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Have you heard? It's in the genes

Steven Pinker tells Tim Radford - even your kids' friends have more influence than you do

Tim Radford

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It's tough being a parent: you try your best and the kids grow up in spite of you, according to Steven Pinker, evolutionary psychologist and researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Time and again, he says, the most exhaustive attempts by researchers to document the role of parents has failed to find any significant influence. For example, identical twins reared together were no more similar than identical twins reared apart.

"When you think about it, that is quite a shock. People confuse that with the finding that identical twins separated at birth are similar at all," he says. "Finding number two: adopted siblings growing up together don't end up similar at all, in intelligence, personality, or in life outcomes like divorce or criminal behaviour. Those are two shocks, because they are very inclusive measures of everything that a child experiences at home, whether the parents are nice or nasty, spank you or don't, whether you have TV sets or books."

Birth order, despite common belief, has no effect on personality. "I used to believe it," he says. "I now believe I was wrong." Experiences that might be thought to have a huge effect on behaviour - being raised by two lesbians, growing up in a hippy commune rather than a conventional marriage - had very little effect.

Professor Pinker is the author of *The Blank Slate*, an attempt to analyse the role of inheritance in normal human behaviour that has provoked other researchers - notably Oliver James - into furious responses. Pinker argues that children are what they are, rather than what their parents might want them to be. Music lessons when young may make children grow into better musicians. But no amount of parental pressure can make an extrovert out of an introvert.

Children, however, can have a more discernible influence on each other. "Kids acquire the language and accent of their peers, not of their parents. The children of immigrants do fine even if their parents never assimilate, as long as they are exposed to a peer group. Contrary to popular opinion, there is no difference between only children and kids with lots of siblings," he says. "It's not all in the genes, nowhere near all in the genes. A huge amount of variation is not genetic. But try as you might, you cannot pin it to the family either."

But could variation come from the way parents might treat one child differently from another? "You try to measure those differences, and it turns out that, yes, parents treat kids differently because kids are different to begin with. The additional effect of treating a child differently, above and beyond what he is already born with, also doesn't seem to have an effect," he says. "The environment is enormously important, but the parents may not be the most important part of that environment in the shaping of personality and intelligence."

The first reaction of everyone to such evidence was, he says, remarkable. "'So you are saying it doesn't matter how I treat my children?' Of course, it matters. Because parents have an enormous influence on the child's

happiness and wellbeing. They may not turn them into one kind of person, but they can make their children very miserable. And no, it is not all right for a big, strong person to abuse a small helpless person for whom they are responsible."

Think of it this way, he says: you are not surprised to learn that you cannot change the personality of your spouse. "But you wouldn't respond by saying that it doesn't matter how I treat my spouse? Of course it matters how you treat your spouse. How you treat your spouse affects the quality of your relationship," he says. "If you are not nice to your children, they will remember that when they grow up. So there are lots of reasons that parents should be loving.

"But I think we have so distorted our conception of parenting as a kind of moulding of raw material that we forgot the human side. That is why you get what I think of as a shocking reaction, that as soon as parents find out they cannot micro-manage their children's personalities, they think: 'Oh, I can do whatever I want: I can beat them, I can abuse them, I can neglect them.'"

- To order a copy of Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*, for £22 plus p&p (rrp £25), call the Guardian book service on 0870 066 7979. Published by Allen Lane.

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