



The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do

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How much credit do parents deserve when their children turn out well? How much blame when they turn out badly? Judith Rich Harris has a message that will change parents' lives: The "nurture assumption"-- the belief that what makes children turn out the way they do, aside from their genes, is the way their parents raise them--is nothing more than a cultural myth. This electrifying book explodes some of our unquestioned beliefs about children and parents and gives us a radically new view of childhood.

Harris examines with a fresh eye the lives of real children to show that it is what they experience outside the home, in the company of their peers, that matters most. Parents don't socialize children; children socialize children. With eloquence and humor, Judith Harris explains why parents have little power to determine the sort of people their children will become. *The Nurture Assumption* brings together insights from psychology, sociology, anthropology, primatology, and evolutionary biology to offer a startling new view of who we are and how we got that way.

The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do Details

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From Reader Review The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do for online ebook

Matty Lehn says

nice little book of observations

Andrew Hill says

I read this book with great interest. It has been quite influential in the developmental psychology community, and its arguments are widely cited in other work on the subject. The book makes two arguments: 1) The influence of parents on their children is grossly overstated by developmental psychologists. decades of research has largely failed to demonstrate the strength or persistence of "nurture" effects on children over the long-term. 2) Group effects are far more powerful than parental effects.

For the average reader, books like this pose a great challenge. The reader must trust the author to interpret a huge volume of research on the subject. This Ms. Harris does extremely well. I have no doubt that hers is an honest and thorough account. But a more fundamental problem concerns the methods and measures that prevail in the discipline of psychology. Most readers lack the grounding in research to evaluate the validity of the inputs and outcomes in the research cited. This is a real problem. It is not at all clear that psychology has figured out how to measure things that truly matter. I refer you to Jerome Kagan's "Psychology's Ghosts" for a good (and recent) overview of this subject.

But even if we accept that the research cited by the author is actually measuring the right thing--some indicator of personality or wellness--the book is deeply flawed. The essence of my criticism is this: I disagree the premise of her argument. Much of her analysis rests on the assertion that parents NOT affecting their children's behavior should be the null hypothesis. She contends that nurture effects are the invention of modern psychology, and draws on observations of primitive societies and primates to back her up.

The choice of the null hypothesis has huge importance. It is the high ground in science. Alternative hypotheses must knock the null off of its perch. Harris argues that research must demonstrate that parents have significant (non-genetic) effects on their offspring. Yet the notion that parents have an enduring, central effect on their children is ancient. It is found in fairy tales, scripture, poems, etc. across numerous cultures and societies. Jews, Christians, and Muslims share the following ideas: "Train up a child in the way he should go; when he is old, he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6) "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee." (Exodus 20:12) "Filial piety" is central to Confucian ideals: honor your parents and your ancestors. (Indeed, whenever the author encounters Asian families and children in her book, her argument dissolves into a mass of confusion. This group appears to be the gross exception to her theory, and she really doesn't know how to deal with it.)

She fails to persuade me that the ephemeral influence of parents is a valid null hypothesis. This is important, because instead of simply demonstrating that most research fails to show significant nurture effects, the burden is on her to demonstrate that parents do not have an effect. It seems that the burden of proof is on researchers to demonstrate that parents do not have significant effects on their children. This should be the alternative hypothesis, and the research in question therefore must demonstrate the inefficacy of parenting in relation to human development.

Toward the end of the book, she makes her hypothesis clear:

"Experiences in childhood and adolescent peer groups modify children's personalities in ways they will carry with them to adulthood. Group socialization theory makes this prediction: that children would develop into the same sort of adults if we left their lives outside the home unchanged—left them in their schools and their neighborhoods—but switched all the parents around."

This scenario is exactly the data that is necessary to reject the null (parental effects matter). And she does not have it. As much as she tries to find discrete examples (separated identical twins, immigrant children, etc.) that pieced together prove her case, she doesn't have the data she needs. You cannot infer her same children-same group-switched parents conclusion from the bits and pieces of natural experiments that she cites. It's like claiming to know what a cookie tastes like by tasting each ingredient separately.

But let's give her the benefit of the doubt, and accept for a moment that her null (no nurture effect) is legitimate. So now we have to demonstrate that nurture effects are significant. The research she cites doesn't do it. This is the crux of her argument. She cites research that demonstrates group effects but not parenting effects.

