

Rationally Speaking #144: Bryan Caplan on, "Does Parenting Matter?"

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and with me is today's guest, Bryan Caplan.

Bryan is a professor of economics at George Mason University. He is also a blogger for Econlog, and the author of many pieces for the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post and also the author of the books, *The Myth of the Rational Voter* and *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids*. Bryan, welcome to the show.

Bryan: Thanks very much for having me.

Julia: Today we're going to talk about a counter-intuitive message in Bryan's more recent book, *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids* as well as extensively on his blog. The counter-intuitive message is for all the parents out there who are working hard every day to make sure that their children grow up to be healthy, happy and successful people. And in short, the message is: stop trying. Your actions have far less impact on your kids than you think they do.

Today we're going to delve in to what that advice is based on and its implications for how you should live your life. Bryan, maybe we could set the stage by talking about why this advice is so counter-intuitive. Parents certainly seem to think that they can affect their children's life outcomes. You talk a little bit about this in your book, about how the amount of effort that parents put into parenting has gone up over the years. Could you say a little about that?

Bryan: Sure, sociologists have been measuring the way that people spend their time for about 50 years now. And what's quite striking is that if you go and take a look at the 1960s, which is the tail end of the baby boom, actually moms on average spent less time taking care of their kids than they do today, even though they had far more kids, even though they were less likely to have jobs outside the home and even though dads helped a lot less. Still back in those days moms were doing less.

Julia: What about dads today?

Bryan: Dads obviously do more, no one doubts that, but dads still do quite a bit less than moms, they do a lot more than they used to. That's for sure.

Julia: I also have the sense just from my personal experience that there's more worrying about children today, which I'm sure relates to the amount of time spent parenting but also seems like a distinct thing.

Bryan: Right, that's something that's harder to measure but it very much seems to be so. That people are more worried than they used to be, if you just think about the kinds of stuff that parents let their kids do in earlier times. I grew up in the 80s, I could ride my bike wherever I wanted without any supervision, no one worried about me, no one told me

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to wear a helmet. And today, at least in the neighborhoods, in the same neighborhood where I grew up, you pretty much never see a kid outside alone anymore. Parents are so nervous about allowing an unsupervised child to just play outside.

Julia: Yeah, I just read a news article about my neighborhood, like not just my county but my immediate 10 minutes from my childhood home. Two kids ages 8 and 10-- or 6 and 8 -- got stopped by the police for not having their mom with them, playing in a park that I used to play in when I was a kid. It just amazed me.

Bryan: By yourself.

Julia: By myself, yeah, with my little brother. So maybe you could now go into your thesis a little bit, what's behind this claim that parenting actually doesn't matter that much for kids?

Bryan: This is of course one of the questions that people have asked for many thousands of years, just to sound like a bad sophomore paper, but the good news is there's actually been a lot of progress on these questions in just the last 50 years. The question really comes down to how much do parents really determine how their kids turn out in adulthood? And in really almost anything parents care about -- how much do you affect your child's adult health, how much do you affect their adult success or their adult intelligence, or how much do you affect whether they turn out to be a nice person.

These are all really special cases of a much bigger question, which is why kids resemble their parents. Why do kids turn out the way they do? For millennia, people argued about this question fruitlessly, because there really are two stories that are very hard to distinguish: one of them is that kids turn out to be like their parents because their parents mold them, they nurture them. The other one is that kids inherit the traits from their parents, and would've been very similar to their parents even if they had never met them.

This debate is really almost impossible to resolve with normal data, with just studying normal families. Then the last 50 years researchers realized, what if we go and look at some special families in order to figure out what's really going on?

The two kinds of special families they focused on are first of all, families with twins, and second of all, families that adopt. In the case of families that adopt, it's really easy to see what the scientific strategy is. We'd say, look, if you go and compare biological children to adopted children and you see that adopted children are as similar to the parents that adopted them as biological kids are to the biological parents, this would really show that nurture was doing all the work.

If you get adopted by a family and you turn out to be just as similar to your parents as if you'd been the biological offspring of that family, that shows that really it was nurture that did the job. On the other hand, if it turns out that adopted kids are less similar to the adopting parents than they are to the biological children of the same parents, then

that is actually a sign that heredity is explaining the gap. Heredity's explaining why the biological children were more similar to the parents than the adopted children.

Julia: Right.

Bryan: So that's the adoption method. The twin method is ...

Julia: Actually, can I ask you a question?

Bryan: Yeah, sure, sure, of course.

Julia: Do we have pretty good reason to believe that parents parent their adopted children and their biological children similarly?

Bryan: Yes. Very good question. Out of the people who do adopt, there is a lot of reason to think that in fact, there is evidence that if the adopted children is having trouble, the adopting parents put in extra for them or they compensate for whatever problems the adopted child might have. I'd say that there's very good evidence that adopted kids are treated very similarly to biological children. There's been stuff done on these things like, do adopted kids get a normal share in inheritance, and they do.

Julia: Okay, great. So, go on.

Bryan: Yes, with the adopted kids, the science is simplest because it really is the experiment of, you have some kids that are not biologically related to the parents raising them, some that are. Is the similarity of parent to child greater when they're biological children than when they're adopted children?

The other approach which is also very widely used is to look at families with twins. At first glance, twins don't really solve anything. You could still say, well, as long as the twins are raised together, then they got nature, they got nurture together. What's special about them, is you can go and compare identical twins who share all their genes, and fraternal twins who would only share half. And then you could see identical twins more similar to each other when they are raised by their biological parents than fraternal twins would be if they're raised by the same biological parents.

Again, if you see identical twins are more similar than fraternal twins to each other, that's at least a strong sign that heredity is explaining the extra difference. And then here's the real catch, here's the real deeper insight: is that if you do some extra math, you could actually, once you have figured out how much of the extra similarity of identical fraternal twins is due to heredity, you can then go and see how much room is left for upbringing to do anything else. And from that, you can also get an estimate of how important upbringing is or again nurture, whatever you want to call it.

