

CHAPTER 4

THE PILLARS OF PARENTING: KNOWLEDGE, LOVE, DISCIPLINE

Knowledge

Love

Discipline, responsibility and control

Methods of control

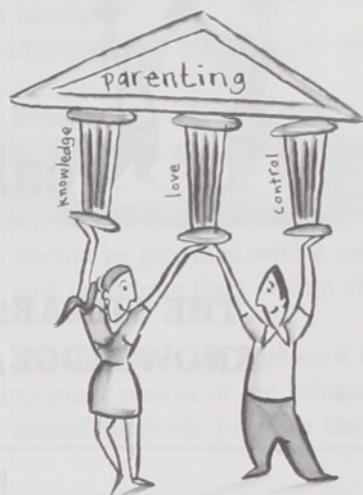
Making discipline work

Summing up

Daily recipe for parents

THE PILLARS OF PARENTING: KNOWLEDGE, LOVE, DISCIPLINE

The three pillars of parenting which provide the structure which holds the house of parenting together, are knowledge, love and discipline. These pillars rest on a foundation of values. The overarching roof is represented by the goals and objectives of parenthood. All these parts of the structure should be strong and mutually reinforcing.



KNOWLEDGE

Parenting requires knowledge, which relates to questions such as:

- What do I expect of myself as a parent?
- What do I expect of my husband/wife as a parent?
- Do I know what to expect of a child at different stages of development?

Answers to questions such as these are essential for effective parenting. It may be argued that most people muddle along well enough without confronting such complex questions. This may indeed be so; however, it needs to be asked whether this is good enough for such a vitally important task. Moreover, anything which increases the effectiveness of a parent should simultaneously make parenting a less stressful task, because some uncertainties have been removed, some aims have become clearer, and some perspective has been gained. In turn, feeling more confident should increase the joys of parenting.

Know yourself as parent

How one has been brought up will inevitably influence one's approach to

parenting. Some people may wish to follow the example set by their own parents closely or, at the other extreme, may react strongly against it. For example, a person who resented a very authoritarian father and strict mother could later be a very permissive parent.

EXERCISE

At this point it might be useful to consider some features of yourself as a parent by answering the following questions. (Do this in writing first, then discuss the answers with your spouse or a group.)

- 1 My main goal as a parent is to
- 2 How have you come to decide on this as your main goal: what factors, experiences, observations or knowledge have influenced you?
.....
- 3 How similar or different are your views from those of your husband/
wife?
- 4 The hardest part of being a parent is
- 5 The best part of being a parent is

Share your views with your partner or, if in a group, with one other person.

KEEP YOUR ANSWERS AND REFER BACK TO THEM LATER.

Knowing your child

Knowledge of one's child requires some sort of perspective, yet every parent knows how difficult it is to be objective because we are just too emotionally involved. Sometimes we see ourselves in our children, who may be a source of pride, exasperation or shame to us! What mother has not heard her child talking to its doll, the neighbour's child or family dog in words that sounded just like her own: and she did not like what she heard!

Parents may also lack perspective because a child is seen through the filter of their own expectations. They may have a tomboy daughter but see

her as a potential ballerina because that is what they want her to be. We may overreact because we see behaviour we do not like as a reflection of our poor parenting – which may or may not be true.

By contrast, a child's achievement may have a parent basking in its glory. This is fine as long as the parent does not begin to live vicariously through this child to satisfy his or her own unfulfilled ambitions. Then the child becomes a major aspect of the parent's self-esteem who may therefore begin to push this child relentlessly, taking the joy out of its achievement.

It is as well to heed the words of Khalil Gibran, writing 'On Children':

You may give them your love, but not your thoughts,

For they may have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

(The Prophet, 1923.)

EXERCISE

Write a one-page description of your child(ren). Compare this description with that of your spouse, grandparent, teacher or friend.

What have you learnt about your child and yourself from this?

LOVE

Love is surely the most central feeling of a parent for a child. But to define love is very difficult because it has so many facets. Moreover, subtle variations may distinguish the love felt towards different children in the same family. A parent may say to his or her three children: 'I love you all equally', yet the love for one child may elicit particularly protective feelings of love, whereas a second child may bring out a special kind of tenderness in the parent. In regard to the third child, a special kind of loving affinity may be felt because of a certain similarity or even because of a valued difference: the shy father may be drawn to his outgoing son or daughter.

C S Lewis makes an interesting distinction between what he calls Need-Love and Gift-Love. 'The typical example of Gift-Love would be that love which moves a man to work and plan and save for the future well-being of his family ...' whereas Need-Love is the love which 'sends a lonely frightened child to its mother's arms ...' (1971, p 7). Over time, the relationship between these two kinds of love changes. As the child matures and becomes more independent, so the need element decreases, although it may surface again even in adulthood in times of crisis. When parents become elderly, we may see a complete reversal of this pattern.

Common features of parental love

Fromm says: 'Love is the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love' (1972, p 25). It is, therefore, an ongoing process which is linked to a sense of responsibility that initially focuses strongly on the physical care and survival of the infant.

In the animal world, such care seems to be entirely instinctive: the mother responds instinctively to the need of her newborn calf, kitten or monkey. In turn, the newborn animal responds with pre-programmed behaviour. Human babies are far more helpless at birth. So, from the very beginning the mother has to take full responsibility for the mere survival of her child. She is guided by love rather than instinct.

Parental love embraces **acceptance** of the child for what it is: even though Peter wanted a son, he can accept his daughter lovingly. It is this acceptance of the child which lays the foundation for the development of the child's self-image and self-respect. Moreover, recognising a child's uniqueness and respecting this acts as a safeguard against parental domination and manipulation to suit the parent's needs. Parental love is, however, not an unchanging constant. At times it may be all tenderness and pride, and sometimes it may be allied to a sense of guilt and anxiety and when a child is truly at risk, it may be associated with almost unbearable pain. The very strength of a parent's love heightens the capacity for both great worry and joy.



Despite tremendous challenges to it, parental love is probably the most resilient kind of love. There may be times when a parent does not

particularly like his child, as when a rebellious teenager seems intent on breaking all the rules of the house, when a bright child refuses to put any effort into its schoolwork, when a son is quite unable to find the time to wash his father's car, but always finds time to wash that of his girlfriend! There may certainly be times when parents may want to divorce their children just as children would sometimes like to divorce their parents. However, in an otherwise loving home, such differences and conflicts are temporary and do not lead to mutual rejection.

Tough mind and a tender heart

Martin Luther King (1969) said some very wise things about love. He stressed the combination of a tough mind and a tender heart. The tough mind helps us to guard against sentimental and over-indulgent parental love which does not foster a child's development.

Sarah is an overindulgent mother. Any problems her son Dennis had she believed were always caused by others, so she never encouraged him to take responsibility for his actions or their consequences. When he failed at school, it was because of poor teaching; when he was not chosen for the soccer team it was because he was not the teacher's pet; when he stole a car it was because his friends misled him; and when he assaulted an elderly person it was because he was provoked. Now at forty, an idle, unhappy person, he blames the world for his problems and his mother is still constantly covering up for him.

Tough-mindedness means that thought is given to the consequences of a child's behaviour, which sometimes demands that firm action be taken because it is in the long-term interests of a child and its development. Tough-mindedness becomes hard-heartedness when it is not motivated by concern for the child, but by selfish parental desires such as having a 'perfect child'.

Some mothers and fathers play complementary roles: the one may be more tough-minded, the other more tender-hearted. Provided they have common parental aims, they may achieve a good balance, but, in the absence of shared parental aims, confusion in the child is very likely.