In research, if you fail to find a significant effect, there are a few explanations:

- 1) You have correctly specified the outcome AND the independent variables and there is, in fact, no effect
- 2) You have misspecified the outcome. You are measuring the wrong dependent variable, or you are incorrectly measuring the right one.
- 3) You have misspecified the independent variables. You are measuring the wrong independent variables, or you are incorrectly measuring the right ones.
- 4) Your data lacks sufficient variance. There is a significant effect, you have the right variables and you are measuring them correctly, but your experiment/sample is not varying the independent variables enough.

Having read the book, I am struck that the studies the author cites probably suffer from a combination of the final three conditions.

It is never clear to me that there is a consistent measure of the outcome, much less an accurate one. Where in the book does the author clearly explain what the outcomes are? Some measures of personality, apparently. Consider the difficulties there. What's more, the author suggests that personality is largely set by the early twenties. Yet recent research suggests that psychological assumptions regarding the "plasticity" of personality are without basis. Because psychologists have been convinced for so long that development really stops at the end of adolescence, they haven't been measuring development in adults. Some researchers are starting to do so, and they are finding that some fundamental aspects of adult behavior change significantly in adulthood. Think of the phases of your own adult life, and how your views of appropriate behavior may have shifted through them: single life, dating and engagement, marriage, young children, adolescent children, empty nest, and so on. And I would argue that the salience of our own experiences as children and members of families becomes particularly pronounced when we have children of our own. We may not mimic our parents when we are out with our friends, but we are likely to echo their behaviors, beliefs, values, etc when we are raising our own children. As a parent, my approach to parenting is not at all affected by my peers' parenting behaviors. I don't observe theirs. But my mother and father are always "with" me. Kagan's "Psychology's Ghosts" tackles psychology's fundamental struggle with the proper specification and measurement of happiness. Ms. Harris is doubtless correct that decades of research on parenting has failed to demonstrate significant effects in the measures of personality/happiness used. That is probably a more powerful statement about psychology as a discipline than about the role of parents in their children's lives.

I also believe that the lack of variance is a real problem in this research. In acknowledging that truly horrendous parents damage their children, the author invokes the example of drug dealing parents example, and then dismisses as an outlier. Why? Truly bad parents harm their kids. And there is a fair amount of truly bad parenting out there. Yet I think modern societies have developed remarkably homogenized approaches to parenting, and that this has resulted in a significant reduction in the variance of the fundamentally important aspects of parenting. The nurture assumption is powerful and it has attenuated the variance in what matters. Research still see some variance, but not enough to create an effect. Consider the steering wheel on a car: most have some "play" around center. Wiggle the wheel left or right and it has no effect on direction of travel. If you don't have sufficient variance in the amount of movement (or a very small number of cases where the wiggle is sufficient to actually steer the car off of center), you will fail to reject the null that the steering wheel has no effect. And you will be wrong.

Where do we see real variance? I was raised Mormon. This was entirely the consequence of my mother's choices, and it has had a profound effect on my life and my identity. Members of religious minorities--Orthodox Jews, Mormons, Muslims in Christian nations, etc.--are likely to exhibit stronger nurture effects because the variance is there, relative to the rest of the population. Over the course of your life, you will find yourself in situations in which certain aspects of your identity are highly salient, while others fade. Harris contends that your identity as a son or daughter becomes less and less salient as your life progresses. But there are ways in which your parents may raise you to understand your identity as a son and daughter as something that is inextricably linked with your identity in other contexts--as a citizen, as an adherent of a religion, as a parent to your own children, etc.

In any case, the book as fascinating and very thought provoking, but in my opinion it suffers from the classic problem of over-correction. She overstates her case and misdirects her criticism. If someone came and told me that thirty years of research had failed to demonstrate that rainy weather makes you wetter than dry weather, I wouldn't hypothesize that it was, in fact, the carrying of umbrellas that makes you wet. I would ask how we are measuring wetness.

Misty says

Very fun and insightful read. I found her ideas salve to the current climate of "expert" opinions on childrearing. Although I am not a darwinist (as she is), her alter-argument to the assumption that every little thing we do has a permanent mark on our children helps assuage the guilt we've accumulated from all those studies done on how we should be the perfect parent. She points out the autonomy children are born with, that parents should not be blamed for most of children's development. Don't get turned off by her personal comments. Clearly she has her own biases, but she is unabashed about them and witty in her commentary. I appreciate this contribution and hope it is part of a paradigm shift to think more realistically about rearing children.