Julia: I have the impression that some twins studies were looking at twins that were raised in separate households.

Bryan: That is correct, but those are rarest and smallest of the studies.

Julia: I see. That makes sense.

Bryan: So in terms of the bulk of the evidence, it comes from either just totally garden variety adoptions, not twins, just regular adoptions; or from twins who were raised together. And then there are the special studies that have gotten an enormous amount of attention because they're so cool, which are ones where you have twins that are actually adopted into different homes. And then you could do this final test.

There is a famous Minnesota twin study that actually does look at kids that were split, that were separated at birth and raised in different homes, or sometimes separated after a few weeks and raised in different homes. And then actually a lot of the very best data comes from Scandinavia where they keep incredibly detailed records on everybody who's ever born there, and then a lot of that data goes back over a century at this point.

Julia: So far we've been talking about basically nature and nurture, but there's this third category, and I want to talk about how it relates to nature and nurture. Which is your environment outside of the parenting, outside of the home. The influence of your teachers, your peer group, just the culture in which you're embedded -- and that seems sort of hard to -- it's not a clean third category, it seems to me, right?

Bryan: Exactly.

Julia: Your parents' choices can affect the peer group that you end up with, et cetera. How is that distinguished in the data?

Bryan: Here's the important thing to realize about all of these estimates of the effect of nature, the effect of nurture -- is that they include all effects, direct or indirect, as long as they actually are caused by being raised by one family or having certain genes. So for example if you go and find there is a genetic effect on income, this could mean that there's actually a gene for money making, but it could also mean that there's a gene for good looks and that good looks are rewarded in the market.

And those stories would actually get jumbled together as all being heredity in some sense. In the same way, when we go and measure an effect of nurture, like you get adopted by one family rather than other, the effect of nurture counts getting to grow up in one neighborhood rather than a different neighborhood. It counts the schools, it counts the peers insofar as your parents affect them. Again there's a lot of things your parents can do to affect your peers.

Really this third thing you're talking about, which is often called non-shared environment, just think about it as a residual, as every thing that is not directly or indirectly caused by either the family you were raised by or by heredity.

That does mean that it could be almost anything. When researchers try to nail down exactly what is this other thing, they generally have really struggled to find any

particular thing that actually really does matter. Again, probably the thing that is best established is just that the country you're living in matters enormously, so when Madonna adopts a child from Malawi, she does take a kid who at birth has maybe a 20% chance of dying before the age of 5 and essentially bringing that probability down to near 0.

Julia: Right.

Bryan: So, the country you're in is probably a big deal, although normally this research all takes place within a single country, so that wouldn't even get picked out. But we do know that matters tremendously, just being born in a rich country versus a poor country has a huge effect.

Julia: Right. But for the purpose of parents, or potential parents trying to decide how much it's worth investing in their kids, the question of comparing a kid in the US versus a kid in Haiti just doesn't, is not as relevant, right?

Bryan: Right, right, yeah. What's kind of interesting about this research is that of course, usually researchers they do the research and then they don't make any effort to say why it's important or convince anyone they should care. Because they're just writing for other professors who are already interested in it intrinsically, so they don't feel the need to sell the work, but when researchers do start thinking about selling the work, it's common that they will start thinking about it in terms of what does this mean for society and so on. And in terms of the social science there is the problem that the studies are generally done just within rich countries so they really don't tell us that much about what's wrong with Haiti, say.

But when... they're going beyond what they actually figured out in order to give broad social policy advice on the basis of the research, but they're ignoring some practical questions where the research is very relevant, namely parenting style. Since very few parents in the United States would be wondering should I abandon my child in Haiti or not -- maybe it's a good idea, maybe it's not, that's not generally the question they're asking. The questions they're thinking about is within the range of what any sane parent in this country would do: how important are my choices within that range?

Just to go and give you the punchline of the research so we can talk more about it, the punchline of the adoption research and the twin research as well as of course the separated twin research is that almost all the similarity between parent and child can be accounted for with genetics. And it really looks like the effect of upbringing is very small or in many cases, zero.

I think just to answer the question you started with, the question "how can this be when it doesn't seem this way to parents," I've got four kids and it doesn't seem this way to me either, in a lot of cases. But the key thing to remember is that these are long run claims. So there's also plenty of evidence that in the short run, the way that parents raise their kids has a very big effect. If you let your kids do whatever they want and don't punish them when they kick you, they will kick you.

The question that the research is normally answering though is: if you don't punish your child when he kicks you when he's 5, does this make him more likely to become a criminal when he's an adult, or something like that, or spousal abuse or whatever, and the answer there is no. It seems like effects of parenting, while very real, they're also very temporary. They're generally short run effects. To use a term that comes up a lot in this research, there's "fade out" -- so while you can change your kid in the short run, over the long run they tend to go back to where they would've been if they've been raised by a very different family.

Julia: And how long is the long run here?

Bryan: That's a very good question. The long run seems to vary quite a bit by trait. For intelligence we can see if you're three or seven and you're adopted by a high IQ family your IQ will be higher than it otherwise would have been. Generally by the time you're somewhere between 12 and 18 all that goes away. The studies don't come out to exactly the same year, don't come out the exact same year but sometime by your mid to late teens it looks like the effect of the family that raised you on your IQ score, or more generally your cognitive ability, is going to be at least near 0.

Now something that seems to take longer is -- this one really does shock people a lot -- church attendance. Many people look at, if anything is caused by your parents, it's church attendance. And as you might guess, if you go and look at someone who's 10, their parents have almost total control over whether they're attending church, but eventually people grow up and they have more choices. And it's just easier for them to go and do what they want. So there's one very interesting study of church attendance that finds that by the time that you were in your mid-thirties there's no longer any effect of the family that raised you on how much you go to church.

Julia: At all?

Bryan: Yeah, right, yeah.

Julia: At the very least I would think, even if there's a ton of fade out among people raised, say, Christian where a lot of them drop off from church attendance, you would think that even if there's some Christian kids who grow up that still go to church that would cause an effect overall. Because the kids who were not raised Christian, almost none of them would be going to church as adults, right?