In a nutshell, love involves the mind as well as the heart. It also involves effort and action. Peck (1990) says quite simply: '... love is effortful'. Expressing and sustaining love, be it between loving adults or

between parents and children, requires hard work. Sometimes very hard work indeed.

DISCIPLINE, RESPONSIBILITY AND CONTROL

Discipline and control

The word discipline is not very popular these days because it tends to be associated with corporal and other forms of punishment. This is unfortunate, since discipline has a much broader meaning. According to dictionary definitions, discipline refers to 'mental and moral training, a system of rules of conduct, corrections, and training towards obedience and order within a particular system', such as the family or the community. The purpose of such discipline is to prepare a person to fit into the existing social order. By contrast, punishment is an action taken to enforce conformity. Punishment is essentially concerned with deterrent action by others whereas discipline is more focused on the development of self-control.



POINT TO PONDER

'But children need and want help in controlling their impulses; if they are not called upon to control themselves, they use their behaviour to control adults. Yet, in fact, it is scary to a child to have power over adults' (David Elkind).

Throughout history, there have always been rebellious children and teenagers. What is different today is that they can no longer be sure what they are rebelling against. A comparison of the main disciplinary problems in American schools in 1940 and in 1990 is quite startling. In 1940 the major problems were

- talking out of turn
- chewing gum
- making a noise
- running in hallways
- queue jumping
- ignoring dress code
- littering.

Now compare these with those listed for 1990:

- drug abuse
- alcohol abuse
- sexual behaviour
- attempted suicide
- rape and sexual assault
- robbery and theft
- physical assault.



(Quoted by Clem Sunter, 1996, based on the Congressional Quarterly, 1993.)

This is an alarming list of criminal activity and one has to ask: What has happened to values and to discipline?

The purpose of parental control

The purpose of parental control should be

- to foster their child's development
- to teach and encourage desired behaviour
- to develop a sense of responsibility
- to help the child to move from control by others toward self-control, a long and difficult process.

METHODS OF CONTROL

Four different methods of training can be identified.

Avoidance versus teaching

In the very young child, parents may have to take strong and fast avoiding action, as when preventing a child from putting its fingers into electric plugs or boiling water. A little child may also have to be distracted and its attention redirected when it insists on pulling the dog's ears or spitting at strangers. However, as a child gains in understanding so teaching should replace avoidant action to an increasing extent. The focus should be on the do's rather than the don'ts. Instead of saying: 'Don't touch that vase!', a child could be helped to hold it gently, put its hand inside and feel its hollowness, stroke its shining surface and then be shown that it has a special place on the table. The point being made is that in teaching a child that an object, such as a vase, is interesting and precious, it is also learning what to do with it rather than damaging it.

Commanding versus directing

'Do as you are told' is the style of the commanding parent who generally sees no need to give explanations. There may certainly be occasions when this approach is appropriate. If the curtains have caught alight there is no time to explain why a certain escape action should be taken. However, in general, directing is preferable to commanding because it encourages learning based on understanding. 'Try doing it this way, it might be easier' would be a directing response. It encourages further questions and discussion.

Positive versus negative control

The following statements show the difference between positive and negative control.

'STOP THIS MESS NOW, OR ELSE!'

'This is very messy, but if you tidy up when you are finished you can play this game again tomorrow.'

'Let's see who can clean up this mess the fastest, starting now.'

Clearly, the first statement is an example of negative control and the two subsequent statements reflect a more positive approach. Few parents

will always exercise positive control, but the positives should outweigh the negatives.

Emotional reward versus material reward

Rewarding good behaviour is an important way of encouraging it. In this regard, adults do not differ from children. We only need to think of time and money devoted to the planning and implementation of incentive schemes in business and industry to appreciate this! Rewards may take many forms. An emotional reward is a response indicating approval and acceptance:

‘That is a lovely picture you drew for me. It deserves a special hug.’

‘I am so proud of you.’

‘I knew you could score that goal, it was terrific.’

‘You are such a nice brother to your little sister.’

‘You really helped me with that job.’

Comments such as these show a parent’s approval and make a child feel good about itself. That is the reward.

Another form of reward may be of a more tangible kind; it may range from a cookie for being good to a golden watch for passing matric. This kind of reward is often anticipated because of a promise given. Used in moderation, material rewards can act as incentives and encouragement. If used to excess, this approach can become counter-productive as ultimately nothing is done unless a reward is promised. A means to an end has then become an end in itself. This can even become a battleground between parent and the child dictating ‘If you give me what I want, only then will I give you what you want.’

EXERCISE

Think of your current family situation during the past week.

- Which of the above kinds of control did you use most often?
- Is this the way in which you generally deal with family situations?
- Is this the best way of dealing with them?
- Depending on the age of your child(ren), how would you describe the ground rules of behaviour in your home?

MAKING DISCIPLINE WORK

At the outset it needs to be emphasised that psychological problems cannot be resolved through punishment. For example, to punish a child with a bed-wetting problem is merely going to increase its anxiety, thereby aggravating the problem. A child who is generally bright at school but cannot do maths or write legibly may have a learning problem requiring special teaching, not punishment. Extreme shyness or nervousness will be worsened, not lessened, by punishment. In all such cases, punishment is likely to engender a sense of unworthiness, which does not foster development.

Several aspects need to be taken into account when dealing with a question of discipline, namely appropriateness, fairness, and consistency.

Age appropriateness

An example may best explain what is meant by age appropriateness. At the age of 15 months, Mary took great delight in pulling the flowers out of the vase, removing petal by petal and watching a flower change its shape with complete fascination. Her mother could respond with 'Stop being so naughty, you are spoiling my pretty flowers', followed by a firm smack. This mother is assuming that Mary is intentionally destructive and therefore deserves punishment. She fails to understand that Mary is examining the flower and is thrilled to be able to change its shape! Had Mary been six years old, the same action could have been interpreted quite differently, as Mary would by then have understood that the flowers in the vase were meant to be looked at, not pulled apart.

Punishment should fit the crime

If punishment is indeed necessary, it should match the 'crime'. To deprive a teenager of a month's pocket money for being twenty minutes late is likely to be felt as unreasonable: hostility is a more likely outcome than repentance.

Fairness

Sometimes punishment may be necessary. But if we want to instil a sense

of justice in our children, then it must be seen to be fair. What is more, the effects of punishment will differ depending on whether it is seen to be fair or not. This means taking account of the intention behind the action.



Little Joe, aged three, loved to observe his mother planting seeds and noticed how plants eventually grew big and numerous from the seeds that had been sown. So he decided that he wanted his daddy to have several watches and maybe even a bigger one. So he planted his daddy's best watch and waited for it to grow! Clearly his intention was good. Punishment for ruining his father's watch would surely have made no sense at all to little Joe.

EXERCISE

How would you have dealt with this situation?

Corrective action is preferable to punishment

Punishment only teaches a child that what it has done is not acceptable. It may teach very little about what is desirable or how to attain it. It can be more helpful to show a child how something can be put right. Even a two-year-old can 'help' its mother to mop up some spilt water. A teenager can help repaint a room whose walls have been spoilt by gummed-on posters and graffiti.

Consistency

Parents are not well-regulated machines that always perform in exactly the same way. A parent under pressure is likely to punish more than a relaxed

parent. In general, however, punishment or reprimand should be consistent so that what is acceptable one day is not treated as unacceptable the next. All the child learns from such inconsistencies is that the parent's mood or motive determines the reaction rather than the child's behaviour. What the child understands is that it is safe to do or request certain things when father or mother is in a good mood but not otherwise. What the child has learnt is to exploit a parent's mood!