Aleksandra says

When it comes to the author's main premise, I can't say I am completely convinced. Because I'm not. :D (That has something to do with the data from the twin studies showing that the so-called shared environmental factors explain some percentage of variance on the variables such as alcohol use, smoking, externalizing problem behaviour etc..)

Also, I can't agree with her views regarding corporal punishment. While I do think that "an occasional smack" (as long as there isn't plenty of those occasions) probably isn't harmful for a child, I rolled my eyes when I've read that *[the advice givers have] made you feel guilty if you hit your child, though big hominids have been hitting little ones for millions of years*. Big hominids have been *killing* other hominids for millions of years. Is that a reason good enough for us to do the same? It probably wouldn't cause any permanent damage if my partner occasionally slapped me, but it's still considered unacceptable - in my social category, at least. As more mature side in the relationships with children, we have a moral obligations towards them. As the author says for herself, "We may not hold their tomorrows in our hands but we surely hold their todays, and the have the power to make their todays very miserable." Also, she claims that *the increase in parental cautiousness did not result in a decrease in child abuse*. The very authors she is quoting are saying something else entirely.*

Also, I can't say I agree with her on all of her *I thinks* and *I believes*.

However, even though I am not scientifically literate enough, nor educated enough, and not by a long chalk willing to go through all of her references to come to have an opinion that truly matters, I have an opinion, and it's that this is a good book and that quite a lot of it makes quite a lot of sense.

The part of the variance on lot of the variables not caused by genetic inheritance is caused by environmental influences that a person wouldn't share with their monozygotic twin had they had one (I think I just did something grammatically horrible). Also, it makes a lot of sense that children acquire culture in the same place where they acquire their language, and even though we tend to call it mother tongue, it seems it isn't a mother tongue really.

(The author doesn't think that parents aren't important. She says that *[mother-child] early relationships are essential, not just for normal social development, but even for normal brain development*.)

Also, the author explained some things I haven't learnt or figured out by myself before, most notably, that *you can't explain the behaviour of individuals by looking at them in isolation, if they happen to belong to a species that was designed by evolution to live in groups*.

But, for me, what's most influential in this book is pointing out the lackadaisicalness and creativity with which social sciences and humanities approach the scientific method. It made me want to cry and blow my nose on my diploma. It has shaken up my professional identity (can unemployed people have one?).

For instance:

Here's what I think: Middle-class Americans of European descent try to use the Just Right parenting style, because that is the style approved by their culture. If they don't use it, it's because they have problems or their kid does. If they have problems, it could be because they have disadvantageous personality characteristics that they can pass on to their kid genetically. (...)**

Yes, that does make sense. I'm not sure I've read anything on the subject that distinguished the correlation and the causation. And there is more examples where that one came from.

So, although there are obviously things I don't agree with, and although there is some unnecessary

repetitiveness, especially towards the end, I strongly believe that this is an important book.

If we don't know which aspects of children's development we can influence and to which extent, and which ones we can't, we are bound to waste time and energy. Also, it seems to me that the whole point of being a middle class parent today is to have something to feel guilty about. No matter what you do and how good are the genes you've provided and acquired from your co-parent, your child will never be perfect, and that means one thing: you fucked up something. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that a lot of guilt ridden parents would hate this book, because it tells them not to feel so guilty, and not feeling horribly guilty means you're not good enough parent. Or at least that's the prevalent belief in their peer group.

Also, if we don't know how to gather data, we'll be gathering misinformation instead. For some reason, they aren't particularly useful.

I quote from somewhere on Coursera: *In response to Harris' book, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation sponsored a conference on parenting, which ultimately led to the publication of a book, Parenting and the Child's World*, so that is the next one I'll be reading.

* I've just remembered one more thing: the author says the parents are able to influence the way their children behave at home (but not how they behave outside), but elsewhere in the book they seem to be completely helpless when their horrible children are ruining their lives and marriages and, all of a sudden, they have no influence and they are victims. If you're a moron and you have unprotected sex with a moron, there is a fair chance your kids will be morons. Since you are the one responsible for them even existing, STFU, it's not you who is the victim here. And, oh, maybe, next time you fuck a moron use a birth control. Thank you.

** The next sentence in those brackets says: *If the kid has problems--a difficult temperament, for instance--then the Just Right parenting style might not work and the parents might end up switching to the Too Hard method.* If a child has a difficult temperament, and you decide to withdraw love and warmth, you are a bloody moron. Birth control. Thank you.

