



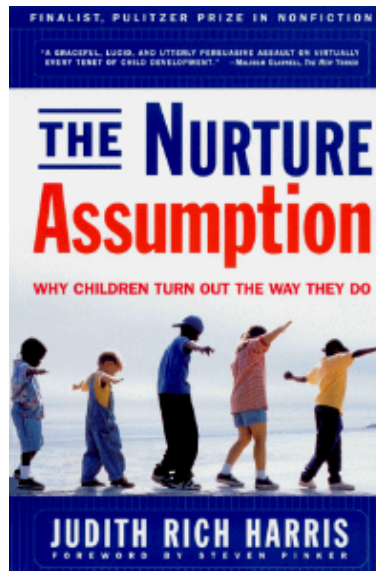
What is the most essential skill we can teach our child?

There is still a great deal of debate as to which, nature or nurture, that shapes the child's mind. Some scholars, such as [John Locke \(1632-1704\)](#), believed that a child's mind is like *tabula rasa* (or blank slates) in which the parents' responsibility would be to introduce, mould, and shape their child's mind through proper education and through the set up of a conducive learning environment. Other scholars, however, believe that it is nature, or the child's genes, that shapes the child's predisposition and talents.

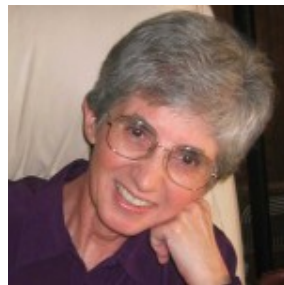


John Locke,
philosopher, who
believed that
babies are born
with minds like
empty "cabinets"
(nndb.com)

When Zachary was born nearly four years ago, I expanded my reading boundaries into child development genre. One of the books I have read that left a deep imprint in me is [Judith Rich Harris'](#) book ["The Nurture Assumption"](#).



The Nurture Assumption
by Judith Rich Harris
(parenting.bookbest.com
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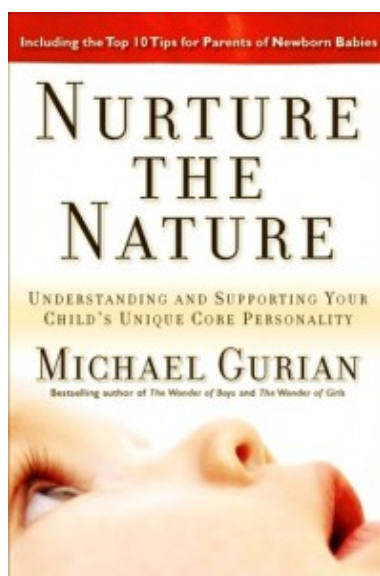
Judith Rich Harris
(Image: Nomi L.
Harris)

She wrote at great lengths to exert—astonishingly— that parents’ influence and education have much less effect on shaping the child’s mind than by the child’s peers. In other words, it is whom our child hangs around with that is more important than what we, as parents, say and do.

There is at least some truth to this. My wife and I, for example, have tried several times (and in vain) to teach Zachary to use both the spoon and fork when he eats. Instead, he rather use only the spoon to scoop his food off his plate, even if it meant him struggling to get the last few morsels of food. However, after a few days at his new school, Zachary, presumably after seeing his other friends eating with both spoon and fork during lunchtime, now demands from his mother a fork

as well when he eats his meals. Zachary's peers have succeeded where we, as his parents, have failed.

[Michael Gurian](#), in his book "[Nurture the nature](#)", challenges the notion that is not the case of *either-or*. It is both nurture and nature that drive the development of a child. Gurian argues that the child's mind is not like a blank slate. Instead, it comes predefined with certain talents, personality, and temperament. As any parents of two or more children would agree, two siblings who are brought up in the same environment and with the same type of care and attention would still show contrasting behaviour and talents. One sibling would be athletic, for example, but the other more studious. One an extrovert and the other an introvert.



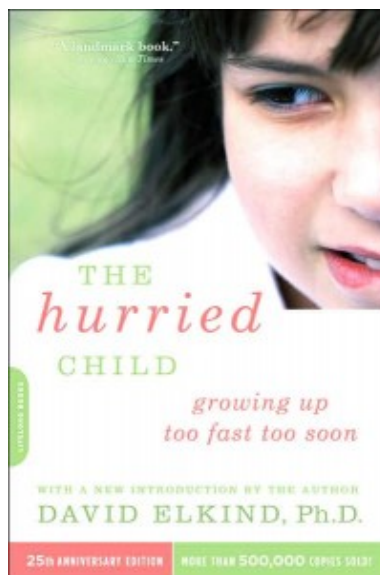
Nurture the nature by
Michael Gurian
(gurianinstitute.com)



Michael Gurian
(gurianinstitute.com)

So, although nature predefines a child with certain talents, personality, and temperament, the role of parents remains crucial. Gurian argues that parents need to uncover what those predispositions are, then nurture or guide these predispositions so that they become useful living skills for their child.

Another book that made a very strong impact on me is the classic book [“The hurried child”](#) by [David Elkind](#). This book, though written thirty years ago (and updated recently in 2007), remains relevant today. Elkind reminds us parents the danger of pushing too hard, too far our child to excel in academia, sports, and in various fields. Children today are unfortunately raised to mirror their parents’ image or forced to fulfil their parents’ own aspirations.