Good example

Parents should model the behaviour they expect of their children. Saying one thing and doing another does not carry much weight. For example, a Swedish study convincingly demonstrated that parents who were well disciplined, who lived in accordance with their values, did not need to preach discipline to their children. Moreover, a comparison between problem children, delinquents and asocial youth and those who were socially responsible and well adjusted revealed only one overriding factor: 'What made the difference was how closely and well parents lived by their stated values and by the values they tried to teach their children' (Bruno Bettelheim, 1987, p 104).

In a nutshell: punishment may sometimes be necessary. It should, however, be a last rather than a first resort. It should be age appropriate, fair and not humiliating. Above all, it should never be abusive or excessive.

EXERCISE

Consider the following questions: write down your answers.

- 1 What behaviour in your children makes you really angry?
- 2 How do you react when they behave like this?
- 3 How would you classify your parental style?
- 4 Do you think that some change in your parenting style may be a good idea? If yes, explain the change you would like to make.
- 5 How would you rate yourself on a scale of leniency versus strictness: place an x on the appropriate number below.

Lenient

Strict

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10

- 6 How similar is your rating to that of your spouse or other person raising your children?
 - 7 If you differ quite a lot, is this a problem?
 - 8 What do you consider to be absolute values and non-negotiable behaviour?
 - 9 How would you describe helpful discipline?
-

Good manners

'Manners maketh man' is an old proverb that guided social behaviour in the past. Taken to extremes, it placed excessive emphasis on the trivial niceties of behaviour which today may be regarded of lesser importance. Yet, at the core of good manners lies a very important social and interpersonal skill, namely showing consideration and respect toward others. Just how such respect is expressed may differ vastly from one culture to another, but the common factor is the avoidance of insult and hurt and promoting behaviour which makes living together more comfortable for all. Good manners are part of self-discipline. Ill-mannered children and adults are generally not popular.

Significantly, at the time of writing, the current *Reader's Digest* features an article: 'How to bring up polite kids in a rude world'. Reference is made to rudeness seen on television, elsewhere and in the home, and stressing the importance of teaching politeness at home.

SUMMING UP

Perhaps you are feeling somewhat anxious at this stage. This might well be the case if it is the first time that you have dealt with your feelings and actions as a parent in this way. All the more reason to go on to the next section to learn about skills which could help you cope better with this difficult task of being a parent. In the meantime you might try this recipe:

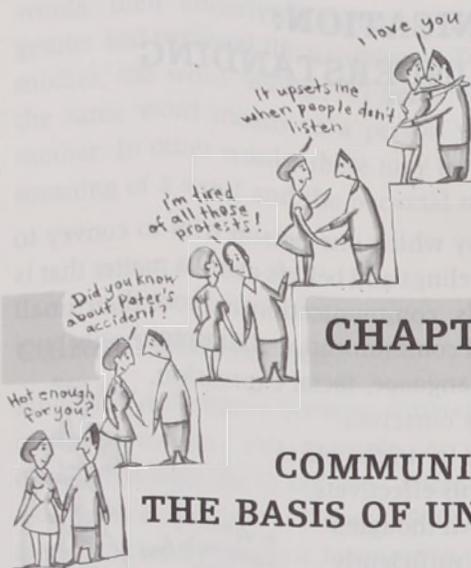
DAILY RECIPE FOR PARENTS

Give each child:

- lots of acceptance
- plenty of love
- at least one hug
- an attentive ear
- control and guidance
- fun and laughter
- encouragement

And be patient with yourself – no parent is perfect.





CHAPTER 5

COMMUNICATION: THE BASIS OF UNDERSTANDING

Why is good communication difficult?

Essentials of good communication

Communication between parent and child

Summing up

COMMUNICATION: THE BASIS OF UNDERSTANDING

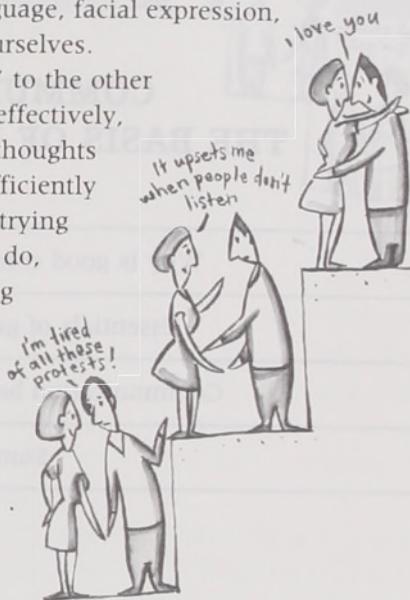
Communication is the process by which one person tries to convey to another his or her personal ideas, feelings and beliefs about a matter that is of some importance. In other words, communication is more than small talk. Language is the main means of communication, but not the only one: we also communicate by our body language, facial expression, the way we dress, the way we carry ourselves.

Communication means 'tuning in' to the other person's feelings and ideas. To do this effectively, we have to be able to silence our own thoughts and feelings temporarily so as to be sufficiently open to hear what the other person is trying to tell us. This is very difficult to do, especially when feelings are running high and when our ideas differ greatly.

It is quite possible for a couple to argue for hours on end, and yet there may be no real communication between them. All that has been learnt is that each partner is angry, and that neither has understood the other.

Conveying information is essentially a one-way process with a speaker putting across ideas or facts to a listener or audience. By contrast, communication is a two-way process in which there is direct interaction between the people involved.

There are different levels of communication, from small talk to intimacy.



WHY IS GOOD COMMUNICATION DIFFICULT?

Even when several people speak the same language and use the same

words, their underlying meaning may differ in terms of culture, age, gender and personal life experience. To a person who had a caring, tender mother, the word 'mother' conveys something very different from what the same word means to a person who had a rejecting and neglectful mother. In other words, there may be a difference between the dictionary meaning of a word and the personal meaning it has for us.

Cultural differences

Linguistic differences between different cultures may be a rich source of misinterpretation. For example, according to Japanese tradition it is considered impolite to say 'No'. There are thus indirect ways of conveying a difference of opinion. Mikes (1970) explains that one should not phrase a question addressed to a Japanese in negative form. For example, 'Aren't you bored stiff with me?' might be replied to, to your astonishment, with 'Yes!', because it is more polite to agree than to disagree.

Differences in cultural norms are revealed to us through knowing another language. It is thus a great help in understanding not only the meaning of the word, but possibly also the customs and values which it reflects. A few examples will illustrate this point.

In Spanish, the clock walks, whereas in English, it runs. Could this be telling us something about differences in time perception between the English and the Spanish? Cultural differences in family constellation and interactions may also be reflected in language. In Afrikaans no difference is made, linguistically, between cousins and nephews and nieces, who are all called 'neefs' (male) or 'niggies' (female). In African languages numerous kinship relationships are detailed very fully. Certain customs may prevail in some groups but not in others. There is always vocabulary relating to various customs and traditions but the appropriate words may not exist in another language where they do not apply. Among the Zulu, for example, there is the *umkhongi*, who is a negotiator on behalf of a young man who wishes to become betrothed to a certain young girl. The *umkhongi* visits the girl's father and male relatives. The matter of *lobola* (what is offered by the intending groom) and the *izibizo* (demands of the wife's family) are discussed. There are no English equivalents for these terms.

So, even concerning something as universal as the family we find great variation in the way family relationships are described. This may reflect patterns of respect and other forms of interaction which may be difficult for someone to grasp whose language does not make the same distinctions.

Gender differences

If you would like to establish whether there are gender differences in the way certain words and meanings are perceived and reacted to, the following little exercise could be carried out.

EXERCISE

Ask a group of men and women to write down whatever other words come instantly to mind and are associated with the following. Give one word at a time and allow only 15 seconds for response.

- 1 tools
- 2 ballet
- 3 string
- 4 tree
- 5 kitchen
- 6 car
- 7 knife
- 8 baby

How similar/different were the responses?

