

## "The Importance of the Home"

How important is the home and family? Traditional wisdom has said that the family is the basic unit of society. It's the home and family more than anything else that shapes a child's life and values. Some have insisted: As the home goes, so goes the nation. *Is that true?*

Some people today are questioning whether the home and family are really that influential in a child's life. Children are exposed to many more influences outside the home. First it was the influence of TV, where children were presented with many different ideas and values. Today children are on the internet, or on social media, where you can find just about anything – good or bad. We're a more mobile society. Families move more, and children are more likely to interact with other children of different cultures and value systems. Children are exposed to many more influences today than they were years ago, and their parent's voice is just one out of *many voices* children hear.

Others today are questioning whether the changes in family life has an effect on the family's influence on children and society at large. Family structures have changed. *There are many more types of family today.* Back in the 1950's, when one thought of family, you pictured a mom, a dad, and one or more biological children. The so-called "nuclear" family. Not so anymore!

*There are many more single parent families today.* Almost 1 out of 4 children in the U.S. are growing up in single parent families.

*Today, many more families are comprised of adults living together, but not married.*

"Cohabitation" (living together without being married) is now the norm. Many unmarried couples bear and raise children, and may or may not ever get married. Cohabitation relationships tend to be short. More parents have children with multiple partners. Therefore, a large share of children experience complex, unstable living arrangements.

*You have gay couples being legally married, and sometimes raising children.* Through adoption, or in-vitro fertilization.

*What effect, if any, is this having on the influence families play in society?* But you know what? In spite of these changes, there's evidence that home life and family still play a major part in shaping people and society. *Newsweek* magazine once devoted an entire issue to children/parent relationships. One article in that issue was entitled "Why the Young Kill". Experts in the field of neuroscience and psychology were doing research around the question: "What makes people become killers?" They had actually done brain scans that showed that brains of murderers are physiologically different from the brains of non-violent people. It said they were beginning to believe that there are genetic factors (biological components) that predispose people to become violent. But here's the thing: What seems to be critical is what happened to babies in the first three years of their life...that if a child experiences abuse, or neglect, or terror, it actually changes the brain physically. A flood of stress chemicals tends to reset the brain's system of hormones, putting them on "red alert".

A biologist named Michael Meaney says: "The early environment programs the nervous system to make an individual more or less reactive to stress...if parental care is inadequate or unsupportive, the (brain) may decide that the world stinks – and it better be ready to meet the challenge." So that, for example, having an abusive parent raises the risk of youth violence. It can change a child's brain! But also parents who are *withdrawn and remote, or neglectful or passive*, can shape a child to shut down emotionally. Parental neglect impairs the development of the brain's cortex, which controls feelings of belonging and attachment. *The family is important! The parent-child relationship is critical!*

A number of studies have been done on families where the dad is absent. The outcomes of children growing up in that scenario are frightening and depressing. Children growing up with an absent father are more likely to experience a low self-image, difficulties with social adjustments (like maintaining friendships), poor academic performance, delinquency and youth crime, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues like anxiety and depression, and more!

One recent bit of research came to the conclusion that having parents who are *married* was a prime factor in the health of children. The study concluded: "Marriage matters to children. Having married parents typically means that children live in families with more resources, including more time with their parents, and with greater stability." It went on: "Study after study shows a strong correlation between marriage and a wide array of positive outcomes."

*I want to be very careful here.* In no way am I condemning single parents. Being a single parent is one of the most difficult roles one can be in. Many single parents are doing a wonderful job raising their child or children. Often another adult – a relative, a neighbor, a friend can be a "substitute mom or dad", providing nurture and love. But generally speaking, having both parents present, and committed to one another in marriage, continues to be the setting in which a child stands the best chance of a stable home life that allows the child to flourish.

*All of this, not from the Bible, or preachers' sermons, but from human studies.* The importance of the home! There are a lot of things children need from moms and dads. Let's think just a bit more about several of these. ***The home is the place here we need to experience love, and learn to love.*** Scripture backs this up! The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christian leader Titus: "So train young women to love their husbands and children" (Titus 2:4).

In the New Testament period, the first century, fathers had absolute authority over the household, and while not much is said in the New Testament about fathers loving their children, Paul puts some negative bounds on how fathers ought to treat their children: "Fathers, do not treat your children in such a way as to make them angry" (Ephesians 6:4). In other words, be fair and loving with your kids. This was a compassionate word in light of the absolute power a father had over his family. Our children need loving parents!

