

Assuming Nothing: Judith Rich Harris on Nature vs. Nurture

Eugene Schwartz

At Michaelmas time seven years ago Judith Rich Harris's book *The Nurture Assumption* appeared amid great publicity and controversy, and then all but disappeared. Neither the controversy nor the rapid fade into obscurity is surprising. Harris questions one of the basic premises of modern child psychology, the seemingly incontrovertible fact that parental influence is the most important element in the life of a child. To bolster her premise, Harris casts aspersions on the findings of hundreds of well-funded research studies undertaken throughout the late twentieth century. Her book appeared at a time when the mapping of the human genome and advances in bioengineering were making the science of genetics front-page news. Harris's arguments provided ammunition to the increasingly vocal ranks of geneticists who asserted that nature, not nurture, determines a child's character and capacities. Harris has, however, no university or research institute affiliation, so her work may be easily dismissed. She works from home, doing her research on the Internet, and her ideas are so original in many respects that they undermine almost all present-day theories about emotional growth and development.

Harris's hypothesis is simple: "Parents matter less than you think and peers matter more." Basing her theories both on the data (rather than the conclusions) of hundreds of child research studies and on her own experience as a parent, Harris points out that two, or three, or more siblings raised in virtually the same way by the same pair of parents may turn out to be profoundly different. Almost all depends on the peer group with which they bond as they grow up. Children, she argues, possess an innate capacity to separate their home life from the life of the street, the classroom, or the school cafeteria. Home influence remains just that—parental influence that stays at home:

Parents belong in the home; when they come out of the home it makes their children nervous. Aside from the embarrassment, it makes it harder for children to know which context they're in, which rules they're supposed to follow. They are not aware of this, of course; context almost always affects behavior at a level that is not normally accessible to the conscious mind. It isn't until adolescence or adulthood that people occasionally become aware of the way their behavior changes in various social contexts. . . .

The youth described by Henry James [earlier in the book] was "demure enough before his parents and teachers" but behaved differently when he was with his friends. He acted the way his parents and teachers had taught him to act, but only in social contexts that included his parents and teachers. It's difficult to teach your dog not to sleep on the sofa when you're not around, because what you are actually teaching him is to stay off the sofa when you are around. When you're not at home, he never gets whacked for jumping up on the sofa.

In Harris's eyes, the old warning that parents have given generations of young people—"You'll be judged by your friends"—takes on new significance. As a modern scientist, however, Harris has no difficulty equating human and animal behavior, and the response of a dog to a situation is assumed to be equivalent to a human response. It could be argued that an animal's behavior is always contextual because it lacks an inner life that could retain the conscious memory of previous responses to previous stimuli. That is to say, the dog lacks the kind of memory that slowly becomes an ingrained "habit of thought," reminding it never to sit on the couch, whether or not the master is home. We hope that a child has a conscience (or is at least developing one), an "inner voice" that acts in *loco parentis* in a host of different contexts.

Nonetheless, many of Harris's examples and arguments are compelling, and they help dispel some of the clouds of guilt that hang over many a modern multi-tasking parent. In one of her most intriguing analogies, she points to the story of Cinderella. In the context of her domestic life, Cinderella is homely and unhappy, her "self-image" having formed in accordance with the demands of her stepmother and wicked stepsisters. In the context of the ball, she takes on a completely different character and appearance—to such a degree that her sisters don't recognize her—and she acts in accordance with completely different expectations. Indeed, many fairy tales are about children who in their parents' eyes are good-for-nothings, yet manage to rise to heroic heights when the setting is right and the expectations are high.

Harris generally takes a passive stance toward what parents can do about the peer group—moving to a "better" neighborhood seems to be her most cogent advice. Further, Harris has almost nothing to say about a teacher's power to help form a peer group in the classroom. This may be because all of the schools studied by the psychologists whom Harris cites are conventional public schools in which teachers have little or no power over—or perhaps little interest in—the social lives of the students. As any contemporary movie about teenagers reveals—and as tragedies such as the Columbine massacre prove—peer groups that are left to form themselves may become, in the words of Hobbes, "nasty, brutish!" But what if a teacher is not only given the mandate to help form a peer group, but given the time, and given the means? In other words, what if the teacher is in a Waldorf school classroom?

