



You have downloaded a document from
RE-BUŚ
repository of the University of Silesia in Katowice

Title: Parents or peers - controversy over the dominant role in child nurture and development

Author: Grażyna Mendecka

Citation style: Mendecka Grażyna. (2010). Parents or peers - controversy over the dominant role in child nurture and development. "The New Educational Review" (Vol. 22, no. 3/4 (2010) s. 365-377).



Uznanie autorstwa - Użycie niekomercyjne - Licencja ta pozwala na kopiowanie, zmienianie, remiksowanie, rozprowadzanie, przedstawienie i wykonywanie utworu jedynie w celach niekomercyjnych. Warunek ten nie obejmuje jednak utworów zależnych (mogą zostać objęte inną licencją).



UNIwersYTET ŚLĄSKI
W KATOWICACH



Biblioteka
Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



Ministerstwo Nauki
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

Grażyna Mendecka
Poland

Parents or Peers – Controversy over the Dominant Role in Child Nurture and Development

Abstract

The article deals with the answer to the question: “Who plays a more important role in nurture: parents or peers?” From discussion it results that both are important and that they are complementary to each other.

Key words: *parents, peers, child nurture and development.*

Introduction

According to psychological theories and social beliefs parents play an important or even indispensable role in man's life. In psychology any person who is of great importance to the individual's life, marking profoundly their development, is called significant other. Among such persons parents hold a special position, which results from a number of factors.

In human life, parents are the first people an infant makes contact with. Without parental care a baby would be unable to survive and it is natural that children are recipients of an unconditional love. Parents initiate their child into the world of language and culture. Owing to everyday contact between parents and the child, their intimacy and common set of genes it is easier for them to become syntonic. As a result of such emotional proximity and kinship the impact of parents on their child's life lasts for many years and persists even after their death, when the child decides to stick to the ideas and behaviours inherited from their parents.

Before man is born his development takes place in the mother's womb. The mother's body does not reject the baby, even though it is foreign for her immu-

nological system. On the contrary, both organisms cooperate benignly, keeping the rapidly developing human foetus alive (cf.: Flanagan 1973, Kornas-Biela 1992, 2000). From the very moment of conception the attachment and interaction are inherent in human life.

The theory of attachment was developed by Bowlby (1969, 1971) in search for the reasons for emotional disorders in infants deprived of their mother by force of major events (such as hospitalization, abandoning or death). Bowlby put forward a hypothesis that each man has an innate tendency to create strong emotional bonds with other people called *attachment*. Such attachment is, at a certain period of life, indispensable for proper psychological development of the individual. It derives from human nature, which is interactive, and from the need to socialize.

A baby develops in their mother's womb, so the first form of attachment is the mother-child dyad. The bond between the mother and the child evolves and can be divided into three stages:

- Incorporation (child in mother's womb)
- Dependence (on birth)
- Attachment (child feels emotionally bound with mother).

A small child tends to remain physically close to their mother, which results from the safety need. When children start to be able to move around they stay close to their mother, protest when she goes away, stick to her when they feel insecure and treat their mother as an attachment figure – as a safe starting point to explore the environment (Bowlby, 1969). The cognitive structures which make such attachment possible, as well as the proper functioning of the child in their life are *internal working models* (Bowlby, 1971). These models can be interpreted as “general perception of what the nature of reality is” (in: Kořta & Doliński, 2000, p. 567).

Working models constitute central personality components, which organise thinking, affections and behaviour according to the experience of attachment (Bowlby, 1973). The working models consist of the following mental representations:

- Working model of the person the individual is attached to
- Working model of self
- Working model of the relations between self and attachment figure.

Those working models are acquired through interpersonal interaction patterns between attached persons. Once these models are constructed, they are omnipresent in the child's experiences which are filtered through them. The interpretation of current events and anticipation of the events to come is dependent on the internal models conceived by the individual. Up-to-date research and contemporary

theories show that an infant may attach not only to their mother but also to other caretakers.

Thus, the relationship with other people is generalized from the relationship with a caretaker in early childhood. If the child experiences a hostile relationship with a caretaker, they will expect hostility from other people, in neutral environment. Perceiving people as not trustworthy the child will avoid them.