Bryan: Well, that's -- what it looks like in the data is that there are some people who proverbially have the God-sized hole in their hearts, and other people who doubt. And out of people who are raised religiously who just don't feel it, they keep doing it for a while and then they start, there's a sharp decline in their 20s, and by the 30s we really just don't see anything. Again, of course it could be a very tiny effect and it just doesn't look as if it was just hard to see the difference, to that from zero but it is very small.

On the other hand there are plenty of people who are not raised religiously who do feel this God-sized hole in their hearts and just start looking around for something to believe in once they become adults.

Julia: But adult conversions to Christianity aren't that common. It must be so much less common than people raised Christian who continue going to church as adults.

Bryan: I have to go and work out the math of that, but -- that could all very well be true... but there indeed seem to be genes for religiosity, and so in religious families they are, at a genetic level, they probably are on average a lot more religious. And they pass those genes on to their kids and then normally those kids keep doing it. But in the cases where you happen to get different genes, then those kids really have a very strong tendency to just give up on it.

By the way, note that I'm talking about church attendance. So what's striking is that there are many different measures of religiosity, so we can also look at something like how religious you feel.

Julia: Right.

Bryan: Or how about what religion you say you belong to. That last one, what religion you say you belong to, there we do see an enormous effect of upbringing on it.

If you were raised by a family with religion X, there's something like an 80% chance that when you're in your 30s you'll still say that that's your religion. However, when you go and scratch the surface more deeply and look into things like, would you actually bother to go to church, do you follow the rules, do you believe the doctrines, do you even know what the doctrines are, or care? That's where we see these large genetic effects, which overtime seem to just wipe out whatever it was that upbringing did.

Julia: This is a very tempting topic because, as with all the topics I've encountered under this umbrella, each one feels more counter-intuitive than the next. But I want to just zoom out first, and I don't think we really talked about all the different outcome measures that the research has shown are not determined by nurture. Why don't you give us a survey of what kind of metrics we're looking at here?

Bryan: Sure, I like I was saying, the researchers usually don't really worry about what's the point in this research or try to convince anyone that it's interesting, but for me of course, what's interesting is, why would someone care about it? What I was doing to write the book is I just tried to first come up with a list of all the main traits that parents care about, all the things they try to influence.

Of course, you might find there's very little effect of parenting on kids on a trait nobody is trying to change, in which case you might say that's not really surprising. Turns out that parents don't have any effect on whether you hold a phone on your left or right hand. How many parents are trying to change that? Hardly any. Turns out that when people don't try to do something, they don't accomplish it.

What I wanted to do was to get a list of the traits where parents actually really are interested in shaping them, so I came up with my own list. And I just asked people around me, is there anything I'm missing, anything you think should be on the list that's not?

Why don't I just go through the main ones on the list and then just talk about some of the evidence? Starting off with health, health is something people are trying to affect prenatally. Trying to change it in the womb. And of course once the kids are born then people are very concerned about the health of their children -- wear a jacket, brush your teeth, all those kind of stuff.

So, there are a number of different measures of health that researchers looked at using these adoption or twin methods. The most objective one, of course, is how long you live, your lifespan. In that one a lot of our best evidence comes from Scandinavia because they've been keeping records on everybody for over a century. And the punch line there is it's very hard to see an effect of upbringing on how long you live.

Julia: Is that from the adoption or the twin studies?

Bryan: Let's see, primarily adoption, if I recall correctly -- although if you go to my book and just go to the health section and just look at the sites you can get exactly what it is. This is a book I wrote 4 years ago so my memory's fading a little bit on it, that is fade out actually.

This is of course only one measure of health, but obviously it's an important one and it is pretty striking. Because there's a lot of things that parents try to do that you'd think would affect life expectancy -- like you try to teach your kids, don't be an excessive drinker, don't smoke, don't use drugs, exercise, eat reasonable amounts.

When you look at life expectancy, when you put it all together, it's very hard -- all the things parents are doing that each one of which you think might have an effect on life expectancy, and we don't see it in the data. The more specific measures, things like how much your parents affect your obesity -- and that's one of the very strongest results, looks like parents do not change your adult weight. Being raised by a family of health nuts is not going to make you thinner. If your biological relatives are overweight, then you are likely to be overweight, and the fact that you are raised by a family that valued keeping very thin, that's not going to change your weight.

Of course this is all on average, so it could be that some people are changed and other people rebel. It might be that some people raised by a family of health nuts and that annoys them so much they go out of their way to eat a lot of Twinkies, that could happen too.

Julia: Earlier you mentioned that these findings are counter-intuitive because you can see the effects of your parenting choices in your own children, but you have to keep in mind that those are short term effects and the research is about long term effects.

Bryan: Exactly.

Julia: I think there's another thing that makes it counter-intuitive which is just -- and I find myself noticing it as you talk -- which is that my brain, and I suspect other people's brains as well, doesn't seem to automatically distinguish the genetic from the nurture effects when it's looking at the correlation in the population.

So as you were talking about the lack of effect of upbringing on adult obesity, I had this reaction of "But that makes no sense, I can see this huge correlation between people's weight and their parents weight," and then only after that moment I checked myself and went "Oh, well that doesn't control for genetics at all." But that doesn't happen automatically.

Bryan: It's very difficult actually for people to do. Because there is such a temptation to just say family resemblance equals upbringing, although we know very well that sometimes that's not so. So if you see a child and a parent that both have the same pig nose, for example, no one thinks it's because the parent got plastic surgery to match the nose, no one thinks that they went and gave them a certain diet that gave them a pig nose. So in general when there's a physical resemblance then our intuition's very much that it's genetics.

But for behavioral resemblance, that's where we are very inclined to see an effect of upbringing, even though really there's not. As to why we think that the behavior is so definitively from their parents, it's not all that clear as to where we get this connection.

