

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## What do we know about children?

The education of our children is rightly considered a vital concern.

But just what do we know about raising them?

Earlier this year, the *New York Times* reported the death of Judith Rich Harris, a psychologist who challenged conventional wisdom about how children develop,



Judith Rich Harris

Genes account for about half of an adolescent's personality, but parents are the next most powerful influence, according to decades of accepted wisdom.

But Harris argued in a 1998 book called "The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do," that peers, not parents, are by far the most important influence in children's lives.

"This book has two purposes: first, to dissuade you of the notion that a child's personality – what used to be called 'character' – is shaped or modified by the child's parents; and second, to give you an alternative view of how the child's personality is shaped."

Harris, who had a master's degree in psychology from Harvard and wrote college textbooks on child development, had a wide knowledge of academic literature on adolescence behavior.

While researching one day, she had an epiphany that adolescents are not trying to be like adults, but are trying to *distinguish* themselves from adults.

Parents may influence how their child behaves with them at home, and the kind of relationship they will have when the child grows up, but will not influence how a child relates with the outside world. That is over-

whelmingly influenced by the child's social group.

If parents are so important, Harris wrote, why would we see the following?

The children of immigrants sound like their friends, not their parents.

The children of deaf parents can speak perfectly normally.

Adopted children do not share their adoptive parents' intelligence, interests or personality.

"The idea that we can make our children turn out any way we want is an illusion," she wrote. "You can neither perfect them nor ruin them."



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton

Harris's ideas left mainstream academia agog, but many highly regarded psychologists agreed with her findings, and she was given a prestigious award from the American Psychological Association.

The book caused a national sensation and became a best-seller.

Is Harris right or wrong? As one reviewer wrote, "her major contribution is her demonstration that there is no research support for any theory suggesting that any type of parenting is a cause of any aspect of the child's adult personality."

But, the reviewer added, there is no scientific evidence on the influence of peers, either.

Beyond heredity, we really don't know what affects the rest of an adult's personality.

When we constantly fret about public education, and academics, and counseling, and the endless revision of curriculum and teaching techniques, it's impossible to say how it impacts any particular child. We just don't know.

*Tom Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the views expressed are his alone and not the board's.*



**JUDITH HARRIS'S book on the effects of parenting on children's adult personalities caused a sensation in 1998.**