Tania says

I read this book because I am a child and youth care worker, and I think it is important to read materials that are influencing current thinking. As a practitioner, I am glad I read this book, even though I fundamentally disagree with the author on pretty much every point. I think it is important to consider the impact that peer relations have on child development. But Harris misses the mark.

Harris is undoubtedly right that peers do have a strong influence over how children develop. However, her thesis is so extreme that it is simplistic. Children are socialized by any number of agents -- parents, peers, teachers, the media, etc -- and the effect is reciprocal. She completely ignores the work of great thinkers like Urie Bronfenbrenner (sp??) who uses systems theory to explain socialization. As well, as another reviewer suggested, the fact that some of the studies she attacks have flaws (and the author is quite right in asserting that) does not mean that their hypotheses are necessarily wrong. She doesn't go far enough to prove that. The only way she could prove that, in fact, would be to attempt to replicate the research, attempting to rectify any

design flaws. Some of the studies she quotes to lay out her thesis are equally flawed.

The quality of the actual writing is poor. The author's attempts at humor tend to fall flat. She repeats herself far too much. It takes far too long to get to her thesis, and once she finally does, it takes forever to get to the end of the book. The author needed a good editor.

This book is not one I would recommend to parents. I would recommend that practitioners give the book a glance simply because Harris's ideas do seem to be having an impact on the current culture. Just don't look for any real answers in this book; it is too simplistic and extreme for that.

Jon Tirsén says

This is the only "parenting" book you need to read. I believe it will change my life quite a bit.

Judith offers fairly convincing evidence that as a parent I have little long term influence on the life outcome of my children. Initially it made me pissed off but now I'm relieved.

It means I can relate to my children more as a friend and life companion. Things I do for them is out of love, not due to some ulterior motive that they will become more successful long term. If I can't be arsed reading a good night story to them every night they won't turn into illiterate dumbos. If I let them watch the iPad a bit longer while I sip my wine they won't get ADHD.

I think I'm just going to sit back and enjoy this parenting thing. Thanks Judith!

Joel says

The main thesis of the book - that parents don't have much of an impact on the way children become socialized outside the home (that responsibility falls to the group they identify with) - was very compellingly argued and backed up with studies and reason, though I did think she belabours the point a little too much. The book could have been at least a hundred pages shorter. Personally, what I got the most out of this book was not a deeper understanding of theories of child development, but a peek into just how dismal of a social science psychology is, and how easy it is for researchers to manipulate studies to get a conclusion they've already made their mind up about. A bit like climate science.

Jurij Fedorov says

What a weird book. The main theory in this book has for a long time been proven correct. But not many know about it, so Harris is doing every scientist a great favor in sharing this very important message in her very entertaining book. But as an academic book I do have some quarrels with it.

Pro:

Harris is a great writer. Only a few people in academia can match her great, easy-to-read and funny way of sharing an important message. Just this alone makes the book a great read. But all the informative science and the very important message makes this a must-read book for anyone who is a parent. This is something we can see in every statistical analysis. And Harris changed the scientific field by telling us why we see it in our studies. Steven Pinker wrote in the intro that reading her book was the highlight of his career, and I understand why that is.

Con:

Harris does write in an entertaining style. She has the personality of a teenager; Energetic, simple, full of life and a personal perception infallibility. The last one is a bad thing in this case. Yes, she got the main theory right and should have a place in every psychology course because of this. But she gets a lot of small theories wrong. One of her many, many small theories is the: violent tv/video games make children violent. She implied it very strongly in the book and it reads like a parenting advice. But the ironic part is, she implies that people assuming things not supported by data are ignorant and biased - while she herself does the same thing on several occasions in her book on just this subject. So, she can do many great things. But she cannot walk on water.

Amith says

The book aims to debunk the 'Nurture Assumption', which claims that how children turn out in life depends strongly on their home environment. The author, through her 'Group Socialization Theory' claims that the peer group that surrounds the kid as he/she grows up- the neighborhood, schoolmates is what shapes the child's personality and the parents have almost negligible influence on how he/she turns out.

The majority of the book is about how she weaves up the defense for her theory. She relies on studies from a variety of fields like Sociology, Behavioral Genetics and our evolutionary history. The book is heavy on concepts. The author tries her best to make this ascent as gradual as possible. This means that the ideas in the later chapters refer back to the ones before it, which can get a little tricky to recollect at times but the journey is worth it. With some patience on the reader's side, the writing can be accessible to a non-technical audience. I really enjoyed the chapters on our evolutionary history that she used to help explain certain aspects of her theory.