One difference that needs to be noted is that, in general, women tend to express feelings in words more readily than men, whereas men may often let actions speak in place of words. This has considerable relevance for dealing with family relations.

Jack and Susie sought marriage counselling because of numerous conflicts they were experiencing. It soon became clear that poor communication was a major factor in their misunderstandings, as the following extract shows. Susie looked at Jack accusingly, saying: 'You

never say you love me anymore.' Jack looked at her in utter amazement and said 'Good heavens! I hand over my pay check to you at the end of every month. I am giving you my hard-earned money. How can you question my love for you?' It was Susie's turn to look amazed.

Age differences

Many humorous examples come to mind when thinking of young children's comments which reflect their own unique way of perceiving and reacting to the world. One small child was astonished to hear his father had a godchild. In utter amazement he exclaimed: 'I didn't even know you were God!'

Iris Vaughan kept a diary as a child that was later published as a book – this provides some endearing examples of a child's perception of the world. 'Only sometimes Pop read us out of the child's Bible about Moses and David and other old men. All had beards. Solomon was the wisest becos he had so many wives and learnt to keep alive for 200 years. That was becos God liked him. I asked Pop why he did not have many wives and he said God forbid and told me not to ask silly questions' (p 21).

What we see here is a logic of its own, reflecting the child's limited knowledge of language and conventions. Yet if we accept the child's level of reasoning, in terms of what it knows, or doesn't know, these responses are entirely sensible.

At the other end of the lifespan, when dealing with the elderly, we may note the use of words which are unfamiliar to the youth of today. For example, a tickey (a small coin) or a tickey box (a pay phone operated by paying with tickeys) is unknown to today's younger generation. A bioscope has become a movie, a gramophone a record player, and a housewife is now a home executive.

Even more confusingly, some words have remained the same, but their meaning has changed. A delightful newsletter for retirees provides some amusing examples. 'When we were young, Grass was mowed, Coke was a cold drink, Pot was something you cooked in, Rock Music was a grandma's lullaby (Rock a bye baby ...) and being gay meant being cheerful.' One could surely spend an entertaining evening with a multi-generation family adding to this list.

ESSENTIALS OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

Volumes have been written about communication. But the basic essentials can be summed up in a few key words: look, observe, listen, confirm, accept and respond meaningfully. In technical terms, we speak of the sender of the message and of the receiver to whom it is addressed.

Look/observe

It is essential for good communication for sender and receiver to look at each other. If one person is trying to communicate with one eye on the newspaper, how can the other person's reactions be observed? Is it with a smile, with indifference, eyes flashing with anger or with complete surprise? Important non-verbal cues will thus be missed. **Non-verbal cues** include gestures, facial expression, posture, tone of voice, appearance, and actions.

- **Gesture:** A person emphatically wagging his finger is being very persuasive or determined. A girl biting her nails is conveying insecurity.
- **Facial expression:** There are obvious cues which are easily recognised: a frown, which may reflect concentration or puzzlement; a smile, which suggests pleasure; tears, which signal acute distress.
- **Posture:** Assertiveness is suggested by a person drawing himself or herself up to his/her full height and facing the opposition directly, leaning forward. Submission is shown by a bowed head and avoidance of eye contact.
- **Tone of voice:** A loud voice tends to be associated with strong feelings or with confidence and assertiveness, whereas speaking very softly may convey timidity or uncertainty.
- **Appearance:** This may tell us something about a person's personality. Flamboyant dress may reflect an outgoing or imaginative personality. A conservative, tailored suit tends to reflect conventionality. Note, for example, the differ-



ence in dress of the presenters of arts programmes on television compared to business executives discussing the financial scene.

- **Actions:** Actions often reflect particular customs and conventions. In Western tradition a person of status usually precedes another of lower status. Among some traditional African groups, the reverse is true. The person of lesser rank goes first, thus paving the way for a person of higher rank.

There are certain conventional ways of expressing attitudes and feelings, but there will also be highly individualistic ways of doing so. We should, therefore, be careful about attributing a conventional meaning to a particular way of reacting because it may mean something different in the case of a specific individual. The more foreign the other person is, the less reliance should be placed on the interpretation of non-verbal signals in terms of our own familiar signs. When actions seem inexplicable we need to use verbal communication to explore their meaning to gain further understanding.

An effective communicator is a good observer.

Listen

An old proverb says that the Lord in his wisdom gave us two ears and only one mouth so that we might listen more than we speak! Many of us need to be reminded of this. Often we are so eager to express our own thoughts and feelings that we forget to listen to what the other person is saying. We need to listen with an open mind so that we are free to hear what the other person is saying and how it is being said. It requires a great deal of discipline to listen in this attentive way, especially when feelings are running high. Often we are so busy putting together our counter-argument or defence that we are really not listening to what the other person is saying. Instead, we keep on interrupting. It is not unusual in a counselling situation to hear one exasperated person saying to the other: 'I have been telling you this for ten years, and you still have not heard me.'



A good communicator is a good listener

Confirm

One way to check that a message has been correctly understood is to repeat it. This is especially true of children. We need to confirm what the other person has said because we tend to filter what we see and hear through our own preconceptions and expectations, heavily laced with our feelings. So, what is said to us may be construed in terms of what **we** think and not in terms of what the sender was saying. Confirming what the other person has said implies a measure of acceptance. However, it does not necessarily imply agreement. It is possible to understand yet to disagree. Consider the following example:

'My boss had absolutely no right to take me to task because I used my initiative. He just saw this as an effort to upstage him. It leaves me no option but to resign.'

Several responses could be made to this indicating different degrees of confirmation:

'Don't be stupid. How can you think of resigning? Where's the money for our rent going to come from?'

'I think you are exaggerating. Maybe your boss was just in a bad mood.'

'You really thought you were doing your best, and your boss does not seem to appreciate this. You feel sore enough about this to want to resign.'

These three alternatives range from total lack of understanding to accurate confirmation of what has been said.

A non-confirming response usually closes the door to further communication, or it may deflect the discussion to an issue that may be irrelevant, or only partly relevant, such as who is going to pay the rent.

Let us consider another example.

Anne, coming to sit close to her husband, Jim, says: 'I have had such a boring day with nobody to talk to.'

Jim, watching TV: 'Well, I wish my day had been more boring. Everybody in the office seemed to have a problem they wanted to talk about.'

Anne: 'Well, I wouldn't complain about that, at least it was interesting.'

Jim: 'What's interesting about Pete's income tax, the firm's overdraft, Helen's gripes about lack of promotion, and Tom's blocked drain?'

Can you imagine this situation? Neither is really confirming what the other is saying, but each is preoccupied with his or her own world of experience. Moreover, each is trying to prove to the other that he or she had the most frustrating day.

Good communication could have sounded something like this. Jim could have replied to Anne's statement by saying: 'Yes, it must be boring to be alone at home the whole day.' He could have switched off the television, and encouraged Anne to come closer to him. Anne, on the other hand, could have confirmed Jim's remark with: 'Yes, it can be a bit much if everyone comes to you with their problems – me too.'

To sum up: to confirm means to acknowledge what the other person thinks or feels **as genuine for them**, however strange it may seem to you. It is this acceptance which keeps the door of communication open. Differences are then likely to be discussed with the aim of solving problems rather than proving each other right or wrong.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD

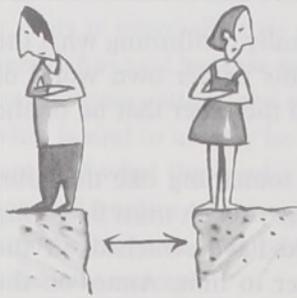
All the features of communication discussed so far also apply to communication between parent and child. Because of the difference in age, experience, the power position and the particular emotional involvement of a parent, there is an extra need for awareness of what kind of communication may be destructive.