The hurried child by
David Elkind
(parenting.bookbest.com
)



David Elkind
(apbspeakers.com)

Children are pushed too hard to mature faster, and they face greater risks of depression and poor emotional development due to the pressure from their parents and from their environment. Children, in pursuit of all round excellence, are rushed from one activity to another, with little time alone of free activity. These moments of free activity, rather than being time wasting, are essential to develop the creativity, emotion, and personality in children. In other words, they are needed so that children can be, well, children.

Parents too, Elkind warns, are inundated by pressure from ubiquitous media to buy the latest educational toy or fad for their child or to enrol their child in the latest training program. The media encourages fear that if parents do not enrol their child in such classes (be it computer, swimming, maths, gymnastics, or language class), their child would be impeded in future achievements. In other words, the media tells us parents that our child needs a good head start in life and the earlier, the better.

As a lecturer at a local university, I have the advantage of witnessing the product of our country's education system, the university students. I have seen many students, including smart ones, who are unpassionate about learning, immature in thinking, and ignorant and uninterested in important local and global issues. Many too lack ambition and are unaware of their own strengths.



University students: Top scorers,
yes, but can they think?
(misterhobbes.net)

Slowly and gradually and after all I have seen, heard, and read, I have begun to realize that the most essential skill we need to teach our child is this: *the ability to self learn*.

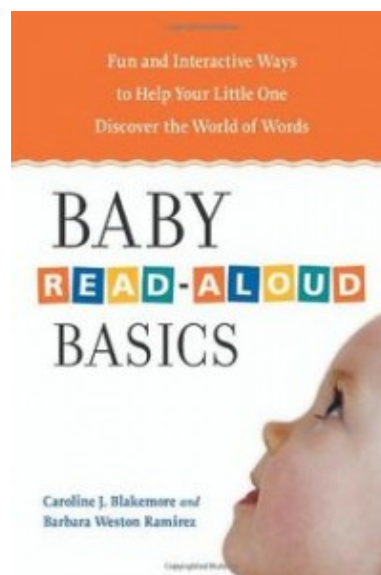
Teachers, educators, and parents can only teach so much and for so long. A child

needs to cultivate that habit of knowing how to seek out information, understanding and learning the information, and deriving pleasure from that knowledge. This ability to self learn is the foundation upon which other subjects such as maths, languages, science, and arts are learned and mastered. This ability to self learn teaches a child to become self-reliant.

And the best way to develop this ability to self learn is the cultivation of a very strong reading habit in the child. Books, as I have always maintained, is more than just storage of knowledge. Reading books biochemically changes our brains to change how we think and act. Books create in us a mind that is more open-minded, critical, informed, sensitive, aware, and appreciative of knowledge and experience.

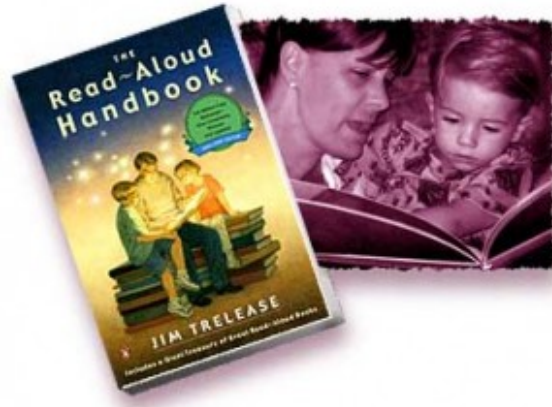
Babies can learn a language simply by listening to others talk. But babies cannot learn reading merely by observing others read. Babies have to be taught how to read, and reading takes effort because its mastery is a skill. It is hard work to read and understand a book.

When Zachary was only a few months old, my wife and I had already started to read books to him. We took advice from [“Baby read-aloud basics”](#) by Caroline J. Blackmore and Barbara Weston Ramirez, both of whom were inspired by [Jim Trelease’s](#) classic book [“The read-aloud handbook”](#).



Baby read-aloud basics
by Caroline J. Blackmore
and Babara Weston

Ramirez
(parenting.bookbest.com
)



The classic book that started it all:
"The read-aloud handbook" by Jim
Trelease (readertoreader.org)

These read aloud books taught us the type of books to pick for Zachary and how to read aloud to him as Zachary progressed from less than a year old to today at nearly four years old. Zachary loved books on transport (such as cars, boats, and trains) and books with simple repetitive and rhyming words.



Mom reading aloud to
Zachary just before his
bedtime

My wife and I have never forced Zachary to read. We merely read to him, and he listened. My wife and I have a large library of books at our home. Unlike most people who would tuck away their library (that is, if they have one) in some inconspicuous corner of their house, we put out library right in our living room. We wanted to create an environment of reading in our home.

Over time, we bought increasingly more books for Zachary. Now, he has a large collection of children books for himself, next to ours. Zachary loves to read, as some of our friends have witnessed to their amazement, and he loves bookshops as much as toyshops. He even carries books with him when we go out and must have a small book (not a toy or doll as with most kids) with him when he sleeps.



Zachary picking a book
from his library

And unlike most kids, Zachary does not enjoy watching TV as much as reading books. This is not a situation my wife and I deliberately created. We did not discourage TV viewing for Zachary. My wife and I seldom watch TV, so Zachary must have learned through observation that TV is not a big picture in our lives. As our last babysitter eventually found out, putting Zachary in front of the TV always failed to occupy our son's attention for long.

We are making good progress, but my wife and I are not disillusioned, of course. Zachary has still much to grow and much to learn, and we, as his parents, are mindful of the dangers of imposing our aspirations on him and coercing Zachary into being someone he does not want to be.



Zachary: a quiet moment with his self-selected book