

## Nurturing Nature

Since Charles Darwin wrote his book, “On the Origin of Species”, there has been discussion about the role of nature and the environment in the development of the individual and the evolution of the human race. Often referred to as the ‘nature or nurture debate’, the pendulum has swung depending upon the current societal viewpoint. With recent developments in science – specifically the Human Genome Project (HGP), research into the role of epigenetics and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) of the brain – we now have a clearer understanding that these forces do not occur on an either/or basis. It is, instead, a dynamic where nurture impacts on nature.

How much is inborn and how much can we influence in the way we nurture these traits? Research has identified that temperament and gender traits, natural abilities, learning styles, mood and behaviour patterns, stress responses, emotional and relational styles are all predetermined at birth. How parents, siblings, friends, teachers and mentors respond to these traits over the years and the choices that the individual makes will influence and nurture the development of these innate traits into personality characteristics, behavioural habits and talents. The interaction is a two-way process and we each have a role in nurturing nature. Too much push and there is resistance; not enough encouragement and there can be apathy; motivation can overcome obstacles; passivity can result in withdrawal.

When we identify naturally occurring traits and characteristics, we are working with – not against – nature. Cognitive abilities, temperament and learning styles can be identified and matched with interests and subject areas to enhance the best outcome in academic achievement and career selection.

In Michael Gurian’s book, “Nurture the Nature”, he encourages a strength-based approach in parenting and teaching. Gurian maintains that young people and their parents need to take time to identify inherent gifts and strengths and look at ways in which these can be enhanced and nurtured. He likens this process to a treasure hunt in which we are searching for hidden treasure.

Similarly, Mel Levine, the author of “A Mind at a Time”, outlines the need for us to identify innate neurodevelopmental strengths, foster connections with subject matter and promote interests in specific subject areas. He maintains that young people should be able to follow their interests because natural affinities promote the development of expertise and lead to passion about involvement in a particular field or area of talent. To facilitate positive personal, academic and professional outcomes, we need to allow students to explore their natural abilities; follow their interests; develop passion in their areas of talent and as adults, we should expend time and effort in nurturing nature.