POINT TO PONDER

Whereas good communication builds relationships and bridges gaps, poor communication widens them.

Damaging communication



What is communicated can be highly destructive. This may be knowingly done by cruel and insensitive parents, but may also be unwittingly done by parents in moments of anger, exasperation, frustration or parental burnout, when total fatigue impairs judgement and self-control. Some parents may simply have so little understanding of a child that they do not realise what effect negative messages can have. An occasional lapse by an

otherwise loving parent may soon be forgotten, but constant negative messages can be a subtle form of abuse because the self-respect and self-image of the child are damaged. This is also true for adults, of course, especially if they are unable to fight back for various reasons, such as fear of loss of work, or of rejection by a partner.

The following kind of communication should always be avoided:

- **Humiliation.** This means putting children or teenagers down, belittling them. This is especially damaging in the presence of others.

‘Oh, so you’ve let the family down again.’

‘You are just so utterly useless.’

Instead it could be said firmly: ‘This sort of behaviour is just not acceptable.’ Note that the *behaviour* is being condemned, not the person.

- **Blaming** even before the evidence has been heard. ‘I suppose you were careless again’, or ‘I’m sure it’s all your fault.’
- **Labelling** which lumps people of a group together without recognising individual differences. ‘You are completely irresponsible, like all teenagers.’
- **Denial**, when the importance of what is heard is not acknowledged. ‘Never mind, dear, let’s go to a movie and forget all about it.’ This leaves a problem unsolved. Rather go to the movie once possible solutions have been talked about.
- **Threatening**, when a parent threatens action which the child may be unhappy about. For example, when a mother belligerently says: ‘I’m going to tell your principal about this !’, which may be the last thing the child would like the parent to do. It is important to consider how the intended action is seen by the child. If it is very unhappy about it, discuss alternatives. Maybe it is the belligerent attitude the child fears

will be adopted more than a visit to the principal. If a visit to the principal seems necessary, explain this calmly to the child.

- **Sarcasm**, as when a child's remark that it won a competition is responded to with 'Some competition!'. Children are unable to deal with this kind of comment.

Constructive communication which builds understanding and trust

- **Listening** is particularly important when dealing with children. Ginott (1965) pointed out that children's messages are often in code which needs deciphering. He gives the example of the little boy who on his first visit to the nursery school asked who had made the ugly pictures on the wall, much to his mother's embarrassment. However, the teacher understood the meaning behind the question and told him that it was OK to paint ugly pictures, thereby reassuring the little fellow that his difficulty with drawing pretty pictures would not be a problem.

Not only do parents need to decode their children's messages, they sometimes need to help them to communicate with themselves. A young child may often feel and sense more than it is able to express in words. A tearful, irritable four year old may be missing his older brother who has just started attending school but may not be able to actually express this in words.

- **Statements of understanding** (confirming) should precede discussion of a problem and how to deal with it. If a teenager has just had a big fight with a best friend it is helpful to first acknowledge the feelings of hurt and anger. 'You must be feeling really mad right now.'

A remark such as 'Well, thank goodness that friendship's over', reflects a parent's relief, not the teenager's feelings. Discussion may follow more readily if we sense that our feelings have been understood. This applies equally to adults.

- **Seeking solutions** should be the purpose of communication about problems. Sometimes the understanding conveyed is enough. Sometimes definite action needs to be taken. What is important is to remain focused on the specific issue. If there is a problem with maths then this is what should be dealt with. It may be quite irrelevant to see this as a problem with the school as a whole. The child should also be given the opportunity to come up with solutions of its own.

- **Choose time and place well.** Communicating about controversial or emotional matters is best avoided when rushed, exhausted, hungry or ill. It is also important to choose a quiet place where one is least likely to be interrupted.
- **Praise and encourage effort,** even if it was not successful.



POINT TO PONDER

What has been said implies that honesty about feelings and ideas is an essential ingredient of good communication. It is an honesty that will only develop in an atmosphere of love and trust. It is an honesty allied to sensitivity and understanding. It is not being 'brutally frank'.

Communicating love

Love may be expressed in different ways. It can be communicated **physically** by touch, hugging, kissing or moving closer. A baby's first experience of love is linked to being held, supported, fed and comforted. The need for physical expression of love remains with us throughout life. In adulthood it may be expressed in the intimacy of sex, though sex does not necessarily mean love.

Love can be communicated **verbally**: 'I love you', 'You light up my day' or 'I can't wait to be with you'.

Love may be expressed in **subtle ways**, by a knowing look, a special smile, words of encouragement, tears of shared sadness or joy.

Love can be shown through **action**: a thoughtful gift, a bunch of flowers, the interest taken in a child's activities, making time to be together, or working hard at a disliked job to support the family.





CHAPTER 6

PARENTS AS PEOPLE AND TEAM MATES

Parenting as a growth experience

The quest for psychological maturity

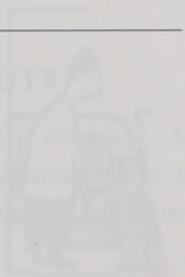
Mothering and fathering

Parents as team mates

Support

Parenting: who does what?

Summing up



PARENTS AS PEOPLE AND TEAM MATES

An old German proverb says 'It is easy to become a parent but hard to be one'. One of the reasons that it is hard to be a parent is simply because people are human, yet they think they should be super parents.

As humans we tend to be rather selfish, demanding creatures and generally like our comforts. We seek recognition and self-fulfilment and would like life to be as trouble free as possible. We want our needs to be satisfied sooner rather than later, and would prefer things to be done our way. Children challenge all this. Remarkably, parents may become willing to do things for their children they would not dream of doing for anyone else. Dad takes Jonathan to the circus even though he dislikes animal acts intensely. Mum stays at home and forgoes a reunion with old friends to comfort her daughter whose first broken romance has left her totally distraught. Ernest postpones early and eagerly desired retirement to send his daughter to medical school and his son overseas for postgraduate training.



POINT TO PONDER

Parenthood is a most demanding role. It can also be immensely rewarding. As a growth experience, it is unequalled.

PARENTING AS A GROWTH EXPERIENCE

The kind of person we are, the beliefs and values we cherish, the way our

parents raised us are but some of the factors that have helped to shape us as people. In turn, they will exert a strong influence over what we as parents expect of ourselves and our children. Just as rearing children is an ongoing process, so too is one's development as a parent. It begins with the anticipation of the birth of one's first child, continues with the arrival of the baby and as it grows and passes through different stages, eventually to leave home and become a parent, thus making you a grandparent.

Perhaps the term 'grand' is appropriate in the sense that by the time one becomes a grandparent one has experienced the full cycle of parenthood and, generally, knows a lot more than when first becoming a parent.

Most parents are wise in retrospect. We could all have done better knowing what we know by the time our children grow up. But few are wise in the beginning. In fact, most first-time parents are rank amateurs – more so than in the past when large families provided a training ground for parenting since older siblings, especially girls, had actively to help raise younger ones. We do not come to parenthood as experts so what really counts is the willingness to learn and to grow as a parent and as a person.

To be an effective parent means ensuring the physical wellbeing of a child, stimulating its intellectual development, encouraging socially acceptable and responsible behaviour, providing emotional security and giving moral and spiritual direction. It presupposes that one has reached a certain level of maturity.

THE QUEST FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL MATURITY

Physical and psychological maturity do not necessarily coincide. In exceptional individuals psychological maturity may be attained early in life but often it is a lifelong quest. Some people remain immature throughout their lives.

