

Kids and Heredity

It goes without saying that the challenge of reaching America's teens for Christ begins at home. But parents are often too quick to take the credit or blame for the way their children turn out. Moms and dads who are raising bright young superstars are inclined to stick out their chests and say, "Look at what we accomplished." Those with irresponsible kids wonder, Where did we go wrong?

It is possible that neither assessment is accurate. Even though parents are very influential in the lives of their children, they are only one component from which children are assembled.

Behavioral scientists have been far too simplistic in their explanation of human behavior. Despite their theories to the contrary, we are more than the quality of our nutrition. We are more than our genetic heritage. We are more than our biochemistry. And certainly, we are more than the aggregate of parental influences.

God has created us as unique people, capable of independent and rational thought that is not attributable to any source. That is what makes child rearing so rewarding—and challenging. Just when you think you have your kids figured out, you had better brace yourself! Something new is coming your way.

Child development experts have argued for more than a century about the relative influence of heredity and environment, or what has been called the "nature-nurture" controversy. Now, at last, it may have been settled.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota have spent many years identifying and studying 100 sets of identical twins who were separated near the time of birth. They were raised in varying cultures, religions and locations. Because each set of twins shared the same genetic structure, it was possible for the researchers to examine the impact of inheritance by comparing their similarities and their differences on many variables. From these and other studies, it became clear that much of personality, perhaps 70 percent or more, is inherited.

Consider the brothers known as the “Gem twins,” who were separated until they were 39 years old. Their similarities were astonishing.

Both were married to women named Linda. Both had dogs named Toy. Both suffered from migraine headaches. Both chain-smoked. Both liked beer. Both drove Chevys, and both served as sheriff’s deputies. They even shared a weird sense of humor. For example, both enjoyed faking sneezes in elevators to see how strangers would react.

A person’s genetic structure is thought to influence even the stability of his or her marriage. If an identical twin gets a divorce, the risk of the other also divorcing is 45 percent. However, if a fraternal twin, who shares only half as many genes with his sibling, divorces, the risk to the other is only 30 percent.

What do these findings mean? Are we mere puppets on a string, playing out a predetermined course without free will or personal choices? Of course not.

Unlike birds and mammals that act according to instinct,

humans are capable of rational thought and independent action. We don't act on every sexual urge, for example, despite our genetic underpinnings. What is clear is that heredity provides a nudge in a particular direction—a definite impulse or inclination—but one that can be brought under the control of our rational processes.

Obviously, these findings are of enormous significance to our understanding of children. Before you take the full blame for the behavior of your child, remember that you played an important part in his or her formative years—but not the only one.

It's also critical to remember that most rebellious teens will settle down in their early 20s. Until then, stay on your knees in prayer and hold on for the ride!