BRINGING UP PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Lily Gerdes
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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA, PRETORIA
To my grandchildren
Alexandra, Kirsten, David and Kelly-Anne
who are all directly or indirectly part of this book
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I am much indebted to the many people who over the years shared their life stories, their joys and sorrows with me, from whom I learnt so much about human nature, its vulnerability but also its remarkable resilience. I sincerely thank the staff of Unisa Press for their professional input and their enthusiasm for a book which is something of a hybrid intended for different kinds of readers and uses.
The purpose of this book

For whom this book is intended

How to use this book

Basic assumptions of this book
Who has not at some stage thought: ‘Life will never be the same again’ after a major life event or change? Suddenly becoming a millionaire, losing a loved one, or having a glorious moment of revelation … What you really should be saying is: ‘I’ll never be the same again’.

It is like that with parenthood too. Not only does your lifestyle change—you change. That is what the title of this book implies.

Parenting is one of life’s most challenging and demanding roles. It is also the role for which one is likely to be the least prepared: there is no clear job description, selection or training for parenthood. Whereas there are tests which measure school readiness, examinations which test if one has the basic training for a particular job, there are no tests for assessing parenting readiness. Most new parents are rank amateurs who learn largely through on-the-job training, and by a great deal of trial and error. This may be hard on parent and child.

Surprisingly, many parents do quite well and most children are resilient enough to survive their parents’ inexperience and grow into reasonably well-adjusted adults. Nevertheless, it is likely that many parents suffer a great deal of unnecessary anxiety because they lack knowledge and direction. This may lead to unrealistic expectations of themselves or their children. Anxiety, doubt, frustration are but some of the likely results.

Effective parenting demands knowledge, understanding and skill. It requires knowledge of oneself, partner and child. But such knowledge should be enriched by imagination which enables one to ‘walk in the shoes of another’ to try to understand their point of view, their feelings and their worries.

Being a family is an ongoing human relations and development exercise for both parent and child. Certain skills are valuable tools for this: good communication, thoughtful decision-making and coping constructively with conflict or stress.

But most of all, parenthood is a matter of the heart: of love, concern, kindness, compassion, and patience stretched to its limits. Being so emotionally involved makes parents vulnerable. They suffer with and for their children. They may be plagued with self-doubt when things go wrong.
Wanting to be ‘perfect’ parents, they may be devastated by their failure to produce ‘model’ children. But because of their emotional involvement they also share the joys and achievements of their child in a very special way: a baby’s first smile, a toddler’s wobbly steps, early attempts to express an idea like ‘Stars are holes the rain comes through’, and seeing them grow and mature may engender a sense of incredible wonder, joy and pride in a parent.

We live in a rapidly changing society in which values and norms of what is right and wrong may be uncertain. Yet, parenthood demands a definite sense of direction. Trying to parent without clearly defined values, beliefs and standards of behaviour is akin to navigating a ship through a stormy sea without a compass. It is far easier to parent in times when standards are rigidly prescribed by society but, today, the onus rests on each family to define their own standards to a far greater degree than was the case with previous generations.

At this point it needs to be emphasised that there are no simple ‘how to parent’ recipes. Every family is unique and will have to chart its own course through the stormy sea of life. Nevertheless, there are certain principles and skills which can make it more rewarding to be a parent, more exciting to be a child and help to make the family a safe haven in an uncertain world.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The purpose of this book is to provide perspective, and to help parents to develop their own insights in order to chart the course of their family’s voyage through life in a more meaningful and joyous way.

More specific goals of the book are:

- to increase understanding of oneself as parent and of one’s child, and
- to identify current issues and problems and how to think about possible solutions, and
- to hone certain skills essential for good parenting

Let me clarify these goals.

- **Self-understanding:** Self-understanding begins with self-awareness: how do we act as parents and why do we react the way we do?
• **Understanding one's child:** This begins with knowing what can be realistically expected of a child at different stages of development.

• **Understanding family interactions:** There is a constant interaction between the development of each parent and their relationship as a couple, and the development of the child.

• **Developing a sense of perspective:** Seeing things in perspective means taking a more objective view of situations and recognising how circumstances impact upon us as parents and our children. Families are part of the larger community and do not function in isolation from it. Many problems parents face today were unknown to previous generations.

• **Current issues:** Difficult issues confront parents, such as: what is moral behaviour? and what is quality time? Relevant information should help them make more informed decisions.

• **Points to ponder:** The purpose here is to encourage parents to do their own thinking about specific issues and thus to find their own solutions.

• **Improving skills:** Certain skills are essential for good parenting: open communication, effective decision-making and coping with stress. These skills demand insight as well as practice.

**EXERCISES** are given throughout this book to develop insight and practise some of these skills.

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**FOR WHOM THIS BOOK IS INTENDED**

This book is for the well-intended caring and thinking parent, and others interested in and involved with the development of children and of themselves.

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**HOW TO USE THIS BOOK**

It is strongly recommended that the book be read in sequence as there is a planned progression.

The book can also be used as basis for **workshops** and **discussion groups**. Each chapter introduces a certain subject. At some point questions are raised, issues are broached or exercises are given to practise...
skills. All of these could form the basis of group interaction and discussion. Schools, churches, self-help and particular peer groups, such as the twenty-, thirty-, or forty-somethings, could form discussion groups. Intergenerational groups, such as parent–child or grandparent–child, might also be considered. (See Appendix.)

**BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF THIS BOOK**

It is impossible to write a book suitable for all parents in a variety of contexts. It would also be presumptuous for me to try to write a multicultural guide to parenting. Yet, among all the diversity in our rainbow nation, certain fundamental common denominators do exist.

