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## The Role of Parents

The role of parents is multi-faceted and as society undergoes modernization, the number of facts multiply too. If unmarried couples think that the main role of parents is merely a biological one, they are going in for a big shock! Babies need both material and emotional support for their nurturing process. Being a provider of milk powder, pampers and a baby cot is just the beginning.

### Before the Industrial Age

In days of old when industry was non-existent and competition was a rarely used term, the role of parents was definitely less complicated. Education was a luxury and parents who knew the letters would assume the role of the teacher. Preparing the children for the norms and mores of society fell on the shoulders of the parents too. Fathers would train their sons to be brave and dependable and mothers had the important task of nurturing their daughters to become demure and virtuous wives. Woes betided a mother if her daughter was found flirting or flaunting her charms to the eager young men in the neighbourhood. Hence parents became a composite of socializer, moral educator and disciplinarian. In ancient China, a wayward woman would be condemned by the entire village and thrown into the nearest river in a pig's cage. Her parents would be shamed and shunned for not doing a good job with her.

Choices in career were limited. Boys would normally follow the footsteps of their father unless they could get into the civil service. Getting a top government post was the dream of every parent for his son and the entire clan would rejoice with the family. Job opportunities for women were very scarce.

Teaching and nursing were the most acceptable careers for women at the

turn of the century. In the past, acting and singing were frowned upon in Asian countries.

Contacts between the two genders were few and closely chaperoned. Hence most marriages were arranged by parents with the help of matchmakers.

### The Technological Age

When the years rolled into the 20th century and countries became developed and industrialized, family life styles underwent drastic changes. Education opportunities for girls and chances for careers multiply beyond the comprehension of most parents. Travel and information flow between

countries are just a matter of minutes and hours. These exchanges of knowledge and information between the east and west have introduced modernization and westernization into the Asian culture. It is inevitable that the role of parents evolves along with social, economic and technological changes in the country.

In these days, it is the norm rather than the exception to have nuclear families where both parents are wage-earners. This means that the task of child-rearing is often relegated to maids, relatives or foster parents. Increasingly, children who have been fostered out as babies tended to be traumatized when they were reunited with the family. The older the child,

### Fostering Scheme

BEFORE



AFTER



## One of the most difficult problems encountered by modern parents is the role conflict of being a friend and a disciplinarian at the same time.

the more difficult is the reestablishment of the bond between child and parents and, child and siblings.

The frequent absence of parents also poses a problem in the personality and moral development of children because of the lack of guidance and modelling. Not every maid or foster parent is well-informed and enlightened to handle these important aspects of a child's development. The vested interest is not there. For older children, many parents expect the school to be the sole socializing agent and moral educator. The guilt experienced by parents over their absence often leads to over compensation in the form of under-discipline and bribery with expensive presents and generous pocket money.

Young children develop a sense of security from routine in daily living and consistency in parental discipline, and the regular presence of the parents. Heavy information input and good food alone do not lead to the total development of children.

With the strong emphasis on research and development in this technological age, new knowledge emerges rapidly everyday. Most parents have to relinquish their positions as the principal instructors of worldly knowledge to their children. But this does not mean that the responsibilities are also shifted entirely to the teachers and other experts. Parents are the initial motivators in learning for the children. They have the responsibility of igniting the interest in learning in

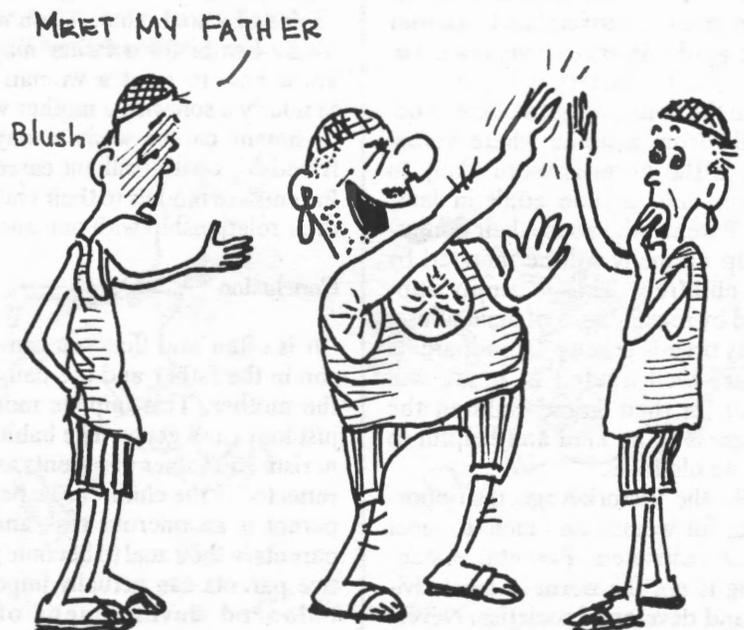
their children and in maintaining this interest. It does not cost a lot to create a conducive environment for learning at home. It is important for parents to be present when the child encounters disappointment in his learning experience. He needs parental assurance and parental understanding.