The most obvious question that came to my mind for the author's claim of no parental influence on child personality is in the case of abusive parents. Regarding this, in the final chapters, she does qualify the bounds of her theory to homes that are 'good enough'. She makes the prediction that if it was possible to swap the parents in two 'good enough' homes, keeping all other aspects of the children's life- the neighborhood, the school unchanged, they would still turn out the same.

I have always felt that a lot of social problems in the society can be traced back to the question "Why do people turn out the way they do?". In that regard, I am thoroughly happy with what I have gained from the book.

Sameer Alshenawi says

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Kathrynn says

There was so much covered in this thick, large paperback that it is difficult to decide what group of people it was intended for. Teachers and parents, definitely. I understand how this book came up in other books I've read and that's why I decided to read it. Wow.

Enjoyed the author's writing style and her humor had me chuckling throughout the 462 pages. The author presented numerous in-depth background examples and used them throughout the book. There was a tremendous amount of research that floored me. Normally, I would have been put off by the length of time it took to get to a point, but in this case it was completely necessary. The author was discrediting many long-standing, hard and true, beliefs and had to set the stage before she made her point. She made her point(s) in spades!

The end of the book, starting at Chapter 12, Growing Up, I found the most fascinating. Here she talks about peer pressure, family groups, teen smoking, playing piano (or not), family units, kids at school, to spank or not to spank, child abuse, birth order, sibling rivalry, what's learned behavior at home and what's learned from peers, choosing schools, bullying, social skills, self-esteem and status, parents as pals, siblings as allies, etc.

Very interesting. The book uses quite a few examples of how nature (genes) are more responsible for our behavior than our environment (nurture). Many examples of identical and fraternal twins raised together and apart. One that I want to share were two identical twins raised apart. The biological mother played the piano. One child was raised by a mom that taught piano lessons. The other child was raised by a parent who introduced her child to a piano teacher and provided the resources, not the expectation, to learn to play. Guess which child played the piano? The latter. It was felt by the first child that that particular role in the family was already filled, so that child was not interested. The author says too bad they didn't introduce her to the Tuba.

Not a quick read by any means. There was a lot of information to sift through and this book is not for everyone. I bookmark-tagged the heck out of it!

Skylar Burris says

This is a very long (and at times personal) review. If you would prefer to read a more concise and formal version of this review, [click here](#).

If Judith Rich Harris is right, there's good news, and then there's bad news. The good news is that there isn't much I can do to screw up my kid. The bad news is that there's not much I can do to keep her peers from

screwing her up.

“The nurture assumption” is the assumption (made by sociologists, psychologists, educators, criminologists, parents, non-parents, and the mass market parenting industry) that the way parents raise their children has a great deal of influence on how their children “turn out.” All of the parenting books we read promise to reveal to us the magical parenting style that will give us happier, gentler, smarter, more obedient children. If we could just figure out the right parenting style, the right method, the right plan, if we could just communicate the right values in the right way, our children would behave well and turn out great. Harris argues that this is hogwash. “Parenting has been oversold.” It “is a job in which sincerity and hard work do not guarantee success.” How children “turn out” (in terms of behavior, attitudes, and personality) depends very little on mom and dad’s parenting style. Rather, it depends about 50% on genetics and about 50% on the influence of peers.

I don’t know how much I agree with Harris’s overall thesis. She certainly makes a persuasive argument that is carefully and logically built, but I have some reservations. For one, just about anything parental influence could appear to account for, she says genetics could also account for. Well, yes, genetics COULD account for it. That doesn’t mean genetics DOES account for it. She has only proven that those who maintain the “nurture assumption” have not proven (or even substantially supported) their case. But neither has she proven hers. (She has made a more convincing case, I will concede.) Ultimately, I give the book five stars not so much because I am certain she is right (I’m not), but because the book is interesting, well written, thought provoking, and, at times, surprisingly funny. (It’s one flaw is that it is a bit repetitive; she could have shaved off about 70 pages.) Rather than merely putting a stake down somewhere in the nature vs. nurture debate, this fascinating tome covers wide territory. It offers an overview of behavioral and social psychology (including accounts of numerous intriguing experiments), a history of child rearing advice and attitudes across the world and throughout the ages, and personal theories of sociological evolution, among other things.

