency. The article reported that breaking the law is highly common among adolescents, even among those who were well behaved as children and who are destined to turn into law-abiding adults. This unending foible was attributed to the frustration teenagers experience at not being adults: they are longing for the power and privilege of adulthood. "Wait a minute," I thought. "That's not right. If teenagers really wanted to be adults, they wouldn't be spraying graffiti on overpasses or swiping nail polish from drugstores. If they really wanted to emulate adults they would be doing boring adult things, like sorting the laundry or figuring out their taxes. Teenagers aren't trying to be like adults; they are trying to *contrast* themselves with adults. They are showing their loyalty to their own group and their disdain for adults' rules!"

I don't know what put the idea into my head; at the time, I didn't know beans about social psychology. It took eight months of reading to fill the gaps in my education. What I learned in those eight months was that there is a lot of good evidence to back up my hunch, and that it applies not only to teenagers but to young children as well.

Sociologist William Corsaro has spent many years observing nursery school children in the United States and Italy. Here is his description of four-year-olds in an Italian *scuola materna*, a government-sponsored nursery school:

In the process of resisting adult rules, the children develop a sense of community and a group identity. [I would have put it the other way around: I think group identity leads to the resistance.] The children's resistance in the adult rules can be seen as a routine because it is a daily occurrence in the nursery school and is produced in a style that is easily recognizable to members of the peer culture. Such activity is often highly exaggerated (for instance, making faces behind the teacher's back or running around) or is prefaced by "calls for the attention" of other children (such as, "look what I got" in reference to possession of a forbidden object, or "look what I'm doing" to call attention to a restricted activity).

Group contrast effects show up most clearly when "groupness"—Henri Tajfel's term—is salient. Children see adults as serious and sedentary, so when the social categories *kids* and *grownups* are salient—as they might be, for instance, when the teacher is being particularly bossy—the children become sillier and more active. They demonstrate their fealty to their own age group by making faces and running around.

into the norms of their group. The child whose parents do not permit him to watch that show will nonetheless be exposed to those behaviors and attitudes. They are transmitted to him via the peer group.

Thus, even though individual parents may have no lasting effects on their children's behavior, the larger culture does have an effect. Child-rearing practices common to most of the people in a culture, such as teaching children to say "please" and "thank you," can have an effect. And the media can have an effect.

In the hunter-gatherer or tribal society, there was no privacy: everybody knew what everybody else was doing. Nowadays children can't ordinarily watch their neighbors making love, having babies, fighting, and dying, but they can watch these things happening on the television screen. Television has become their window on society, their village square. They take what they see on the screen to be an indication of what life is like—what life is supposed to be—and they incorporate it into their children's cultures.

One of my goals in writing *The Nurture Assumption* was to lighten some of the burdens of modern parenthood. Back in the 1940s, when I was young, the parents of a troublesome child—my parents, for instance—got sympathy, not blame. Nowadays parents are likely to be held culpable for anything that goes wrong with their child, even if they've done their best. The evidence I've assembled in my book indicates that there is a limit to what parents can do: how their child turns out is largely out of their hands. Their major contribution occurs at the moment of conception. This doesn't mean it's mostly genetic; it means that the environment that shapes the child's personality and social behavior is outside the home.

I am not advocating irresponsibility. Parents are in charge of how their children behave at home. They can decide where their children will grow up and, at least in the early years, who their peers will be. They are the chief determiners of whether their children's life at home will be happy or miserable, and they have a moral obligation to keep it from being miserable. My theory does not grant people the license to treat children in a cruel or negligent way. Although individual parents have little power to influence the culture of children's peer groups, larger numbers of parents acting together have a great deal of power, and so does the society as a whole. Through the prevailing methods of child rearing it fosters, and through influences—especially the media—that act directly on peer-group norms and values, a society shapes the adults of the future. Are we shaping them the way we ought to?

Do Parents Count?

Howard Gardner

NO 

1.

