

# Understanding Parenthood

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## **How children affect the lives of those who bring them up.**

The subject of parents and children is so immense and so much discussed that it takes a certain effrontery to write yet another article on it. I do, however, have a slightly original slant in that I am not concerned so much with how parents affect their children, but with the effects that children have on their parents.

Practically everybody has strong impressions of their own parents, even if they are not parents themselves, so that everyone has some kind of experience of parent child relationships. Sometimes this experience leads to understanding and insight: sometimes it leads to distortion and bias. In order to move away from the sort of discussion that is either an exchange, or a confrontation of various people's experiences, I propose to use two different approaches. The first will try to elucidate the structure of the dominant contemporary mode of parents-children relationships. The second will examine alternative ways of viewing parent-child relationships.

### **Family Structure in Australia<sup>1</sup>**

There are very few people in Australia who do not marry at some stage of their life. Ninety five per cent of the population have married at least once by the age of 45<sup>2</sup>, although the number of first marriages is decreasing in relation to second and third ones. Among all households where there are two adults married to each other, 60% have children.

Two parent families form by far the greater majority, i.e. 92%, and one parent families i.e. families where one or other of the parents is

left alone to look after the children, form 8% of the total number of families with young children.<sup>3</sup>

Some people express surprise at this proportion in the light of increasing numbers of divorces and separations; however the probable explanation is in the trend for people to remarry or to form de facto relationships very quickly after the first marriage breaks up, so in effect, the two parent family is reconstructed. Australian statistics do not show the proportion of two parent families where the original parents are still together.

Two parent families are likely to have more children than one parent families. About half of the one parent families and slightly less than one third of the two parent families, have one child only. To have two children in a two parent family is still the most usual situation, but only just as the proportion is not much greater than that where there is a single child.<sup>4</sup> The proportion of families with three or more children falls away rapidly as the number of children increase both in two parent and one parent families, but is of course markedly less common in the latter case.

Other trends which affect parents and children is that child bearing begins earlier in a marriage than it did formerly, and takes place over a shorter time span. This means that women, who are generally younger than their husbands, are likely to spend long periods in the workforce even if they give up working in the early years of their children's lives. This trend has led to changes in the division of roles between male and female parents.

## Relationships between Parents and Children

Ever since Freud it has been taken as axiomatic that parents have an enormous influence on the lives and personalities of their children. In addition few people would contest the fact that the relationship between parents and children is very dependent on the relationship between the parents themselves. If the parents are happy and well-adjusted, the children are also likely to be happy and well adjusted.

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More recent writing has suggested that the influence is not a unilateral one, and that children themselves may be more autonomous than we think, and in their turn, have quite an effect, not only on how their parents lead their lives, but on the sort of people they become.<sup>5</sup> I will enlarge on this point presently.

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In many ways these relationships — parent-parent, parent-child, child-parent, have a great deal in common.

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They all show up a basic human dilemma in microcosm. Namely the tension between intimacy and belonging on one hand, and freedom and self fulfilment on the other. I think it is possible to look at all human relationships according to how they deal with this balance of opposites. In a general way, the ties which emphasize the **belonging** dimension can be called **committed** relationships (relationships which by their very nature, involve social institutions) and those which emphasize personal choice, **conditional** and **companionate** relationships.

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Of course, in practice, these dimensions are not separate, but the

difference between the ideas behind them are important. Let us take extreme examples to illustrate what is meant, first by committed marriage. It is possible for a society to see marriage as a carefully planned and anticipated event, able to be relied on by those inside and out. The social institution of marriage relates to the need of all societies to have stable child raising units, and to the needs of individuals to have a primary group to which they belong in a large amorphous group of people. It implies many limits on the choice of partner and permanent relinquishing of many options during the course of marriage. When Bismarck said to his young wife who was complaining of his lack of demonstrative affection, 'I married you not **because** I loved you, but **in order** to love you'; he summed up this extreme position. The other type of marriage which I have called 'conditional', could be expressed in the words: 'If I fall in love and I stay in love, and if neither of us wants to move out or on, we will make a go of it together'. This attitude is seen as providing spontaneity, keeping people on their toes, making them constantly rethinking their position. It also means that outside people and circumstances, as well as internal shifts of mood and attitudes, will largely control the destiny of those involved. Such relationships are in consequence, very vulnerable. There are very few limits on the choice of partner, from another generation, race or even another partnership. This type of marriage was summed up by one young couple who were married in front of the TV cameras during a documentary on marriage a couple of years ago: "We see ourselves," they said "as being married for the foreseeable future".

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How do these differences relate to parent-child relationships? In my opinion, the relation between parents and children is very much of the

committed, rather than the conditional type. You do not choose your children (save in a very general sense) and you cannot divorce them. Few parents willingly repudiate their progeny, desert them, or ask them to leave home. Even after a divorce, children inevitably mourn a lost family, but they seldom lose their parents as individuals. Becoming a parent will irreversibly change a person's life. If then, the parent-child relationship is a committed, institutionalized one, with fairly clear and mutual rights and obligations, acknowledged both by the participants and our society, it definitely bears some resemblance to a committed marriage.

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However, it is necessary to move on from this basic similarity and look more closely at differences.

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First and foremost, children begin to separate themselves from their parents from the moment they are born — and none too evenly. While an evolving relationship is common to **both situations**, the marriage partnership should lend towards unity, and the parent-child relationship towards independence and autonomy.

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Second, a child will need to make a major transition at some point from his own family of origin, to a new adult family. Incidentally, this transition seems a characteristic difficulty in families today. The old pattern of children growing up, working, contributing to the family and staying with their parents until their whole status changed with their own marriage is rare. Now older children or rather young adults, live separately from their parents, although often still dependent on them, and may go into a

half way stage of being single yet cohabitating without starting a new family unit at all. This often exacerbates the belonging/freedom tension inherent in the parent-child relationship which was mentioned earlier.

