

Does It Matter How We Raise Our Children?

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“It’s not our abilities that show who we really are but our choices.”

J.K. Rowling

This is my last monthly article until September. It was written with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein to address important questions that have arisen in the past few years about the influence of parents on their child’s development. We wanted to share our thoughts with you about this provocative topic.

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Recently developed, sophisticated scientific techniques have highlighted the significant impact of genetics on adult personality, adjustment, and cognitive and behavioral patterns. As a consequence, the role of parents in influencing a child’s development has been increasingly questioned by several researchers in the field. Yet, we have based a prominent part of our academic and professional careers upon a guiding principle that is seemingly in contradiction to this research, namely, that parents can exert a major influence on the thinking, feeling, and ultimately behaving of their children that lasts into their adult years. We do not believe this guiding principle is weakened by or in disagreement with these recent research findings.

We have especially described the influence of parents within a framework of resilience. After sixty years of combined clinical practice we have come to realize the fundamental force that qualities of resilience play in children’s lives. This awareness resulted in a major shift in our focus. As we reflect on our years of clinical practice, we recognize that many children suffered because well-intentioned parents and professionals expended more time and energy attempting to fix deficits rather than build assets. We redirected our work guided by an appreciation of how resilience plays an important protective role in children’s lives and adult outcome.

We believe that a resilient mindset, which provides the foundation for one’s ability to cope with and overcome adversity, is not a luxury or a blessing possessed by some children but is an essential component for all children. Based on our review and interpretation of the scientific literature, we continue to advocate the view that while some children are genetically

endowed with greater stress hardiness and capacity for resilience than others, sources of resilience are also found in everyday experiences, in the quality of upbringing, and in the success children experience in important areas of life such as school and friends. We have suggested that a deficit model may be appropriate for identifying how and why children are different and even for prescribing strategies to improve those differences. However, we now believe our highest priority is to improve the future of all children by identifying and harnessing their strengths and by recognizing, accepting, and effectively utilizing what science has to offer in regard to the power of resilience factors on children's lives.

Our professional activities have enabled us to work with countless children and adolescents experiencing a wide range of medical, developmental, emotional, and behavioral problems. Over the years we found ourselves spending more and more time with the parents of these children. Our clinical experience, though not qualifying as a double blind, placebo controlled study, has helped us understand the essential role parents play in the lives of their children. Yet, we would be remiss not to acknowledge the current research that raises questions about the precise influence of parents on their children's development and eventual adult lives. As author Steven Pinker points out in his book, *The Blank Slate*, there appear to be three basic laws of behavioral genetics. First, all human behavioral traits are heritable. These are the proportion of the variance or difference in a trait that correlates with genetic difference. These can be measured in several ways. For example, through family and twin studies we have come to recognize that ADHD is powerfully transmitted through genetics rather than experience. If one identical twin suffers from ADHD, the other nearly always does, even if they are reared apart.

The second law of behavioral genetics suggests that the effect of being raised in the same family is smaller than the effect of genes that one inherits. In this regard we accept the significant impact of genetics on one's thinking, feeling, and behavior. Third, a substantial proportion of the difference in complex human behavioral traits is not accounted for either by the effects of genes or families. Most researchers agree that when the discussion turns towards personality style or patterns of behavior or adjustment, perhaps as much as 50% of the difference

is explained by something other than genes or families. This finding raises the intriguing question of “what is this other 50%?”

In her 1998 book, *The Nurture Assumption*, Judith Harris pointed out that the overwhelming evidence suggests that the extended environment outside of the home, particularly the impact of peers, explained much of the non-genetic differences in human behavioral traits. Though Harris has been lauded and awarded for her work and contribution to the field, she has also been widely criticized. We believe that many professionals have mistaken her hypotheses and conclusions as suggesting that parents matter little in children’s lives.