We all want to know how and why we got to be who we are. Parents have a special interest in answering the "how" and "why" questions with respect to their own children. In addressing the mysteries of human growth, traditional societies have invoked God, the gods, the fates, with luck sometimes thrown in. Shakespeare called our attention to the struggle between "nature and nurture." In our own time the natural sciences and the social sciences have been supplying a bewildering variety of answers. Those with biological leanings look to heredity—the gene complexes of each parent and the ways in which their melded sets of genes express themselves in the offspring. The traits and capacities of the biological parents are seen as in large part determining the characteristics of offspring. Those with a psychological or sociological perspective point to the factors beyond the child's physiology. Psychoanalysts emphasize the pivotal role of parents, and especially the young child's relationship to his or her mother. Behaviorists look at the contingencies of reward and punishment in the child's experience; the character of the child depends on the qualities that are "reinforced," with those in control of reinforcement in early life having an especially significant influence.

Recently, three new candidates have been proposed to explain "socialization"—i.e., how children grow up within a society and absorb its norms. Impressed and alarmed by the powers of new means of communication, particularly television, students of culture like Marie Winn and Neil Postman have described a generation raised by the electronic media. The historian of science Frank Sulloway has brought new attention to the once discounted factor of "birth order": on his account, first-borns embrace the status quo, while later-borns are far more likely to support scientific, political, or religious revolutions. And now, in a much publicized new work, Judith Rich Harris suggests that all of these authorities have got it wrong. On her account, the most potent "socializers" are the child's peers, with parents having little or no effect.

Harris's work has many things going for it. For a start, she has an arresting hypothesis, one that should strike especially responsive chords in adults who feel they are inadequately involved in the formation of the post-baby boom Generation X and the generations to come. She has an appealing

personal story. Kicked out of graduate school in psychology in the early 1960s and a victim of a lupus-like disease, she has hitherto led the life of a semi-invalid, making her living coauthoring textbooks in psychology. One day in 1994, after reading a scholarly article about juvenile delinquency, she was struck by the idea that the role of peers in socialization had largely been ignored while the influence of parents overestimated. She succeeded in publishing a theoretical statement of her view in *Psychological Review*, the most prestigious journal of psychological theory. She soon gained recognition among scholars and, in a delicious irony, won a prestigious award named after George Miller, the very professor who had signed her letter of expulsion from Harvard almost four decades ago. Harris's book is well-written, toughly argued, filled with telling anecdotes and biting wit. It has endorsements from some of the most prestigious names in the field. Already it has been widely—and mostly favorably—reported on and reviewed in the popular press.

However, in my view, Harris's thesis is overstated, misleading, and potentially harmful. Overstated in the sense that she highlights evidence consistent with her thesis and understates evidence that undermines it. Misleading because she treats as "natural" and "universal" what, in my view, is really a characterization of contemporary American culture (and those societies influenced by America). Potentially harmful in that it may, inadvertently, discourage parents from promoting their own beliefs and values, and from becoming models of behavior, at a time when such values and models should be clearly and continually conveyed to children.

2.

Harris begins by outlining familiar positions in psychology. On her account, Freud's view of the Oedipal period is quaint and unsupported, while the behaviorists have been widely discredited, both by the cognitivists (who put are as much a product of our genes as of our experiences). She then turns her keen critical skills to an attack on the branch of empirical psychology that attempts to document important contributions of parents to their children's personality and character. (Harris uses both terms.)

For over half a century, psychologists and anthropologists have observed parents and children in different settings; they have filled out checklists in which they record predominant kinds of behavior and action, and they have administered questionnaires to the parents and children themselves. These researchers, according to Harris, began with the "nurture assumption"; they presupposed that the most important force in the child's environment is the child's parents and then collected evidence to support that assumption. Moreover, while scholars themselves are often guarded in their conclusions, some "pop" psychologists have no inhibitions whatever. They stress the role of parents over all other forces, thus making parents feel guilty if they fall (according to their own criteria), and full of pride when they succeed.

