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Living in Families

This era of change has brought new pressures into the home, adding to the difficulties parents and children have always had getting along together. Families need help, but they can also help themselves in definite ways ...

1994 International Year of the Family

So much has been said about unusual families in the media coverage of the International Year of the Family 1994 that people may tend to forget about the usual ones. Journalists are not stimulated by the placid regularity of normal domestic life. That is why they seem to have concentrated harder on "dysfunctional" families with grievous interpersonal problems than on the far more numerous cases of people living together in reasonable harmony. And that is why they have paid relatively more attention to spectacularly broken homes ("Tyler is divorcing his parents") and unconventional living arrangements ("Kimberly has two mommies") than to the standard units of fathers, mothers and children in which the vast majority of the world's people live.

In the process of publicly analyzing the family during this United Nations-designated year, the meaning of the thing itself has been stretched nearly out of recognition. No longer, it seems, is it correct to speak of a couple "getting married and having a family," since little distinction is now made between a childless couple and a family in the traditional definition of the term. Perhaps the broadest statement about the Year was made by popular sociologist Shere Hite: "Wherever there is lasting love, there is a family." That would seem to make a family out of a single person and a pet.

Be that as it may, the first image to come to most people's minds at the mention of a family is of a household consisting of parents and children up to the age of 20. Not only is this the world's most common living arrangement, it is also most people's idea of the best way to live. Surveys of Canadian youths show that more than 85 per cent of them hope to get married, have children, and enjoy a stable marriage ever after. Canadian parents have repeatedly told pollsters that their spouses and children are the most important thing in their lives.

When the traditional family unit is discussed, it is usually in terms of the external social changes that are threatening its existence as an institution. Little thought is given to the internal problems of normal homes. The central problem for most family members is, of course, how to get along with each other. This internal matter is not without its external implications; for only where there are orderly and peaceful families can there be an orderly and peaceful society.

Of all the social changes that have affected the family in recent years, by far the most significant has been the increase in the number of mothers of school-age children who have taken outside employment. In Canada, some 75 per cent of women in this category now have full-time or part-time jobs. For the most part, economic imperatives have left women no choice but to work for money. An income sufficient to maintain an average family in average style took one Canadian 48 hours a week to earn in the 1950s. It takes two people 65 to 75 hours a week to earn that today.

The conflicts between work and family life and scarcity of time to devote to children have taken a personal toll on women in the form of stress and depression. Obviously individuals under stress are harder to deal with than those who are not, so the tensions of work are carried over into tensions in mother-child relationships. Men, too, report feeling "stressed out" and squeezed between work and family obligations. Males raised in the tradition of mothers

doing everything in the home are inclined to be lax in doing housework and awkward in the unaccustomed role of actively nurturing children. But if a two-income family is to run smoothly and fairly, the household workload must be shared.

Another profound change in family relationships lies in the relatively high incidence of divorce and marital separations in western society. The fact that so many couples feel they must go their separate ways illustrates just how difficult it is for people to live together satisfactorily at the best of times.

Household break ups, together with the fact that more single mothers now choose to raise infants themselves rather than put them up for adoption, have brought about an increase in single-parent households, usually headed by a woman. The tension between parent and child is likely to be more pronounced in a one-parent household than in one where both natural parents are present, since the difficulties of child-rearing all fall on one set of shoulders. The burden is increased by having to live in poverty, as a disproportionate number of one-parent families do.

According to statistics, Canadian children are unlikely to live permanently in a single-parent household after their parents have parted. As Alan Mirabelli of Canada's estimable Vanier Institute of the Family put it in a recent speech: "Marriage is still popular. It's so popular that many Canadians marry two or three times." People are getting married at approximately the same rate as they always have, but there has been a huge increase in the proportion of those who re-marry. This is not necessarily good news, given the antipathy children are apt to feel towards step-parents. How often has step-father or step-mother heard the words, "I'm not *your* child. You can't tell *me* what to do!"

The generations approach each other in a state of culture shock

Still another trend that affects household relationships in the western world is a low birth rate, which means that children are less exposed to the socializing influences of big or extended families. They have fewer brothers and sisters (if they have any at all) and fewer cousins, uncles and aunts, with whom such salutary friendships can be formed. In Canada, their isolation is heightened by our national penchant for moving from place to place, which means that children are often geographically separated from their extended families. For many, the love and wisdom of grandparents are felt only in brief, stilted long-distance telephone conversations and occasional visits on holidays. One of the great functions of the family has always been to act as a transmitter of values from one generation to the next, and our low birth rate and mobility make it more difficult to fulfil this role.