*Loving our children means spending time with them.* That issue of *Newsweek*, focusing on parent-child relationships, had an article titled "How Well Do You Know Your Kid?" It said that in survey after survey, kids interviewed indicated that they wanted to connect with their parents,

and have their parents involved in their lives. One author who wrote a book about teenagers profiled 8 teens who live in an affluent area of Virginia. This author wrote, "Every kid I talked to at length eventually came around to saying without my asking that they wished they had more adults in their lives, especially their parents." Take time to be with your children!

Our own children are grown now. Often it was a struggle for me as a pastor to take time to do things with our kids. I often felt bad, working long hours. We did try to make their baseball games, soccer games, their ice hockey games, their school activities. For 3 years I served a church in Easton and lived there through the week, while my family lived in suburban Philadelphia, but I would make all the Friday night or Saturday afternoon football games where our daughter Karin was a cheerleader. The team stunk during that period, but I didn't go to see the games. I went to see her. I have no regrets for driving all those extra miles to do that.

*But loving our children means setting appropriate boundaries.* Underneath it all, children want boundaries – to know what is acceptable, what is not. Kids need discipline that is fair and consistent. No matter how much they fuss, deep down they want that security of our setting proper boundaries.

Sometimes parents confuse "love" with a mushy kind of sentimentalism. One doting, indulgent mother actually wrote this note to her son's teacher: "If my Archibald is naughty – and he sometimes is – just whip the boy next to him. This will frighten Archibald and make him behave." An article in the Lancaster paper a while back was captioned: Parental monitoring touted. It said, "Parents who keep close tabs on their children's whereabouts and activities are less likely to produce kids involved in risky behavior, according to a new study. Researchers found that children living in Baltimore public housing who felt their parents set limits and talked with them about their concerns were far less likely to use alcohol and marijuana... (or) sell drugs... than their counterparts without parental intervention...".

*Loving our children means loving them unconditionally – no matter what.* I still remember the night we got a call from the high school. I had gone into bed, but not yet asleep when the phone rang. Our daughter Karin was at a school dance. One of the school officials was calling. Karen and two other girls were caught with alcohol. I assured him that I would back up whatever the school did in terms of discipline. I was disappointed. Angry. Though she had just taken a little to try, she got caught. The ride home with Karin was not pleasant. But you know what? I never stopped loving her. I figured unconditional love would count the most over the long haul.

*Home is where our children need to be taught Jesus' kind of self-giving love.* Some time ago I read Coretta King's book about her husband, Martin Luther King, Jr. The book is *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.* She wrote of the obscene phone calls all hours of the night, the house being bombed, the abuse and hate they received because of his leadership in the civil rights movement. She confessed that even when she was on the verge of retaliating, he would calm her and others: "We must love... we must forgive... we must meet hate with kindness and non-violence." His four children got a supreme lesson in loving as Jesus loved! What a legacy!

*The home, and family, is where faith is to be passed on to the next generation.* The Apostle Paul could write to the young Christian pastor Timothy, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you" (2 Timothy 1:5). Notice, from grandmother, to mother, to Timothy! We don't hear much these days about religious education in the home, or the responsibility of Christian parents to pass the faith on to their children. But it was certainly a big deal in the Word of God. For instance, in the Book of Deuteronomy we read these words: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Then it goes on:

"Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). Notice, it says, recite them to your children! Talk about them!

Ephesians 6:4 says fathers are to bring their children up in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord". The word "discipline" comes from "disciple" one who learns. Fathers...parents are to teach and instruct their children about their faith and values.

Of course, it's not just words. Our kids need to see in us what a disciple of Jesus look like!

Families have changed a lot since the 1950's! Even over the last 10-20 years. But the importance of the family to children and society hasn't changed, and what's important within the home hasn't changed.

Most of us who are parents realize we've been far from perfect. But parents don't have to be perfect to have a positive impact on their children. Just be there for your kids. Spend time with them. Love them unconditionally, but with boundaries. And if you're a follower of Jesus, teach them by word and deed about the Lord.

One of the times I attended a conference at Ginghamburg UMC in Ohio I sat behind a young family in one of the worship services. Mom was holding a baby, rocking her back and forth with the worship songs, every so often kissing her. Another daughter sat snuggled against her dad. Dad had his arm out and around his wife. And I thought to myself, "They've got it! No matter how much families change, the things that make for healthy families remain the same!"

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