As Harris shrewdly points out, there are two problems with the nurture assumption. First, when viewed with a critical eye, the empirical evidence

about parental influences on their children is weak, and often equivocal. After hundreds of studies, many with individually suggestive findings, it is still difficult to pinpoint the strong effects that parents have on their children. Even the effects of the most extreme experiences—divorce, adoption, and abuse—prove elusive to capture. Harris cites Eleanor Maccoby, one of the leading researchers in the field, who concluded that "in a study of nearly four hundred families, few connections were found between parental child-rearing practices (as reported by parents in detailed interviews) and independent assessments of children's personality characteristics—so few, indeed, that virtually nothing was published relating the two sets of data.

The second problem with the nurture assumption is potentially more devastating. Harris draws heavily on recent results from behavioral genetics to argue that, even in those cases where children resemble their parents, the presence and actions of parents have little to do with that resemblance. The argument she makes from behavioral genetics runs as follows. Studies of siblings, fraternal twins, identical twins reared together, and identical twins reared apart all point to the same conclusion: about half of one's intellect and personality results from one's genes. That is, in any group of people drawn from a particular "population" (e.g., middle-class white youngsters living in the United States), about one half of the variations in an observed trait (for instance, IQ or aggressiveness) is owing to one's parents' genetic contribution.

For those who assume that the behavior of parents and the models they offer make up a major part of the child's environment, the results of studies in behavioral genetics are surprising. According to those studies, when we examine any population of children and try to account for the nongenetic variations among them, we find that remarkably few variations can be attributed to their "shared environment"—i.e., when parents treat all of their children the same way, for example, being equally punitive to each child.

In fact, according to the behavioral geneticists, nearly all of the variation is due to what is called the "nonshared environment"—i.e., the variety of other influences, including instances where children are treated differently by the parents (e.g., a brother is punished more than his sister, or differently). In the case of any particular child, we simply do not know with any accuracy what makes up the nonshared environment. We can guess that it consists of siblings, printed matter, radio and television, other adults, school, luck, accident, the different (as opposed to the common or "shared") ways in which each parent responds to each child, and—if Judith Rich Harris is correct—most especially, a child's peers.

So much for Harris's demolition of the importance of parents—except genetically—to the behavior and psyche of the child. Harris adduces evidence from a wide variety of sources, moreover, to stress the important contribution of peers. She goes back to the studies of nonhuman primates to indicate the importance of peer groups in child-rearing—pointing out that monkeys can be

"softer variables" such as affection and ambition. While psychologists have made genuine progress in the study of visual perception and measurable progress in the study of cognition, we do not really know what to look for or how to measure human personality traits, individual emotions, and motivations, let alone character.

Consider, as an example, the categories that the respondents must use when they describe themselves or others on the Personal Attributes Questionnaire, a test used to obtain data about a person's self-esteem and gender-linked traits. Drawing on a list reminiscent of the Boy Scout oath, those who answer the questionnaire are asked whether they would describe themselves as Gentle, Helpful, Active, Competitive, and Worldly. These terms are not easy to define and people are certainly prone to apply them favorably to their own case. Or consider the list of acts from which observers can choose to characterize children from different cultures—Offers Help, Acts Sociably, Assails Sociably, Seeks Dominance. Even if we could agree on what kinds of physical behavior merit these labels, we don't know with any confidence what these acts mean to children, adolescents, and adults in diverse cultures—let alone to the observers from a distant university. What does a raised fist or a frown mean to a three-year-old or to the thirty-year-old who observes it? The same question could be asked about a wink or an imitated curtsy. We are not measuring chemical bonds or electrical voltage in such cases. We are seeking to quantify the most subtle human characteristics—the sentiments described so finely by Henry James. And therefore it is not surprising when studies—whether by empirical psychologists or behavioral geneticists—do not yield strong results.

