

Youth Culture Window

Are Parents Obsolete?

Don't Underestimate the Influence of Parenting

An article from Jonathan McKee and David R. Smith at TheSource4YM.com

Last week, the 10th Anniversary edition of Judith Harris' *The Nurture Assumption* hit bookshelves. In this controversial book, she asserts that "parents have no important long-term effects on their children's personalities."

Wow! That's a slap in the face to parents.

Contrast Harris' views with those of Dr. Ross Campbell, M.D., professor of Pediatrics and Psychiatry at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine, and author of the book, *How to Really Love Your Child*. Campbell asserts, "The home wins hands down in every case. The influence of parents far outweighs everything else."

So, who is right?

Call me bold, but Harris' *anti-nurture* book is *sooooo ten years ago*. Most research and articles of recent agree that the influence of a caring parent makes a huge impact. Parental efforts as simple as the good ol' family dinner are making a difference. Surprisingly, kids aren't necessarily pushing away these efforts. Research reveals that 60% of kids actually feel close to their parents, while 67% want to spend time with their parents, and make better decisions when they do. "Young people who spend time with their parents, talk with them and feel close to them, are overwhelmingly less likely to drink (62 percent versus 43 percent) or to use other drugs (87 percent versus 77 percent) than are those who don't."

Determining Factors

Still, Harris doesn't seem to budge on the issue. When she was asked about influences on kids in a recent [interview](#) with TIME, she responded by saying, "The strongest influence on morality is the local culture or subculture."

In my years working with youth, I have definitely seen the power of local culture in the lives of teenagers. (*Why do you think we write this [Youth Culture Window](#) article each week?*) But Harris' assertion seems to convey that parents don't even have a shot.

It's easy to say that media and culture are the biggest influence on morality. In many homes... *they are*. Latchkey kids are raising themselves in empty homes with only Dr. Drew and MTV for parents. Parents only have an impact when they are present in their kids' lives, available to listen, and willing to invest their most precious commodity of all: *time*.

Unfortunately, parents aren't always as "present" as they should be. Maybe that's why Walt Mueller of www.CPYU.org puts the influence of parents third on his list. In his book *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, the noted youth culture researcher, and Christian, lists the top four influences on kids today.

1. Media. ([Duh.](#))
2. Friends. (His term for peers.)

3. Family. (By the way, family topped this list in 1960.)

4. School. (Education.)

Unlike Harris, who seems willing to throw the parents out with the bath water, I think parents can make a substantial difference, but only when they deliberately endeavor to do so. Here's proof.

"Just Say No" Begins with Mom and Dad

The influence of parents, however big or small, is growing. In the latest annual survey from *The Partnership for a Drug Free America*, the number of teens who reported "learning a lot" from their parents about the risks of drug use rose last year from 32% to 37%. This increase represents statistical significance.

Over 6,500 teenagers between 7th and 12th grade participated in the survey. President of *The Partnership*, Steve Pasierb, came to a conclusion that stimulates hope. "Parents are talking, and what you see in the study, particularly among the girls, is the willingness of kids to listen."

Talking is one thing. But what results – if any – are coming from kids' willingness to listen?

Evidently, a lot. "We know from the last 20 years of this study," says Pasierb, "that kids who report learning a lot at home about the drug issue are half as likely to use as kids who don't get that at home."

Half as likely! That's a huge difference.

Contrary to Harris' theory, it seems parents *do* make a difference in their kids' lives.

Navigating Parenthood

If you're a parent and you've seen the hilarious film *Parenthood* starring Steve Martin and Rick Moranis, no doubt you've had thoughts similar to Martin's character, Gil, who constantly worries that his son will live a wrecked life in spite of his best efforts to parent him correctly. But what can youth workers and parents do to affect the lives of teenagers in a world skeptical of parents' influence?

1. **Stick with it.** To be fair, Harris is not advocating that parents simply jump ship, but it may be difficult for some to read her views and not be enticed to throw up their arms in frustration and/or surrender. Granted, parenting isn't easy, and unfortunately, there aren't any guarantees, but we must remember that parenting happens over the long-haul of life. As a youth pastor, it brings me great delight to point out to parents the influence they've had on their kids, even if both parties were initially unaware of it. From values, to politics, to everyday opinions, when I point out the sway parents have had on their kids, a glimmer of hope returns to their eyes.
2. **Give teenagers what they desire most...you!** I guess we can't complain about giving kids what they want, when they want something good. According to the surprising findings of this in-depth [report](#), "spending time with family" brings teenagers the most happiness. (*I explored even more positive ramifications of this report in [this article](#).*) Though I disagree with her thrust, even Harris picks up on how crucial happiness is for this generation. "I believe the most important function

of parents is to give their children a happy home." Happiness for the sake of happiness isn't very helpful in the long run, but happiness that stems from parents making an intentional investment in their children is priceless.

- 3. Refer to the owner's manual...often.** Contrary to the popular joke that says "kids don't come with an owner's manual," they actually do. As parents, we just need to remember who the real Owner of our kids is. In several places, the Bible makes mention of parenting tactics. One of the most impacting is Ephesians 6:4, "*Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*" The more we expose our children to His training and instruction, the better our chances are of not only having an impact on our kids, but helping them live godly lives, as well.

In her interview, Harris closes by saying parents "are convinced that they are playing an essential role in their child's life. Perhaps their children will look back at these efforts with amusement someday."

Indeed, *some* parents have lost the place of loudest and most influential voice on their children's lives. But parents who commit to having the most consistent voice will have children who look on their parents' efforts, not with amusement, but with gratitude.