Open Forum 3
Web Site Transcript
Chapter 8

A = Professor
B = Student 1
C = Student 2

A: Good afternoon, class. Our next topic is influences on personality development. There are many theories about personality development, but before we get into them, we need to ask a basic question: How much of our personality comes from our genes—nature? And how much from our environment (home, school and friends)—what we call nurture? I have asked two students to debate this question: which is most important for forming a child's personality, nature or nurture?

B: I'm going to argue that the answer is nature. In recent years, scientists have learned much more about our genes, the chemical instructions which control all aspects of the human body. We now know that there are personality genes. Your DNA, the total of all your genes, determines whether you will be shy or outgoing, optimistic or pessimistic, well-behaved or a troublemaker. There's no difference between personality and other characteristics, like eye color, hair color, or height. If your genes say you're going to be short, then no amount of nurture will make you a star basketball player.

C: I agree that genes are clearly important, but I disagree with your idea that there is no difference between physical and psychological characteristics. The truth is that your personality is heavily determined by the environment. Let me give you a sad example. In the 1990s, many children in Romania were orphaned. After their parents died, they lived in appalling conditions in orphanages. They did not have enough to eat, they were often sick, and they were neglected. Worst of all, they received no love or affection from the staff. After they were rescued and adopted by loving families, they recovered physically but not emotionally. Psychologists have shown that children need an emotional connection very early in life in order to develop normally. It doesn't matter what your genes say if no one shows you any affection.

B: That's a very extreme case. But let's say you're right that early experiences play a role in personality development. Geneticists have shown that genes describe the possibilities and limits for each person. Not everyone will live up to their potential. For example, if you have a musical gene, but you never play an instrument, obviously you won't develop as a musician. Let me say one more thing about childhood: a child's "nature" can influence her "nurture." For example, if a child causes a lot of trouble and behaves badly, the parents will try to discipline or punish the child. I don't think you can say that the parents' behavior is responsible for the child's personality; the child's nature caused their behavior in the first place.

C: That's very clever, but the fact is that good parenting can change a child's behavior and personality. Here's an example. What do you do if your child is hungry and wants food *now*. A geneticist would say that the child has a natural personality to be impatient and bossy. So, the parent should wait a short time before giving any food, and try to change the child's personality. However, researchers have found that it's better to feed the child immediately because you create a feeling of trust. It's important for children to trust their parents. When children have a strong sense of trust, they grow up to be more secure adults.

B: But there is still a genetic influence. A recent university study found that there is a crime gene. If you have a certain gene, you are more likely to commit crimes as an adult. Now, not everyone with this gene becomes a criminal. However, if a child with this gene is abused, there is a very high connection with crime later in life. Clearly, the gene is activated by early experiences, but after that, nature directs your life.

C: Your theory puts too much responsibility on the parents, and it does not allow children to change as they grow older. Not every abused child with that gene becomes a criminal. So, there must be other factors at work. Many researchers in human behavior have discovered developmental paths that most children follow. This means that there are stages in our development as we change from babies to children to young adults and adults. Our identity develops over time—it's not finished so early in life. In fact, in some models, an important part of personality development happens to teenagers and young adults—that's us!

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A: Okay, thanks for presenting those arguments. As I'm sure you've seen, it's hard for most experts to accept a strong version of either the "nature" or "nurture" theory. That means, few people believe that our personality results from 100% genetics or 100% social environment. It is safe to say that our personality is formed by a combination of nature and nurture. Psychologists cannot ignore the results of genetic tests, but they should also not forget the remarkable human ability to change and adapt to circumstances.