



Bringing up Father

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On Saturday night our family went out for dinner and my eighteen year old son ordered a bottle of beer. This was a courageous act because we are (or were) a family of teetotallers and the abstention goes back through the generations.

The situation was well handled with only a little ragging to relieve the surprise and tension. During the disturbed night that followed I came to several conclusions. Firstly, it was apparent that a significant step had been taken with all sorts of reverberations, both petty and profound. Amongst the trivial considerations, I now asked myself whether I would need to continue buying Cocoa Cola with the weekly shop. The larger issues included the impact of the solitary bottle of beer on the conduct of the younger members of the family.

The second set of conclusions was more philosophical, as I endeavoured to place the evening's event into some sort of larger context and to derive some lessons from it. It seemed to me that the beer-drinking episode was but the most recent of a long series of educative experiences that my offspring have inflicted upon me.

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To the extent that parenting is thought about seriously at all, it is something that adults do to children. Parents model and manage behaviour and children conform (and rebel) accordingly. Very true, but as well, children are major modifiers of their parents' behaviour.

In the human development literature this is referred to an interaction effect, a bi-directional influence, or reciprocal socialisation. The process starts at the child's birth (or before) and it probably continues until the parent dies, when the parenting role is finally relinquished. The points I would like to make here concern the significance, both personal and social, of the contributions that children make to adult development.

What do parents think they get from parenting? Answers to this question probably cover opportunities to care and nurture, to rediscover childhood joys and reaffirm family connections, and to achieve continuity and have purpose. In fact, the pre-eminent gains of parenting may not be in terms of these satisfactions and, rather, have more to do with the knowledge and behaviour change that experience provides and demands.

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Of course, parenting is not some sort of standard treatment for the adult involved. People will get different things from it depending on their situation, and this includes the extent of their involvement. Raising a number children, both boys and girls, is obviously quite different from being the parent of a singleton.

Oftentimes, parenting prompts new social involvements and important relationships are formed. Indeed, the connections that are made around a child's birth and in the preschool years can be extraordinarily enduring. The positive consequences associated with the new social relationships include support for parenting and important knowledge about the child's world.

It is suggested that parents are particularly 'in touch' people. Sons and daughters introduce them, successively, to the current interests and concerns of babyhood, infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and beyond. This is more than head knowledge that might be obtained indirectly. It is a felt experience, as we share our children's hopes and attainments, and disappointments and losses.

As well as being more in touch through their children, experienced parents could also be more psychologically resilient individuals. Care giving is a comprehensive stressor with continuing and changing physical, emotional, and intellectual demands. Those who meet the trials and tests of child rearing may cope better with subsequent challenges and adversities.

Other careers (i.e. in the paid workforce) can also confer psychological resilience. However, parenting is distinct in the extent of its demands for selflessness and in the regularity with which adults respond to these demands. Hence, the resilience that is achieved at home is likely to be different too and perhaps it is in an increased capacity to cope with obligations to other people. Mothers and Fathers can report enhanced time management abilities and by this they usually mean that they are better able to balance the expectations of a job and the requirements of a family.

To social relevance and psychological resilience I would now like to add wisdom as a possible outcome of parenthood.

Wisdom is more than knowing a thing or two in the evening of life. It is exceptional insight and judgement concerning human affairs. This advanced practical intelligence depends on an understanding of people's needs and motives, on an appreciation of the importance of context to decision making, and on a commitment to the wellbeing of others.

Parenting is probably unparalleled in its potential to provide training in wisdom's prerequisite abilities. Caring for children and adolescents offers close and graduated perceptions about people and circumstances and the upshot can be greater empathy and acceptance. Like the other attributes that have been discussed, wisdom blends knowledge and emotion and it is an answer to the dangers associated with unfettered intellect and unbridled sentiment.

The case that parenting contributes to adult development has important implications for society. Aside from the colossally significant task of providing for the next generation, parenting very probably empowers and enables adults and it ensures that there is a wellspring of caring within the community.

We might acknowledge that society is richer for parenting by seeing employees with children, including people returning to the workforce, as possessing an additional qualification. Some jobs and positions will benefit more than others from the experience of parenting and it would seem especially relevant to human service occupations and to leadership roles.

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At the least, the choice to have children is not on the same level as the decision to travel overseas or to buy a boat, where it currently seems to languish. Parenting is often a choice behaviour but it comes with substantial physical, financial and emotional costs. It also brings frightening risks. Ask any mother with postnatal depression or caregivers of an antisocial adolescent. Another difference between parenting and lifestyle choices is that the community generally benefits and, again, this is quite apart from the fact that parents produce new people.

And what of my eighteen year old and his initiation of our family into drinking? I make no claim to wisdom or resilience related to the event. I may now have a few more insights about young people and alcohol. There's also the germ of a conviction that what is good enough for my son to do is worthy of closer consideration by the older generation. Now, that would be a radical shift in social behaviour, prompted by a rarely acknowledged source.

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