

What We're Reading:

**The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature**

By Steven Pinker

Have you ever wondered what is going on inside your child's head? If so, you're in good company. Most parents find themselves puzzled at times by what exactly causes their child to act the way he does. In **The Blank Slate**, MIT psychology professor Steven Pinker argues that children are primarily the products of their biologic heritage, and that their actions and abilities are dictated by genetic material that they carry with them from conception.

For years, experts have entertained us with debates on the impact of "Nature vs. Nurture" on the budding brain. Those who take the side of "Nurture" would have us believe that children are born with minds that are essentially 'blank slates.' The idea of the 'blank slate' was initially put forth by philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). John Locke decried the notion that select people are born with knowledge and abilities that make them better at some things than others. He believed we are all born with minds that have the infinite capacity for being 'molded and shaped.' Following this reasoning, children learn best when they are offered an appropriately nurturing environment.

Modern child development experts championed the cause of the 'blank slate.' In the 1990's, dubbed 'the decade of the brain,' child development experts encouraged us to view a baby's brain as an internal hard drive waiting to be formatted. Brain research touted countless examples of this concept, calling it "neural plasticity." Caring parents were encouraged to play Mozart to their infants, and buy them appropriately stimulating monochromatic mobiles.

Problems with the "nurture" idea arose when parents who supposedly 'did everything right,' were not having the expected results. People began to realize that playing music to a baby in utero did not guarantee that the child would turn into a budding musician. Even identical twins who supposedly had similar 'nurturing' were exhibiting very different character traits and pursuing markedly different interests. Clearly, nature also plays a part in child development—the question is, to what extent?

Steven Pinker believes that it is the interactions between genes, which are genetically preprogrammed, that cause children to develop the way they do. He maintains that all organisms exhibit certain complex behaviors that are clearly predetermined, and belie the number of genes they must rely upon. "Anyone who has watched the Discovery Channel has seen footage of baby wildebeests or zebras falling out of the birth canal, wobbling on shaky legs for a minute or two, and then prancing around their mothers with their senses, drives and motor control fully operational." Like zebras, humans have extensive brain

connections that enable them to perform tasks necessary for survival soon after birth—tasks such as sucking, rooting for a breast or bottle, and crying when in need.

Given the genetically predestined strength of human nature, why should parents make the effort to nurture their children? Because, in the end, a child and a parent have a human relationship. Parents wield a great deal of power over this relationship, and over their children. Their actions may impact a child's memories and attitudes for years to come. This concept is made easier to understand when one begins to view a child as a person, and not simply a little organism waiting to be molded.

We groan when children obsess over wearing the right kind of cargo pants, but we would be just as mortified if a very large person forced us to wear pink overalls to a corporate board meeting or a polyester disco suit to an academic conference. "Being socialized by a peer group" is another way of saying "living successfully within a society," which for a social organism means "living." It is children, above all, who are alleged to be blank slates, and that can make us forget they are people."

The **Blank Slate** is a dense, though comprehensive tome. In arguing his case, Dr. Pinker addresses such far reaching topics as "The Fear of Nihilism," "The Sanctimonious Animal," and the impact of human nature on politics, violence and the arts. He gives compelling examples to support his theories, but the message occasionally gets lost in the vast amount of information presented. For those who seek a quick read, it would not be ideal. For those who are interested in a deeper discussion of human development, **The Blank Slate** offers interesting fodder.

The field of child development is currently in a state of flux. As Steven Pinker points out, "Human nature is a scientific topic, and as new facts come in, our conceptions of it will change." The **Blank Slate** is an absorbing look at the impact of human nature on development. It may also be a good read if you are a parent who seeks to find out what is going on inside your child's head.