I am not sure that many Waldorf school teachers make the most of the "context-creating capacity" with which they are endowed through Steiner's educational methods. Indeed, Waldorf practitioners are probably the teachers most likely to demand that parents do an ever-better job on the home front, even though those same teachers will attest that most children act very differently with their classmates than with their parents. My own experience leads me to believe that Judith Harris's thesis is worth pondering. I have been a Waldorf school teacher for thirty years and have known several "generations" of graduates, from a group of fifteen year olds to a group in their early

forties. As a Waldorf school consultant who has had long-term relationships with a number of schools throughout North America, I have come to know hundreds of other students and their families. The majority of these alumni were raised by caring, upper middle class parents. On one end of the bell-curve there are a number of families who applied "Waldorf methods" at home, and raised their children without any media influences, served them organic food, and made every effort to maintain healthy rhythms and strong family bonds throughout the grade school years. At the other end of the curve there are a few families who seemed to have no connection whatsoever to the school's philosophy, rarely took my earnest advice, had no household rhythms, abused drugs, or suffered from emotional disorders.

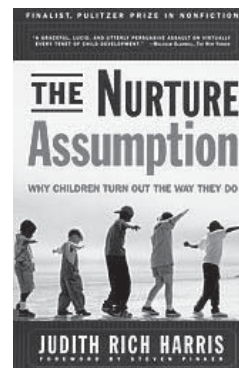
How have all of these students turned out, especially the interesting ones at the ends of the curve? Most of the students from the "dysfunctional" households have turned out very well indeed, finding their way to highly competitive colleges and then to careers in academia or business. On the other hand, a disproportionate number of those raised in the "right" way by families cleaving to Waldorf school methods are still struggling to find their way in life, and some have had severe problems with drugs and crime. Several are college dropouts, and many have wandered from one part of the country to another, still searching for their direction in life. Of course, there are those from druggy homes who are wanderers, and those from Waldorf homes who are successful artists, scientists, and entrepreneurs. If I blend the biographies of the extremes with the many students from middle-of-the-road homes, I have to admit that their parental upbringing and influence have not appeared to matter very much. When asked about what formed them most in their childhood, these alumni always say that it was their Waldorf classmates—their peer group—that made the biggest difference in their lives. Based on such admittedly limited, anecdotal evidence, I would say that Harris is on to something.

With this in mind, we must consider the possibility that we Waldorf school teachers may be overly critical of parents, asking them to perform makeovers of their homes and lives that will have only a negligible effect on their children. My

Waldorf school colleagues often complain, justifiably, about parents who are always on their case, unremittingly criticizing their abilities and classroom performance. Does it ever occur to us that, in much the same way, many parents feel persecuted by the relentless commentary of their child's teacher?

Waldorf educators gladly accept the brain-mind research reported by such Steiner-friendly authors as Jane Healy and Joseph Chilton Pearce, because it corroborates so many Waldorf school practices. Although Rudolf Steiner repeatedly cautions us not to assume the brain's centrality in the activity of thinking, no less than in a host of other organic functions, we are at times so desperate to find some kind of validation in the "real world," that we accept Healy, Pearce, and others without doing the requisite research ourselves. Harris presents Waldorf educators with a more subtle challenge. Are we willing to entertain ideas—based on research more solid and considerably more mainstream than the studies that the brain-mind writers cite—ideas that may support some Waldorf educational principles, but that severely question others? Can Waldorf teachers read a book while maintaining what Keats called "negative capability," or do we only want to study those writers who don't ask us to question any of our assumptions?

Rudolf Steiner tells us that the reign of the Age of the Archangel Gabriel, which extended from the Renaissance to about 1900, was characterized by an intense interest in issues concerning heredity and family life—areas in which Gabriel holds sway. The age of Michael, however, will gradually shift society's interest toward issues involving individuality and community life. For a good part of the twentieth century, mainstream child psychology continued along its Gabrielic trajectory, convinced that the key to human unfolding lay within the bonds of family. Harris's book represents a seismic shift in this regard. Flawed and glib as her book may be, it casts a Michaelic light into the murky obscurantism of child psychology, and may be the precursor of more profound studies to come.



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

Judith Rich Harris
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