All these factors and more are weighing on modern family life, and the strains are showing. If good communications spell good human relations, the present situation is none too bright. Surely it is a sign that many parents have failed to get across a crucial parental message when a majority of the Canadian teenagers in a broadly based survey say that education is not important. The fact that 30 per cent of Canadian schoolchildren are found to have problems with basic literacy and numeracy is a damning indication that their parents are not keeping a close enough eye on their educational progress. The apparent lack of interest tends to confirm the opinion of the majority of youths in one survey who said that adults do not really care about them.

An indication of how wide is the communications gap came in a recent study of Quebec fatherhood published in Montreal's *La Presse*. The fathers' perceptions of how well they related to their children differed radically from the children's. For example, 90 per cent of fathers were under the impression that they listened to their children's problems, but only 77 per cent of the children thought they did.

Of course, the gulf in perception between parent and child has always been enormous. The two generations approach each other in a mutual state of culture shock. Each was raised in a different environment and at a different stage in social development, so they see life from a different standpoint. The faster the rate of change, the farther apart are those standpoints. And in recent times the pace of change has been staggering, especially in the realm of the attitudes that dictate what is socially acceptable behavior and what is not.

Television has a notable role to play as a moulder of attitudes among modern children who typically spend more time watching it than attending classes. Children are the best of mimics — they learn by imitation, after all — and they naturally mimic the cheeky and unruly antics of the impossibly precocious kids they watch on TV. Worse, both children and adults are likely to feel that their lives should be as glamorous and trouble-free as those they see in televised fiction. TV traditionally has held up a standard of household bliss unknown to real families. It only exacerbates the friction that periodically afflicts

every family when television leads people to believe that their home should be happier than it is.

All these contemporary pressures on family life are superimposed on the inherent difficulty of raising children. We have Plato's word for it that it has never been easy: "Of all the animals, the boy is the most unmanageable," the ancient philosopher wrote. But then, as has been remarked, the human is probably the only species to undertake the taming of its half-grown progeny. There is a strong instinctive impulse to try to accomplish this by physical force, which always carries the danger of becoming excessive if not applied very judiciously.

Perhaps the single most important point for a parent to keep in mind in dealing with a child is that it is a relationship of the stronger over the weaker. The parent has all the power of coercion, by physical, psychological, and material means. Short of spankings and slaps, he or she can dish out stinging reprimands, withhold privileges, force a child to do unpleasant things, and deprive him or her of amenities. Like all power, the power of the parent is accompanied by a terrible responsibility. If the child is to grow into a well-adjusted adult, that power must not be abused.

One way to guard against wielding parental power irresponsibly is to remember that there is a difference between punishment and discipline. Punishment has an element of revenge to it; it is "suffering, pain, or loss that serves as retribution," as Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary says. Discipline, on the other hand, is "enforcing obedience or order." It is not discipline to hit or otherwise chastise a child for doing something that merely displeases you, and nobody knows that better than the child does. Very early in their lives, children develop a keen sense of what is fair.

Enforcing discipline by establishing a clear set of rules

In fact, psychologists say, one of the biggest mistakes a parent can make is to take a child's behavior personally. The inclination to do so is deeply embedded in the nature of this most sensitive of relationships. Parents naturally project their own personalities on their children and become frustrated when their expectations are thwarted. Frustration can manifest itself in punishment based on anger, and the unfairness of the situation can make legitimate discipline difficult to enforce.

One way around this, experts say, is for parents to sort out the acts that threaten the order of the home from those that upset them personally. This must be done in a systematic way. Parents should take the time to establish a set of rules that call for disciplinary action if broken. Each offence should carry a clear penalty.

Ideally, the child will come to think of the penalty for the offence as a natural consequence of his or her actions. To do this, however, there must be a high degree of consistency. Staying out past a curfew, for instance, must always have the consequence of being "grounded" unless there is a very good provable reason for having done so. Parents must resist the temptation to coddle a child between "punishments" because they feel guilty about invoking penalties.