This book rests upon three basic assumptions about human development:

- **We all share a common humanity.** In some respects, all people are alike. We all have the same physical appearance of human beings; we share the same basic needs for survival; all children are born totally dependent on the care of others; we all need to be recognised as worthy human beings; we all grow according to a pre-determined sequence and we all need to be loved.

- **In some respects some people are alike.** People are grouped, or group themselves, in terms of certain features common to them, but different in specific ways from others. There are differences associated with gender, age, socio-economic status, lifestyle and beliefs, values and traditions. It is a natural tendency to seek out the company of those with whom we have a great deal in common. Group differences only become a problem when they are used as a basis for stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, or when they isolate groups from one another to the extent that mutual understanding becomes impossible.

- **Each individual is unique.** It is one of the most inconceivable mysteries of life that every single individual is totally unique. None of us has an exact replica or clone among the billions of people inhabiting this world. So any generalisations made about human development must also take cognisance of individual variation. The life stories and anecdotes in this book are a pertinent reminder of this fact.

This book does not claim to give equal weight to all three assumptions, but recognises their validity as well as the constant interplay between them.

(xv)
CHAPTER 1

PARENTS THEN AND NOW

The era of the child

How do children become what they are?

Factors influencing development

Many factors interact

Summing up
It may be said that parents are not what they used to be. To some extent this is true because different times and circumstances may lead parents to behave somewhat differently. This immediately raises the question: were parents better, more effective or less competent parents in the past? Historical sources, biographies and literary classics are informative in this regard.

There is little evidence to suggest that childhood was ever an idyllic period in the past. Instead, there is a good deal of information to suggest that children were little understood, often expected to behave like miniature adults, not infrequently exploited, abused and ill-treated.

It is also noteworthy that prevailing ideas and myths about human nature in general and children in particular have always profoundly influenced parents and the treatment of children. Consequently changing beliefs have led to changes in parental behaviour and to different expectations of acceptable behaviour in children.

The further we go back in history the worse the treatment of children seems to have been. For example, the practice of infanticide, by exposing newborn babies to the elements and leaving them to die, was widespread in Roman times. The practice was so common that a law was passed in 374 AD which proclaimed that infanticide was a crime of murder. This law had become necessary because of concern for the decline of the population and because of the imbalance created by an excess of boys, as more girls were put out to die. Nevertheless, abandonment of unwanted and illegitimate children continued for many centuries after this.

However, throughout history there were also caring parents. While some parents were practising infanticide the Apostle Paul was saying to fathers that they should 'not provoke their children to wrath' (Ephesians
In the twelfth century the great Jewish philosopher and physician Maimonides wrote about the love of parents which, he believed, became stronger as the child grew older. However, he cautioned against indulgence.

Another feature of earlier times was that parents tended to place the blame for their own shortcomings on disasters or outside forces. De Mause, in his book *The history of childhood,* tells of a father who blamed the accidental death of his five-year-old son who drowned in a well on the fact that he had worked on a holy day. That he and the mother had left their young children alone at home was not seen as a relevant factor!

During the eighteenth century the prevailing philosophy of the time stressed the absolute power of the parents, who were to 'conquer the child’s mind and break its will'. As a result, extreme strictness and harshness were acceptable. Towards the end of the eighteenth century and well into the next century, attitudes began to change as the emphasis shifted from conquering the child’s mind to training it to conform.

**THE ERA OF THE CHILD**

Changes in attitude were gradual in the past. But in the course of the twentieth century several dramatic changes have occurred. At the beginning of this century the emphasis was still on training children to conform rigidly to social standards. By the 1920s the belief was held that children should be regulated, like effectively functioning machines: it was the time of rigid feeding schedules and sleeping times. Adhering to a fixed schedule was more important than responding to the needs of a particular child. For example, all babies were to be fed only every four hours for twenty minutes, ignoring the fact that some might be slower or hungrier than others.

By the middle of this century a new style was in vogue: that of 'helping' the child to develop its full potential. Probably for the first time in history an attitude of great tolerance of children’s behaviour and an understanding of the child’s psychological needs had begun to emerge. The mother’s role was considered all important in this regard. She had become more than a child bearer and child rearer, she had become a child developer. As her role became defined in this way, child rearing became an all-encompass-
ing task. Any problems of the children were laid at mother’s door: it was a
time of great maternal expectations but also of maternal guilt as many
mothers tried to live up to these expectations without knowing how to.
Mothers were confused by experts advocating different approaches. These
were sometimes extreme, such as recommending the total freedom of the
child, which was largely a reaction against former ideas and practices
expressed in sayings such as ‘children should be seen but not heard’ or
’spare the rod and spoil the child’.

New perspectives on women, men and work

The Feminist Movement, which gained much impetus in the 1960s,
stressed the rights of women and the development of their potential, not
only in their domestic and maternal roles but in the occupational field as
well. This led to a period of new role patterns at work and in the family as
more and more women sought to improve their education and more
married women went out to work. Inter-role conflict and role strain
resulting from the demands of combining several roles became an
important feature in the lives of many women in the later decades of
this century. They remain a source of considerable strain to this day.

From the mid-seventies onwards we see yet another change as the
spotlight begins to fall on the father’s role and the increasing expectation
that he should be a more involved parent, not only a provider and
disciplinarian. In other words, the view emerges that he should become
part of the developmental parental team.

POINT TO PONDER

'It is noteworthy that in societies where fathers are
more involved with their children the status of
women tends to be higher' (Scott Coltrane).
New challenges for parents

This brief review of parental beliefs and attitudes lends support to the view that the twentieth century may legitimately be called 'The Century of the Child': one of the most dramatic and least publicised of the achievements of this century is the phenomenal change in parental attitudes and practices. This has been largely the result of a new understanding of human development from infancy to old age, thus providing a developmental perspective on both parents and children. For the first time insight into the world of childhood has begun to emerge and attempts to see the world through the eyes of the child are encouraged. Inevitably this has added greatly to the challenges facing parents.