Julia: Although, I think people in general are just very confused about it, more confused about genetics than you and I would think. For example I was talking to a plastic surgeon a while back and he said -- he does nose jobs, and he said he regularly gets this question from his patients: is my child, my future child going to get my new nose or my old nose? So the problem may be deeper than we think.

Bryan: Yeah, so they never heard about the experiments where they chopped off mice's tails and see what happened, I guess. Well, it works for tails, but our noses...

Julia: I'm sorry, that was off tangent, but you were talking about the-

Bryan: Health, yes -- for the most objective measure, which is life span, then we see little or no effect of upbringing on that. Then they've done things like subjective health. Subjective health, you might find a bit more of an effect on upbringing, although then it also matters whether you just ask people or whether you get a doctor's evaluation of your subjective health. Again the doctor's evaluation will show less effect of upbringing, so maybe upbringing really more affects your standard for what counts as healthy, rather than your true health.

Julia: Yeah.

Bryan: That's health. Then another one that people also try to affect prenatally, with playing Mozart, is intelligence.

Most parents want their kids to be smart, there are a bunch of things people try doing, even when the kids are in the womb, like reading to them, and playing music, which are relatively easy to test and very hard to find any effect of those. But anyway of course once the kid's born then you try to give them a stimulating environment, read to them, help them with their homework, hope that it will make them smarter. And there, the short run conclusion is it does, so if you get adopted by a smart family you will be smarter for a while. But the long run effect however is quite different.

People have trouble with that, why is it that the long run effect will be smaller than the short run effect? You might think the short run effects will all tend to add up into one big long run effect, but the main thing to remember is that as people get older, they gain more and more control over their own lives, and if something just doesn't feel right for them, something you've been sort of pushing on them that just doesn't resonate with them, then the older they get, the greater their opportunity is to do what they want rather than what you raised them to do.

When I'm talking about this to college students, I often mention, "As you may have noticed, some of you changed your behavior once you showed up on campus. When your parents aren't around, you don't do what your parents want you to do," and no one argues with me on that. Everyone realizes, yeah when my parents are not around, I do what I want to do, when they are around then I do at least more of what they want me to do.

But what is adulthood? It's really not being around your parents all the time. So when you think about it that way it's easier to understand how your parents could be telling you to do something, read a book everyday, and as long as you're living under the same roof, they might be able to control you -- although even there, a lot of people start rebelling as teens.

Julia: Yeah.

Bryan: Once they're adults, then it's really hard for parents to do much to you.

Julia: It also fits with what I know about the science of conditioning, or shaping, or reinforcement learning -- that your motivation and your behavior will be shaped by the rewards and punishments that you get, even the subtle ones you're not really noticing, but if over time you stop getting those little rewards or punishments, then the behavior that was trained in you will fade.

Bryan: Yeah, exactly, and here actually there are experiments on using discipline on kids where, if you've ever heard of the naughty corner, just putting your kid in a corner, "You are in the naughty corner and now you can't come out until you've apologized." There are actual experiments where parents who have problem kids either get advice on how to discipline their kids or not. And the punchline is that, the advice works, even very

modest punishments do improve kids behavior. The main problem is that when you stop punishing them, then they revert back to their old bad behavior. It is an uphill battle because parents have to really stubbornly keep doing it.

One of the few things that actually you can get very good permanent results on, is if kids have sleeping problems. Because there is the Ferber method where you just let kids cry it out for a little while and then you don't immediately comfort them. So as you might guess, if kids immediately get attention whenever they cry, they cry a lot and they're bad sleepers.

Experiments were done where some kids, you just do whatever you want, some kids get the Ferber method where they at least let them cry for five minutes before you go to them, other kids just let them cry it out, it doesn't matter how long it takes. This works, but not only does it work, once you get a kid on the right track of sleeping they generally don't stop sleeping again. And once they start sleeping then they aren't awake to go and want to get attention anymore. So that's one where as long as you do it for a good six months, even kids with pretty bad sleep problems can be fixed with this problem, fixed from parents' point of view anyway.

Julia: So, you were talking about intelligence.

Bryan: Yes, that's one where parents seem to really want to affect it a lot, and there is the short run effect to give parents hope. But it is a false hope, if what you're trying to do is to change their adult intelligence, because that really does seem to disappear.

Then of course a thing a lot of parents are more likely to admit they want to change is happiness, most parents now say they want their kids to be happy. And in fact there's plenty of parents saying, I don't care whether they're smart or successful, I just care about whether they're happy.

There's also some very strong evidence of the effect of upbringing on happiness, one of the best studies here actually was a study of separated identical twins. And the result of the study, which was quite shocking, it said that identical twins who were raised in different homes were more similar in their adult happiness than identical twins that were raised in the same home.

Julia: Wait, what?

Bryan: Yeah.

Julia: That seems like even a stronger result than your theory would predict.

Bryan: Yes, yes. That could actually just be sampling error, there's a few hundred people in it so it might just be by the luck of the draw, it turned out that they were actually more similar when they were separate. Although there is a story that people told – it's just a story but, my first two sons are identical twins, so it does resonate with me a bit. This story just says, that when they were raised together they naturally tried to differentiate

themselves in an artificial way just to get their own niche: I'm the hard working twin, I'm the lazy twin. I'm the cool twin, stuff like that.

As long as you have two twins together, then they keep sort of differentiating themselves, but if you separate them, they don't really know what they're not supposed to be.

Julia: Right, right.

Bryan: Then they just do what is in their hearts, and there you have it. Again, the similarity in happiness between separated twins was very strong. Actually one of the strongest similarities that you can see between identical twins, who are of course, as similar as two people, two human beings will ever be.

And people had a lot of trouble with this because all these things I'm doing to try to make them happy doesn't change it. Again, remember this is long-run happiness, this is adult happiness. It's not saying that you can't give your kid a better or worse childhood, although that probably is quite a bit harder than people think.