The attachment theory and further research have demonstrated that parental influence on child development is far-reaching. **The separation anxiety disorder of childhood** is a dramatic argument showing the importance of mother in the child's life. Two different psychological theories – psychoanalysis and behaviourism argue that early-childhood experiences gathered in interactions of children with their parents are of key importance for shaping personality and influence the functioning of the individual in adult life. Freud held parents responsible for traumas suffered in childhood, which remain in the subconscious and are at the origin of anxiety and other difficulties of the adulthood. J. Watson expressed the view, from the standpoint of behaviourists, that using reinforcements from the very first days of human life: rewards and punishments, parents influence the child's behaviour in a significant way.

Judith Rich Harris in her book entitled “The Nurture Assumption. Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do” questions all of the above psychological theories, claiming she wants to put an end to the myth of parental nurture. According to Harris, these are not parents, but peers that play a decisive role in the nurturing process. Harris received the American Psychological Association's George A. Miller Award for an Outstanding Recent Article in General Psychology. The Polish publisher, Jacek Santorski, asks the readers to approach the book with courage and open-mindedness. It is worthwhile to face her challenging assumption and find a proper place both for parents and peers in the nurturing process, which constitutes an important factor in the development of the individual.

Family system as the context of nurture

Life span psychology is a contemporary stream of developmental psychology, which strongly emphasizes the fact that developmental changes take place throughout life. Taking this into account we must insist on the fact that in the interaction between parents and the child both sides are constantly developing. This fact needs to be considered in analysing the way parents influence their children in nurture.

Explaining this influence is particularly important for a systemic approach towards family. Such an approach views family not as a group consisting of individuals, but as a system of relations between those individuals (Tyszkowa, 1990). Family is a network of mutual relations between interdependent individuals, which results in constant development of all the family members. Each activity of the individual provokes a reaction in the other family members, who constitute a benchmark for each other, a transmitter of behavioural patterns and activity models (Tyszkowa, 1996). That is why not only parents influence their child's behaviour, but also the child provokes a specific behaviour in their parents and sometimes also transmits behavioural patterns to them.

The analysis of the role of family environment in individual development should take into account two aspects of parental influence on the child: delay and developmental nature of parental patterns (Harwas-Napierała, 1995). The delay makes it possible for children to benefit from the experience gathered by their parents during childhood and adolescence. Every child is one generation younger than their parents, which is on average 25 years. Such an important age difference does not prevent the child from being familiar with information on the way their parents lived: what their problems were when they were children and in what way those problems were solved at the time. Children enjoy such stories and ask parents or grandparents to tell them again and again, as it allows them to become familiar with the facts of parents' life. This enriches children's experience with their parents' experience, which may be similar or completely different, and in such a way gives them a deeper insight into social relations.

The delay also has an impact on parents in their adulthood. Having children is not only a new experience, but it also triggers the necessity to view one's own childhood from a new perspective (Birch, 1992). As they watch the children, parents compare their behaviour with their own reactions at the time, recall their own experiences, recall and judge the behaviour of their own parents in similar situations. These memories shape their own parental behaviour.

The developmental nature of parental patterns means that the child, watching their parent who is older than themselves in different periods of their life, has an opportunity to watch closely how they cope with developmental tasks of an early, middle and late adulthood. Parents show their children what it means to be a mother or a father, what attitude one should have towards work and duties, how to support each other in case of an illness or a failure, how to become a grandmother or a grandfather, how to cope with an illness, taking retirement, death. Different behavioural patterns during life span are learnt at different moments of life, as we make friends at school, university, army or at work. It has been calculated

that parental patterns remain active for 50 years on average (Harwas – Napierała, 1995).

This influence is also exceptional because personality patterns seen in parents are of very intimate character. In family environment parents are relaxed and behave spontaneously, taking off the mask of official behaviour and they show the most deeply hidden emotions. Repetitive behaviour in everyday common situations at home becomes more or less consciously incorporated by children into the set of their long-term behaviour patterns.