I do not want to elevate psychanalytic theory or practice over other kinds of inquiry, but at least the Freudians were grappling with the deeper aspects of human character and personality—our urgent longings, our innermost fears and anxieties, our wrenching conflicts. We might perhaps find evidence for these complex feelings—and their putative causes—through long narratives, or projective testing (where the subjects respond to ambiguous photographs or inkblots), or by analyzing a series of sessions on the couch. We won't reach them through questionnaires or checklists; yet Harris relies on many studies that use them.

As social scientists we have been frustrated by our own clumsy efforts to understand personality and character, and even relatively measurable skills, like intelligence or the capacity for problem-solving. And perhaps that is why *The Nurture Assumption*—have become drawn to evolutionary psychology and behavioral genetics. Here, at last, is the chance to put psychology and social science (and even squishy inquiries into personality, temperament, and character) on what seems a "real" scientific footing. Physics envy has been replaced by biological bias.

But things are not as clear-cut in the biobehavioral world as outsiders may imagine. Because of the possibility of controlled experiments, sociology has made genuine progress in explaining the social life of insects; but its account of human behavior remains controversial. The speculations of evolutionary psychology are just that; as commentators such as Stephen Jay Gould

3. Harris has collected an impressive set of examples and findings to fortify a position that is indeed novel in empirical investigations of "human socialization." I have sought to do justice to her arguments, though I cannot convey her passion, her missionary sense of having seen the light. Yet I do not find her "peer hypothesis" convincing, partly because I read the literature on the subject differently. My deeper reservations come from my belief that Harris has misconstrued the problem of socialization and, in doing so, has put forth a position that harbors its own dangers.

When we consider the empirical part of Harris's argument, we find it is indeed true that the research on parent-child socialization is not what we would hope for. However, this says less about parents and children and more about the state of psychological research, particularly with reference to

Harris describes recurrent situations where youngsters overlook the evident models of their parents in favor of those provided by peers. Deaf children of speaking parents ignore their parents' attempts to teach them to read lips and instead begin to invent gestural signs to communicate with other deaf children and seek opportunities to learn formal signing. The hearing children of deaf parents, Harris points out, learn to speak normally in the absence of a parental model. Analogously, children raised by parents with foreign accents soon begin to speak like their peers, without an accent; like the deaf children, they ignore the models at home and turn, as if magnetized, to the most available set of peers. Arguments like these convince Harris, and apparently many readers (both lay and professional), that young human beings are wired to attend to people of similar age, rather than to those large and obvious authority figures who give them birth and early shelter.

Harris also provides many telling anecdotes from her own experiences, and from the press and television, about how adults are ignored and peers admired. British boys who rarely see their parents successfully absorb social values at boarding school. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich quit the Cabinet to be with his sons in Cambridge and found that they would rather hang out "in the Square." Touchingly she indicates how she and her husband tried to deal with their wayward adopted daughter but finally realized that the peers had more influence. No such problems existed with their biological daughter, who simply followed her biological destiny; the model provided by her parents was no more than an unnecessary bonus.

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Indeed, despite some imaginative suggestions by Harris, it is very difficult to envision how one could test her hypothesis. For, after all, who are peers? Do they include siblings? Are they the children in the neighborhood? The children in class? The children in after-school activities or in Sunday school? The children on television? In the movies? At some remote spot on the Internet? Who decides? What happens when peers change because the family moves, or one child switches schools, or leaves (or is kicked out of) one group and then enters another? Most important, who selects peers? At least with parents, we researchers stand on fairly firm ground; and with siblings as well. But for all Ms. Harris's anecdotes, when it comes to peers, we're afloat.

Undoubtedly, psychological researchers inspired by Harris's book will seek evidence bearing on her thesis. We will learn from these studies; and some of us who have taken skeptical positions in this debate may have to acknowledge influences we hadn't sufficiently recognized. Meanwhile, I want to suggest an entirely different approach to the problem, one that might be called "the culture assumption."

4.