In some ways parents may be less comfortable than in the past, when conformity to clearly spelt out standards and expectations, rather than insight into children's behaviour, was stressed. But the opportunities for parents to be more active participants in their children's development has never been greater than now. This implies a special kind of responsibility, but also holds the potential for parental rewards which may have been little known to parents in former times. But it is no easy task to achieve a balance between the needs and aspirations of both parents and children.

The changes among urban, westernised families have been considerable. Among many black families it has been enormous, especially among those who are in a state of transition from a rural, extended and traditional family life to an urban, more westernised lifestyle. This change is more like a quantum leap than a transition.

EXERCISE

1. What do you think are the most important influences shaping a child's behaviour and development?
2. How have your ideas about this subject been formed?

It is quite possible that you have never really thought about this question. Then this is a good opportunity to begin doing so. If you are in a group then compare and discuss different answers.

REMEMBER that you are entitled to your personal views. Do not judge the views given as either right or wrong.

Bear your view in mind as you work through this book. You may find
HOW DO CHILDREN BECOME WHAT THEY ARE?

The point has been made that our notions about the nature of children and the forces shaping them will greatly influence our behaviour as parents. Consequently we need to consider current ideas and theories about children which may strongly influence our expectations and practices as parents.

At the outset it is emphasised that diversity rather than acceptance of one particular viewpoint is found at present. This is not surprising in view of the complexity of the subject: childhood development comprises many different aspects and there is enormous individual variation, and circumstances may differ widely.

Having said this, it is possible to identify a few predominant viewpoints which can briefly be summed up in a few statements:

- It's all in the genes (that is, a child inherits its characteristics).
- Mothers are responsible (how they rear their children determines what they become).
- It is the environment that counts (it is the environment that determines how a child develops).
- Fathers should be more active parents (parenting is not only the mother's task).

Until fairly recently educators, psychologists and other professionals in the mental health field were divided among themselves: some argued that 'nature' and inherited characteristics were mainly responsible for a child's development and wellbeing, or lack of it. At the other extreme, learning theorists stressed that a child learned as a result of the encouragement given or punishment meted out for certain behaviour to either persist with it or to avoid it. Clinicians, working mainly with emotionally disturbed children, focused on the role of interpersonal relationships, notably on the determining importance of the emotional bond between mother and child. Environmentalists argued the case for the overriding importance of environmental circumstances ranging from nutrition to educational opportunities. Small wonder then that parents
were often confused while the 'nature versus nurture' controversy prevailed. Moreover, the most extreme viewpoints tended to get more publicity than more moderate ones.

Today, a more balanced view is emerging which acknowledges that many factors interact. Rarely is it possible to reduce human behaviour to one cause. A few examples illustrate the complexity of factors involved.

Studies of black township youth who grew up in the turbulent times since 1976 have revealed some interesting facts which contradict the popular idea of a 'lost generation'. What is being revealed is the remarkable resilience of many young people who were exposed to ongoing conditions of severe family disruption, deprivation and high levels of violence. Certainly there were many psychological casualties among them, but what is noteworthy is how many proved to be remarkably resilient. This does not mean that they were unaffected but that, given a supportive environment, they had the potential to recover and were not broken by the hardships endured. A feature of the lives of those who may be seen as resilient and coping with the demands of life is that they felt encouraged and supported by others, such as grandmothers, older siblings, or peers who shared their political beliefs and aspirations (Straker, 1992).

It is also interesting to note that many people of exceptional ability, recognised as creative geniuses, were able to lead highly productive lives, even though their lives may have been characterised more by stress and trauma than by tranquillity: one can think here of a Mozart or Vincent van Gogh. Einstein suffered a nervous breakdown in high school and was considered a problem pupil.

What the foregoing suggests is that some people are broken or severely damaged by adverse circumstances but others are able to rise above them or can recover from early trauma to become effectively functioning adults. Even within the same family different children may react in a variety of ways.

Jonathan and Mary were a loving and caring couple who had three children who were balanced, doing well at school and popular. Jonathan and Mary enjoyed their parenthood and were somewhat puzzled that some of their friends seemed to be struggling as parents. This perception changed when their fourth child arrived: a noisy, restless boy who struggled at school in spite of good intelligence, he was given to temper tantrums, often rebellious and resistant. Nonplussed, they sought professional help, to be told that their son
had a learning problem, which left him frustrated and angry and irritable.

FACTORS INFLUENCING DEVELOPMENT

Many different forces affect the development of children, chief among them:

- the genes they have inherited
- their temperament and personality
- their physical health and condition
- the extent to which their basic needs for food, shelter and security are met
- their early attachment and bonding with mothers and care-givers, and the consequent development of trust or distrust
- the parenting styles of their mother and father
- the harmony or disharmony within the home
- relationships with other members of the family
- the availability of suitable role models
- the context in which they live whether it be a city or country home, suburban home or squatter camp
- their teachers
- their peers and friends
- the culture in which they are embedded
- the worldview, faith or ideology of their parents and community
- the support available to them when in difficulties, be it illness or family crises
- opportunities available to them such as good schooling and health care
- the stability or instability of their social system and country: life in a war-torn country is totally different from life in a peaceful one

MANY FACTORS INTERACT

Many family histories demonstrate the interaction between numerous factors. John, Diana and Peter came from a family in which their mother was an alcoholic. The father’s work often took him away from home and he was not really involved with his children. It is interesting to note the
development of the three siblings. John grew up to be a highly respected member of the community. He had worked his way through university and eventually established his own engineering firm. He was a devoted husband and father. He never touched alcohol. It was as if he wanted to provide everything for his family that he himself had missed.

