

Do Parents Matter?

Todd Huffman, M.D. February 2006

In our incessant media world of confusing and often contradictory advice, few are more vulnerable than parents. Across all forms of media, various self-described “parenting experts” contradict each other, and often even themselves. Parents are then left confused and uncertain as to what is considered the “best advice”.

For example, since the late 1990s, a very public debate has raged amongst such “experts” as to whether parents themselves even really matter. It began with the publication of Judith Rich Harris’ controversial book, “The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out The Way They Do, which suggested that if you left children in their home and social milieu and switched their parents, it would matter little which parents they had.

Her controversial thesis is basically that parents have little or no influence on their child’s ultimate personality. How our kids turn out, she argues, is largely a matter of genes and, after that, peers. Harris concluded that personality is shaped by the experiences children have outside the home, and that any similarities between parents and children are due to shared genes and a shared culture.

Her conclusions, while hotly debated, have gained wide acceptance amongst experts in the field of child psychology and parenting. But to many, they defy common sense.

So how much do parents really matter? Parents must matter, mustn’t they? Is what parents do truly nearly irrelevant? How much credit, or blame, should parents really claim for their children’s accomplishments?

As a pediatrician, I function almost solely under the assumption that parents do matter. I hold the belief that when they are given the training and support to be the most effective and nurturing parents they can be, parents matter an awful lot. And while parenting is undoubtedly one of many influences on a child, it is the one we can do the most about.

Experience has shown me that parents have a powerful effect, positive or negative, on the mental health and development of children. Along with parenting style, disciplinary approaches, marital stability, and the presence or absence of substance abuse in the home, parents influence the schools their children attend, the foods they eat, and even the neighborhood they grow up in.

Clearly, bad parenting matters a great deal. Children subject to neglect and abuse, or subject to witnessing domestic violence or substance abuse in the home, have worse outcomes in life than children eagerly welcomed, loved, and nurtured by parents involved in a stable relationship.

While parents do matter, this is not to say that genes and peers don’t. Ms. Harris brings up legitimate points that genetics have a major impact on temperament as well as behavior and personality, and that peers are much more important than parents give them credit for being. Peer pressure indeed is a powerful and daily force in the life of a school-aged child, one that parents have at best modest control over.

While the question of whether parents matter is a good though terribly complicated one, the bottom line is that in a given child’s life, parenting, genes, and peers may hold different degrees of importance. There is not a “number” that can be put on how big an influence parents have on their children. Besides, even if parents only account for a small percentage of how a child turns out, it can still make a large difference over the course of a lifetime.

I feel that it’s not so much what you do as a parent; it’s who you are. It’s not so much whether parents read to children or buy their children a lot of books, but rather whether parents pass on their work ethic and their love of learning and their strength of relationship and their emphasis on good health and nutrition.

Can you make your child be who you want? Of course not. But you do matter. Parents who understand that education doesn't end at age eighteen, and who continue learning and model the joy of learning are more likely to have children who do the same. Parents who work hard at maintaining positive relationships with each other and others, at making compromises and being honest and apologizing openly when mistakes are made, are more likely to have children who do the same.

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