Psychological maturity is a special combination of self-knowledge and practical wisdom, guided by moral principles and beliefs. It is associated with psychological wellbeing. It promotes good human relationships and certainly fosters our effectiveness as parents. Certain characteristics are linked to this kind of maturity.

Realism

A feature of maturity is the ability to assess oneself with a fair measure of objectivity and to see things as they are, rather than as one would wish them to be. It implies a willingness to recognise one's strengths and limitations. It also means accepting responsibility for one's mistakes instead of projecting them onto others. This kind of honesty is an essential ingredient of maturity – and of parenting. The realistic parent does not try to be a perfect parent, whatever that may mean, but strives to be a good one. Moreover, parents who are realistic about themselves are also more likely to be reasonably realistic about their children's abilities, personal strengths and limitations than those with too high or too low an opinion of themselves.

A positive self-image

We all have definite ideas about our personal characteristics such as our looks, level of intelligence, personality, what others think we are like and what we would ideally like to be. This is what is meant by our self-image. Susan says, 'I need to lose weight.' Peter says, 'I'm as competent as my boss.' Mary moans, 'I'm stupid at budgeting.' Mark laments: 'I wish I could keep my cool when I get angry.' All these are self-evaluative remarks which tell us something about how Susan, Peter, Mary and Mark see themselves.



In general, our self-image tends to be a mixture of the positive and the negative. However, if a self-image is too negative, when our shortcomings feature too strongly, it is likely to impair our functioning because of anxiety, and persistent doubt about our own worth and our ability to cope with the demands of life. By contrast, a positive self-image tends to be linked to self-confidence and higher self-esteem because it recognises certain strengths. In turn, this generates faith in our ability to cope reasonably well. It does not mean being self-satisfied, smug, or unwilling to learn.



POINT TO PONDER

It is difficult for a child to have confidence in a parent who lacks it and has a poor self-image.

Our self-image is not static. As new situations arise, so it may need to be modified. In fact, every major life change is likely to entail some re-evaluation of our self-concept. Becoming a parent may not affect the image we hold of ourselves as a fairly intelligent and sociable person, but may require a new look at our level of frustration tolerance or the ability to postpone the satisfaction of our own needs to give priority to those of our child.

A balanced self-image means that there is a reasonable balance between its different dimensions – that it is not, for example, centred almost exclusively on one's appearance or social skills or musical ability.

A **firm sense of identity** is a feature of maturity. Our identity is closely linked to our self-image, but refers more specifically to the position we hold and the roles we play in the family, at work and in the community. For example, a person could be described as a husband, father and shopowner. Becoming a parent adds yet another role to existing ones: a woman becomes a mother in addition to already being a homemaker, wife and salesperson; a man becomes a father in addition to being a husband, a church elder and an auto technician. Parenthood, however, could also threaten a person's existing identity with which it is incompatible, such as that of the 'eternal bachelor' or the 'glamour girl'.

A mature person is able to adapt his or her identity in response to new roles and challenges.

Caring love

The mature person is able to freely give and receive love. Parenthood requires the capacity for caring love in abundance. Much has been said about love in chapter 3. Here it is merely re-emphasised that the caring

love of a parent should comprise a tender heart, a thoughtful mind, and should be expressed in caring actions.

Sense of responsibility

A sense of responsibility towards oneself and others is a feature of maturity. The current emphasis on self-fulfilment and human rights needs to be counter-balanced by accepting one's responsibility for the wellbeing of others in the family and community.

Commitment

Commitment means believing in the importance of what one is doing and to be fully involved in doing it well. It embraces enthusiasm and perseverance. Enthusiasm implies an underlying spirit of joy and pleasure. Perseverance means persisting with a task despite difficulties and setbacks. It is the quality which often makes the difference between success and failure.

Commitment means wholeheartedness, of which parenthood demands plenty. Moreover, there can be little personal development without it.

Life balance

It is not always easy to achieve a good balance between the different spheres of one's life – that is between family, work and leisure. But in general the mature person strives for a reasonable balance, trying to spread his/her energy and commitment across these different spheres.

Another kind of balance may be between change and stability. Stability is important to give continuity and consistency to our behaviour. However, as we live in a rapidly changing world we also need to be flexible to adapt to changes of various kinds, including our way of parenting. As our children grow older so our interaction with them needs to change.

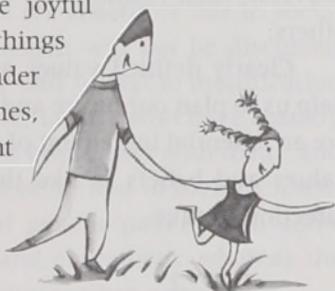
How balanced is your life at present?

Are there certain changes you would like to make in regard to this?

How could this affect you and your relationship with your child(ren)?

Joyfulness

Optimism, enthusiasm, a sense of fun, and zest go together. They enhance ordinary experiences. The bored, blasé person who feels that all has been seen and heard before lacks such joyfulness. The joyful person can take a childlike delight in simple things and so can identify with a child's sense of wonder and fun, like the father sitting on his haunches, sharing his little son's fascination with an ant carrying a burden of crumbs to its nest; or the parent who joins in a child's laughter as it walks barefoot in long grass, and who can share its utter amazement when it sees an ostrich ('BIG birdie') for the first time. Joyfulness and curiosity often go together. The joyful person anticipates happy things and may therefore be more venturesome than an anxious person.



POINT TO PONDER

What is this life,
if full of care
we have no time to stand and stare ...
(W H Davies).

The child is an explorer by nature, wanting to learn about the world, trying to make sense of it and to gain control over it. This curiosity, and the enjoyment it can generate, can strongly draw parent and child together.

A philosophy of life

Everybody has some kind of philosophy of life or worldview, that is a system of ideas about life and about people. It also involves ideals and what we see as desirable. It gives direction about our social standards and moral behaviour. More than this, it refers to our beliefs about the purpose and meaning of life itself. The ability to identify with larger ideals and goals and to accept the meaningfulness of life itself lies at the heart of psychological wellbeing (Carl Gustav Jung, 1933; Viktor Frankl, 1969).

Some people may be guided by ideological beliefs, others by economic values or by a strongly developed code of ethics. For many, their faith and religion provide the foundation for understanding man's place in the universe, their relationship with the Almighty and their obligation toward others.

Clearly defined values and beliefs act as an integrating force which help us to plan our future and to evaluate people and events. They certainly are an essential ingredient of effective parenting. A parent without guiding values and beliefs is like the explorer without a map, unsure of what direction to take.



POINT TO PONDER

If you value your child, teach it values!
(D Stewart Briscoe).

MOTHERING AND FATHERING

The features of maturity discussed above apply equally to men and women. There are, however, also some subtle psychological differences between men and women, although it is not considered politically correct to say so these days. The egalitarian philosophy of our times has led us to neglect the value of certain gender differences because 'It seems particularly difficult for people to accept differences between their own and other groups without judging one group, usually their own, as superior

to the other.' This often forms the basis of prejudice and discrimination, yet 'the optimal development of both men and women can be achieved only when psychological similarities as well as differences are understood by all concerned with human development such as parents ...' (Gerdes, 1988, p 15).

Although some features tend to be more dominant in one sex, this does not mean that they are exclusive to it: it is more a question of preference, style, and priority. As an analogy, one can think of the masculine/feminine dimensions of personality as akin to the warp (thread running lengthwise) and the weft (thread running across) of woven material. Both threads should be of high quality if the material is to be strong. Applied to parenthood, it is suggested that mothering and fathering together provide a strong parental fabric.