We interpret Harris’ findings in a different light. Her work need not imply that we give up on parents but rather that we shift our perspective in understanding the role parents play in the daily and ultimately future lives of their children. As Pinker points out, it is not that parents don’t matter; they in fact matter a great deal. It’s that over the long term, parent behavior doesn’t appear to significantly influence children’s intelligence or personality. However, we believe that while the reported 10% or at most 15% of these qualities attributed to parental influence may in a statistical equation represent a small amount, in the daily lives of children they may be the difference in helping a child succeed in school, make friends, or overcome a developmental or behavioral impairment. Parents possess enormous influence in directing the lives of their children. Suggesting that a particular parenting style may play a minimal role in intelligence or personality development does not absolve parents of their responsibility to raise their children in moral, ethical, and humane ways. Research has suggested that the quality of daily parent-child relationships makes a vital difference in children’s behavior and adjustment.

Less debatable is the impact that inappropriate, inhumane, unethical, aggressive, or hurtful patterns of parenting have upon children. We can all agree there is a limitless range of adversities parents can create for their children that may leave lasting scars on children’s personality and cognitive development. Studies of children raised in extreme social isolation with limited human contact reflect the stifling of general development, resulting in these children falling far behind normal developmental progress. Children in these cases rarely, if ever, catch up, even when appropriate care is ultimately provided.

Where do these different perspectives leave us? Some experts find it difficult to accept that parents may not play as influential a role as previously thought in the development of many complex human traits such as intelligence, personality, or certain aspects of behavior. Research indicates that at the very least, parental interactions with their children may be neutral in determining a variety of future adult qualities. At most, parental interactions may contribute a modest but we believe important influence on the outcome of complex behavior, personality, and cognitive functioning. But, perhaps more importantly, the day in and day out patterns of behavior children are exposed to and observe in their parents provide them with a menu or repertoire of behaviors from which they choose as they grow and mature.

With this in mind, it is our hope that we can all agree that we must identify both those parental practices that nurture the skills and stress hardiness necessary for children to deal with an increasingly complex and demanding world as well as those practices that hurt our children. We must find consistent ways of raising our children that will lead them to happiness, success in school, satisfaction in their lives, and solid friendships. To help children realize these goals requires them to develop the inner strength to deal competently and successfully, day after day, with the challenges and demands they encounter. Regardless of ethical, cultural, religious, or scientific beliefs, we must strive to raise resilient youngsters, that is, youngsters capable of dealing effectively with stress and pressure, coping with everyday challenges, possessing the capacity to bounce back from disappointment, adversity or trauma, learning to develop clear and realistic goals to solve problems, relating comfortably with others, and treating oneself and others with respect. Numerous scientific studies of children facing great adversity in their lives support the importance of resilience as a powerful force. The process of resilience explains why some children overcome overwhelming obstacles, sometimes clawing and scraping their way to successful adulthood, while others become victims of their earlier experiences and environments.

In essence, we believe that the concept of resilience offers an ethical and scientifically valid framework for raising children. The tenets housed within this framework possess what are referred to in the scientific field as “face validity.” When we hear about them, they make sense and would seem at first blush to be effective. Also, there is no research to suggest that applying the concepts of resilience is harmful to children. There is, on the other hand, a large body of

research to suggest that at least for children facing significant adversity, these qualities of resilience predict, in part, successful outcome. The process embracing the concepts and methods associated with resilience can be objectively defined. There are increasing data reflecting the reliable measurement of these phenomena and increasing interest in attempting to apply these qualities not just for children at risk but for all children.

We have no argument with science when it is suggested that parents may play less of a role in some areas of their children's development but perhaps more of a role in others. We take no offense when research implies that the influence of parents in shaping intellect, personality, and certain aspects of behavior may be more limited than previously assumed. However, we do question those who interpret this research in ways that minimize the impact that parents can have. We believe that our theories and ideas are in concert with the current research reflecting the role of parents. The new millennium offers unlimited possibilities and unimagined advances. We believe the future lies not in advancements in technology, although these certainly are important, but rather in the actions of parents, teachers, and other adults to instill children with the resilient qualities necessary to help them shape a future marked by satisfaction, confidence, and optimism.

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