Diana was an anxious and insecure person, demanding constant reassurance and subject to bouts of depression. On the whole she nevertheless coped well with her work as bookkeeper and had a good marriage. Peter showed great promise at school. At university he became a great party-goer, neglected his studies and dropped out.Occupationally he never settled down. He struggled to maintain lasting relationships with women. By the age of forty he had a serious drinking problem.

How can one explain such different reactions within one family?

Rarely is it possible to find one specific explanation which accounts for the course a particular person's development takes. Peter may have been physiologically more predisposed to become an alcoholic: as the lastborn he may have arrived when his mother's alcoholism was in a more advanced state and he may have suffered more neglect than his older siblings.

John, as the firstborn, will have received more undivided attention than either Peter or Mary. One can go on suggesting many other factors.

**SUMMING UP**

To sum up, one can say that many factors influence development: the temperament and ability of the child, the care it receives from its parents and concerned others, the environment in which it grows up, the opportunities provided, the support available when in need or distress, and role models who represent values and goals with which one can identify. Parents play a vitally important part in regard to most of these aspects.
CHAPTER 2

CAN THE FAMILY SURVIVE?

Why then is the family in trouble?

Why has the family changed?

Strong families

Parents and the community

Summing up
CAN THE FAMILY SURVIVE?

It is not unusual these days to be confronted by this question. In support of asking it, people say: ‘Just look at the divorce rate in this country!’ True, we cannot argue away the fact that South Africa has a divorce rate which is among the highest in the world. True, there is real concern about neglected children, family disruption and violence.

However, it is also true that the majority of couples do remain married and that the majority of divorcees remarry. Although the incidence of violence in families is far too high, it is not the norm. What the foregoing suggests is that the family is in trouble but far from dead.

It is reaffirmed that a good family life contributes enormously to the wellbeing of its members. It is linked to psychological satisfaction and happiness and to a sense of personal security. It also promotes physical wellbeing and health and is associated with longevity. It forms a most powerful support system in times of distress and need. It is the best antidote to Aids, one of the greatest threats to society, by encouraging fidelity.

WHY THEN IS THE FAMILY IN TROUBLE?

At the outset it should be recognised that marriage and family life have always been complex matters. To think of the family as having moved from an ideal state to one of conflict and disruption is to ignore the facts of history. For instance, in the Bible we find many examples of strained marriage and family relationships.

Bad publicity for marriage

Marriage is an excellent investment, yet nowhere have I seen it recommended or advertised as such. Look at any of the major newspapers or financial journals or glossy magazines and we find them brimming with big, bold advertisements shouting at us:
• 'Invest in Krugerrands'
• 'Time sharing – an investment for the future'
• 'Unit trusts are the best investment'
• 'How to make your money work for you ...', etc, etc.

I have yet to see the advertisement which says:

• 'The best investment for the future is a good marriage'
• 'Get married – live longer'
• 'Marriage promotes health'
• 'Married couples enjoy the best sex life!'

All these statements have been confirmed by research, yet whoever hears about them?

Changes in family structure

How does one define a family today?
• Is it the extended family consisting of husband, wife, their children and elderly parents, and probably other relatives, all living in a common household in which resources are shared and goods and services are exchanged?
• Is it the nuclear family comprising only husband, wife and their children, which is economically self-sufficient and in which the emphasis falls on love, psychological closeness and emotional compatibility?
• Is it the blended family comprising, for example: father, married to his third wife, mother, married to her second husband, who between them have five children: his, hers and theirs?
• Is it the single parent unit?
• Is the single person, living alone not also part of a family?

These questions relate to but a few of the more commonly found family structures today. Steyn (1993/94), who undertook a survey of family structures in South Africa, identified 14 major different kinds – a list which is not exhaustive since even within these categories a great deal of variation is to be found.

This situation is vastly different from that found at the beginning of this century when two forms predominated: the extended family, which
was the most usual in the black community, and the nuclear family, which predominated among whites.

What does noticeably distinguish much of the past from the present is that social pressures to conform have diminished and so we find infinitely greater variation in the way in which families and relationships are structured.

**Choices**

Even within a particular structure, certain choices are nowadays possible which may previously have been more limited. More effective family planning has made it possible to choose how many children to have and when to have them: professional women may postpone parenthood until their mid-thirties and some couples may choose not to have children at all. Ironically, we also find a high incidence of teenage pregnancy – one of the most pressing social problems of today.

Single parents are becoming a sizeable group. They may be divorced, widowed, separated, never married or en route to marriage. Some are comfortably off, some are desperately poor. In some flatlands in big cities it is estimated that up to 80 per cent of the inhabitants are single parents, mostly mothers, often trying to cope on their own with little support from others. They may be part of what has come to be termed 'the new poor', that is women who are struggling to rear children on their own with limited financial resources. They often have poorly paid jobs with little possibility of advancement because of unfinished training or frequent absence from work because of problems with their children, such as illness. Employers thus see them as poor investments for further training.

In the black community it was traditionally expected that the young bride would move into the home of her husband’s family and family relationships were guided by clearly defined norms and standards of behaviour. This does not necessarily mean that everyone was always content with these arrangements, but at least there was no uncertainty about what was expected of each of the role players in the family. Today we find many admixtures of these old and new family traditions. In urban areas it may be a lack of housing, rather than preference or tradition, that determines sharing a household with members of the kinship group.

What the foregoing tells us is that nowadays the responsibility rests
much more on the shoulders of each individual, couple and family to
define their own roles, values and norms of behaviour: this is both a
problem and a challenge. But it is not easy. It is a major reason that couples
and parents seek information and guidelines about marriage and
parenthood.

The core of the family

For the purposes of this book it is accepted that the core of a family ideally
consists of a couple and their children. However, it is recognised that other
members of the family may be directly or indirectly as involved with
parenting in a particular family. What is certain is that most general
principles of child-rearing still apply whether mother, father, grandparent
or extended family is responsible.