There are a lot of people who are just by disposition downers, and other people who are by disposition uppers, but really what it's saying is that you're not going to put your kid on the path to happiness, so because you raise them in a certain way then they're going to be happy for the rest of their lives. Really that's something that very much comes from within. So there's something, I'm very interested in happiness research generally, but this is very real. General result of your happiness research overall is that external circumstances of all kinds are just much less important than people think.

Julia: Right, I think there's also, it's also intuitively confusing because people might think well, if someone doesn't have a happy childhood, surely that knowledge and that memory will make them happier as an adult -- which I think probably is true to some extent but only to the extent that they are thinking about or reflecting on their childhood, which probably doesn't happen as often. There's just other stuff going on in your day to day life.

Bryan: Of course. How much of your day have you spent today reflecting on your childhood?

Julia: Right.

Bryan: ... so I have a lot of vivid childhood memories, which I know memory researchers will tell you that probably a lot of them were constructed, but still, a lot of them aren't constructed. Just remember, a lot of people are just not very reflective at all. So a lot of people aren't listening to this podcast – just, they wake up and they have their day and they don't think about what was happening last year and much less 20 years ago.

Julia: Yeah, I mean, since we're talking about happiness research, you're probably aware that it's pretty tricky to actually measure happiness as a bunch of ...

Bryan: Yes. So normally this is the asking the method, which is the easiest method, and it's the most commonly used because it's the easiest, this is just, how would you rate your life overall? As an economist I know, a lot of economists hate this method and they just think that it's nonsense, but to me it makes perfect sense. Yes, people-

Julia: Economists want to use revealed preference? People decide not to kill themselves and that shows they prefer living to not living?

Bryan: Yeah, that's not a terrible argument.

They say that, when some people say they're happy, just on principle they say that proves nothing. That just seems paranoid to me – what, they're all lying about being happy, or whatever? And then there's this idea well, happiness is a subjective term so that's, it's very relative to whatever society you're in.

Here I have to think about, my wife has worked at several law firms. I know a bunch of partners at law firms who seem to be miserable people and I look at them and say look, if you think that's, if you think they're miserable now with the standard, with the stuff they take for granted right now, do they remember what it was like to be younger and much poorer?

The idea that they're changing the word that quickly it seems, it's pretty odd to me, really. And just the cultural universal of smiling people are happy, it does actually correlate in the data -- and it makes a lot of sense to me that sure, there could be someone who's really happy but they just culturally don't believe in smiling or something like that. But still, to just go and throw that out and say, we don't know anything about it, seems overly sketchy.

Julia: Yeah, I agree. I also think that in this case the bias that I would expect in these self-reported happiness, I would expect that to show more of an effect of nurture. In this sense.

Bryan: Yeah, your family might tell you what you're supposed to say -- Everything is happy, everything is good, all the time.

Julia: Right. Or it's not virtuous to not be happy, I think in some subcultures, it's considered sort of, like a character failing or a negative commentary on your family or your, culture to not be happy. I'd expect that to bias people in the direction of saying they have the same level of happiness as their parents, or their families, say they do. If we don't find that, then that's sort of more interesting.

Bryan: For sure. So happiness, and then, should we keep going?

Julia: Yeah, go on.

Bryan: Then, another thing that parents are, possibly more than anything else this days, pushing is success -- not in the follow your bliss sense, but in the stuff you can brag about, that your parents can brag about to their friends.

So I go and look at the effect of parenting on educational outcomes as well as income. And so for education we actually do see a small but very reliable effect of upbringing on it. There's a lot of different studies, all of which find a pretty similar small effect, and it comes down to roughly, if you get adopted by a family where the mom has an extra year of education, you'll probably have on average about five extra weeks. About a one to ten ratio of which- and again, the studies are large, statistically the stuff is reliable but still a lot less than what most people would think.

Julia: Statistically but not practically significant.

Bryan: Yes. Basically it comes down to if your mom had ten more years of education, you have one more year.

Julia: Right.

Bryan: That doesn't seem like that big of a deal. It's something.

Julia: And is there any way to tell where that effect is coming from, whether it's through the amount of encouragement the parent gives, or whether it's through the parent choosing schools that have very studious peers for you, et cetera?

Bryan: Very hard to say, although there is a tendency to find an effect for moms but not for dads, although that's not universal. Which again suggests it's something or other involving the moms, but that can be almost anything. It could be their moms reading to you or paying more attention to you or giving you better diets or taking more interest in your school work, there's all these possibilities. But, it's not a universal rule that it's moms that matter and dads don't..

What's really striking is when people look at the effect of upbringing on income. Here, one of the most vivid cases of this, there was a Korean adoption study where Korean war orphans got adopted by random American families, through real random assignment, and they took a look at them when they were in their 30s and found that the kids that got adopted by the very richest families had the same average income as the kids who were adopted by the very poorest families.

And what's really striking is this study was actually, since it was done, these kids were adopted in the 50s and 60s, this was back when it was much easier for poor families to adopt, so you only needed to be 25% above the poverty line to be eligible to adopt in this study.

Julia: So there was a lot of variation.

Bryan: There was a big range. And yet being adopted by the rich family did not make you rich, being adopted by the poor family didn't make you poor in terms of your own income. So it's quite likely that your parents, richer parents are funneling you more money, so that's nice, but they didn't change you except that they gave you extra stuff.

Julia: So there's definitely a correlation, that we can observe in the American population between your income and your parents' income, which as we were discussing earlier does not mean that there's a causation there that's running through your upbringing.

Bryan: It's a very strong cultural belief that it is through the upbringing. You got to go to the rich family, you got to go to the good schools and you got the good connections and you get to be rich like your parents -- but it really doesn't look like that's the story, actually.

Julia: Okay, one thing that has changed over the years is income mobility over time. How likely are you to end up with more or less income than your parents?

Bryan: That's actually really complicated because, it's true that inequality has gone up but when you just measure, if you measure mobility just by rank order, if you rank the 30th percentile now, what percentile would you expect to end up at. That actually is much less clear that has changed over time. The best recent work that I've seen by economists, it makes the distinction that... if your family is lower income, then in a way it's worse because the bottom has gotten worse than it used to be. But if you just think of it in terms of percentile, measured by percentile doesn't seem like mobility really has changed very much.