The overtness of parental behaviour is possible in a family which constitutes a coherent, well-functioning system with an appropriate communication system. If a family system encounters serious communicational difficulties and functions in a chaotic manner, parental patterns tend to be rejected. In such a case an adolescent seeks behavioural patterns outside family.

Focusing on the parental influence, psychologists and social scientists very often fail to notice and emphasize that the transmission of behavioural patterns is of mutual nature. Mother and father make it possible for their children from the very first days of their lives to make contact with their language and culture, they teach their children how to function in a given civilization. Parents familiarize their children with their tradition and culture and as a result the children become anchored to it, become its guardians and transmitters. Parents are anchored in the past, which makes their children feel safe, stable and well-ordered.

By confronting the child's own behaviour forms, as conditioned by parents, with a peer group children realize which of them are anachronistic and not compatible with the contemporary world. Negotiating with their parents, children provoke changes in their behaviour. As a result, little by little, children start to guide their parents in the rapidly changing contemporary world. Children teach their parents a new language, modern behaviour, encourage them to use technical novelties and to change their lifestyle into one better adapted to future challenges. This is a very important role, which offers parents an opportunity to develop under the influence of their own children.

Thus, not only children need parents, who by exerting a long-term influence allow them to be better prepared for their own life, but also children play a comparable role for their parents. Two related intergenerational courses of development, mutually optimizing, making it possible for the young generation to be anchored in tradition and for the older generation to face future challenges. Such a bilateral process of intergenerational exchange is more efficient when it involves individuals of similar genetic outfit. Such dynamic changes come about in any family system, be it efficient or not.

Peer group as nurturing environment in the perspective of J. Harris

Man is social by nature and conscious of belonging to a social group. Starting from infancy, children feel best in the company of other children. When they see an adult it does not arouse such interest and joy as when they see another child. Toddlers like playing by themselves, they are unable to cooperate, but still they prefer to play when other children are around, rather than being entertained by adults.

People naturally divide into groups of people similar to each other and the sole fact of belonging to a group makes one's own group more attractive than other groups. In this way people divide themselves into "us" and "them," i.e., groups of people showing certain similarities. J. Harris notes that even infants under the age of one are able to divide people into groups according to their age and sex. Six-month-old babies start to be able to make a distinction between people they know and strangers of whom they are afraid. However, fear is provoked only by adults, not by children they do not know. Thus, already infants accept a group of children as their own, unlike a group of adults, which appears as unfamiliar, as "them".

On this basis Judith Harris concluded that children are mostly influenced by their peers and not by adults, who belong to a different group, to the group of adults. The essence of nurture is socialization and the parental dyad is too weak to carry out the socialization process. Peer groups are strong enough to do that and that is why only they can socialize and in consequence to nurture efficiently. Most children aspire to behave in the same way as their peers and not like adults, which is poorly judged and for which they are punished (Harris, p. 158). A peer group has a number of penalties at its disposal, which are used to enforce without mercy the rules applied by the group. Laughter, copying, ignoring, giving a low-profile role in the group or expelling from the group are severe sanctions imposed on those who break the group rules. Children's groups operate by the majority rule – anyone who is different has to change (p. 158). This is how the members of a group assimilate by eradicating differences.

Taking this into account Judith Harris argues that the socialization of the young generation takes place not in the family environment, but most importantly in the peer group. She provides a number of arguments to support this assumption. Children do not belong to their parents, but to the future, which is better understood by their peers (p. 329). Socialization is not done to children, but it is something that children do to themselves because they want to belong to a certain group. Children want to be like their peers (p. 158). S. Asch demonstrated in an experiment that children under 10 are most prone to group pressure. Peer pressure

is the most merciless during childhood (p. 268). Even if a group rejects the child, it does not prevent the child from identifying with the group (p. 159).