However, even within the nuclear family
of parents and their children we find different scenarios:

- **Scenario 1**: The traditional nuclear family in
which the husband is the sole breadwinner and the wife a full-time housewife.

- **Scenario 2**: The companionate nuclear family. The father is the main breadwinner
but the wife actively supports the husband in this role as, for example, in the doctor/
nurse team, the shopowner/counterhand team, the minister of religion husband and
wife team, and so on.

- **Scenario 3**: The dual-career team in which
husband and wife share the breadwinner role and both are committed to
a career of their own.

- **Scenario 4**: The wife is the main breadwinner and the husband plays the
supportive role.

In these different scenarios we may find different authority and power
relations between husband and wife in terms of which it is decided who is
responsible for what, but there are no absolute norms regulating such
family interactions.
POINT TO PONDER

Whatever is said about parent–child interactions in this book generally also applies to parents living apart: marriages may be dissolved but parenting usually continues.

WHY HAS THE FAMILY CHANGED?

The small nuclear family is essentially a product of the twentieth century. It resulted from the interaction of many factors:

- Greater mobility because of new, faster methods of transport often results in family members moving away to distant places.
- Industrialisation and urbanisation broke up the home as a productive unit where all hands were needed, as on farms where sons helped their father on the land and daughters assisted their mother in the kitchen.
  - Several tasks previously carried out at home were taken over by other organisations: schooling and nursing the sick in hospitals began to replace teaching and caring for the severely ill in the home.
- In cities, smaller families became desirable as the family changed from a producer unit to a buying, consumer unit.
- Relationships became more demanding: one no longer seeks only a husband who is a good provider or a wife who is a capable housewife and mother. Instead one expects a mutually satisfying relationship based on love, sexual satisfaction and companionship.
- The training of children for adult roles was largely taken over by outside agencies. Previously the tradesman trained his son from an early age to follow in his footsteps. Older daughters were expected to actively help with the care of younger sibling and household chores. They were thus generally much better prepared for their roles as housewife and mother than is now the case.
- Nowadays, the choice of occupations is much wider and training much
more intensive and in the hands of specialists in the field. On-the-job training in the family has made way for training in institutions of higher learning and within organisations of various kinds.

- Values have changed: duty, responsibility, obedience and respect were stressed in the past whereas the emphasis has shifted to freedom and self-actualisation and personal happiness. In the past, the needs of the family had a higher priority than the needs of the individual, and divorce was strongly disapproved of.

- Moral behaviour in regard to marriage was clearly defined in the past and transgressions were not readily tolerated: marriage was for life and 'for better or for worse'. There was heavy pressure to conform to expected standards. Today, morality is defined in more relative terms so that a situation is judged less in terms of absolute rights and wrongs and more in terms of personal circumstances. At its best, this has led to greater tolerance, at its worst, to confusion, hedonism or escapism.

- Sex: Previously the emphasis was on procreation; now it is on pleasure and performance.

- Roles: These were clearly defined in the past and there was no ambiguity about the family tasks and responsibilities of men and women. For example, in the black community the young bride was expected to become part of the household of her husband’s family, to perform specific tasks and to observe certain forms of respect toward her husband’s family. Today, roles are far less clearly defined in black and white communities, giving rise to uncertainty and role conflict as when the demands of one role conflict with those of another or when old traditions and new lifestyles are difficult to reconcile.

- In society as a whole there seems to be an authority crisis. Gone are the days when people in authority, including parents, were unquestioningly respected and obeyed because of the position they occupied. There has been a move away from blind obedience to a more critical attitude towards those in authority, including one’s parents.

- Parents used to know better what was expected of them. Today, many parents are uncertain about how to parent.

What is evident is that the family is in transition. Such transitions can be confusing and painful; they can also be seen as a challenge to find solutions to complex situations not encountered before. In view of the many complex changes the family has undergone and is still undergoing, it might be considered remarkable that it has survived at all and that there are still so many well-functioning, strong families to be found.
STRONG FAMILIES

The year 1994 was proclaimed 'The International Year of the Family' recognising the fact that happy, healthy families contribute towards a healthy society. The family is society’s barometer: the ills of society directly affect the family. The reverse is equally true.

Much attention has been focused on the problems of families today. The media report vividly on conflict and violence in disrupted and unhappy families. By happy contrast the year of the family highlighted what the components of strong, happy families are – and there are many of them to be found, they just do not hit the headlines!

The features of strong families provide useful guidelines for any efforts aimed at strengthening family life.

POINT TO PONDER

A word of warning at the outset against unrealistic expectations when considering the features of strong families: not even the best of families manifest all the features of strong families all the time. Families, after all, are human and will fail sometimes. Nevertheless, the features listed below tell us what the strengths are of those families which remain intact and happy, and provide a secure haven even in the turbulent and changing times in which we live.
Features of strong families

• There is mutual respect among members of the family.
• They spend time together, interacting with one another, be it at meals, sharing hobbies and interests, or whatever.
• There is good communication and family members listen and talk to one another.
• There is lots of love and affection between family members.
• There is a good sexual relationship between spouses.
• There is a balance between togetherness and respect for individual privacy.
• Parents work as a team and are agreed on parenting goals.
• Strong families are not conflict free but they handle conflict constructively, working toward solutions.
• Family members support and praise each other.
• There is a fair division of labour in the home. All family members know what their specific responsibilities are.
• There is a reasonable balance between work and play and between work roles and family life.
• The family shares a firm religious or ideological belief. This enables it to clearly define its values, its goals and to determine what is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour. In view of all the transitions and changes currently occurring this is a particularly important and difficult task for the family in today’s uncertain world.
• Parents set a good example: an example is worth a thousand words!

