Over the past decade, a growing number of scholarly voices in North America have suggested that parents don’t matter much in children’s lives. I asked my 17-year-old son what he thought about this notion. He quickly replied, “That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. How are kids suppose to learn how to get along in life without instruction from their parents?” I agree and view the perspective that parents don’t matter as a serious threat to children’s well-being. Parents and societies that buy into this thinking will be more likely to abdicate important responsibilities that are vital to fostering healthy development in children.

Since erroneous conclusions about parenting and family life have recently been published in leading scholarly outlets, I’ll present some facts that combat the myth that parents don’t matter. This myth calls into question time-tested values and views that good parenting and natural family structures are important for children’s development. I believe that holding onto the idea that parents do matter is vital to the well-being of individuals and nations throughout the world, which is in sharp contrast to these four mistaken views:

1. Married heterosexual parents (mothers and fathers) are not essential for children.
2. Fathers and mothers don’t make unique contributions to children’s development.
3. There is no evidence that parenting is reflected in child behavior outside of the home.
4. Genetics and peers matter, not parents.

Besides the intuitive falseness of these views, research shows that parents do matter in the lives of children and adolescents.

Married Heterosexual Parents Do Matter

A recent article by Silverstein and Auerbach concludes that married heterosexual parents don’t matter. The stated goal of the authors is to encourage “public policy that supports the legitimacy of diverse family structure, rather than policy that privileges the two-parent heterosexual, married family.”

The authors’ arguments stem from a study of 200 fathers from ten different subcultures within the United States. Based on their observations and a review of research, the authors conclude that a mother and father living together in a committed marital relationship is not essential for healthy child development. They note that as long as children have a consistent adult in their lives who is emotionally connected to them, there are a wide variety of family structures that can support positive child outcomes. These include cohabiting couples, single mothers, and gay and lesbian parents.

However, abundant evidence indicates that “natural family” structures, which include married mothers and fathers living under the same roof, are more likely to provide stable and secure environments where children can flourish. Natural family structures benefit nearly every aspect of children’s well-being, including greater educational opportunities, better emotional and physical health, less substance abuse, lower incidences of early sexual activity for girls, and less delinquency for boys.

Ample evidence suggests that some alternative family structures can do more harm than good. For example, U.S. data gathered in 1995 indicate that only 10 percent of children under age 18 in families with two married parents lived in poverty. Contrast this with 50 percent who lived with an unmarried mother. Contrary to arguments suggesting that single parenting is as optimal as any other family structure for child-rearing, the data on average suggest that married parents are in the best position to protect their children from poverty. This is particularly important, because poverty is a defining predictor of child academic and social problems, particularly when it is accompanied by frequent changes in residence and multiple intimate adult relationships. Despite the overwhelming challenges associated with single parenthood, I am impressed by many dedicated single parents who find ways to make things work out.

In light of evidence suggesting that
The single most important factor... for diminishing delinquent behavior is the presence of the father in the home.

Marriage is more likely to protect children from poverty, another angle taken by some academicians is to argue that it is the poverty, not just having a single parent, that poses the greatest risk for children. However, this argument overlooks a significant pool of data suggesting that, although the consequences of poverty and having a single parent are interrelated, each is a risk factor that has independent effects on negative outcomes in children.

Fathers and Mothers Make Unique Contributions to Child Development

Some who oppose heterosexual marriage downplay the importance of fathers in facilitating positive child development. They argue that men and women do not make unique contributions to children’s lives. For example, it is suggested that because father absence is associated with other family instability indicators, like less family income, it is more likely that negative child developmental outcomes are due to the disruption of children’s lives, rather than simply to the absence of their fathers. In fact, one study cited in the Silverstein and Auerbach paper suggests that a father may add to a family’s cost of living because some fathers spend family financial resources on gambling, booze, and cigarettes, which also result in “increased women’s workload and stress levels.” My question to this is, do we throw away fathers just because of a few bad apples?