J. Harris calls into question the rule stemming from Bowlby's attachment theory that the behaviour shaped in the family environment is transferred to other environments. J. Harris quotes the research by M. Lamb and A. Nash (1989) demonstrating that the attachment relationship with mother, as well as the mother-child attachment pattern do not determine the quality of social competence with peers. According to D. Detterman (1993), a learning theorist, there is no evidence that people transfer what they learned in one situation to another one. A number of research studies confirm this fact. Swedish studies (Rydell, Dahl and Sundelin, 1995) on picky eaters demonstrated that only 8% of the children examined showed problems both at home and at school, while 30% of the children were picky either at home or at school, without transfer of this behaviour to the other environment. Studies by Fagot (1995) and Goldsmith (1996) showed that children's behaviour at home is different from that at day nursery. Zimmerman and McDonald (1995) reported that infants of depressed mothers show serious, still faces only in the interactions with their mothers and not in other contexts. G. Fein and M. Fryer (1995) concluded that a child playing sophisticated roles with their mothers does not do so when playing alone or with a playmate.

The statement by William James that man "has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares" (p. 53) means that man's behaviour changes in different social contexts. Children learn how to behave in different social situations and they do not transfer behaviour patterns from one context to another. That is why parents' favourite child will not be accepted by their classmates.

J. Harris makes reference to traditional societies to demonstrate that parents are not indispensable to raise children. Research carried out among others by I. Eibel-Eibesfeldt (1995) in African tribes demonstrated that children spend only the first years of their lives with their parents, mostly with mothers. As soon as they learn to walk they join children play groups. Older children, who feel responsible for the younger ones teach them everything – the language, local customs, proper forms of behaviour and how to play. Younger children are teased, ridiculed and harassed by the older ones, who are impatient, so the younger want to become like the older ones as soon as possible. In such circumstances children learn fast and their personality develops rapidly. "In some sense they stop being their parent's children and become the community's. Any adult in these societies can admonish a child if he or she sees the child doing something wrong" (p. 150).

Also in Europe similar cases happen: during the Second World War a group of

children became a kind of substitute family for its members. J. Harris quotes a story, reported by Anna Freud, of six children who had survived a Nazi concentration camp. The children lost their parents soon after they had been born and were cared for by different camp prisoners, none of whom survived. In their life there was only one scrap of stability, which made their life in this horrible chaos better: the fact that they remained together at all times. Three boys and three girls between three and four years of age were, after liberation of the concentration camp, brought to a nursery in England, where Anna Freud studied their behaviour.

In the new environment the children acted like little savages. During the first days they destroyed all the toys and damaged much of the furniture. Their attitude towards adults was hostile – when approached they would hit, spit and use bad language. However, their relations with each other within the group were completely different. They became upset when separated from each other, even for short moments. In their attitude towards each other there was no jealousy, rivalry or competition. At mealtimes they would “take turns” and were eager that everybody should have their share. They were not envious of each other’s possessions, on the contrary, lending them to each other with pleasure. On walks they were concerned about each other’s safety in traffic.

Thus, it turned out that a mother cannot replace peers to her child, while other children may, in some circumstances, replace mother. A peer group plays a very important role in the case of immigrants, where peers socialize the child for living in the new environment. While the origins of adults remain evident until the end of their lives, because of their accent, poor vocabulary and strange behaviour, the children of immigrants are in no way different from their peers as regards their expression and behaviour. If socialization, like J. Harris says, does not mean something that is done to children, but something that children do to themselves, it should be added that they do it by using the patterns available to them. That is why small children want to be like their mum and dad, and older children want to be like their peers. This is because contacts with other children, particularly with peers, are so important, the children of immigrants accept the culture and language of their peers, which very often goes together with rejection of parents’ lifestyle, who attempt to preserve the customs and language of their home country.

Parents – peers – mutual impact

It is worth mentioning that the opportunity to be around a peer group constitutes a civilization achievement and is connected with the introduction of compulsory

education for children of all citizens. This gave children the opportunity – which earlier had been impossible – to grow up and perform developmental tasks together with their own cohort, i.e., a peer group. Spending time with one's peers offers unique opportunities of: alternating interactions, sharing leadership and playing different roles, managing aggression and violence. One child is running, another one is chasing, one is hiding another one is seeking. They can alternate, because they are of the same age and they can change roles easily – they are partners of equal status. J. Piaget remarked that children cease to think in an egocentric way when, during interactions with peers, they get to know different perspectives from which other people view a situation. Attending a class with peers makes children more empathic.