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A third difference, is the inequality between parents and children. This formal inequality is of a very different kind from that which exists between the spouses. It is obvious that knowledge, power and the ability to set guidelines is stronger in parents than children, particularly in the early years. For this reason a child has a right to demand more of the parents than vice versa. For instance, a parent who rejects a child is judged more harshly than a child who rejects a parent. Neither owns the other, but dependency is clearly vested in the child.

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A fourth difference has already been mentioned as characterizing the committed rather than the conditional approach. It can be said for certain, that parents have less choice as far as their children are concerned than they had when they chose each other. Although the trend for later, less, and shorter child bearing mentioned earlier, strongly suggests that the parents have a far greater say in certain aspects of child bearing than they did formerly. This control in its turn has affected the way parents see their children. The parents intentions with regard to them become very important. They decide when and where they will be born, at what stage of the marriage or rung of the career structure of both parents, or even, having been conceived, whether they will survive until birth.

Once born, parents are free to decide whether they themselves or others will bring them up (by means of adoption). Who can blame parents, under these circumstances for having excessive expectations, for investing a great deal of their personal hopes in their children turning out to be exactly the sort of people they planned. In other words, who can blame them for feeling they have enormous rights where their children are concerned.<sup>6</sup>

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The crunch comes when a custody dispute is heard in the Family Court. Suddenly, these parents' rights and hopes mean next to nothing, and the interest of the child becomes paramount. This turns upside down the assumptions of a considerable number of parents about their own position with regard to their children and leaves them confused and bereft. How then do these characteristics of the parent-child bond today, affect the parents?

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Because larger families are fairly rare, it is likely that both parents will have far longer periods in their lives where they can work, study or travel, and generally live their lives in a similar way to childless couples. Even where there are one or two children, the fact that the children do not outnumber the parents is fairly critical and allows the latter to be fairly mobile even when the children are young. On the other hand, the parents will be very dependent on these children to fulfil their own aspirations, and perhaps therefore be very vulnerable if their children reject them, or in other ways make them feel inadequate as parents.

Because the proportion of first marriages is decreasing, it could happen that some parents at least, will come to rely on their children, rather than their marriage partners for their stable, life-long relationships. This could mean that it will be more difficult for the children to eventually break their ties sufficiently to establish a completely independent adult relationship of their own.

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### Conclusion

I have suggested that the demographic evidence indicates that the structure of the dominant form of parental relationship is increasingly of the conditional type. This means that, when they have children, the latter are typically seen as fulfilling parental needs. In this sense, the parents invest a great deal in their children and have high expectations of them. In a sense they **depend** more on their children than parents in a committed relationship.

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On the other hand, while the relationship between the parents may be of the conditional kind, the relationship between the parents and children does not fit in easily into the conditional form. One may have a 'trial marriage' (or a conditional partnership) with another person, but one cannot be a trial parent, vis a vis one's children. The conditional form of relationship between people only works then, if the couple do not have any children at all. If they do have children, then the conditional relationship they

have with each other is inevitably at odds with the committed relationship they have with their children.

#### REFERENCES

1. Unless it is specifically mentioned, figures are taken from *Social Indicators*, No. 2, 1978, A.B.S. Canberra.
2. This marriage boom has occurred in a number of western countries. See *Marriage in Australia* Peter F. McDonald, Australian Family Formation Project, Monograph No. 2, ANU, 1975, p.169.
3. See *Families in Australia a Profile* Brian A. English, Raymond J. King, Sali S. Smith, Family Research Unit, University of N.S.W., 1978, p.7-13. In this work "families are defined in terms of children and the adult or adults that live with them, and are responsible for their care" p. 4.
4. Among two parent families, 31% have one child and 35.4% have two. This is set out in a diagrammatic form in English King and Smith op. cit. p.11.
5. For a discussion of the ways in which parents are the product of the children born to them see Julius Segal and Herbert Yahraes "Bringing up Mother" in *Psychology Today*. Vol. 12, No. 6 November 1978 (American Edition) p. 90-93.
6. The element of *intentionality* is discussed as being a new characteristic of family formation in "The Changing Family", by Ted Bowman in *Conciliation Courts Review* Volume 15, Number 2 — December 1977, p. 17.

**Pass**

**Australian Child and  
Family Welfare  
to a friend**

## TOMMY'S WORLD

TOMMY'S WORLD, an exhibition of paintings by mentally retarded children, was presented in Canberra from March 16 to April 5 as the start to an Australian tour during International Year of the Child.



The exhibition, opened by the Minister for Social Security, Senator Margaret Guilfoyle, at Melville Hall, A.N.U., has been assisted by Commonwealth Government grants amounting to \$6,500.



The paintings were assembled by committee members of the Art Project for the Mentally Retarded (Vic.), whose convener, Mrs Myra Hilgendorf, says: "The Art Project for the Mentally Handicapped Committee was formed to encourage the use of visual arts in the development of mentally retarded people. Their handicap in verbal skills isolates them from other people and through painting they can be helped to convey the depth and intensity of their feelings about themselves and their surroundings. This provides them with a different form of communication, a pictorial language, which we should learn to read".



The tour has been arranged by the Australian Gallery Directors' Council on behalf of the Visual Arts Board. The exhibition is expected to be presented at Wollongong City Art Gallery (May); AMP Centre, Brisbane (June); Sydney Opera House (July); Launceston and Devonport, Tasmania (August, September and October), National Gallery, Victoria (November and December). There are also plans to take the exhibition to Benalla, Ararat and Mildura in 1980.