Opposing evidence indicates that the single most important factor (more relevant than family income) for diminishing delinquent behavior is the presence of the father in the home. In fact, delinquency is twice as high in cases where the father is absent than when he is present. Boyfriends do not seem to be a substitute for absent biological fathers either, since delinquency rates are lower when the mother is alone with her son than when she has invited a man to live with her.

Significant research indicates that fathers are more physically playful with their children than mothers. Fathers elicit more positive and less negative emotion from children during play, which has been shown to help children learn to read social cues and regulate their emotions in ways that can result in more positive social adjustment with peers. Fathers who are patient and understanding of children’s emotions have children with similar positive social outcomes. Studies, such as our research conducted in Russia, have shown stronger links in these regards for fathers than for mothers. Greater playfulness, patience, and understanding with children on the part of fathers are associated with less child aggressive behavior with peers at school.

Fathers provide unique contributions to children’s development besides reducing poverty and being playful and responsive. For example, father presence can provide daughters with a stable relationship with a non-exploitive adult male who loves and respects them. Security and trust derived from this relationship help girls avoid precocious sexual activity and exploitive relationships with other males. Fathers contribute to core aspects of children’s stability, self-confidence, self-regulation, and self-identities in profound ways.

In other domains of parent-child interaction, mothers seem to matter more. For example, in a study we conducted in Louisiana, we found mothers (as compared with fathers) had greater success in reasoning with children about consequences for their actions. Children who had more reasoning-oriented mothers engaged in more social, cooperative play and were more accepted by peers. These findings suggest that mothers and fathers do indeed make unique contributions to children’s development.

Parenting Makes a Difference in Children’s Behavior Outside the Home

Recent critiques of developmental research on parenting conclude that there is no evidence that parenting in the home
is related to ways children behave outside of the home. *Newsweek* as well as other prominent media outlets ran cover stories on this landmark conclusion. However, they overlooked scores of scientific studies demonstrating that parenting styles, as associated with children’s social development, are crucial for optimal growth in children. Children who have social skill deficiencies that stem from poor parenting are often at risk for a host of academic, emotional, and behavioral difficulties throughout their lives.

Parenting plays a vital role in children’s social adjustment outside the home. Numerous intervention studies show that positive changes in parenting behavior are reflected in corresponding changes in how children interact with others inside and outside of the home. Other studies show that parents who are more coercive tend to have children who are more coercive and aggressive with peers, but parents who are warmer and more responsive tend to have children who are more cooperative and sociable with peers. Evidence also indicates that the direction of effect goes more from parent to child than from child to parent, at least in terms of parental influence maintaining child behavior patterns. These types of findings hold up across diverse socioeconomic and cultural groups regardless of research methods used.

**Genetics, Peers, and Particularly Parents Matter**

Scholars’ conclusions as to how much parents matter in children’s lives range from the view that optimal parenting is vital, to the perspective that an “average expectable” environment provided by parents is all that is necessary for most children, to the notion that parents are not essential to children’s development. With regard to the latter view, one major argument stems from the notion that only genetics and peers matter. According to this philosophy, whatever genetics isn’t accounting for in development should be attributed to peer-group influence, not to parents. I have no problem with the notion that genetics and peers both matter, as I will illustrate. However, parents provide far more influence than they have recently been given credit for.

**Peers.** Although scientific understanding of exactly how peers socialize peers is limited, peers do influence other children’s language development, clothing
However, I am not aware of any studies with tendencies towards aggression, then, for good or for ill. There is indeed influence. Peers are in total control by shyness, sociability, impulsiveness, higher in a variety of different ways. Because of this, children to some degree "select, modify, and even create their environment." For example, children by their tendencies can evoke different parenting patterns for different siblings in the same family. This was illustrated in a recent study finding that adopted children who are at genetic risk for antisocial behavior are more likely to evoke more negative parenting from their adoptive parents. Another recent study suggests that children with inhibited temperaments are more likely to evoke more overprotective encouragement for pursuing peer-group interests. However, children are not in total control over parents. Children and parents likely respond to and modify the behavior of the other, illustrating that parent-child interactions are dynamic and transactional in nature.

