

# Your Family, Your Future



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Are you thinking of starting a family, or do you already have one in progress? If so, look around. As you go through each day, you are creating the template for your kids' future. If you doubt it, cast your mind back in time to your own childhood to learn about what you will be teaching your children.

What kind of house did you live in as a kid? Were you in the city or in the country? Were the nearest neighbors ten or twenty feet away, or down the street, or miles off? Were you often alone, or were there other kids around? How often did you move? Did one of your parents (or both!) work at home, or did both leave every day for a job somewhere else? Did you eat meals together as a family, share household chores, and have fun together? Did you get together frequently with relatives? What was your family's routine?

How old were you when you first got a room of your own? What were the rules (if any) about use of the television or the computer? How did your parents feel about your schoolwork? Were grades important to them? Were they available to help you when you needed help? Did they show up for your games and performances? Did you feel fairly treated by your parents?

If you remember crises during your childhood—sickness, death, or financial problems, for example—how were they handled? Did family members support each other when there was trouble, or did they hunker down silently and go it alone? Did people apologize to each other? What did it mean to “behave”?

Now make an inventory of your attitudes as they are today. Which values have remained intact since your childhood? Were there any aspects of your family that you hated enough to rebel against them? If so, you may have some core beliefs that represent the exact opposite of what your parents taught you. Whether your values are virtually identical or radically different, you probably defined them by reference to the ones you grew up with.

Childhood teaches us about roles as well as values. Think about your dad. Did he live with you or somewhere else? Did your parents divorce during your growing up years? Did your dad make time for you? Did he teach you skills—hunting, fishing, how to fix things, or something else—that you regarded as important? Did he listen when you talked? Was he fun to be with? Did he seem to enjoy being a dad, or did he retreat behind a newspaper or alcoholic drink after a hard day’s work, emerging only after you had gone to bed? What about your mom?

How did your dad treat your mom and vice versa? Did they openly hug and kiss, or were they cool and aloof with each other? What happened when they disagreed? Did they work things out? Did they lash out verbally or physically? Did they treat each other respectfully, or did they seem to resent and needle each other? How did they divide up the tasks of earning money, running the household, and raising children? Do you remember viewing them as loving partners? If not, how did they appear to you?

Very young children see their parents as gods—so much so that when parents disappoint them, very young children tend to blame themselves: “If I hadn’t messed up, my dad would have spent more time with me.” From a child’s point of view, the alternative explanations—that problems happen for no reason or that grownups, including parents, sometimes behave badly—are often unthinkable.

As children grow up, they distill from their family-of-origin experiences principles that they internalize. Dad becomes the prototype of man, father, and husband; mom, of woman, mother, and wife. Children who grew up without a mom or a dad may find it harder to step into some of these adult roles.

If you can remember how you felt as a child learning about your immediate environment and the world, you will probably also remember assuming that your parents’ beliefs, opinions, and values were normal. In this way your family of origin gave you the yardstick that you would use for the rest of your life as you set goals, pursued relationships, and created a family of your own.

In adolescence and adulthood, because all of us are more comfortable with the familiar than with the unfamiliar, we look for people and experiences that ring true with our upbringing. There’s nothing wrong with this scenario, of course. Indeed, much about it is good. Children, like the offspring of other animals, learn by watching their elders. How could it be otherwise? When you become a parent, you can capitalize on this process—and the example you set will have everything to do with the example that your parents set for you, which in turn will owe much to the example that their parents set for them, and so forth, extending back through the generations.

I should add a word of caution here. I am not advising you to become any more of a slave to your offspring than you already are. I don’t want you to neglect

yourself or devote yourself 24/7 to riding herd on your children, nagging them about table manners, homework, chores, and peer relations. Actually I regard these things as secondary in importance.

The most important thing you can do is to show your children how to live in the world—not how to laugh or have fun (skills that come relatively easily for most of us) but how to do the tough stuff, such as cope with death, loss, crisis, anger, conflict, sadness, and adversity generally. Above all, your children need to see you taking good care of yourself no matter what happens.

From our earliest memories, we see ourselves (and indeed everything) in relation to something else, in some kind of context. Relationships mold our attitudes in areas ranging from body image to talents and abilities to character and virtues. Our primary relationships with parents and siblings set the stage for our outlook and strategies later on and have lots to do with our success as adults.

I am asking the grownup parent you to see the guidance and discipline you give your children in a new light, namely in the context of your relationship with them. If you want your kids to mind you—to adopt your values and heed your directives—you will want to nurture this relationship in a variety of different ways.

To see what knowledge and tools you bring to the job, check the database you compiled in childhood. Ask yourself these questions:

- What sort of example did your mom and dad set as parents and as husband and wife?
- What values did they teach you to regard as important?
- What did they do that influenced your behavior the most?
- Perhaps most important, what is it like to remember your childhood? Was it a happy time in your life, or did you spend most of it longing to escape into adulthood?

Your memories will be the single most important resource on which you can draw as a parent, particularly when it comes to understanding and empathizing with your child's feelings.

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