The laying down of laws and spelling out of sanctions in the interests of order have overtones of governing. And indeed, the sages of history have always talked of raising a family in governmental terms. "A family without government," wrote Matthew Henry, "is like a house without a roof, exposed to every wind that blows" — to which Tryon Edwards added: "He might better have said, like a house in flames, a scene of confusion, and commonly too hot to live in."

A hard, demanding job which requires concentration and time

The only trouble is that, because such strong feelings are involved, a family is likely to be a lot more difficult to govern than a nation. The key dilemma is much the same in both arenas of human affairs: how to maintain a consistency of policy in the face of the anomalies and ambiguities that keep cropping up. There is no magic method of accomplishing this; the best one can do is to keep informed of developments, and bring one's best judgment to bear on each individual question. The overriding point is that being a parent can never be regarded as a casual task, to be subordinated to work or recreation. It is a hard, demanding job which demands concentration and time.

In the long run, the leaders of families, as of nations, can only govern in the best interests of all if they have the consent of the governed. Their authority therefore must be freely recognized. The first step in this direction is to follow the advice of the great psychologist Carl Gustav Jung: "If there is anything that we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it and see whether it is not something that could be better changed in ourselves."

Possibly the worst formula for bringing up children is contained in the expression, "Do as I say, don't do

as I do." A child will temporarily bend to coercion, but only good example will put him or her on the right track permanently. The leaders of the happiest jurisdictions rule not through fear, but through trust and respect; to do so, they must reciprocate the trust and respect of their people. The best-regulated families, like the best-regulated states, are those in which people regulate themselves.

At one time the dominant form of family government in western countries, as it still is in many parts of the world, was an autocracy ruled by the father. With so many mothers now sharing in the bread-winning in countries like Canada, the leadership of most families has come to be shared more or less equally between two adults. But parents who put domestic order ahead of seniority have learned that the best form of internal government is a democracy. In it, children share in making decisions that affect the whole home.

Children can be brought into the process quite early, on such decisions as how to allocate money for recreation. The script runs something like this: "Well, Billy, we have a choice to make here. We can either go to the circus once or to go twice to the movies. What do you think we should do?" As they mature, children can be brought in on substantive projects, such as household budgeting and task-sharing, with the aim of instilling in them a sense of responsibility.

Happy families make a happy land

Like the regime of discipline, the regime of decision-making should be pursued systematically. Parents are well advised to establish a "family council" which meets regularly. The meetings may serve as a safety valve for interpersonal tensions and ensure a fair consideration of the wants, needs and opinions of every family member. Membership in the council further helps to cultivate a balanced sense of independence. Children learn that the fulfilment of their desires must take into account the rights and feelings of others. Yes, they can get their own way — but only if it does not hurt anybody else.

It is in the family that children learn how to live among other human beings on the most basic level. In a caring household, they will learn to share everything from small items of clothing to their innermost hopes and dreams. They will learn how to resolve the conflicts that are bound to occur among humans, conflicts that are all the more painful when people love one another. They will learn teamwork, comradeship, mutual trust, understanding and sympathy. If the fundamental principles of human relations are not imparted to them early, they may never come to know them as long as they live.

It is in the family, too, that people acquire the values they will bring to adult society. Greedy families are likely to produce greedy people; violent families, violent people; intolerant families, intolerant people; and so it goes. Parents should constantly be aware that the upbringing they give their children is not a strictly private matter. It is also a preparation for citizenship.

"As are families, so is society," the American author and scholar William M. Thayer wrote. "If well ordered, well instructed, and well governed, they are the springs from which go forth the streams of national greatness and prosperity — of civil order and public happiness." In short, happy families make a happy land.

This being so, the viability of the family is the business of all the institutions concerned with the public good — governments, the educational system, religious establishments, and employers who recognize that their employees' family lives affect their own businesses. (See RB Letter March/April 1992: "The Civilized Workplace.") With all the pressures now bearing upon it, the family needs all the help it can get.

But people cannot be helped if they are not first willing to identify their own shortcomings and commit themselves to improvement. In this case, improvement literally begins at home.

Editor's Note

The May/June edition of the Royal Bank Letter contained several typographical errors associated with the introduction of a new technical system. We apologize for these defects, and would like to assure readers that our usual standards have been restored.

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