Not many parents are knowledgeable about the many career opportunities and their requirements. But parents are important in guiding their children in their selection of a suitable career. However, this is only possible if parents were aware of their children's strengths, weaknesses, values and interests. Unfortunately, some parents are unrealistic about their children's abilities and only aspire to achieve their own ambitions through their children. This has led to many incidence of unhappiness and failures for children and eventual parent - child conflicts. At the same time, there are also parents who try to exonerate themselves from their children's unwise choices in the guise of liberal parenting. Children are left absolutely free to make any choices and made accountable for their own actions. The development of independence in children is a very vital aspect of parenting but wise decision-making can only be built on a foundation of solid values and good sense inculcated by parents. Parents should also assure their children that they are always available for advice and suggestions.

One of the most difficult problems encountered by modern parents is the role conflict of being a friend and a disciplinarian at the same time. A child's concept of a friend is someone who gives them blind support and loyalty without criticisms and questions. The disciplinarian on the other hand is perceived as a harsh person who metes out punishment. Some parents strongly believe that children should trust and respect their parents' decision without question as they are older and hence wiser. It is not unusual for adolescents to have stormy relationship with such parents. Surveys have shown that youths prefer their friends as confidants rather than their parents. Parents are not often viewed as friends by the young people.

If parents were never privy to their children's thoughts, fears and problems, the bond between parents and child is dangerously anaemic and needs a remedial diet of dialogues and sharing. It is quite shocking to read of parents' pleas of ignorance when their children had brushes with the law in cases ranging from prostitution, thefts to gang involvement. A principal was most disgusted with a mother's response when she rang the mother to inform her of her depressed daughter's suicidal tendency. The mother dispassionately claimed that she would be too busy to keep a watch on her daughter!

By banning children from bringing home their friends, parents are creat-



ing long-term and serious problems for themselves. In rejecting their children's friends, parents are shutting the door to their children confiding in them. At the same time, parents would be totally ignorant of their children's activities outside the home. Setting a curfew hour for the children does not prevent them from engaging in undesirable activities. It is important to meet and understand the friends and companions of one's children. Children often lie to their parents about their friends if their parents are very critical of their associations. Parents must make an attempt to befriend their children and their friends.

It is not unusual these days to find children speaking English with a Tagalog or an Indonesian accent. This is usually the result of leaving children too long in the company of maids in their waking hours. Many parents claimed they have little time for their children because of their work and social commitments. A working mother once sought advice on the poor relationship between her and her son but rejected the suggestion of giving up her *mahjong* games and shopping sprees with her friends on Saturdays and Sundays! Any form of relationship requires time and some small sacrifices to cultivate. Quality time is important. But before quality becomes the issue, time must first be made available.

Besides speech patterns, young children also learn about social interactions with people of different age groups from observing the behaviour of the adults in their immediate environment. If courtesy is being practised in the home, we get a polite child. A child from a home where verbal abuse is the norm is more likely to grow up into a rude adult in later years. Parents who abuse their domestic help normally will be imitated by their children. This is amply supported by recent cases of maid abuse. Cruelty breeds cruelty. Grandparents who are well-treated at home will develop in their grand-children the willingness to be kind and helpful to destitute old folks.

Unlike the Victorian age, the opportunities for women and men to meet are not restricted. Parental matchmaking is not the norm in most civilized and developed societies. Never-

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theless children can benefit from the experiences of their parents in learning the ropes as responsible spouses and good parents. The marriage of parents often influence the children in their views on marriage and their choice of a soul mate. A son who has a wife-beater for a father may never know how to treat a woman gently. Similarly a son with a mother who is a dominant career women may avoid friendships with brilliant career girls. Parents are models to their children in their relationship with one another.

### **Conclusion**

It is often said that you can see the son in the father and the daughter in the mother. This implies more than just looks and genes. The habits, mannerism and values of parents are often reflected in the children. To be a good parent is an onerous task and many parents in their zeal to become protective parents can actually impede the balanced development of their

children. Children need to make mistakes to learn and to encounter failures to develop resilience. An overprotected child rarely grows into an independent, decisive and reflective adult. Parents must not only love their children but must also know *how* to love their children. Do not hold their hands all the time but walk behind them.

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