To convince the reader of her thesis, Harris first tears down the evidence used to support the nurture assumption, and she does a rather good job of it. She then uses anecdotal evidence, coupled with logical reasoning, to support her own position. Culture, Harris argues, is not primarily transmitted from parent to child, but from slightly older child to slightly younger child. The “power of group socialization” is paramount. “What children learn from their parents about morality doesn’t go any further than the door of their home.” What you do at home affects how your child behaves at home and in your presence, but it doesn’t necessarily affect how he behaves in the outside world, among his peers. (She cites studies that show, for instance, that children who do not lie or cheat at home are no less likely than their peers to do so in school). For example, as a parent, you could try to remove your child from the bad influence of television by throwing your TV out the window (or, as we have done, simply disconnecting the cable). But it’s pretty much useless. “[A:]s long as most of his peers watch it, the effect on the norms of an individual boy is the same, whether or not he watches it himself.” Children bring the outside world into the home, but they rarely bring the home into the outside world. This is why my daughter comes home from public school saying “totally awesome” but does not go to public school saying, “God is omniscient.”

The desire to be a part of the group is strong. This “peer pressure” is internal and not external. While there’s not much parents can do to leave a “permanent” negative mark on the personality, “low status in the peer group, if it continues for long,” can. (Which, she says, is why you don’t want to give your kid a weird name like Skylar or Shiloh, which might interfere with her socialization and lead her to turn out peculiar. She might end up, like me, spending hours writing reviews on Goodreads instead of going to cocktail parties, or, like my preschool daughter did, raking large piles of leaves in the yard and then hovering over them, shouting, “In 40 days, if it does not repent, Ninevah will be destroyed!”)

When it comes to socialization studies, making this distinction between peer and parental influence is rather like straining out a gnat. For most children, their peer group will be the children of their parents' peer group, so whether it is the parents or the peers who are actually transmitting the culture, things will "turn out" about the same, with some minor modifications. What it does mean, however, is that if you take a kid who is growing up in a crime-ridden, culturally backwards area, and you transplant him to a nice suburb with good schools, he'll probably "turn out" better than he would if he had remained where he was. This seems to me to be common sense, and it hardly requires 400 pages to defend.

What people have a harder time processing, however, is her argument that (1) "bad" parenting styles do not have any permanent negative effect on a child and (2) "good" parenting styles do not have any permanent positive effect on a child.

We're uncomfortable with rejecting idea (1) because that would mean placing the blame for our personal screw-ups either on our genetics (which we are absolutely hopeless to control) or on our own choices (which perhaps we'd rather not be held responsible for failing to control). Parents, myself included, are uncomfortable with idea (2), because it means that, basically, we have no control whatsoever over how our children "turn out." Really, I think many of us suspect that's true, at least on some level, at least some of the time, but we don't want to believe it. We want to believe that if we just raise our kids with the right values, they won't one day choose to be jerks or failures. "Raise up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it," is a popular Biblical proverb. The problem is, we've all seen many a child depart from the way in which he was brought up, usually because the group of which he is a part (either at school, if a child, or at work, if an adult) does not hold those values. The religious among us may reassure ourselves with the faith that these departures are only temporary, that a seed was at least planted, and that, by the grace of God, it will one day bloom. And perhaps that is true. I choose to hope it is.

So, does Harris believe that it doesn't matter if you beat your kid, tell him he's worthless, or teach him that lying and cheating are the best ways to get by in life? No. Parents probably are powerless to write the futures of their children, but they can affect their presents. They have great influence on their children's quality of life at this moment, and on the quality of relationship that they, as parents, enjoy with their children. "We may not hold their tomorrows in our hands, but we surely hold their todays, and we have the power to make their todays very miserable."

Harris does actually offer a few timid suggestions about what parents can do for their kids. Parents can impart knowledge, traditions, and religious beliefs to their children, and, **provided they are not contradicted by the child's peer group**, they will probably stick. Things practiced or talked about primarily in the privacy of the home (cooking styles, for instance) are better able to withstand the tide of the peer group. Parents can also, until a child is about ten, determine who his peer group is, at least outside of school. After ten, though, it's rough sailing. You can try to forbid your kid to hang out with certain kids, but he can usually find a way to do so, whether during or after school, and usually by lying. Especially in the teenage years, it is very difficult to influence your child's selection of peer group. "The adolescents who can be monitored are the ones who are willing to be monitored, and they are the ones who need it least. Parents have remarkably little power to maintain control over the adolescents who need it most." As a "draconian" measure, in extreme cases, a parent can change schools or move to a different neighborhood or even homeschool, all of which may or may not help, depending upon whether the child is able to find a similar peer group in the new environment. (The last option of homeschooling she describes as "risky," because she does think it is important for children to have an opportunity to be socialized by a group of peers, lest they turn out "peculiar." I was actually surprised she had almost nothing to say about homeschooling in this book; one would think it would be a field ripe for study given her thesis, but perhaps in 1998 there just weren't enough subjects who had been homeschooled as children; homeschooling is much more common today.) She

