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A new study published this week which looks at the private lives of 'burying beetles' shows that bad parenting creates bad parents-to-be, while well-cared for larvae mature into high quality parents.

Rebecca Kilner, professor of evolutionary biology at Cambridge University, took it one step further. Interestingly, when they took one 'good' and one 'bad' parent and put them together, the 'good' parents compensated - they worked harder to feed their larvae (and thus give them 'a better start in life' which, in part, determined how long they would be likely to live). This had a detrimental effect on the 'good' parents themselves, however, who tended to die sooner than their more laid back partners.

Do the same theories extend to humans? We're told that obese parents tend to have obese children, sporty parents often have sporty kids, academic parents frequently have academic kids, parents who chose to embrace the benefits culture (rather than doing so of necessity) appear to have a greater chance of having kids who do likewise ... and so on and so forth. How much of this is 'nature' (i.e. what is predetermined by your genes) ... and how much is 'nurture' i.e. a product of our environment and how positively or otherwise we adapt to situations in which we find ourselves. The nature v nurture debate has gone on for years - and all we can say for certain is that, in humans, both are important.

ENDING IT ALL

Beachy Head is a famous beauty spot. The spectacular 500ft high chalk cliffs draw tourists from all parts of the globe. Unfortunately they also draw people intent on jumping off. I heard a radio programme a while back which featured a man whose wife leapt to her death from the cliffs. He now keeps a lonely vigil and tries to deter others who have the same idea.

Last year we read that the board of the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District voted unanimously to approve a \$76 million funding plan for installation of steel-cable nets 20 feet beneath the east and west edges of the bridge that are intended to deter people from leaping to their deaths ... or catch them if they do.

Now a study published in The Lancet Psychiatry journal looks at the problem of "suicide hotspots" in the round and at the success of projects which target preventative measures at them. It shows that restricting access at these sites (blocking the means of suicide e.g. by installing barriers and safety nets) at suicide hotspots like high bridges and cliffs reduces the number of suicides by more than 90%

For the first time, this large meta-analysis shows that a variety of other suicide prevention approaches currently being used at known hotspots around the world including encouraging help-seeking (e.g., placing signs and crisis telephones) and increasing the likelihood of intervention by a third party (e.g., increasing surveillance by using CCTV and suicide patrols) also appear to significantly lower the number of deaths at these locations.

Lead author Prof. Jane Pirkis from the University of Melbourne in Australia says: "These key interventions have the potential to complement each other and buy time to allow an individual to reconsider their actions and allow others the opportunity to intervene." According to Prof. Pirkis, "Although suicide methods at high-risk locations are not the most common ways for people to take their own lives and may only have a small impact on overall suicide rates, suicide attempts at these

sites are often fatal and attract high profile media attention which can lead to copycat acts. These methods of suicide also have a distressing impact on the mental wellbeing of witnesses and people who live or work near these locations.” She adds, “Studies that have looked at substitution suggest that although restricting access at one site may shift some of the problem to other locations, there is still a significant overall reduction in deaths by the same method.”

For some - for example those with difficult to treat mental illnesses which make every day a misery - measures such as this may act as a minor deterrent ... but they will eventually find a way. Others, however, attempt suicide on impulse - and, if they fail, one suspects they spend the rest of their lives giving thanks for their good fortune. Others see it as the easy way out - and preferable to dealing with problems which, with good advice, may be relatively easily solved. Those for whom life potentially has a lot to offer may in time be grateful for the work Prof Pirkis and her team have undertaken.

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