

Reviews

Harriet Shaklee

Who's raising the kids these days?

Have you heard anyone wondering lately just who *is* raising the kids these days? Some worry that parents are too caught up in the working world to spend enough time with their children to influence their behavior. Instead, we're turning our children over to childcare programs, schools, peer groups, and summer camps to shape their character in the critical childhood years. Not to worry, according to the theory of Judith Rich Harris. After all, parents don't socialize children anyhow. Peers do. This is the surprising conclusion of her book, *The Nurture Assumption*, where she reviews research on parental influence and peer group formation in the United States, as well as in other cultures.

Nature vs. Nurture

Harris says we're too hasty in blaming (or congratulating) Mom and Dad for their children's behavior. Studies in behavior genetics show that genes from parents can influence behavior, but the evidence also suggests there is more to the story. Here the common assumption is that parenting practices are the other important determinant of children's character. Such is the reasoning behind the nature-nurture debate -- that which is not determined by nature (genes) must be determined by nurture (parents). The same reasoning is integral to much theory about abnormal behavior of children and adults -- parents must have done something wrong in childrearing or the children wouldn't have the problems they have today. And a parallel assumption underlies the push for parent education, so that improved parental practice can produce healthier, more adaptive children.

However, Harris suggests this reasoning is much too simplistic. Sure, genetics don't tell the whole story, but what makes us think that parents are the powerful players in the picture? Here she cautions that much research on the effect of parenting practice on children is correlational, and unable to show what causes what. For example, one of the strongest findings in parenting research is that authoritative parents (who set ground rules, but are flexible) have children who

are high in self-esteem, successful in school, and popular with peers, along with other positive traits. However, Harris points out that the direction of effect could just as easily go from child to parent. That is, a positive and cooperative child makes it easy to be firm, yet responsive to his or her concerns and ideas. However, a noncompliant child can turn even a model authoritative parent into an autocrat as rules are violated and trust breaks down between parent and child. The relationship could also hold because of an influential third variable related to both parenting style and child behavior. For example, authoritative parenting has become the dominant tradition among middle class white parents in America, but other styles are more common in other groups. Could the positive child behavior effects just be another by-product of a life of privilege, free of the struggle for basic necessities?

Harris also points out that relationships found between parent behavior and child outcomes are not strong, and are often nonsignificant in research. For example, parents' attributes and beliefs are only weakly correlated with those of their children, and in many cases show no relationship at all. Siblings growing up in the same household have the same parental influences, yet they show little resemblance to each other. If parents are so influential, as the nurture assumption holds, where are the family-based effects we should see?

Harris concludes that "nurture" effects in studies are weak because we're looking in the wrong place. She finds the strong influences on children to be taking place out of the home, with their peer group. This is a perspective bolstered by her own family experience, where she raised one model child and one who rebelled at every turn. Yet, the two children had the same parents who tried to treat them both with the same care and consideration. How, Harris puzzles, can you get such different child outcomes in the same household? Because, claims Harris, the important socialization of children is happening with peers, not with parents.

Peers rule

Harris draws on research in group process to support her points about peer influence. For one thing, a child's job is to act like a child, not an adult. According to Harris, children won't learn much about how to act by watching adults, who have such different tasks and responsibilities from them. On the other hand, neighborhood and school friends are good guides to child behavior, and serve as strong models for other children. Research further shows that we model our behavior after people we categorize as being similar to ourselves. Children are far more like other children than adults, causing them to look to other children as a guide to behavior. On top of it all, children spend more time with their peers than with their parents, especially as they get older, thus have more exposure to peer values and behavior. Harris cites examples of other cultures where children are put in charge of their siblings as soon as they are weaned, and are left to their own devices while Mom and Dad attend to the business of providing for the family.

These children learn what they need to know in their societies with little adult input -- perhaps our children do the same as well.

If peers are so important, according to Harris, the best way for parents to influence their children's behavior is to choose carefully the neighborhood and schools they will attend. When peer interaction is the training ground, you'll want your children to associate with peers who share your values.

Harris' theory of socialization turns common wisdom on its head. While most would accept the strength of peer influence, parents work hard to influence their children as well. However, Harris suggests parents are struggling in vain. But one field of evidence indicates that Harris is overstating her case. That is, parent education can be effective in changing parenting practices, which, in turn, affect children's behavior. This may be the one research tradition that indicates, unequivocally, that parents are a potent influence on children.

However, even with this contrary evidence in mind, Harris helps us put parent behavior in perspective. That is, parents are only one part of the socialization process. Studies show that peers actively shape each others' behavior even in the preschool years. Hence, children tend to show up at home with beliefs and behaviors that conflict with those of their parents. Consider the many gender-egalitarian parents who have been surprised by the stereotyped beliefs uttered by their children. Or the immigrant families struggling to raise their children with the values of their homeland, but who are dismayed to see their children gradually take on American values. Or how about the family trying to preserve family religious beliefs that conflict with the values of their children's friends? All of these families face an uphill battle against the power of peer influence.