doesn't mention this, but you could also immerse your children into regular participation in a religious sub-community that shares your values, beginning at a young age, so that they form friendships that, one hopes, will last into adolescence, and so that participating in this community becomes a regular habit. My daughter goes to public school, but she also regularly spends anywhere from four to nine hours a week interacting with her peers in church-related activities of one kind or another.

Much of what the author says strikes me as common sense and is in keeping with my own observations of people. I do like the fact that she points out that parenting style is not simply something a parent chooses and then practices. Parenting style is a two-way street; it is influenced by the child, not just the parent. You may have one parenting style for one kid and another for a second kid, and you may change your parenting style according to the child's reaction to it. Your parenting style may not CAUSE your child's behavior, but may rather be a REACTION to your child's personality and behavior. To say "too-hard- style" parents have more rebellious kids sounds like causation; but what if you said rebellious kids illicit a harder parenting style from their parents? And it seems obvious that personality does not result from how a child was raised. I certainly know many siblings (both adults and children) who differ from one another both in personality and in personal values, and their values and attitudes more nearly resemble those of the people with whom they hang out than those of their parents. The influence of the peer group is well known to all the major world religions. It is why the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all encourage fellowship with like believers, and adopt varying degrees of wariness toward relationships with nonbelievers.

Nevertheless, a mother likes to believe that she makes more than a mere genetic contribution to the values, behaviors, and fate of her children. Yes, not believing this may give her some relief when, during a church scripture reading involving the punitive death of David's son, her four-year-old daughter shouts out loud, with an air of apathy, "Well, EVERYBODY dies!" But not believing it may also cloak that same mother with a sense of indifference when she's writing a Goodreads review and her son keeps begging her to play Go Fish. She might say to herself, "If I continue to amuse myself rather than share this moment with my son, it will leave no permanent marks on his personality." Or, she might just go and play Go Fish with the kid, because her parents taught her that virtue is its own reward, and you do what's right, even if you get nothing in return for it, even if it leaves no "permanent mark." Or was it her peers who taught her that? Or was it an attitude programmed into her genes? Who knows. Who cares. In the immortal words of the commercial giants who brought us Nike, "Just do it." Or, as Harris says in this book: "If you don't think the moral imperative is a good enough reason to be nice to your kid, try this one: be nice to your kid when he's young so that he will be nice to you when you're old." Try to have a good relationship with your kid, not because it guarantees he'll work hard, get all A's, have a successful career, never cheat on his wife, always clean up after himself, and never reject your values, but because a good relationship with your kid is better than a bad one.

In the end, the main message of this book is simple and (for some) encouraging: LIGHTEN UP! This whole modern business of parenting has us all so bent out of shape. You'd think no one had ever raised decent kids in any generation before ours! "Parents," she says, "are meant to enjoy parenting. If you are not enjoying it, maybe you're working too hard." We try so hard to do what's right, so sure it really matters that we get it right, that we end up running ourselves ragged. "The experience of previous generations show that it is possible to rear well-adjusted children without making them feel that they are the center of the universe." You never know what's going to happen. Maybe those kids with silly names like Skylar and Shiloh will turn out alright in the end. Maybe your kid will learn better in the public school than in the snooty private one. "You never know. If it makes you feel any better, neither do the advice-givers. You've followed their advice and where has it got you? They've made you feel guilty...guilty...guilty...if anything goes wrong with your child. It's easy to blame parents for everything: they're sitting ducks. Fair game ever since Freud lit his first cigar." True enough. True enough.

Tim says

This book first came out 16 years ago, and for whatever reason, it's just as fresh today as I imagine it would have been back then. I don't say that lightly because in the interim, I've read a few developmental psych textbooks, taken psych classes, and read more than my fair share of books pertaining to parenting or education. Somehow, Group Socialization Theory (GST) escaped my purview.

For someone interested in education and parenting, I place this book at the very top. Perhaps I do that because of how lacking my knowledge was and how pivotal GST is.

