



Families ... generations of strength

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Parenting: A Circle of Life

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It would be easier for all of us if parenting challenges were predictable. But, in fact, families are complex, each having their strengths and weaknesses. When two adults are joined together in a solid relationship, they remain unique people with a bond of commitment. Each person brings her/his own perspective of love, parenting, house-keeping, work, financial management, and so forth, into the relationship. When a child enters the family, parents must deal with the unique personality of each child, assessing that child's special place in the family. Parents' roles and responsibilities change according to the child's needs. Likewise, the couple's relationship to each other changes.

While moving through the stages of parenting, adults deal with their own physical and emotional changes, in addition to relationship stages with their partner. For example, at the same time a child enters puberty, he or she could have a parent experiencing the restlessness of her thirties or the soul searching of his forties. The newborn may be initiating parents who recently married. The elementary-age child may have a parent who changes careers, starting all over again in the climb up the career ladder. An adolescent may be confronted with his/her parents' turbulent marriage. Things will change.

Predictable Stages

Parenting falls into roughly three recognizable stages. Families with young children (under ages 10–12) are in the early stage. The middle stage includes families with

teenagers, and the late stage occurs when parents are sending their adult children to college, careers, or marriage (the launching stage).

Transitions from stage-to-stage take time. Life events, however, can propel a family into the next stage. An unexpected pregnancy, for example, may initiate parenthood before a couple is prepared. An exceptionally bright child could graduate from school early, forcing unprepared parents to launch their child. On the other hand, a child with special needs could extend parenting obligations far beyond expected years.

Parental Roles

The birth of the first child requires a tremendous emotional and physical investment for the couple. Not surprisingly, men and women approach becoming parents from different motivations. A man commonly feels a loss of companionship from his mate, but his self-concept is enhanced by the birth of the child. He focuses his energy on the establishment of his career with a strong sense of being the family provider. A woman's dominant role becomes that of parent, usually perceiving career as a secondary role. In this stage, balancing the parents' needs with the child's fosters a child's healthy self-concept.

During the middle stage, caring for teen children requires patience and energy. Studies show that teens involved with sports and other extra-curricular activities are much less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. Consequently, parents with active teens find themselves spending a good

deal of time shuttling children and attending competitive events. The stress of balancing work and family, though present at all stages, peaks late in the middle stage.

Late stage couples also face changing health, both theirs and their parents. Occasionally, middle or early stage couples find themselves caring for elderly parents, too. Because early and middle stages have young children and adolescents at home, they are particularly stressed when elderly parents also need care. Interestingly, no matter which stage, the daughter or daughter-in-law is usually the main caregiver for the elderly parent.

Another late-stage concern is sending the child on to college, a career, or marriage. Parents need to give conscious and unconscious permission for the adult child to leave. Giving mixed messages invites indecision, uncertainty, and even failure for the adult child. The parents must make the transition from caregivers to friends or advisors, generally not an easy task.

Sources of Conflict

Conflict in a relationship is inevitable. How conflict is handled will determine the outcome of the relationship. Conflict does not go away in relationships — it just changes shape.

In the early stage, marital expectations are reinforced, adjusted, or changed. In-law relationships may be strained as parents relinquish emotional caretaking to their child's spouse. After the birth of the first child, division of labor between the couple comes into focus more clearly, often creating friction. In general, women perceive they do the majority of housework and child care, a perception proved true by data from numerous studies. Men's willingness to accept their share of the work greatly reduces the conflict.

The middle stage sees parents defining marital expectations according to the stresses of adolescent children. The teen years put the most stress on families. Teens test boundaries and demand their independence. As a parent sees her care-giving role diminishing, she struggles emotionally, one minute looking forward to the launching stage, the next minute hoping to postpone the launching as long as possible. Parents may disagree on appropriate boundaries for their half-child, half-adult. Parents' own

physical and emotional changes add another dimension to the chaos of living with a teen.

Both the early and middle stages are ripe for financial conflicts. Establishing and maintaining a house, starting and building a career, transportation expenses, and all the "extras" involved with raising children provide ample opportunity for disagreement.

While the late stage does not usually create as much financial friction, it also presents challenges. The late stage requires couples to examine retirement and resources available for old age. Adult children may request financial assistance, creating a strain on the late-stage budget.

Special Considerations

Again, these stages are viewed as the "normal" way families develop and relationships unfold. Family, personal, and societal expectations make deviating from the norm stressful. The way parents handle the stress makes all the difference. Recognize that your family may not look like your neighbor's family, but all families can grow and thrive through a positive attitude.

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