

# A reaction to sharon begley's the parent trap



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Sharon Begley starts her article "The Parent Trap" by naming several common "nurture assumptions" that most educated people have come to take for granted, such as "reading and talking to children fosters a love of reading," and "physical abuse makes them aggressive." She then introduces Judith Rich Harris in a quick overview of her life and work, and points out that Harris' personal experiences support Harris' idea that the nurture assumption is wrong.

It is clear that Begley does not agree with Harris, but instead of directly dismissing Harris' work, Begley's main message is to keep an open mind, which effectively warns readers against the faults in Harris' work. Like the theory of evolution, for which there is a very large body of evidence but no outright "proof," the nurture assumption is an "assumption" founded on strong evidence and backed by many studies. There is simply too much evidence to dismiss the nurture assumption as Harris does.

This is what Begley successfully reveals in her article. Early in her article, Begley is able to quickly destroy Harris' credibility by simply pointing out that Harris "has no academic affiliation and no Ph. D.," and that she "was thrown out of Harvard because her professors believed she showed no ability to do important original research." Begley then points to Harris' argument that parents play absolutely no part in how a child turns out (meaning they don't "leave a lasting effect" on what kind of an adult someone becomes).

Although Harris recognizes that the way parents rear their children does have an effect on how children behave at home or how parent-child relationships develop, she believes that this isn't enough to affect the child's

behavior in the long term and into adulthood. While some of Harris's arguments provide food for thought, her selectivity regarding which studies to take into account makes the objectivity of her study suspect. There are studies from many of leading scholars that run contrary to Harris's thesis.

These studies also shatter Harris's assumption that behavior is determined (for the most part) by genes. However, as Begley points out, Harris largely ignored these studies. The scrutiny surrounding Harris's methodology does hold weight. The very backbone of Harris' study refers to very small sampling sizes and the results of questionnaires (which, Begley rightly points out, are notoriously unreliable in reflecting reality). If the nurture assumption is an " assumption", then Harris' thesis is a " super assumption", in the sense that it is an extreme position backed by much less evidence.

I agree with Begley's implication that Harris's study is one that was tailor-made to support an already pre-conceived conclusion. Any scientist or researcher who is overzealous or who is motivated to get certain results is at a danger of consciously or subconsciously distorting the facts or designing a study to conform to their expectations. In her conclusion, Begley cleverly uses Harris' own contention to encourage a critical attitude towards Harris' work.

Begley cites Harris as bemoaning the " tendency to carry things to extremes, to push ideas beyond their logical limits," and Begley adds that " everyone who cares about children can only hope that readers bring the same skepticism. " It is clear from Begley's " The Parent Trap" that she has little regard for Harris' book. Begley's overall message is that " The Nurture

Assumption" should be taken with a large grain of salt, and this is probably the best way of approaching Harris' work.