

Preparation for Parenting

This session about parenting is intended for all of us. In thinking about family, you can consider a family of origin (birth parents or adoptive) or other strong influences on your life. If you do not have children, you can consider the topic of parenting as it relates to your parents and to children in your life, such as nieces and nephews or children associated with your career or volunteer work.

Ushering a child into the world, witnessing her first unaided step, her first intelligible word, and the standing ovation she received as the star of the school play are among the most joyful of a parent's memories. That's not to say raising a child is a walk in the park. Raising a child to adulthood is arguably the most consequential role one could undertake, in no small part because intermingled with episodes of joy are inevitable moments of disappointment and even of sheer fright. Yet, despite all the ups and downs, sacrificed sleep, and financial burden, in the end, the precious unforgettable memories wash over proud parents unbidden, and it can be hard to resist the urge to raise another.

Researchers describe three general approaches to parenting. *Authoritative* parenting is characterized by clear parental expectations and support. Employed less frequently is the *uninvolved* parenting approach, though more common in France than in the United States. This laissez-faire parenting style frees the child to make her/his own way. A third approach, not to be confused with authoritative parenting, is *authoritarian* parenting, in which children know the rules and suffer the consequences – perhaps including punishment – if those rules are tested.

All parents want the best for their children, but different parenting styles may have slightly different goals for parenting success. The *uninvolved* parenting style encourages the child to learn from mistakes and develop greater independence early on. The *authoritarian* style, at least as practiced in many families, values obedience and achievement. *Tiger Mom* Amy Chua, a Yale Law School professor, states that to ensure a child excels in school and enters adulthood well prepared, one must circumscribe personal freedom and respond to failure firmly. The *authoritative* style attempts to balance these two approaches, providing guidance, encouragement, and diverse opportunities. Another goal of the authoritative style is a good relationship between child and parent. A warm relationship may be less important in the authoritarian style, which Chua describes as “mean.”

Some parents unconsciously adopt their parents' childrearing style, perhaps hoping to fix their own unresolved childhood issues. It's useful, however, for parents to consider what approaches might be most suitable for a particular child, while balancing what feels natural for themselves and is appropriate for their values. At any rate, parents shouldn't feel they have to go it alone. For parents who avail themselves of outside support, an entire village is available to help – family, friends, teachers, the family doctor, clergy, books, and online resources.

Compassion for our parents is the true sign of maturity. *Anais Nin*

Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them. *James Baldwin*

There are times as a parent when you realize that your job is not to be the parent you always imagined you'd be, the parent you had always wished you had. Your job is to be the parent your child needs, given the particulars of his or her own life and nature. *Ayelet Waldman*

In raising my children, I lost my mind but found my soul. *Lisa Shepherd*

Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one. *Jane Howard*

I believe that what we become depends on what our fathers teach us at odd moments, when they aren't trying to teach us. We are formed by little scraps of wisdom. *Umberto Eco*

Whether or not you have children yourself, you are a parent to the next generation. If we can only stop thinking of children as individual property and think of them as the next generation, then we can realize we all have a role to play. *Charlotte Davis Kasl*

I can't tell my children to reach for the sun [and not do so] myself. *Joyce Maynard*

Every father should remember one day his son will follow his example, not his advice. *Charles Kettering*

If we continually pressure a child to do something frightening, he will develop a talent for avoidance. *Anonymous*

My parents did the best they could to protect and help me, to make my little world safe and secure. *Bart J. Mindszenty and Michael Gordon, Parenting Your Parents*

Families, whether biological or chosen, are what give most people's lives their shape. They produce enormous pain and joy and all the emotions in between for their members. . . . Families are flawed, complex, intense organic units whose members often fail each other in important ways. But family affection is the glue that holds lives together. *Mary Pipher*

Questions to Ponder

1. What cultural influences affected parenting styles in your family and the communities where you grew up?
2. Should we think of "successful parenting" according to the quality of the parent/child relationship or by the child's success in his/her endeavors?
3. Perform a thought experiment where you consider what parenting approaches might have worked best with yourself as a child.
4. Who has been most important in shaping who you are? (This might not be your parents.)
5. How many families do you belong to? For instance, consider the group you have coffee with once a week or the network you maintain on social media.
6. Is parenting a spiritual process? Describe your view.

Words of the Day

Consider your thought experiment of re-parenting yourself (question 3) as a child. Then think of a few words, short phrases, or metaphors to describe the approach you would use. The Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: "If I were going to re-parent myself, I would" For example, you might say "I would listen more" or "I would provide more structure."