Molecular genetics research focuses on identifying new genes, discovering their effects, and determining how they effect development. Genetic predispositions are in no way deterministic. Molecular geneticists point out that most personality characteristics are due to a highly complex interplay between multifactored genetic and environmental influences. Genetic markers discovered by molecular geneticists thus far account for only a small proportion of variance in certain child behaviors. Even though ongoing gene mapping should increase our understanding and the new knowledge will be exciting and useful in many ways, it will be limited. Even if we come to know with certainty the probabilities for behavioral risk or childhood abilities associated with certain constellations of genes, we still would likely not know why some individuals are able to override certain biological tendencies and others are not. This would help us understand how individuals exercise their own agency with regard to how they might choose to be influenced by peers or other factors.

Behavioral genetics. A less direct but viable way of assessing genetic influence is through behavioral genetic research, which suggests that variation among individuals can be due to both genetic and environmental sources. Results of behavioral genetic studies using twin or adoption methods typically suggest that many personality characteristics can be partially accounted for by genetic factors.

Environmental sources that touch individuals in unique ways are referred to as non-shared environment effects. These factors are not specified in behavioral genetic studies and could be due to parental or peer influences that help make children different from each other. Since genetic factors can vary considerably across siblings in the same family, genetic predispositions can elicit different responses from parents in ways that result in different child outcomes. Or they can serve to predispose children towards...
responding to similar environmental influences in different ways. This represents two different ways that parental treatment can result in non-shared effects.

For example, a more spirited child may elicit rules and enforcement from parents in an effort to regulate behavior more than her more-conforming sibling does. However, parents may still try to interact with both children in warm and nurturing ways. In response, the extra rules for the one child may evoke more oppositional behavior directed towards the parent from the difficult child than from the easy-going sibling. Likewise, warmth and nurturance may be interpreted as license by a more difficult child as he gets away with whatever he wants, while the more conforming sibling may respond to this by being even more open to parental input and direction.

Peer effects might also be assumed in this non-shared effects category. For example, when playing baseball with the same group of peers, a more athletically inclined child who performs better will likely evoke more positive reactions from peers than a sibling who can’t catch the ball whenever it comes his way. This differential experience with the same peers may generate more self-confidence in one sibling and greater feelings of inadequacy in the other. Even if the peers respond similarly to both siblings and are tolerant and affirming towards the less athletic child, he may still feel less adequate due to perceptions of his own athletic skill.

Environmental sources that operate to make siblings alike are referred to as shared environment effects. This could include parental and peer behavior that has a similar effect on children or differential treatment of children that yields similar outcomes. For example, siblings are more likely to adopt the religious values and political orientations of their parents, despite their different personalities. Likewise, the tolerant behavior and encouragement of peers may inspire confidence and greater success in playing baseball for a less athletic child. This may eventually serve to help him or her become more athletic, just like a more athletic sibling. Even different treatment of children can result in similar outcomes. For example, rather than creating more rebellious behavior for one sibling versus another, more rules and limit-setting for a difficult child may serve to foster more conformance in ways similar to the child’s already easy-going sibling. Likewise, less tolerance by peers may serve to inspire a less-athletic sibling to work harder to be accepted by them. These examples illustrate that both peers and family can contribute to both shared and non-shared effects.

Non-shared environmental influence surfaces in all behavioral genetic studies. In the critique of parenting research, sibling differences reflected in non-shared effects were attributed only to forces outside the family; namely, peers. It should be kept in mind that classical behavioral genetic designs can only say that many sibling similarities may be primarily due to genetics. However, the root causes of sibling differences are unspecified. Contrary to the recently promoted assumption that only peers matter beyond genetics, this leaves ample room for the importance of parents as contributors to child outcomes as well. And behavioral genetic research does not suggest that parents don’t matter. Rather, it indicates that many things parents do similarly with siblings often do not make
Good parenting is difficult but fulfilling work.

Sibling personalities the same.