Every individual is unique and every family has its own character, strengths and vulnerabilities. While we need to be aware of our vulnerabilities we should not let them blind us to our strengths. I am reminded of a remark by the famous tennis star Martina Navratilova at a time early in her career when she was struggling with certain weaknesses in her game. She had to decide whether to concentrate on overcoming her weaknesses or developing her strengths. She decided on the latter course of action – and we know what this did for her tennis! I believe that one can make the same recommendation for building a family’s strength.

PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

Parents often go it alone these days because they may no longer have the
support of the extended family as in the past. Nor may the local community in which they live be as bonded and supportive as was the case formerly. Life in towns and cities is very impersonal and it is not unusual for someone not even to know his or her neighbour.

For these and many other reasons, parents need to get together as formal or informal groups in order to

- share and discuss common concerns
- learn from one another and thus gain a new understanding about different children and various ways of dealing with them. In this way parents can begin to feel more secure in their own parenting role
- reduce feelings of uncertainty and isolation
- provide mutual support for parental values expressed in rules of conduct: like children, parents also need an 'everybody' who is doing it their way
- add weight to parent's convictions so that children may be dealt with more consistently in the community of which they are a part.

SUMMING UP

The family is responding to many changes in society and is under considerable threat itself. Nonetheless a sound family life is one of the greatest sources of security in a sometimes chaotic world. It remains the greatest source of happiness for many. But it needs to adapt to social changes around it without sacrificing its most fundamental values of love, hope for the future generation, and faith in its survival. Whatever their lifestyle, parents need the encouragement and support of other members of the community.
# PARENT–CHILD SCENARIOS

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N o-one will dispute that we are living in times of phenomenal change. Just consider that in mid-thirties of the twentieth century

- organ transplants were a future dream
- the word processor did not exist
- TV was not a feature of home life
- antibiotics were not yet developed
- women generally stopped work when their first child was born
- women’s rights were coming under review but the Women’s Liberation Movement was still some 20 years away
- the mid-life crisis had not been identified
- pre-marital chastity was the norm
- divorce was rare
- sex was still a taboo subject not featured in the mass media
- women had very limited occupational choices
- parents were seen as authority figures and their needs had priority
- moral codes were clearly defined, even if not always adhered to
- rural life in the past fostered more sharing of resources; urban living today is more individualistic.

POINT TO PONDER

At this stage it is emphasised that there is no single or perfect recipe for parenting. Parenting changes with the age and development of the child and that of the parent. The challenge today is to strike a balance between the needs and rights of the parents and those of the child – which is more easily said than done!

The family has been described as the most sensitive barometer of society and parenting has not been unaffected by the changes which have occurred in the course of this century. Toffler, in his bestseller *Future shock* (1970), pointed out that change was occurring at a faster rate than many
people's ability to adjust to it. Never have family patterns, values and norms varied as much as today. Not surprisingly, many parents seek knowledge and reassurance about their role.

EACH CHILD IS UNIQUE

No two children are identical and there should always be respect for the uniqueness and individuality of each child. But while acknowledging the diversity we also need to identify common factors which characterise certain kinds of children.

Children differ enormously from the moment of birth, even within the same family. Yet, despite this, there is a strong belief that parents can mould their children almost as if they were an unformed lump of clay. Watson, a famous psychologist of the thirties, claimed that ‘Give me a dozen healthy infants and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become a doctor, a lawyer, artist, merchant ...’ (in Segal, 1978, p 8).

Even everyday observation of families belies this. Although there may be similarities between siblings, there may also be big differences. Stemming from an inherited pool of genes, their combinations may vary surprisingly. Some children may be easier to parent than others. And some parents may find it easier than others to be a parent.

If parents were the only factor shaping their children, they would surely mould them to suit themselves. The rugby forward would probably try to mould his son to become a great sportsman, yet he may have a son who is a writer or painter or who actively dislikes aggressive sport. It really is too simplistic to assume that parents alone are responsible for the shaping of their children.

Many characteristics are part of the nature of the child. This, however, does not mean that parents cannot exert considerable influence on how their children learn to behave. A parent can certainly teach a child to be well mannered, to communicate and to learn to cope with the demands of life as constructively as possible. But parents cannot determine a child’s
basic temperament, such as being placid or highly strung or introverted and shy, or extroverted and sociable, although they can strongly influence how these tendencies are expressed.

Diaries can tell us a great deal about children’s development. For example, extracts from a diary kept about two sisters, Lynne and Kerry, born fourteen months apart, shows how early certain tendencies may be observed and how they tend to persist.

Lynne: ‘At three months shows no traces of shyness, nor is she upset when left in strange surroundings. At her first birthday party she waddled happily from person to person. She likes being with a group of people and is always well behaved at parties, better than at home. She shrieks with delight when being carried through a busy town. She is rather a fearless child. At the age of twenty-seven months she was known as “the swimming babe of Uvongo” who loved the sea and being bounced by the waves. Concerned onlookers who rushed to her aid were greeted with calls for “more, more!”’.

As an adult Lynne still tends to take risks, albeit of a different kind. She loves entertaining and her dinner parties are something to remember.

Kerry: ‘At two and a half months cried bitterly when taken to the neighbour and picked up by her. At five months she did the same when her grandmother, whom she had not seen for a little while, picked her up. She is the least troublesome of children when at home with mummy and daddy. She does not like her routine upset and will stop in the middle of a game because she wants to go “doodoo” and heads for bed. Kerry walked early at nine months and from then on always ran but she always seems to know just where she is headed, be it the vegetable patch or whatever. At three Kerry is more sociable but seems to do her own thing even when with others. She is very independent but likes to be rooted at home. She settled down very easily on her first day at school – in fact when marching to her classroom she rather gave the impression of being in charge of it!’