The relationship between peers is different for instance from the relationship between siblings, where one child is older and another one is younger and where, apart from the mutual relationship, other complementary aspects are at stake: the younger one receives support, the older one dominates, but also takes care of the younger one. Even in the case of twins one child (the one born first) dominates.

Taking age into account, which is connected with life experience, human relations can be divided into vertical and horizontal ones (Schaffer, 2006). The vertical ones refer to asymmetric relation, when one party to the interaction has an advantage over the other due to age, life experience, role played, power structure, influence exerted, etc. Such a relationship exists between children and adults, who dominate because of their superior status. The vertical relationship is most often of complementary nature: the child needs help or safety, which is provided by adults. The child needs also to be directed and to be taught, which adult, especially teachers educated for that purpose, can provide them with.

The vertical relationship does not provoke objection in children who are subordinate to adults. On the contrary, as noted by A. Maslow when developing his hierarchy of needs, children need subordination, as it makes them feel safe. L. Vygotski insisted on another aspect of adult domination over children – by giving children tasks ahead of their current competences, adults show the children their zone of proximal development, without which their development would be much slower. Thus, the vertical relationship plays a significant role and is important for development and nurture.

The horizontal relationship is of egalitarian nature and it involves people of the same social position, most of all peers. As a matter of fact, there are abilities one may acquire only from one's equals. Such abilities include mainly cooperation and competition, but also solidarity and loyalty. Such experience is gained only in relationship with peers. It is also provided by subcultures, which also teach how

to cooperate, act together with loyalty and solidarity. They are complementary to the competences achieved in the vertical relationship and they would be hard to achieve in another relationship. A description of these two kinds of relationship is impossible without mentioning their cultural background. One of them dominates in society, while the other one is widespread in the individual one.

In contemporary Western culture the time the individual spends with a peer group becomes longer and longer. In many countries nursery school has become obligatory for small children and the years spent at school are ever longer, which gives the individual an opportunity to spend more time with peers, which has an impact on socialization by this social group.

It is worthwhile to mention, in the context of the impact peers have on the child's development, that to a large extent children still depend on parents, who play the role of "managers" in their children's social life (Schaffer, 2006). Parents choose where the family lives and which school the child attends. This is parents' choice whether the child graduates in home country or abroad.

Early in children's life parents regulate their social contacts. Overprotective or possessive parents very often isolate their children, not allowing them to play with other children at the playground, in the neighbourhood or even they forbid their children to see friends from school and do not tolerate the presence of children's friends at their house.

Some parents decide who their children can make friends with and with whom they dare not have contact, they are judgmental about what children say to their friends or how they play with their peers. Such parents feel obliged to manage their children's social contacts by monitoring them and demanding a certain kind of interactions only. Such a parental behaviour results in the child's difficulty to make spontaneous social contacts with peers and prevents the possibility of gaining a number of competences they could learn in such contacts. So, before peers start to influence the child, they must deal with parental attitudes, which may favour or inhibit such contacts.

Attending school enables the child to make contacts with peers, even if parental attitude prevents such contacts. It does not mean, however, that at school children make contact with a culture that is completely different from their culture at home. Apart from some exceptions, all children raised in families sharing common culture have similar behavioural patterns, which are shown in the group and which are judged by the group. Most common patterns are immediately accepted by the majority rule. What is common becomes popular. Rare patterns have weaker chances of being preserved by the group and only the ones that are very attractive are not rejected. All original, surprising or weird patterns are ridiculed, condemned

and “invalidated” and the child will try to reject them. In such a way children create a culture of their own, but its starting point always consists of family patterns.

J. Harris emphasizes (p. 159) that even children expelled from a group, who remain at its margin, are influenced by the group and attempt to be similar to its members. A child whose behavioural patterns learned at home are not popular in the group will try to negotiate with parents that they change their ways. In this manner, whether they like it or not, parents also adjust little by little to the lifestyle accepted by their child’s peer group. Such a change in the way the parental role is performed contributes to the development of parents, also by understanding that their parental power has its limits.