What is socialization about? It is about becoming a certain kind of person—gaining specific knowledge, skills, manners, attitudes, and habits. Animals have little culture; human beings revel in it. Yet what is striking in Harris's book is that the words "disciplines," "civilization," and "culture" (in the sense of civilization) are largely absent from the text and from her thinking. Socialization is reduced to having, or not having, certain personality traits—traits that are measured by rather coarsely conceived and applied tests.

The work of the much-maligned Freud remains the best point of departure for a treatment of these issues. In his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud defined culture: "the sum of the achievements and institutions which differentiate our lives from those of our animal forebears, namely that of protecting humanity against nature and of regulating the relations of human beings among themselves." He concentrates particularly on "the one feature of culture which characterizes it better than any other, and that is the value that it sets upon the higher mental activities—intellectual, scientific, and aesthetic achievement." And he speculates that culture (or civilization) rests upon the human superego—the sense of guilt—which develops (or fails to develop) during the child's early interactions with his parents. Guilt keeps us from murdering our fellow citizens; guilt prompts us to delay gratification, to sublimate our primordial passions in favor of loftier pursuits.

Whether one examines the least developed preliterate culture or the most advanced technological society, the question remains the same: What structures and practices will enable children to assume their places in that culture and ultimately aid in transmitting it to the generations to come? Children will have some say in this process, and it is to Harris's credit (and that of the authorities whom she cites) that she has called attention to this fact. But children are not born just into a family or into a peer group. They are born into an entire culture, whose assumptions begin when the

and Steve Jones have pointed out . . . , it is difficult to know how to disprove a hypothesis in evolutionary psychology. (For example, what evidence can help us decide whether genes, or humans, are really selfish, or really altruistic, or really both?—in which case we are back where we started.)

And what of behavioral genetics? Certainly the opportunity to study twins who have been separated early in life gives us an additional advantage in understanding the heritability of various traits. And Judith Harris rightly calls attention to two enigmas: the fact that identical twins reared apart are almost as alike as those that are reared together; and the fact that identical twins still turn out to be quite different from one another.

But this subject is also dogged by difficulties. We cannot really do experiments in human behavioral genetics; we have to wait until events happen (as when twins are separated early in life) and then study the effects retrospectively. But this approach leaves too many puzzles unaddressed. First of all, for at least nine crucial months, the twins share the same environment—the womb of the birth mother—and we still know very little about the shared chemical and other effects of gestation on their neurological systems. Then, too, they may or may not have been separated right at birth. (And under what extraordinary circumstances does such separation occur?) They may or may not have been raised for a while by family members. The children are not randomly placed; in nearly all cases, they are raised within the same culture and very often in the same community, with similar social settings. Also, infants who look the same and behave the same are likely to elicit similar responses from adults, while those who are raised in the same house may try all the harder to distinguish themselves from one another. Or they may not.

A few of them here) of human behavioral genetics, and the impression of the measures used to describe personality and character, it is no wonder that we find little reliable evidence of parental influence. It would be reassuring if we did—but it is not surprising that we do not.

Which brings me to the alternative picture that Harris attempts to construct. She argues that "peers" are the real instrument of socialization. She may be right; but she does not have the evidence to show this. Her assertions depend almost entirely on what she thinks could one day be shown. Indeed, I find it extremely telling that she relies very heavily on the arguments about language—language-learning among the deaf, and the loss of foreign accents. Neither of these has to do with personality, character, or temperament, her supposed topics. In the case of accents, I assume that we are dealing with an unconscious (and presumably innate) process in which the growing child generalizes from his encounters with many of the adults and children he meets outside the home and through television, the movies, and other media. In the case of deafness, the enormous difference between child and parents forces youngsters to make use of resources outside the home—ranging from adult teachers to television and other visual media.

tradition-centered and "inner-directed" families, where the parental models were powerful, and to the concomitant rise of the "other-directed families" that made up "the lonely crowd." In this increasingly common family constellation, much socialization occurred at the behest of the peer group, whether for adults or for children. Riesman wrote, "The American peer group, too, cannot be matched for power throughout the middle-class world." Examining the America of the 1950s and 1960s, the psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner noted that children spend more time with peers than with parents and reached the same conclusion: "Whether in comparison to other contemporary cultures, or to itself over time, American society emerges as one that gives decreasing prominence to the family as a socializing agency. . . . We are coming to live in a society that is exaggerated not only by race and class, but also by age." Thus not only has the peer group had an important part in American society from the first, but in recent decades this trend has accelerated.