The theory outlined in this book explains so many unanswered questions, and it does so in a balanced way. GST isn't made out to be the end all be all of theories, but it is, according to the author, the primary driver in our current modern society of social outcome. You want to know how to narrow the educational achievement gap? Aside from the genetic (which, let's face it, is at least half the problem), GST stands at the center of any solution*. The good news is that you will see problems a bit clearer. The bad news is that there's not exactly easy answers.

I had many questions prior to reading this book; questions I didn't anticipate could be answered so easily nor did I expect this book to answer them. Yet, it did.

This is nothing but a five star book, and don't let anyone fool you into thinking otherwise. That doesn't mean that Harris is correct about everything in the book. There are minor mistakes (minor in the sense of the book, but the mistakes themselves could be huge). Stick to her major thesis. I can tell you flat out that she's wrong about the years 0-5 and the influence a parent can have. She bases her opinion on what the research says, but the research is unable to deliver an understanding of bright spots that defy the norms; bright spots that aren't really scalable and therefore are statistically insignificant. Ignoring this can have a huge detriment to your child from their potential. At least, that's my opinion. On the whole, Harris is absolutely spot on.

I can't recommend this book enough, even though I know the majority of people that read the book may not be able to stomach its message. Just remember, the truth doesn't have an agenda. Only in admitting the truth can you come to a more reasoned and reasonable strategy. For that purpose, this book is a must read for anyone that cares about kids.

* The book doesn't necessarily address "the achievement gap," directly, but it does address it indirectly. Harris gives the reader two alternatives, both are untenable in our society. #1 would be complete segregation by group (she mentions Howard University as an example of a school that produces far superior black intellect than would be expected) #2 complete Balkanization. While I think this would work if it could be done, there aren't enough halcyon neighborhoods or schools to absorb the disadvantaged; there are simply too many disadvantaged. When there are too many of them gathered together, any remedy will be fighting an uphill battle against GST. In isolated cases, such as Marva Collins' Westside Prep or Rafe Equith's Hobart Shakespearians, a new social identity can be forged that will have a lasting influence on the group (ie, throughout the rest of their life). These isolated instances, however, aren't exactly scalable. Due to GST, I can clearly see how and why these classroom anomalies work as well as they do.

Yousif Al Zeera says

This book is amazing. It completely (and breathtakingly) revolutionizes the way you think over parenting. Highly recommended by world renowned scientists like Steven Pinker and Robert Sapolsky.

The book was also a 1999 Pulitzer Prize finalist (general non-fiction).

K says

I wrestled with whether to give this book four stars or five. Despite its length and density, it was one of the most enjoyable reading experiences I've had in a while – stimulating, provocative, highly readable, and actually laugh-out-loud funny at times. Her arguments are too intelligent to be easily dismissed, much to the chagrin of Jewish mothers like myself. However, I decided on four stars because, ultimately, I'm not convinced.

Harris points out that much of the evidence for what she calls “the nurture assumption,” the idea that parents actually have some influence on how their kids turn out, comes from correlational studies. This is a limitation that pervades psychology, because many conditions cannot be controlled, precluding the use of experimental research and the ability to prove causality. In support of her conclusions, however, Harris herself cites many correlational studies and, worse yet, descriptive ones. I cannot blame her for this. As I said, the pervasiveness of correlational research is a limitation no matter what you are trying to prove. But let's be honest about it.

Harris did manage to convince me that the conclusions of socialization researchers on the influence of parenting, particularly when it comes to birth order, are not well-supported. However, does that mean that parenting does not have an effect, or that we are not able to measure that effect properly? What if the problem is that our measurements are not sufficiently sensitive to pick up the effects of parenting?

Parenting and its hypothetical influence are subjective, changeable variables which do not lend themselves to empirical measurement. Although we can try to operationalize certain aspects of parenting and its effects, I think it is presumptuous to say that we can make any kind of conclusion based on such crude indices. I feel that this is particularly true in the absence of statistics that can prove anything other than correlations. Basically, what Harris has demonstrated is that the research supporting the effects of parenting is seriously flawed, both conceptually and empirically. What she has yet to convince me of is that I should therefore assume that parenting has no influence on children.

I have a ton more to say about this book, but goodreads is really not giving me enough room to emote and pontificate the way I want to. I ended up typing up a 6-page review and posting it to Amazon; those who are interested can check it out there. There are two ways to look at this: 1) This was a stimulating and provocative book which inspired a lot of thought for me, or 2) I have no life.
