

How Important Is Parenting?

In a controversial book published in 1998, Judith Rich Harris made a bold argument. How parents raise children, she maintained, does not have a major effect on children. According to Harris, two other factors have the most impact on a child's personality: genetics and peer relationships. Harris makes her argument in the book *The Nurture Assumption*.

Genes, she says, account for about half of the personality differences among people. For years, scientists believed that the rest of the differences came from the environment provided by parents. The way they raised their children affected how those children turned out.

Studies of adopted children seem to undermine the idea, however. One research project looked at almost 500 children, half raised by their biological parents and half raised by adoptive parents. It found that biological parents and children scored similarly on personality and intelligence tests. The scores of adoptive parents and children were hardly close at all. These findings flew in the face of the accepted wisdom. If parents were so influential, why didn't adoptive children become more like them?

Harris read other studies and felt that she found the answer in peer relationships. Children, she said, are oriented to their friends and schoolmates,

not to their parents. It is these young people whom they imitate and whose behavior they adopt. She points to other studies that suggest how children are oriented toward their peers. One researcher found that as early as preschool, children develop complex sets of rules that other children must meet in order to join in group play or other activities.

Harris's view came under intense criticism. Critics pointed out that Harris is not a professional social scientist and that she conducted no experiments of her own. Some say that she ignored evidence that did not fit her theory. Noted child psychologist Jerome Kagan pointed out that study after study has shown that parents talking and reading to young children has a tremendous impact on children's brains. Such children have strong language skills, get better grades, and tend to get good jobs. These studies alone, Kagan says, are enough to disprove Harris's thesis. Respected pediatrician and author T. Berry Brazelton labeled Harris's argument as "absurd."

Taking Action

Based on what you have read in the text, evaluate Harris's idea. Consider such questions as: to what extent are children shaped by heredity? By environment? What influences in the environment are more important—parents' or peers'? Does that change during childhood?

Educational Options for Teen Parents

When teens become pregnant, finishing school becomes more challenging. As a result, many pregnant teens drop out of school and never finish their education. Teen fathers are also more likely to quit school before graduation. However, all teen parents need to make completing their education a top priority. Those who do not earn a high school diploma often have trouble finding jobs that will allow them to provide for their families.

Teen parents who have the support of their family and community have a better chance of achieving their educational goals. Studies have shown that a single teen mother who continues to live with her parents for the first two years after her baby is born is much more likely to remain in school. As a result, federal laws now require that teen mothers live in a home with adult supervision and attend school regularly in order to receive public assistance. These laws are intended to encourage teen mothers to complete their education.

Lack of affordable child care is the main reason many teen parents do not stay in school. In order to attend classes and have time to complete assignments, they need someone to provide child care. If family or friends cannot help, it may be necessary to get a job to pay for child care expenses. (Single teen mothers are entitled to child support from their baby's father.) In the end, teen parents may feel that they have to choose between a full-time job and full-time enrollment in school.

TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS

Traditional high schools can help teen parents stay in school by providing on-site child care or by linking students to other affordable child care options. Attendance policies that allow teen parents the flexibility they need to get their children to doctors' appointments and to and from child care can also make staying in school easier. Summer programs can help teen parents finish classes that they may not have had time to complete

during the regular school year, or that they may have missed when their child was born.

In many cases, however, completing a traditional high school program is simply not feasible. In these cases, teen parents should be encouraged to pursue other options.

ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

Some school districts and cities have alternative programs that can help teen parents complete their high school education. These programs make it easier for teen parents to attend school and graduate. The programs usually provide child care while the parent is attending school. In many cases, the child care center is nearby so that parents and children can interact throughout the school day and continue the bonding process. Some of these programs create individual learning plans that tailor the program to meet the needs and goals of each student in the most efficient way possible. In addition to the regular high school curriculum, teen parents in these programs are often taught parenting skills. The main disadvantage of such programs is that students may not have access to all of the specialized or advanced courses offered in traditional high schools.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education programs allow students to take courses at home, by mail or through the Internet. These types of programs usually allow students to take courses at their own pace. This can be particularly helpful to teen parents who are working, as well as caring for their child.

The programs may be administered by states or area colleges or universities. One disadvantage of these programs is that they require self-discipline to keep up and complete the program. Some are also expensive.

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THE GENERAL EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DIPLOMA (GED)

If teen parents find that they are not able to earn a high school diploma through any of these programs, another option is to work toward a General Educational Development Diploma (GED). A GED is the equivalent of a high school diploma. In order to receive a GED, a person must pass a test. The test is intended to determine if the person has a level of knowledge that is comparable to what a traditional high school graduate would have.

There are testing sites for the GED all over the United States. Many people take classes to prepare them for the GED test. The GED testing sites often offer these classes or can recommend places that provide the classes.

HIGHER EDUCATION

After earning their high school diploma or GED, teen parents should not assume that further education is not an option. Although higher education is expensive, many forms of financial assistance are

available to those who wish to attend colleges or universities. Advisers at these institutions can help students who have children find the right schedule and course load to help them balance the demands of family, work, and education.

Although it is more difficult for teen parents to complete their education, the obstacles can be overcome. Eventually, their hard work will pay off. As young parents with an education, they are better able to provide for their children and know the feeling of accomplishment that comes from achieving their educational and career goals.

Taking Action

Find out what education options for teen parents are available in your area. Write a summary of what you find. Do you feel that there are enough options? Why or why not?