Julia: If it's the case that the correlation between parents' income and child's adult income is mostly just genetics, then would that predict that we wouldn't see changes in income mobility over time? Not just in the US, but everywhere?

Bryan: No, because again remember, just like you were saying, we've got nurture, we've got nature and then we've got the residual, non-shared environment which is everything else. The nature of the world economy is definitely in the something else category. Your parents don't decide which planet you're on, they don't decide what era you live in, so there can be all kinds of environmental changes going on and yet still heredity can explain all of the similarity between parent and child.

There could be a horrible plague that comes and leads to mass death and yet still the similarity between parent and child could remain entirely hereditary even though the death rate goes up to astronomical levels.

Julia: Right.

Bryan: Just means the conditions could be more random. By the way, on income there's one study from Sweden where again, they have the best data because they keep such careful tabs on everyone, and actually there's a half-Swedish, half-Czech professor at NYU named David Cesarini who managed to get tax records for this giant sample of twins. So you know exactly how much legal income they're reporting for many decades,

and what he found on income was that when you're in your 20s, there we still do see this effect of upbringing on your income, but by the time you're in your 30s it goes away. So looks like maybe your parents can go and get you a good first job and make some phone calls for you or maybe they actually do teach you the ins of how to get a better job, or they teach the value of money or whatever.

You can see this when you're getting your first job, but looks like over time people aren't going to keep doing favors to your parents anymore. Or people who just naturally are not good with money or start messing up their lives, they lose that edge. Again, this is another result where you would do the short run effect and where it's so blatant in many cases, where you say look, I'm a rich parent, when I got the kid, they did the donation, got the kid into Harvard, the kid got the job at, Ernst & Young or wherever other high profile high paid firm in New York, clearly due to the family and that can all be totally true for the first job but it doesn't mean their parents had an important effect or even noticeable effect on their lifetime career.

Julia: Right.

Bryan: And again, if you think about, basically if your dad goes and gets you a job that you're not qualified for, they may go and put up with you for a while but eventually they're not going to keep treating you great forever just because your dad made phone calls some years ago.

And on the other hand you may not have the advantages but you still have an opportunity to prove yourself, and that's very random on the short run but over time you have the opportunities mount up and what people rise to whatever the level would have been.

That's success for you.

Julia: In the interest of time, because I want to make sure we get to discuss implications of this research...

Bryan: Sure, sure.

Julia: Let's discuss one more outcome metric -- and I'm going to nominate values because that was most interesting to me. And in fact as I was reading, I like the way you staggered or ordered the various outcome measures. Because each one I was like, well, so fine, health isn't affected but surely happiness is -- oh, okay, so happiness isn't affected, but surely values are- oh.

So yeah, why don't you talk about what kinds of values researchers looked at?

Bryan: Sure, sure. I wanted to distinguish what I call character from what I call values. For character, these are traits that almost everyone agrees are good, honesty or hard work or something like that -- and we'll gloss over that, there's nothing too surprising there.

Then for values, these are the controversial ones, these are the ones where different parents want to instill very different values in different kids.

So mostly I looked at the effect of parents on religiosity and your political views, then also at, also looked at marital behavior, childbearing behavior and sexual behavior as well.

The big punchline there is that both politics and religion work in a very similar way, namely that we see enormous effects of upbringing on two measures. One of them is the religion you say you believe in, and the other one is the political party you say you believe in or you say that you vote for. If you're raised by Presbyterians you are very likely to say you're Presbyterian for the rest of your life. If you're raised by democrats, you're very likely to say you're democrat for the rest of your life.

These are actually the two biggest effects of upbringing that I found in all this research. Now, many people there would be very quick to say ah-ha, now we found it, but as I was mentioning earlier, the religion you say you belong to is not the only way they might measure religiosity. You might measure it by say whether you actually go to church, whether you follow the rules, whether you say, whether you read the bible, whether you say you consider yourself a spiritual person. Or similarly for politics. Saying that you're a democrat that doesn't, that is one measure of your political views but how about your views on the issues or whether you actually bother to vote or whether you are a consistent party line democrat or not.

What we see in both these cases is that the more deeply rooted the measure is then the more important genes become. And then for the things that seem to be more intrinsic in the person, like the actual religious doctrinal views that you have, whether you believe you're going to hell or not, or similarly whether you believe that raising the minimum wage is a good idea or you favor the death penalty, these things where you act out your views about doctrine, those ones where again, we see that genetics have most or all the effect -- upbringing really doesn't matter very much.

We see some similar things for sexual behavior, seems like parents do have an effect on when you start having sex but not on your adult sexual behavior, so you have that kind of stuff as well.

Julia: And whether or not you get divorced? That's definitely a common instance.

Bryan: Yeah, yeah, divorce, yeah.

Julia: If your parents got divorced, that'll, it's harder for you, you don't have a good role model, of a good marriage, et cetera, et cetera.

Bryan: Yeah. A lot of, quite a bit of work done on that one specifically, and it looks like the resemblance between parent and child for divorce is highly genetic, maybe entirely genetic. You can actually see that the similarity of identical twins for whether or not they're divorced is much higher than fraternal twins, which is a smoking gun of a large

genetic effect. And really if you go and read a bit about the effect of personality in general on divorce, it's nothing too surprising. People who are disagreeable and have low conscientiousness and who have bad attitudes, have high chances of getting divorced.

People who are agreeable and are very concerned to follow rules strictly and to have sunny dispositions are much less likely to get divorced. If you can believe that genetics have a big effect in your personality and then your personality has a big effect on your divorce, then it really is not that hard to believe.

Julia: Yeah, interesting.

There was something that you said, almost in passing, in your book -- about how you explain the outcomes for example for your children, that don't go through genetics and wouldn't go through nurture -- and you attributed them to free will. And I couldn't tell quite how serious you were being there. I think you were being serious.

Bryan: Oh yeah.