Conclusion

In her book, Judith Harris presents a number of arguments which she strongly believes are sufficient to abolish the nurture assumption and to show that peers are responsible for the socialization of the child. This however means replacing one myth with another – that of parental socialization with the peer one. Harris is mistaken in claiming that emphasizing the peer role she automatically diminishes parental impact, while both roles are of equal importance and of complementary nature. One cannot compensate fully for the lack of the other.

The system of interactions creating the family environment has certain boundaries separating it from the rest of society. This boundary makes family a separate, intimate subsystem within the general social system. However, this does not mean that family is isolated from the rest of society. It is exceptional, as being clearly distinctive, it is at the same time open to social influence. This fact should make it clear that mutuality of relationship refers not only to family members, but also to the socialization between family and society in general. Keeping this in mind, we can understand that neither parents nor peers (whose impact is strong in a long-term perspective because contacts at school last many years) are dominant in children’s development and nurture. Both environments are mutually dependent and interconnected, performing complementary functions. Judging either of the two as less important would constitute a serious material mistake. Therefore, the answer to the question: “Who plays a more important role in nurture: parents or peers?” is that both are important and that they are complementary to each other.

Bibliography

- Bowlby, J. (1969). Attachment and loss. (t.I). *Attachment*. New York: Basic Books
- Bowlby, J. (1971). Attachment. Harmondsworth: PenguinBooks
- Bowlby, J. (1973). Attachment and loss (t II). *Separation. Anxiety and anger*. New York: Basic Book
- Detterman, D.K. (1993). The case for prosecution: transfer as an epiphenomenon. W: D.K. Detterman, R.J. Sternberg (red). *Transfer on trial: Intelligence, cognition, and instruction*, 1–24. Norwood NJ: Ablex
- Eibl-Eisbesfeldt, I (1995). The evolution of familiarity and its consequences. *Futura* 4, 253–264
- Fein, G.G., Fryer, M.G. (1995). Maternal contributions to early symbolic play competence. *Developmental Review*, 15 , 367–381
- Fagot, B.L. (1995). Classification of problem behaviors in young children: A comparison of four systems. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 16, 95–106
- Harris, J.R. (1998). Geny czy wychowanie ? Co wyrośnie z naszych dzieci i dlaczego. Warszawa: Jacek Santorski & CO
- Harwas-Napierała, B. (1995). Rodzina jako kontekst rozwojowy jednostki. In J. Trempała (red.), *Rozwijający się człowiek w zmieniającym się świecie. Materiały IV Ogólnopolskiej Konferencji Psychologów Rozwojowych* (303–316). Bydgoszcz: WSP.
- Lamb, M.E. , Nash, A (1989). Infant-mother attachment, sociability, and peer competence. In T.J. Berndt, G.W. Ladd (eds). *Peer relationship in child development*, 219–245, New York: Wiley
- Kornas-Biela, D (1992). Problemy psychologii prenatalnej. In A. Biela, C. Walesa (eds) *Problemy współczesnej psychologii*, vol. 1, 237–311, Lublin: PTP, Oddział w Lublinie.
- Kornas-Biela, D. (2000). Okres prenatalny. In B. Harwas-Napierała, J. Trempała (eds). *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka*, vol. 2 , 17–44. Warszawa: PWN.
- Rydell, A.M. , Dahlm., Sundelin, C. (1995). Characteristics of school children who are choosy eaters. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 156, 217–229
- Schaffer H.R. (2006). *Rozwój społeczny dzieciństwo i młodość*. Kraków: WUJ
- Tyszkowa, M. (1990). Rodzina, doświadczenie i rozwój jednostki. Paradygmat teoretycznych badań. In M. Tyszkowa (ed.), *Rodzina a rozwój jednostki*. Nakładem Centralnego Programu Badań Podstawowych CPBP 09.02.

- Tyszkowa, M. (1996). Jednostka a rodzina: interakcje, stosunki, rozwój. In M. Przetacznik-Gierowska, M. Tyszkowa (red.), *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka, vol. 1* (124–150). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Zimmerman, L., McDonald, L. (1995). Emotional availability in infants' relationship with multiple caregivers. *American Journal of Orthopsychitry*, 65, 147–152.