The question of whether these differences are genetic or due to social factors, or both, is a highly complex issue, which will not be discussed here. Whatever their origin, they are malleable and subject to modification should circumstance demand this. For example, fathers who have custody of their children tend to become gentler in their interaction with them, and single mothers often expect more independent behaviour of their children.

It is also possible to find a reversal of gender patterns. In some couples, the father may be more nurturant and empathetic whereas the mother may be the more assertive, or even domineering parent.

Nevertheless, the following are fairly general differences in mothering and fathering:

- Mothers tend to be the main caretakers, especially during their children's infancy. Fathers often become more involved once their children are mobile and able to take part in games like playing ball and romping in the bath, and are able to communicate to some degree.
- Mothers are concerned more with nurturance and interdependence. Fathers tend to encourage independence. A mother, on seeing her child climb a tree, is likely to say, 'Don't go too high – be careful.' A father might say: 'Well done, check your foothold before you go any higher!'
- Mothers respond strongly in terms of a child's needs and feelings. A little boy who is scared of going into a dark cave is likely to be picked up and cuddled by his mother concerned about his fear. By contrast, his father might take him firmly by the hand, assuring him that he will be safe.
- Both mothers and fathers are protective towards their children. A mother's protectiveness is often aimed at soothing hurt feelings. For

example, if her little girl has been ignored by a group of playmates and is distressed by this, she will try to comfort her child or ask the other children to play with her. Fathers often see themselves more in their role as protectors against physical threat and danger. This could range from shielding a child against a raging Cape southeaster or protecting the reputation of his teenage daughter by carefully vetting her boyfriends.

- Mothers are role models for daughters and their attitudes towards their husband or men in general are of primary significance in shaping that of their daughters.
- Fathers are role models for their sons and greatly influence their attitudes towards women. It should be understood that if biological mothers or fathers are absent, friends, teachers or relatives may act as role models.
- Fathers play a particularly important role in the development of their children's masculinity and femininity. This is because fathers respond rather differently to boys and girls than mothers do. They will, for example, roughhouse it more with little boys. They also tend to insist more on gender-appropriate behaviour in terms of culture and norms. Thus they tell their sons: 'Cowboys don't cry' while being much more tolerant of emotional upsets and tears in their daughters.
- When it comes to dealing with problems, mothers may seek to understand, fathers to take action. Ten-year-old Paul has a problem with a school subject, his mother might wonder if this is due to his inattentiveness, the teacher's lack of skill, the fact that Paul is more interested in sport than school work, or because of his general lack of confidence. Paul's father may simply assume that he needs extra lessons.



This example also suggests another difference, namely that women often take a more holistic view of things, considering the possible interaction between several factors. This ability to attend to several factors simultaneously is more characteristic of women than of men. With a baby in her arms, a mother may manage to stir the stew on the

stove, while reminding her four-year-old to wash his hands, and her twelve-year-old to do his homework, and feed the cat. In its extreme form, women may be too unfocused. Men, by contrast, tend to be more single-minded, concentrating on one thing at a time, and sometimes being excessively one-track-minded.

- Mothers are more likely to discipline in terms of a child's present state of mind; fathers are more likely to discipline by rules.
- Men and women play differently with their children: mothers join in at the child's level, which gives the child the opportunity to feel in charge. Fathers often use play to teach skill and teamwork, often trying to stretch a child to test its limits.

(Gerdes, 1972; 1988; Thevenin, 1993.)

Shapiro says: 'My wife is the mother in our family, and she is very good at it. I'm not much of a **mother** but I still consider myself a good parent to our two children. My approach to raising children is quite different from Susan's – because if the truth be known, she doesn't know much about how to **father**. That's where I'm a natural! As parents, both of us have inherent tendencies that do not always co-incide, and occasionally we disagree about what is best for our children. I'm convinced, however, that what is best for our children is that we **don't** always agree – that each of us brings a certain dimension to parenthood that complements the other' (*Living and Loving*, 1994, p 62).

A new definition of motherhood

I'd like to quote a little episode here. It happened some time ago but the message is still valid.

A few months ago, when I was picking up the children at school, another mother I know well rushed up to me. Emily was fuming with indignation.

'Do you know what you and I are?' she demanded.

Before I could give her an answer – and I didn't really have one handy – she blurted out the reason for her question. It seemed she had just returned from renewing her driver's licence. Asked to state her occupation, Emily hesitated, uncertain how to classify herself.

'What I mean,' explained the clerk, 'is do you have a job or are you just a ...?'

'Of course I have a job,' snapped Emily, 'I'm a mother.'

The clerk smiled indulgently. Then she wrote 'Occupation: Housewife.'

'Oh, no!' protested Emily, 'I'd rather be listed as a mother.'

'We don't list "mother" as an occupation. "Housewife" covers it,' said the clerk emphatically.

I forgot all about her story until one day I found myself in the same situation, this time at the Town Hall. The clerk was obviously a career woman, poised, efficient and possessed of a high-sounding title, like 'official interrogator' or 'Town registrar'.

'And what is your occupation?' she probed.

What made me say it, I do not know. The words just simply poured out.

'I'm a research associate in the field of child development and human relations.'

The clerk paused, ball-point pen frozen in mid-air and looked up, as though she had not heard right. I repeated the title slowly, emphasising the significant words. Then I stared with wonder as my pompous pronouncement was written in bold, black ink on the official questionnaire.

'Might I ask,' said the clerk with interest, 'just what you do in your field?'

Coolly, without any trace of fluster in my voice, I heard myself reply, 'I have a continuing programme of research [what mother doesn't?] in the laboratory and in the field [normally I would have said 'indoors and out']. I'm working for my master's [the whole darned family!] and already have four credits [all daughters]. Of course, the job is one of the most demanding in the humanities [any mother care to disagree?] and I often work a fourteen-hour day [24-hour is more like it!]. But the job is more challenging than most run-of-the-mill careers, and the rewards are in satisfaction, rather than just money.'

There was an increasing note of respect in the clerk's voice, as she completed the form, stood up and ushered me personally to the door.

As I drove into our driveway, buoyed up by my glamorous new career, I was greeted by my 'lab assistants' aged 13, 7 and 3. Upstairs, I could hear our new experimental model (six months) in the child development programme, testing out a new vocal pattern.

I felt triumphant. I had scored a beat on beaurocracy. I had gone

down on the official records as someone more distinguished and indispensable to mankind, than just 'mother'.

Home – what a glorious career! Especially when there is a title on the door.

Esther Wilkinson Cross

(This delightful anecdote was featured in a magazine that went out of print many years ago. So I cannot be more specific in my acknowledgement.)

PARENTS AS TEAM MATES

The gainful employment of women has been one of the most dramatic changes during the past three decades. Currently, approximately 40 per cent of women in urban areas are employed (Erwee, 1994). This has obviously had an impact on women's role as homemaker and parent.

A vast body of research investigating these changes has been spawned. Some findings are remarkably consistent – notably that women's entry into the labour market has greatly increased their workload. In fact, reference is made to their 'double day'. What this means is that the roles of women have changed more dramatically than those of men, and that there is not always a fair division of labour in the home.

In the traditional family, the roles of husband and wife are clearly defined. He is the breadwinner, she the full-time homemaker and mother. There is little ambiguity about who does what in the home. Although each partner may help the other, this is not prescribed in any way.

In one dual-earner marriage, for example, Brendon is a business executive and Joyce a journalist. Both face heavy demands in their work situation. Their joint salary enables them to live a life of material comfort and security. They have a son of ten, and a daughter of seven, and they have the back-up services of a part-time domestic. Joyce does the shopping and cooking for the family. Brendon sees to breakfast for the family and looks after the garden. They take turns to transport their children to and from school. Joyce supervises homework. Their role division works fairly well, but Joyce feels overburdened, and especially when there is a crisis, like a sick child or a deadline for her to meet at work. Brendon feels that compared with other men, he does more than his share and is entitled to having Saturday off for golf. Joyce sees this differently, and says: 'Saturday is my catching-up day, pre-cooking for the next week, shopping, spending special time with

the children, having my hair cut and so on. I would also like a day off.'