But there are many possible peer groups. To which ones are children drawn and why? Here I believe (and Harris concedes this) that parents have a decisive role—by the friendships they encourage or discourage, by the schools they select or avoid, by the after-school activities they encourage and summer camps they approve of, parents contribute substantially to the choice of possible peer groups. I would go one step further. Children themselves select—and are selected for—various peer groups according to parental predictions. The work of the social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on "talented teens" strongly suggests that the values exhibited at home—integrity vs. dishonesty, hard work vs. laziness, artistic interests vs. philistinism—imprint themselves on children and in turn serve as major determinants of the peer groups to which children are attracted and, not incidentally, the ones where they are welcomed or spurned.

6.

It seems that in every passing decade—perhaps in every passing selection of fall books—we are told of a new approach to bringing up children or of a new, villainous influence on family life. Certainly, we do not have the feeling of a steady scientific march toward truth. It is more as if we are on a roller-coaster with each new hypothesis tending to invalidate the previous one. Still, it would be defeatist simply to embrace the opposite perspective, to declare that each of the various factors—mother, father, grandparents, same-sex siblings, different-sex peers, television, etc.—is important and be done with it. As a scientific community, we can do better than this. To do so, we should be undertaking two activities.

First, even as we welcome the clarifications provided by evolution and genetics, we cannot lose sight of the different meanings attached to seemingly similar traits and actions. Parents and peers have different meanings in Japan, Brazil, and the United States; what we learn from the Whittigs, and from much other sociological and anthropological research, is that these "independent

parents say, happily or with a twinge of regret, "It's a girl," and continues to exert its influence in nearly every interaction and experience until the funeral rites, burial, cremation, or ascent to heaven takes place.

Earlier, I referred to Eleanor Maccoby's pessimistic conclusions about documenting parental influence, and I mentioned some of the studies of it that both Maccoby and Harris seem to have had in mind. But let me reconsider the most ambitious of these studies in a different light. In the 1950s and 1960s, John Whiting, Beatrice Whiting, and their colleagues studied childrearing in six cultures, ranging from a small New England town to agricultural settings in Kenya, India, Mexico, the Philippines, and Okinawa. What emerges from that study is that childrearing practices are distinctly different around the globe: different in treatment of infants, in parental sleeping patterns, in how children do chores, in their helping or not helping in rearing younger siblings, in initiation rites, in ways of handling aggression, and in dozens of other variables. So differently are children reared in these cultures that no one would confuse an adult New Englander with an adult Gusi of Kenya or an adult Tata of Okinawa—whether in their knowledge, skills, manners, habits, personality, or temperament.

For the social scientists, the analytic problem is to find the source of these differences. Parents behave differently in these cultures, but so do siblings, peers, other adults, and even visiting anthropologists. And of course the adult roles, natural resources, technology, and means of communication (primitive or modern) differ as well. In all probability, each of these factors makes its contribution to the child's "personality and character." But how to tell them apart? Harris chooses to minimize these other factors and zooms in on the peers, but her confident choice is not justified.

5.

Harris takes little note of a crucial fact: all but a few of the studies that she reviews, including several of the most influential behavioral genetic ones, were carried out in the United States. The United States is not a country without culture; it has many subcultures and a more general "national" culture as well. Harris and most of the authorities that she cites are not studying child-rearing in general; indeed, they are studying child-rearing largely in the white, middle-class United States during the last half-century.

