

# Do Parents Matter?

Source: The New Yorker, Malcolm Gladwell

Judith Rich Harris, a textbook writer, had her epiphany about child development on January 20, 1994, while reading a paper about juvenile delinquency, which argued that adolescents participated in delinquent behavior in an attempt to mimic adults. Harris, however, came up with an opposite thesis--that adolescents are more interested in imitating and learning from their peer groups rather than their parents.

This thesis unravels all the conventional wisdom about parents and family and child-rearing; it means that, in some key sense, parents don't much matter. Over the next 6 months, Harris immersed herself in psychological and anthropological research and in late 1994, she wrote an article on her theory which was published by the academic journal "Psychological Review." After the article was published, Harris was

inundated with E-mail, because everyone in the field wanted to know more.

At this point, Harris was suffering from a lupus-like illness, but nevertheless she began a book on her theory, "The Nurture Assumption," which will be published this fall. This week, Harris will travel to San Francisco for the annual convention of the American Psychological Association, where she will receive a prize for her "Psychological Review" article.

Harris's idea that peers matter much more than parents runs counter to nearly everything that a century of psychology and psychotherapy has told us about human development. The writer discusses the Colorado Adoption Project, a University of Colorado study held between 1975 & 1982, which tested and observed 2 groups of 245 parents: one group with adopted children & one with biological children.

They found that when there is no genetic connection to parents there is

no resemblance, which seriously contradicts the "nurture" argument. Harris argues that science has been in the grip of a parent-centered bias known as the "nurture assumption." Research shows that in many cases of a child's personality development, the parents seem to be irrelevant.

Harris also argues that a parent's behavior might be shaped by the personality of her child, and not the other way around, a phenomenon she calls child-to-parent effects. David Reiss, of George Washington University, and Robert Plomin, a behavior geneticist who also headed the Colorado study, have just completed a 10-year, \$9-million study of 720 American families which found that the manner in which parents relate to their children makes no predictable difference in the way those children end up.

Harris uses the story of Cinderella to show that children learn early on that they can reconstruct themselves away from their parents, which is an important limitation on the power of parents. The

writer cites several studies which uphold the theory of the Cinderella effect. Thus, Harris argues, a parent's behavior toward a child affects how the child behaves in the presence of the parent, but it doesn't necessarily affect how a child behaves outside the home.

And, she continues, what our parents do to us is overshadowed, in the long run, by what our peers do to us. The writer describes Harris's perspective on delinquency, which claims that delinquent behavior is more attributable to growing up in a bad neighborhood or without a lot of income rather than anything the parent might do.

The writer describes Harris's friendship with Indiana University sociologist William A. Corsaro, a pioneer in the ethnography of early childhood, who has spent months observing preschoolers and who found that, even at that early age, the children were defining themselves as a group in opposition to their elders. Harris's theories & her interest in child development stem from her problems with her own

children--Nomi, her biological daughter, and Elaine, who is adopted.

Although Harris treated them the same, Nomi was a perfect daughter, while Elaine always got into trouble. This led Harris to the conclusion that parents really can't have a big effect on children. Almost single handedly, Harris has helped wrench psychology away from its single-minded obsession with parenting.

### Discussion Questions

1. Under the circumstances mentioned in the article, Is it really true that parents don't have a significant role in shaping their children's behavior?

2. How powerful or relevant is peer influence on children?

3. I assume most of you are parents. What is your experience with raising children or grandchildren? Were you able to influence them in the way you wanted to?

4. In the Article, it was mentioned that children may act or behave

differently depending on whether they are around their parents or not. What do you think of that?

5. Do you believe culture has a role in all of this?