Is it surprising that Kerry became a dedicated teacher?

Despite such definite predispositions the importance of parents should never be minimised. They remain the greatest external influence on their children. But they need to recognise and respect certain inherent tendencies their children have. Failure to do so may have detrimental consequences:
Parents may fail to accept the child for what it is and try to change it to someone it does not have the potential to be, which will be frustrating for parent and child.

Parents may see themselves as terrible failures because they have not been able to produce a perfect child and may blame themselves for attributes for which they are not responsible, such as hyperactivity or low frustration tolerance in their children.

**POINT TO PONDER**

It is true that in cases of rejection, neglect or abuse, parents can do irreparable harm. However, this book is not about such pathological behaviour but about well-intentioned 'normal' parents. Undoubtedly they will make mistakes but they are willing to learn and to work at becoming good parents.

**DIFFERENT KINDS OF CHILDREN**

Several attempts have been made to group children in terms of certain characteristics. One such classification is that of Thomas and Chess (1977) who studied children in some 80 families from infancy to adolescence. They identified three patterns of temperament and behaviour in children which showed remarkable persistence over time from infancy through to adolescence.

- The *Easy Child* is characterised by positive mood and responsiveness to others, even-temperedness, adaptability to new situations, and regular sleeping and eating patterns. Such children are generally easy to rear. They comprised about 40 per cent of the children studied.

- The *Difficult Child* is more or less the opposite of the easy child, manifesting considerable negative mood, a tendency to withdraw from people, showing poor adaptability to new situations, irritability, intense mood swings and irregular sleeping and eating patterns. Only about 10 per cent fell into this category. They are difficult to parent.

- The *Slow to Warm Up Child* has a low activity level and slowness in adjusting to new situations. These children are less emotionally intense than the difficult child and have somewhat more regular sleeping and
eating habits. As their descriptive name implies, they need time to adapt to change. An important child-rearing requirement for these children is patience: they need to be ushered into new situations gently. Approximately 15 per cent fell into this category.

The remaining 35 per cent of children did not clearly fall into any of these three categories.

**Vulnerable and resilient children**

A distinction has also been made between resilient children who are able to cope with considerable stress and disruption to a surprising extent and vulnerable children who are not able to do so.

Three factors are involved in regard to vulnerability or resilience. First, certain *personality characteristics* of the child make a difference: is it cheerful or fretful and anxious. Second, the *family situation*: is it harmonious or conflict-ridden. Third, the availability of *support* in times of stress. Role models who provide examples of how to cope with difficult situations or ineffective role models are another important factor. In combination these factors can make the difference between vulnerability and resilience.

It is of particular interest to note that these findings have been found to apply to children in different places and contexts: to children from black urban ghettos in America, children from the Isle of Wight and the Inner City of London, children from strife- and war- torn situations, and from a Hawaiian island. Young black activists in South Africa could also be included in this list (Garmezy, 1983; Straker, 1992). All had been exposed to conditions of great hardship, such as poverty, war and degradation. In all these groups some children were more resilient, others more vulnerable.

Parents, too, may be vulnerable or resilient. (For further information see chapter 10, the section on children and stress.)

**DIFFERENT STYLES OF PARENTING**

Parenting styles tend to reflect the personality values and ideas about child-rearing of the parents.
In broad terms, several styles of parenting have been identified, namely the authoritarian, the permissive and the democratic style (Baumrind, 1971).

In the authoritarian style the emphasis is placed on the absolute authority of the parents. It is assumed that they know best and children should obey them unquestioningly. This kind of style was at its height during the last century and the beginning of this century.

A letter in a woman’s journal in the middle of last century tells how an eighteen-month-old child was commanded to say ‘Dear Mama’, but when it failed to respond correctly it was severely punished for its ‘wilfulness’. Such an expectation and extreme action would not be acceptable nowadays. However, there are still many parents today who strongly emphasise their authority and see their role as that of decision-making and controlling parent. They tend to be strict disciplinarians, enforcing rules that they have made. Extreme authoritarianism may lead to social inhibition, and a lack of confidence and independence in children.

At the other extreme, we find the permissive style. As the name suggests, a wide range of behaviour on the part of children is permitted which would previously not have been tolerated. There is a strong emphasis on the freedom of the child, allied to the notion that such freedom from restraint will foster the development of the child.

Here, I am reminded of a thank you letter from a mother to a friend who had sent her a playpen on the arrival of her fourth child. The letter read: ‘Thank you for the playpen – every afternoon I go and sit in it for an hour so the children can’t get at me!’

A further distinction can be made between permissive parents who are indulgent and those who are indifferent. Permissive-indifferent parents are uninterested and uninvolved. For example, they often do not know where their children are or what they are doing. The effects may be poor self-control and sensation and pleasure seeking in their children. By
contrast, permissive-indulgent parents are very involved with their children but make few demands on them. The result may be children lacking in self-control and in respect and consideration for others (Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Thirdly, there is the democratic style of parenting where the authority of the parent rests upon his or her qualities of leadership. This style is founded on decision-making in which the child is encouraged to participate, especially as its understanding increases. The emphasis is on control, encouragement and agreement rather than on punitive discipline. For example, family meetings might be held where problems and choices are discussed and decisions are reached (Keech, 1993). Children of democratic parents tend to function well socially.

It should, however, be recognised that even within one family, parenting styles may differ in response to children's different needs, personality and age. One child may respond best to gentleness, another to firmness. Yet it cannot be stated without reserve that any one of the three basic styles mentioned is always the ideal. The personality of the parents and of the child, its age, their life circumstances, and particular cultural background will all exert a greater or lesser influence on parental ways of dealing with their children. It must also be recognised that not all children will react in the same way to particular parental styles.