Julia: But it seems to me that the question of free will in the way I understand it was sort of orthogonal, independent of the predictors, scientific predictors of the outcomes. Even if all my important life outcomes are the result of my culture growing up, or my genetics... There still, seems to me an open question of, philosophically, can I be said to have had free will in making those decision? But it seems like a separate question to me.

Bryan: Of course logically they're separate questions, but in probabilistic terms if you can predict people's behavior extremely well, this would reasonably undermine your belief in free will and on the other hand if you've made an enormous effort to predict it, and still are coming up very short, probabilistically I would say, put some weight in the scales of free will.

Especially when one of my first two sons, they're identical twins, they're raised together, and yet you look and you see that they are quite different in a bunch of ways, when you're like why would that be, what exactly happened? ...

Yeah, this is not intended to be a philosophical thesis on free will but I just couldn't resist putting it in there, because it's my view. Every now and then I just like to take a chance to put it in there.

Julia: Okay, makes sense. In our remaining minutes I want to talk about what this research means for lifestyle choices -- for example, I guess it's somewhat obvious but what it might mean for how much time and effort to spend on your kids, but also the question of how many children to have.

Bryan: That is in fact the whole thing that motivated me, which is in the title of the book. A lot of parents when they hear this stuff, they get super depressed and say what's the point of anything or woe is me. And I always say well, look you seem very happy with how you

turned out, well, what the evidence is saying is that you could expect your kids to turn out a lot like you even if you don't try very hard.

They say I don't want to just be a lazy parent who does nothing. Well so, look, so do the stuff that you actually enjoy doing, the activities that you would do with your kids that you would do even if you didn't think there is any long run benefits, keep doing them. You like them? Why not. On the other hand, the stuff that's painful, the part of parenting that makes you wish that you didn't have kids, this is the part where I say this stuff looks like you really could stop doing it without doing any long run damage. Especially as is often the case, where kids don't want to do the stuff that you're forcing them to do either. It really is an across the board win, where the parents are happier, kids are happier and the long run looks like it's going to be the same either way.

I know some parents who make their kids do Tae Kwon Do, the parents don't like dragging them there, the kids don't enjoy it, parents feel like they have to do it because otherwise their kids are going to be losers, and what they're saying is, this is not what's going to turn your kids from being losers into winners, it's just not that important.

Julia: That's easier for me to accept, but what's harder for me to accept is the idea that -- what this seems to suggest, the implication seems to be that if you wouldn't enjoy punishing your kids for not doing the chores they promised to do or telling a lie or et cetera, et cetera, if you wouldn't enjoy that and your kid certainly wouldn't enjoy it, then don't punish them.

Bryan: Well, remember as I said there are substantial short run effects to punishment.

Julia: So the reason to do it is so you can have an easier time?

Bryan: Yeah. Make your kid into a decent roommate.

Julia: Okay.

Bryan: If you have a roommate and they're not acting well, and you can figure out some way to treat them so they will behave. That's a good reason to do it. If someone says yeah, but when they're 50, they'll be back to their usual tricks, who cares? Then you won't be living with them anymore.

Actually, a lot of my advice is precisely this -- expect your kids to treat you well, because I know a lot of parents who let their kids physically and emotionally abuse them. I know parents who let their children kick them hard, with their shoes on. And I'm not just horrified at this, but again, it's not that you are going and getting the idea they can run around as adults kicking people. Life will teach you you can't kick people, other than your parents, very quickly, but why should parents have to sit around getting kicked by their kids?

That's a case where I say, there's a very good reason, you don't enjoy it, your kid doesn't enjoy it but there is this benefit that you're gonna stop getting kicked, so that's what we were doing.

Julia: But maybe getting kicked builds character for parents!

Bryan: Barely studied... I guess it's possible, I wouldn't recommend trying it.

Julia: All right, what about the question of how many kids to have?

Bryan: Yes. When I was almost done with the book, there was this article that came out by a mom who said, well, my husband and I are thinking about having a third child but both of our kids are in soccer and we already spend 20 hours a week shuttling them to and from soccer games. And then we realized, with a third kid, then we'd have to go and have a third set of soccer games, third set of soccer practices, we don't think we can handle it.

When I was reading this, I was thinking, all right, let's just reverse this logic. Once you accept that you don't need to take your kids to soccer in order to give them a decent future, this means the cost of having third kid is in fact much lower than you thought. And for many though not all people of course, that will be the difference between wanting to have one more kid and not wanting to have one more kid.

This is the case where the economist in me really came out, and when I read all the research saying so, basically what you're saying is that you can get the same kids that you would've had otherwise for a lower price. The obvious thing of course is to stop overpaying, but the next step is to reconsider whether or not you're buying the right amount, and that really is the inspiration for the title.

Julia: You're not arguing about the right number of children to have, you're just arguing that the right number for a given person is probably higher than they originally thought it was before they found out they were overpaying.

Bryan: Yeah, that's exactly right. This is not, I never intended it to be a bossy book where I'm going to go and try to tell everyone you should be having kids because the planet needs them or anything like that. I do have a chapter as you're mentioning where I try to get rid of people's guilt about having more kids, and saying actually you're doing something good for the planet, but I didn't want to go and say and therefore you should go and have 20 kids or anything like that. I just want to go and say - you know your own preferences, it's not my place to tell you how many kids to have, but I do think I have a role in just letting you know exactly what the effects of parenting are on your kids' upbringing and this may imply something about what the cost of having kids is in terms of your time and effort and stress.

If the time and effort and stress is the reason why you're not having a kid, then my advice is, first revise your parenting style to fit with the facts, and then secondly, once

you've revised it, say well, I guess now that I do it this way, having kids looks like a much better deal than I thought it was, so I'll stock up.

Strangely, the people who hated this book the most were the voluntarily childless. I thought I had gone out of my way to say look, I have no problem with you, I don't want to start a fight here, I just want to say that having kids is a lot cheaper than you thought. If you say "I wouldn't want them if they were free," then fine, we'll go in peace, that's cool. But for some reason they seem to be very upset at me anyway, I don't know.