In rural families, role patterns used to be particularly well defined, but this is no longer always the case. Greta, for example, sees to the running of the farm, while her husband works as a bookkeeper in the nearby town.

The extended family, too, is changing. Nzimande, who undertook research in a rural Zulu community, remarks: 'Much debate still goes on as to the exact type of change that has taken place. Certainly, it has not been a case of replacing one family form with another. Often, we find aspects of different systems coexisting' (1996, p 45). Jithoo (1996) claims that the Indian family in South Africa is changing towards the nuclear family system but that it is not the same as the Western nuclear family because it still exhibits many of the features of the joint family, as reflected in traditional values and certain inter-generational family obligations.

Not surprisingly, there is scope for considerable role confusion. On the other hand, these changes have also brought some advantages, notably the

greater flexibility concerning the roles within a particular family, to suit its specific needs. The disadvantages lie in uncertainty about role fulfilment and the potential for role strain and role conflict.



Role strain occurs when the demands of one or several roles produce a situation of overdemand and overwork. A case in point would be that of Raymond, a young medical intern, working 18 hours a day and trying, not very successfully, to maintain a relationship with his wife and new baby.

Another example is that of Linda, a young mother with three children under the age of four. Her husband, Pieter, is often away from home on long business trips and may not be there when his practical and moral support may be most needed. As they live far from family and close friends, crises such as having a sick child can be particularly difficult for Linda to manage.

Role conflict occurs when the demands of one role conflict with another. For example, Elisabeth is a mother of two teenagers. She has a demanding job as a teacher and is studying for a degree. Examination times at school clash with her own, thus creating a real problem for her.

Then there is Moses, who works long hours in his shop to make ends meet, but he only sees his children when they are asleep because he gets

home so late. He would like to see much more of them, but his economic position makes this difficult, because his business must be his first priority for the survival of the family.

Support

Role strain and role conflict can be reduced if sufficient support is available, especially in times of pressure and stress. Such support is one of the strengths of the extended family with its strong ties with siblings and kinship folk, often living nearby. In the nuclear family, such support is often lacking because of its emphasis on self-sufficiency and independence. Moreover, family members may be living far apart. To some extent, childcare facilities have come to replace the extended family, but they are not always affordable or accessible. Sometimes self-help groups provide backup for people finding themselves in similar situations, such as an association for mothers of multiple births, or a neighbourhood group of single parents.

Parenting: who does what?

The question of who does what in the home concerning household and parenting tasks has generated much debate and research. On the whole, research findings indicate considerable variation, which is not surprising in view of the many factors implicated. Nevertheless, certain trends can be briefly summarised.

- Not unexpectedly, the most general finding is that women perform far more parenting tasks than men.
- Interestingly, mothers and fathers view their own and each other's role fulfilment somewhat differently. Both tend to estimate their own contribution as higher than their partner gives them credit for.
- There are less clearly defined roles for fathers in urbanised technological societies than in rural areas. A South African study found urban black fathers more involved in family responsibilities than their rural counterparts or those in transition from rural to urban living. This suggests that urbanisation has a particularly important effect on changing parenting roles (Edwards, Borsten & Kunene, 1986).
- The extent of a father's participation is not generally much affected by

the wife's employment. Although she may be sharing the breadwinner role equally, this does not necessarily mean that he will equally share the parental role. The greatest role uncertainty, in fact, seems to be in dual earner couples (Gerdes, Coetzee, Cronje, 1996; Maconachie, 1985).

- There are indications that men's attitudes have changed, but this is not necessarily paralleled to the same extent by their actual behaviour. Societal attitudes may have much to do with this. In fact, Lamb (1975) refers to the father as the 'forgotten parent'. Nonetheless, there is a 'quiet revolution' going on as more men are asserting their right to greater participation as nurturers and not only as providers for the child, as in the past. Numerous studies concerning the possible detrimental effects of a father's ongoing absence or non-involvement with his children have highlighted his specific importance as parent. It is noteworthy that nowadays more fathers are fighting for custody of their children.

No general rules can be formulated for role division in the home, but in the interest of a harmonious relationship, the focus should be on fairness as seen by a particular couple and determined by their particular circumstances. With the foregoing in mind, the following exercise could be undertaken.

EXERCISE

Each partner should complete the following questionnaire separately, and then couples should compare the results. It should be borne in mind that the list will be affected by the age of the child, or children, in the home. Clearly, some tasks refer to younger and some to older children. Ignore those which seem irrelevant.

In the column below, indicate who performs the following tasks and allocate a score as follows:

If you do it all, score 4 points.

If you do most of it, score 3 points.

If you do approximately half, score 2 points.

If you do it occasionally, score 1 point.

If you never do it, score nothing.

(You may wish to add to the list to make it more relevant to your own situation.)

TASKS OF PARENTS	DONE BY		
	Mother	Father	Others
Physical care			
Playing games			
Visits to doctor/clinic etc			
Transporting children			
Talking to a child			
Reading to a child			
Answering questions			
Seeking information together			
Interest in school work			
Encouraging child's interests			
Encouraging good study habits			
Comforting child when distressed			
Dealing with child's worries and fears			
Giving emotional support			
Sharing joy and laughter			
Creating opportunities for social contact with friends			
Supporting school functions			
Monitoring social activities (where is your child and with whom?)			
Discipline/control			
Rewarding good behaviour			
Restraining; punishing			
Teaching acceptable behaviour			
Teaching/sharing religious beliefs			
Developing a code of values			
Other (name them)			
TOTAL SCORE:			

- How close or different are the final scores? What have you learnt from this exercise? Is this work division reasonable, bearing in mind your special circumstances? In other words, take account of the time each parent has, his or her state of health and energy, and ability to deal with certain tasks.
- What tasks would you like to be involved with more, or less?
- If you are feeling very overworked is this a temporary situation or an ongoing one? Is some renegotiation of tasks required?

It may also be helpful to complete a similar table for household activities because the time and energy available for parenting will also depend on the extent of one's involvement in household activities.

These exercises may leave you feeling over- or under-worked! The point is not only how much is done, but whether it is done with enjoyment or resentment. For example, Esther loves cooking and spends a great deal of time in the kitchen but really enjoys it. Her sister, Lucy, dislikes cooking and spends as little time as possible in the kitchen, and never stops grumbling about it. Mike enjoys preparing special dinners, but won't make breakfast.

Some renegotiation of roles may be required or sources of support be enlisted if there is acute role strain or conflict. But it also needs to be remembered that family situations change with time and that some demanding and difficult periods do not last for ever.

SUMMING UP

This chapter has gone well beyond parenting as such because parents are, after all, individuals with their own needs, role commitments and preferences. Parenthood has to be woven into the fabric of their lives in a meaningful way in the interests of their child's development and their own.

The flexibility of work distribution in the family and home these days should be seen as a challenge for each couple, testing their ingenuity and allowing for the expression of their individual talents and skills.

At this point it is perhaps appropriate to consider what children's perceptions of a good parent are.

To a child a good parent is one who

- does things for and with the child
- can be relied on
- is not too strict
- is fair in discipline
- respects the child's individuality
- inspires love not fear
- is even-tempered
- shows affection
- is sympathetic when the child is hurt
- encourages friends in the home
- grants independence appropriate for age
- does not expect unreasonable achievements
- creates a happy atmosphere
- has time to share
- gives encouragement.