Well-adjusted children can come from the most authoritarian as well as from extremely permissive homes because another crucial factor is involved, namely the love of the parent. So one really needs to compare the parenting style plus the amount of love and caring that goes with it. A loving, authoritarian parent is experienced very differently from an emotionally distant one.

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**EXERCISE**

A recent letter to a newspaper by a grandmother reported the following incident:

Two little boys (aged about four and six) were moving about eating popcorn and dropping much of it on the carpet. Then they proceeded to raid the slips and forms provided by the bank.

As a granny I was just a little taken aback that no one checked them and eventually leaned down to one of them and said as kindly as
I know how: “Sweetheart, I don’t think these forms are for kiddies to play with.”

He meekly replaced them but his father, an enormous chap, verbally attacked me. His argument was that he practically owned this bank and his kids could do as they pleased. I replied that wastage and mess were everybody’s concern.

1 What kind of parenting style does the father’s reaction suggest?
2 What difference in values do the reactions of the father and granny suggest?
3 What is your personal viewpoint?

Obedience

The matter of obedience is central to the question of discipline. The obedience expected of children varies greatly across time and culture. In the eighteenth century absolute obedience was generally required. Among many black groups, obedience tends to become an issue when a child reaches the age of three or four. Mwamwenda (1989) explains that among the Shona ‘parents start teaching their children how to behave after the age of about three years ... A child is expected to obey his parent’s instructions unquestioningly and is not expected to answer back when he is reprimanded’ (p 293). Black children in a rural, traditional environment may be given certain responsibilities at an early age. A girl of five may be expected to balance a gourd or other water container on her head as she goes to fetch water with her mother. Or she may be expected to babysit a younger sibling. Boys start herding goats between the ages of four and five and assist with milking by holding the cows. This preparation for adult roles begins early.

The large-scale move to the towns and cities and the different lifestyle this entails may create many uncertainties about such parent/child activities.

Consistency

A factor of particular importance is consistency in parenting. Inconsistent parenting may be reflected in vacillation between a ‘do as I say’
authoritarian approach one day to a 'do as you please' the next. An inconsistent parent's actions may be more influenced by a current mood or by a matter of convenience than by any principles of childrearing.

Some variation in how parents deal with situations is inevitable. However, major and regular inconsistencies are very confusing for a child. Inconsistencies are most likely to occur when parents

- have problems of their own
- are under a great deal of uncertainty and stress
- drink to excess
- have no guiding values

Great inconsistencies may also stem from the difference between the values and styles of the mother and the father where one veers to the extreme of rigid authoritarianism and the other to indulgent permissiveness, or where one parent tries to impose traditional values and the other a modification of these.

**FAMILY INTERACTION**

Parents and children form an interacting system. So whatever fosters the development of one member of the family, be it parent or child, is likely also to benefit the others. The reverse is also true; if one member of the family has a serious problem of whatever kind, this is is likely to affect the rest of the family.

A graphic illustration of this is provided by the story of Nicola, the eldest of three children in a happy family living in very comfortable circumstances. Nicola was regarded as a model but somewhat vulnerable child because of frequent illnesses. She was a lovely girl and a talented dancer of whom great things were expected. In her autobiography, *Nicola*, she describes her childhood as very happy with caring and supportive parents who had a great sense of fun. But, after puberty Nicola began to change in inexplicable ways. She became a compulsive eater, suffered extreme mood swings, resorted to destructive behaviour (as when she tried to mutilate herself), and twice set fire to the family home. The once sweet, talented and co-operative child had become an uncontrolled, destructive, irrational, obese young woman. The point being singled out for emphasis here is the totally disruptive effect this had on the rest of the family: a puzzled
and often outraged, but deeply concerned father; a guilt-ridden mother who believed it must all be her fault; a younger brother and sister who felt more and more neglected because all the attention was focused on giving Nicola support and seeking a solution for her bizarre behaviour. The once happy family was in disarray. Eventually, Nicola was in prison awaiting trial, with the possibility of a long-term sentence.

The story has an amazing ending. It was finally established that the onset of her menstruation had caused an unusual hormonal imbalance. Medical and legal history was made in Great Britain as her condition was finally diagnosed and successfully treated and her case was dismissed. Gradually, she began to return to normal. At this point, we also see the family stabilising. Angry interactions begin to be replaced by loving and helpful ones. Of particular note is the part played by the father, who by following up some vague leads was able, as a complete amateur, to help identify a rare medical problem.

Few disturbed family interactions can be attributed to one specific problem. Often causes are numerous, subtle, and difficult to pinpoint. What is being illustrated here is that family relationships are highly complex and always changing. There is a strong reciprocity between what one person does and how others respond.

In this book, the development of parents and children and how they impact upon one another is dealt with. At this point, it seems relevant to state a bill of rights for parents and for children.

**A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR PARENTS**

You have the right to

- do the best you can for your child
- love, care for and enjoy your child
- be depressed or angry or have hostile thoughts once in a while without feeling that you are a bad parent
- be alone sometimes
- enhance your marriage by having time alone together
- be supported in your role as parent
- foster your own development

(Adapted from the Newsletter of the South African Federation of Mental Health, January 1994.)
A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR CHILDREN

Article 6: Family Life

- All children have the right to a safe, secure and nurturing family and the right to participate as a member of that family.
- All children have the right to love and affection from their parents and family.
- All children have the right to clothing, housing and a healthy diet.
- All children have the right to clean water, sanitation and a clean living environment.
- All children have the right to be protected from domestic violence.
- All children who do not have a family should be provided with a safe and secure place to live and clothing and nutritious food within the community where they live.
- Special protection should be given to children who are orphaned or abandoned as a result of violence or any other reason or are refugees returning from exile and every effort should be made to place them within a safe and secure 'family'.

(Taken from The Children's Charter of South Africa.)