Julia: That's- I would have predicted that the people who'd be most upset would be the parents. Actually, when I was doing some prep for this podcast I found some discussions on reddit and other forums and the reactions are pretty ... vicious sometimes. What really frustrates me is that they don't- people will say "That's bunk, of course parenting matters" but they don't actually respond to the evidence that you present. They'll sometimes present anecdotal evidence or intuitive evidence, but even when they do that they don't take the next step of explaining what's wrong with the arguments that you laid out in the book.

Bryan: Right, and sort of what bothers me more is I do really try to take seriously the challenge of reconciling the science with first hand experience, because in general it seems like a bad idea to tell someone who's done something for 20 years "You don't know what you're talking about." Of course they know what they're talking about, they've done it for 20 years, they gotta know something.

That's why I try to go over these points of why the short run result is consistent with your first hand experience. The long run result is not, but you don't really have first hand experience with long run things. It's not really how it works. In the very short run you can see, I went and punished him, his behavior improved, cause and effect. And that works, but you go and say I did something and 20 years later he was different from he otherwise would've been... How do you know what he otherwise would've been?

It's very hard to actually judge that, that really is a case where causation is very hard to disentangle. And then I also made an effort to look around for the counter-examples again, things like the religion you say you belong to, the political party that you identify with.

And then I also talked about what I consider to be the most meaningful effect of parenting, which is just on the relationship, the quality of the relationship. This is one where we've got very good twin evidence that if you were raised by the same person, you're going to see them in a similar light.

There is some tendency for even separated twins to say similar things about their adoptive parents, but in general, if you are a kind person, your kids will see you as kind. If you're a mean person, your kids will see you as mean. This is the kind of stuff that I really think about a lot as a parent. There was an article that I did for the Wall Street Journal, where as usual, I didn't get to pick the title, so they picked the title "Lessons from twin research, have more kids, pay less attention to them", which-

Julia: Yeah, you could expect that's going to be the spin the media is going to put on this.

Bryan: Right, this does not describe my parenting style at all, actually, I spend an enormous amount of time with my kids. I'm homeschooling my identical twins for middle school, they're in the other room right now. I'm not doing this because I think this is going to turn them into super geniuses later in life, I don't think I have much control over that. Really, I was just trying to give them a better experience in 7th and 8th grade than I had because those were the most miserable years of my life and I want those years to be better for them.

Julia: Excellent. Well, we're actually over time, and this seems like a good note to close on. I'm going to wrap up this section of the podcast, and we'll move on now to the rationally speaking pick.

[interlude]

Julia: Welcome back, every episode we invite our guest to introduce the rationally speaking pick of the episode. It's a book or website or movie or whatever else tickles his or her rational fancy. Bryan, what's your pick for this episode?

Bryan: I hope you'll let me do two.

Julia: All right, people have gotten away with three in the past.

Bryan: Right. Coming to stores very soon is Philip Tetlock's *Superforecasters* -- so Philip Tetlock is my favorite political psychologist in the world, I think that he is the greatest political psychologist of all time. *Superforecasters* tells the story of a major experiment that he's involved in, where he was trying to find people who are good at forecasting major social events. There are actually a number of competitors with him, Robin Hanson is running one of the competing teams. Tetlock's team won. Basically the deal was that they setup all kinds of very specific questions with definite right or wrong answers, and then tried to find people who'd be good at predicting the probabilities for those events.

Not only did Tetlock find that there were some people, there were of course some people who did much better than others, but he found that was a very reliable trait. Out of people on the top 2% of forecasting accuracy, something about half could manage to stay in that top 2% for over a multi year period. And then the book looks at what exactly is the deal with these people who are great forecasters, what are their cognitive styles, how do they think - and other things like if you put a bunch of superforecasters together, are they super superforecasters? And yeah, they kind of are. This book is one of the most important books of social science ever, really.

It goes and shows that while social scientists, and especially pundits, are terrible on their accuracy it's not because the questions are unsolvable -- rather it's because pundits are mostly entertainers, they're not actually serious thinkers, so we should just ignore them and start paying a lot more attention to Tetlock's *Superforecasters*.

Julia: A copy of which just arrived on my desk yesterday.

Bryan: You're one of the lucky few, it's a great book. And my other favorite book, a work of political philosophy by philosopher Michael Huemer, it's called *The Problem of Political Authority*. I am as your readers probably don't know, a long time libertarian, but I will say almost every book of libertarian political philosophy embarrasses me, I wouldn't think about giving it to someone who didn't agree...

Julia: Have you ever heard Dennett say that nothing irritates him more than a bad argument for a position that he holds?

Bryan: I haven't heard it but I totally know the feeling, yes. Michael Huemer actually, I knew him when I was an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, he was one year ahead of me, he's written this book which, it will still not convince most people yet it is the book that I'm very happy to give to people who have very different political views from mine and say look, if you're going to read one book that I recommend on political philosophy ever, this is the book. It just does such a fantastic job.

What's great about the book is, it really makes a sincere effort to meet people where they are, to start with premises they already accept and take them to a conclusion that is very different from the one they currently hold. Then along the way say, why is it exactly that you don't want to go and follow this chain of argument through? What exactly was stopping you?

This book, there's no obscurantism, no attempt to just go and preach the choir. It's the kind of book that I like, where it takes readers where they are, say here's some things that seem obvious to almost everyone, right? Agree? Right, let's start from there and move on and see where we get.

Julia: And see whether you're going to bite the bullet or find some-

Bryan: Yes. Exactly.

Julia: -- escape route, or something.

Bryan: Exactly. Another great book which I bought tens of copies just to give them out to people, I'm such a fan of the book.

Julia: Excellent. We'll link to both of those picks on the podcast website as well as to your blog and of course to your book: *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids*. Bryan, it was a pleasure having you on this show, thank you so much for joining us.

Bryan: My pleasure, thanks very much.

Julia: This concludes another episode of *Rationally Speaking*. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.