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*Who has stronger influence in your life—your parents or your peers? According to author Judith Rich Harris, relationships with peers and acceptance by peer groups are greater influences on personality than either parents or genetics. Rejecting both the nature and nurture theories, Harris considers social acceptance in childhood and adolescence as the primary shaper of the individual. As you read the following passage, consider this question: who has the power in your life?*

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Text reference: *Sociology and You*, Chapter 4

A new theory says that peers, not parents, are the strongest shapers of human personality.

If asked who the most influential people are in shaping your personality, what would you say? Your parents? Your brothers and sisters? Your teachers?

According to a new book, what you should say is your peers—your friends, teammates, and classmates. In her new book, *The Nurture Assumption*, author Judith Rich Harris contends that peers exert an influence on a child's personality far stronger than that of anyone else, including parents. Personality is all the traits that define someone—intelligence, sense of humor, shyness, aggressiveness, and so on.

Harris developed her theory to explain some findings about human personality that she considered puzzling. Studies of twins and adopted kids have shown that genes play a large role in determining human personality. . . . About half of a person's personality traits come from their parents by way of their genes.

What about the other half? For years, many psychologists and childcare experts have believed the answer lay in the "nurture assumption." According to that assumption, parents influence their kids' personalities through their child-rearing techniques.

However, no researcher has found any truth in the nurture assumption, says Harris. No reliable study has shown that one kind of

upbringing produces kids whose personalities are significantly different from those of kids who have another kind of upbringing. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" has about the same effect on kids as the opposite philosophy has, says Harris.

The same goes for family makeup, adds Harris. Kids who grow up in nontraditional families—with a single mom or dad or hippie or gay parents—turn out about the same as kids who grow up in middle-class homes with a mother and a father.

If family makeup and upbringing don't have an influence, then what does mold the uninherited half of a child's personality? Harris's answer: the child's playmates and classmates. From toddlerhood on, children feel the pull of a force as strong as magnetism—the need to be part of a group. And the group that children pick is the one with members most like them—their peer group. "A child's goal is not to become a successful adult," writes Harris. "A child's goal is to be a successful child."

Belonging to a group involves assimilating—conforming to the group's codes of behavior, styles of dress, and speech patterns. It also involves differentiation—finding a place in the group. Explains Harris: One kid becomes "the brain," another "the jock," a third "the clown," and so forth through the group. The experience of assimilating and

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differentiating smooths and shapes a child's rough inherited traits into a human personality, says Harris.

You don't believe it? Consider the countless kids born to immigrant parents in the United States, says Harris. Instead of picking up the foreign accents of their moms and dads, the children speak the unaccented way their friends do. Such is the power of peers over parents.

What applies to language also applies to other forms of social behavior, says Harris. To support her case, Harris draws on studies and stories from many fields of science. She cites a study of delinquent boys in England. When boys who were troublemakers moved away from their delinquent pals, their behavior improved. The boys didn't get new families, but they did get new, better-behaved friends. And that change in friends was enough to change the boys' personalities. Another study found that a child's attitude toward schoolwork improved if the child began associating with a group of kids like Lisa Simpson. It got worse if the child switched to a gang of Barts.

Harris also draws on her own experience. Young Judy was adventurous, fearless, and

loud and had lots of friends. Then, when Judy was 9, her family moved to a suburb where the girls were snobbish and cared mostly for their appearance. Judy found herself cast out and friendless. The active and outgoing girl became inhibited and shy. "The kids in the snooty suburb . . . changed my personality," writes Harris.

Some people who don't read Harris's book may misinterpret her theory. Some parents may think it gives them permission to neglect or even abuse their kids. They are wrong, though. Harris clearly states that children need their parents' love and guidance, especially in the early years. Kids also acquire valuable knowledge and skills from their parents.

Some kids may think the theory gives them the go-ahead to ignore or disobey their parents. Not so, said Harris. "Kids rule in the world they share with their peers, but that world is part of the adult world," she told *Current Science*. "The greatest power kids have is the ability to choose their friends. It can make all the difference. Kids who join groups that ignore or defy the standards of the adult world are much less likely to have successful and happy lives in the long run."

Hugh Westrup, "Who Rules—Peers or Parents?" *Current Science*, Vol. 84, Issue 16 (May 14, 1999), p. 8.

**Student  
Worksheet  
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**THE POWER OF PEERS**

**Directions:** Using information from the reading, answer the following questions.

**PERSONAL INVENTORY**

1. Who has the most influence in your life: Your parents? Your peers? Someone else? For each situation or event listed below, indicate the most significant influence on your behavior. If possible, cite a personal example to illustrate your answer.

CHOICE OF CLOTHING:

\_\_\_\_\_

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS:

\_\_\_\_\_

CHOICE OF COLLEGE AND/OR CAREER:

\_\_\_\_\_

DECISIONS CONCERNING ALCOHOL OR DRUGS:

\_\_\_\_\_

DECISIONS CONCERNING DATING:

\_\_\_\_\_

ATTITUDES ABOUT SCHOOL AND SCHOOL WORK:

\_\_\_\_\_

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

2. Many experts reject Harris' theory concerning the influence of peers. How does Harris defend and support her theory? Do you agree or disagree with the theory? Explain your answer.

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