Even though children may share constellations of genes with parents and siblings and somewhat similar environments with them, their natures can create different environmental niches that can contribute to declining resemblance over time. Depending on temperamental characteristics and other factors such as birth order, the ages of siblings, and exposure to peers, children in the same family can experience “non-shared” aspects of their child-rearing environments. Even identical twins, who share the same genetic attributes, do not turn out to be entirely similar because of the different sets of experiences from which they build their environmental niches.

How Do Parents Matter?

In the recent highly publicized critique of parenting research that concluded parents don’t matter, it was declared that children and parents resemble each other for genetic reasons only. Cordial parents have cordial children, and difficult parents have difficult children. This is far too simplistic an explanation. Some difficult parents have cordial children and some cordial parents have difficult children. This critique of parenting research also noted that siblings in the same family who have the same parents are likely to have quite different personalities. If so, let me suggest three specific ways that parents do matter, given that different child personalities may exert different influences on their socialization environment in ways that can make children difficult.

First, parents matter by teaching morals and values. Crucial scientific evidence indicates that shared family influences, stemming from parental modeling and encouragement of the same moral, religious, and political interests and values in the home, are as important or even more important than genes in creating likenesses between brothers and sisters. Thus, the vital role of parents in teaching children moral and religious values to help them make wise choices in the face of their own biological proclivities or peer group pressure cannot be underestimated. This evidence tends to be overlooked by proponents of the view that parents don’t matter.

Second, parents can actively help children overcome less desirable inborn characteristics. As I noted earlier, not only do children influence parents, but parents influence children. More than 100 years ago, Brigham Young, after whom Brigham Young University is named, encouraged parents to “study their [children’s] dispositions and their temperaments, and deal with them accordingly.” In line with this, scientific evidence is emerging to suggest that active parenting styles, for example, can enhance or diminish children’s biological predispositions. There is plasticity in inborn predispositions. Genes do not necessarily determine behavior.

Parents who actively work to adjust their parenting styles favorably, increase their sensitivity and nurturing involvement, and accompany those attributes by firm limit-setting and cohesive family relationships, can help diminish difficult child behavioral dispositions such as hyperactivity, antisocial tendencies, and negative emotionality. More inhibited children are more likely to develop internal regulation mechanisms (or a conscience) that play out in socially skilled behavior if their parents use gentle discipline rather than more punitive forms of control. Alternatively, problems may result by not adjusting parenting styles to meet the child’s needs. Parents giving in to punitive control urges or overprotective inclinations in response to spirited or inhibited child characteristics can worsen the behavior of difficult children and evoke more difficult behavior in easier-to-rear children. But when parents change their behavior in positive ways, child behavior in and out of the home changes accordingly.

Third, parents can matter by enhancing many positive inborn capabilities that different children bring with them into the world by providing opportunities for further development. Social, academic, athletic, artistic, spiritual, and musical domains are examples of areas where parents can provide opportunities for enhancement. This can be done by providing opportunities to practice social skills with peers, reading to children when they are young, allowing children to participate in organized sports, emphasizing spirituality through practicing family religious traditions, and providing art and music learning opportunities. Talents along these lines that are less complete to begin with can also be developed with parental encouragement and the provision of opportunity.

In conclusion, good parenting is difficult but fulfilling work. The pattern of interaction with individual children and the climate created by parenting styles in the home can enhance or mitigate inborn child characteristics. Also, what parents teach their children by precept and example about moral and religious values helps the children make wise choices, even in the face of biological urges or peer influences that would have them do otherwise. Finally, parents can make a difference by providing opportunities that capitalize on individual
strengths that children have. Married heterosexual parents matter; fathers and mothers do make unique contributions to children's development; what parents do with children in the home matters outside of the home; and genetics, peers, and particularly parents are important in children's lives.

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Selected references listed below, many of which stem from our research program at BYU, overview research that supports numerous points made in this article. For an extensive bibliography of scientific studies supporting these views, see the expanded version of this paper at www.worldcongress.org.

Portions of this expanded paper were delivered in a speech at World Congress of Families II in Geneva Switzerland, November 1999.


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