However, Harris may be too narrow in her scope as she considers out-of-home influences on children. That is, peers are only one of many other factors that contribute to children's behavior. School effects can be strong, as can the power of the media. Positive and negative influences in the neighborhood may shape a child's behavior and aspirations, or a strong church connection may be an important factor. Other effects are indirect, such as the way work and transportation demands can limit the time parents have with their children, or the ability of family economics to limit or broaden children's hopes and dreams.

Ecological perspective

The way in which these many factors combine with family life to affect children is the focus of the ecological perspective in child development. This orientation finds the child growing up in a family context, but the family is affected by a panoply of out-of-home influences and beliefs. A particularly strong proponent of this approach is James Garbarino, who has shown special

concern for children growing up under difficult circumstances. His comparison of children in several war-torn countries found that cultural beliefs, community cohesion, and family strength can combine to insulate children from the worst of war effects. However, children exposed to comparable violence without these supports suffer psychological breakdown. Garbarino's recent book, *Lost Boys*, uses case studies of several violent youth in prison to chronicle the complex factors that lead children into violent behavior. In these cases, parents and peers may play a role, but other forces conspire as well to make a seemingly irrational turn to violence look like the only logical course of action to a child or teenager.

The ability for children to grow up successfully against the odds has become known as resilience. However, Garbarino considers the possibility that some environments are so negative that children hardly have a chance. Psychologists found an environment like this, where even adults couldn't make it. During World War II Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall commissioned a study of the effects of chronic combat on American soldiers and found that when soldiers served in combat for 60 continuous days, 98 percent had to be taken off duty and psychologically rehabilitated. And who were the 2 percent who survived unscathed? They were psychopaths. Thus, violent combat qualifies as a "toxic environment" -- if you weren't crazy going into it, you were when you came out.

But how about the conditions in which children live? Are there environments that are this toxic for children and youth? Psychologist Pat Tolan asked this question as he studied 15-year-old African-American youth residing in a large public housing project. This housing project was famous as one of the most afflicted war-zone neighborhoods of Chicago. Tolan defined youth as resilient if, over the two-year period of the study, they needed no remedial education in school, and did not have mental health problems sufficient to require professional attention. And how many survived this negative environment, according to Tolan's definition? None. Each one of the youth growing up in this environment showed negative effects on mental health and/or school performance. For these teenagers, the relentless pressure of community violence, family disruption, racism, and trauma was uniformly overwhelming.

Mary Pipher also recognizes the power of social context in her recent book, *In the Shelter of Each Other*. Pipher is concerned about the way in which recent societal trends may undermine children's developmental opportunities. A family counselor, Pipher is especially effective in helping families fight off these negative trends in restoring parents' ability to create a strong family base for their children. For example, a family with a rebellious teenager may come to her fearing she will find fault with their parenting practices. But instead of focusing on the parents, she looks at ways societal pressures may be threatening family cohesiveness. Turning off the TV is a common recommendation, with families discovering that they like to play board games, read books, or take a walk once they have time together without distraction. Other families find they are so burdened by work demands, including commuting and long working hours, that they have

little time for each other. These parents begin to decline overtime, or make a job change to one that better fits with family needs, with favorable effects on parents and children alike. Her case studies show that, once these out-of-home influences are under control, even surly teenagers enjoy the family time together, finding home and family to be a more welcoming place.

Though the perspectives and themes differ, all of these books combine to remind us that childrearing is a complex matter indeed. Recent concerns that parental influence is too weak these days may simply be a recognition of the out-of-home forces that have been important throughout time. But by the present analysis, who *is* raising the kids these days?

- Parents are not the only influence on children today, but they never were. However, there is every reason to believe that parents continue to have a strong effect on children, despite Harris' conclusions to the contrary. She's persuasive in arguing for peer influence, but less so in dismissing parents' effect on their children's well-being.
- People outside the nuclear family can be important as well, including extended family, adult and child friends, teachers, counselors, etc. Recent research strengthens our confidence in the ability of such people to be a positive *or* a negative influence on children.
- Institutions, including schools, faith communities, social services, work sites, shape outcomes for children. Recent movements in many communities for such groups and agencies to work collaboratively can enhance the network of care supporting children and families.
- Broader cultural forces, such as media messages, economic conditions, political instability, population mobility, and community violence, can be powerful influences on children's well-being. Policy makers need to be mindful of the way in which these forces either support or undermine families' abilities to raise their children successfully.

The ecological perspective reasserts the parent's role at the core of the socialization process for children. However, it also gives full recognition to the part played by out-of-home forces in successful developmental outcomes for children. This more complete view gives us a better theoretical basis to understand how family and society need to work in tandem to support successful socialization of children.

This discussion is based on:

- Harris, Judith Rich. 1998. *The nurture assumption: why children turn out the way they do*. New York: Free Press.

- Garbarino, James. 1999. *Lost boys: why our sons turn violent and how we can save them*. New York: Free Press.

- Pipher, Mary. 1996. *In the shelter of each other*. New York: Putnam.

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