From the time of Alexis de Tocqueville's visit to the United States in the early 1830s, observers have noted the relative importance in this country of peers, friends, or fellow workers of the same age, the members of one's own community. Tocqueville commented, "In America the family, in the Roman and aristocratic significance of the word, does not exist. All that remains are a few vestiges in the first years of childhood. . . ." As a sociologist might put it, America is a more horizontal, "peer-oriented" society than most others, and particularly more so than most traditional societies.

When empirical social science began in this country, these unusual cultural patterns were noted as well. Studying the America of the 1940s, the sociologist David Riesman and his coauthors called attention to the decline of

little foundation, that parents are not important in socialization borders on the irresponsible. Perhaps, on the average, those of us who are parents are not particularly successful in encouraging the personality traits we would hope to see in our children, whether because we do not know how to get their attention, or because they are "primed" to pay attention to their peers and we are not aware of how long and how hard we must work to counter these proclivities.

But children would not—could not—grow to be members of a civilized culture if they were simply left to the examples of their peers. Indeed, parents are especially important when children's peers set strong and destructive examples. In the absence of credible parents and other adults, most children will not be able to deal effectively with life. A social science—or a layman's guide—that largely left out parents after birth would be absurd. So would a society.

Whether on the scene, or behind the scenes, parents have jointly created the institutions that train and inspire children: apprenticeships, schools, works of art and literature, religious classes, playing fields, and even forms of resistance and rebellion. These institutions, and the adults who run them, sustain civilization and provide the disciplines—however fragile they may seem—that keep our societies from reverting to barbarism.

Sad to say, these most important parts of life—which make life satisfying and fascinating—are largely absent from *The Nurture Assumption*. They are absent as well from most of the work emanating from the biotropic pole of contemporary social science. Until their importance is realized, and the biological and cultural perspectives are somehow deeply integrated with one another, scientific claims about children and family life are bound to remain barren.



variables" cannot simply be equated in designing research or in interpreting findings. In fact, a father may be treated more like a sibling in one society, and an older sibling more like a father in another; parents may encourage children to associate with peers in one culture and to steer clear of them in another and, in yet another, to combat their influence in every way they can.

Second, even as we discover genes or gene clusters that appear to influence important social or psychological variables, we must not assume that we have "solved" the problem of socialization. We still don't know the physical mechanisms by which genes actually affect the brain and cause people to make one choice or another. What triggers (or fails to trigger) genes will vary across cultural settings; and how their expression is understood will also vary. Young men, for example, may have a proclivity to imitate other young men of similar size and power, but that proclivity can be manipulated, depending upon whom the child is exposed to and which rewards and punishments are contingent upon imitation or non-imitation.

Each of the numerous influences on a child's personality I have mentioned can surely have an effect, but the effect will vary among different children, families, and cultures. As science progresses, we may someday be able to predict the relative importance of each across these different factors. My reading of the research suggests that, on the average, parents and peers will turn out to have complementary roles: parents are more important when it comes to education, discipline, responsibility, orderliness, charitableness, and ways of interacting with authority figures. Peers are more important for learning cooperation, for finding the road to popularity, for inventing styles of interaction among people of the same age. Youngsters may find their peers more interesting, but they will look to their parents when contemplating their own futures.

Parental attitudes and efforts will determine to a significant extent how a child resolves the conflicting messages of the home and the wider community as well as the kind of parent the child one day becomes. I would give much weight to the hundreds of studies pointing toward parental influence and to the folk wisdom accumulated by hundreds of societies over thousands of years. And I would, accordingly, be skeptical of a perspective, such as Ms. Harris's, that relies too heavily on heritability statistics and manages to reanalyze numerous studies and practices so that they all somehow point to the peer group.

To gain attention, an author often states a finding or hypothesis very strongly. ("I've been guilty of this myself.") In Harris's case, this has led to a belittling of the roles of parents in childrearing and to a stronger endorsement of the role of peers than the current data allow. I do not question Harris's motives but I do question her judgment, which might have been better guided by the old medical oath "first, do no harm."

It is all to the good if parents do not become crushed with anxiety when they have problems with their children or when their children turn out differently than they would like. Guilt is not always productive. But to suggest,