

Millennial parenting

"You sit down and go over who does what. A father's role in a child's upbringing is just as important as the mother's role."

-- NAHEED ROUF

While both parents work, the concept of a joint family has morphed into something unnatural in today's world. Not only do mum and dad have professional careers to maintain, but the number of nuclear families is on the rise, while joint ones are dwindling, and house help is a godsend, if found; add technological development and easy access to information into the mix, and parental skills got a whole new upgrade, like the latest software update on an android phone.

Sarcasm and jokes aside, the reality is that the same old fashioned practices of parenting are a recipe for disaster in this day and age. While mothers have always been the primary care-givers, the role of the father has become more important, now more than ever.

Professor of Psychology at the College of Dupage, Naheed Rouf discussed about the more technical aspects of child rearing in relation to fatherhood. "Two aspects of personality development strongly correlate to a father's influence and involvement in a child's life that can be explained more precisely through the social learning theory and the cognitive development theory," she said. While the first sheds light on behaviour modelling in terms of learning and behaviour, the latter discusses about the changes in mental operations that take place about later, brought on by actions and the processes involved. The quality of the relationship a child has with his or her father is key to not just self-identity, but the ability to distinguish as an individual, wrong from right, in other words-- a sense of morality. She went on to further explain the differences between the interactions of a child with their respective parents, stating that mothers tend to play more passively, while fathers are more physically stimulating, such as roughhousing. The absence of a father in a daughter's life affects her self-esteem and confidence, while in the son's case, it increases the likelihood of substance abuse, behavioural problems and run-ins with the law.

Addictions and accesses to them are easier now more than ever, resulting in children losing basic socialising skills. "As this society changes, so must parenting tactics based on the child's nature. Children in general are very resilient, but to sustain that as they become adults, a lot of it comes down to how strong the bond is with both parents. It is now all about quality over quantity, in terms of the relationship a child has with their parents," said Rouf. This paved the way to discuss on the differential treatment of children based on their gender. In a scenario where a young girl is distressed and crying, parents would likely respond by comforting her, whereas in the case of a boy, he would be told not to cry and brush



it off. "The problem with such practices is that you are teaching the boy what it means to be masculine, but not sensitive, leading to an emotionally unavailable man. There is a need for sensitive men in today's world," said Rouf. Thus, the challenge now lies in minimising the gender differences and discriminatory behaviour that children are exposed to through parents, to raise androgynous individuals.

To do so, a lot of it comes down to reconditioning one's own perceptions and maintaining an open conversation with their respective spouse. "Responsibilities have to be outlined and expectations must be cleared out. Who picks up the children and drops them off to their various games later? Things like that. Couples are forced to share not just the household chores, but the familial responsibilities now and mutual understanding between two partners is key. If one gets stuck with something, then the other one pulls the slack," she said. In a marriage, the best thing is to try and maintain open communication between two partners. The responsibility of sharing a child can never be 50-50, but the target is to lessen that gap. "Some things, for a fact, cannot be argued with. There's a reason why we say, 'mother nature' or even a 'mother's instinct.' It is an inherent bond only a mother shares with her child. A mother can very easily differentiate between the cries of her new-born; fathers, therefore, need to make the extra effort to connect," she said.

The real struggle for many men some-

times is to forego the traditional gendered roles of a man and woman that they themselves, as children, were raised to believe, to sustain a quality relationship with their own children. Little things such as talking to them while dropping them off to school or after their scheduled television time, sitting them down and asking about how their day went, is a start. It is easier to tell a child off than to

understand the reasoning behind their actions. Although the absence of a father is not recognised when the child is young, it becomes more prominent as they get older, so it is very important for fathers to start developing a healthy relation with their children from a very early age. Parental tactics are also dependent on the age of the child. As mother and father, maintaining that power balance between disciplining and being there for them is always tricky. It comes without saying that teenagers test that boundary the most. "The best all time disciplinary tactic is to always talk it out with children. To make them understand why what they did is not right, so that they don't do it again," said Rouf. For a father of two, comedian Naveed Mahbub explains it by saying, "My wife and I try to be more like older friends- ones that they can rely on, so that when faced with trouble, my daughter knows she can tell either one of us about it. Although she is reprimanded, we acknowledge and reward her with positive feedback for coming to us first."

Fear and physical punishment also do more harm than good. Constant belittling is a very painful thing for anyone to experience, let alone children. "In fact, they eventually learn how to block that,

resulting in a lack of sympathy for others," she said. From a very early age, children can identify each emotion that people around them experience. To raise a conscious human being, it is important to teach children the right emotions from the wrong ones, instilling empathy. Physical punishment is not an option either, because it is only a temporary solution that satisfies the parent, but does nothing for the child. To leave a long-term impact on the child, it comes down to communication again. "Children crave for a structured environment, meaning even punishments must follow the same pattern. Sit the child down and explain it to them. Ask them to reflect on their behaviour and explain how their actions have upset you. Discuss and mutually agree upon the nature of punishment. Of course, the child will always try to lessen the degree of it, but remember that's where structure comes in," she said.

Rouf concluded with a question that she often asks when parents ask for advice on the right way to discipline their children; "How often do you praise your child for the right thing versus reprimand them for the right?" Even as an adult, the answer, most often, is the latter superseding the former.

By Supriti Sarkar

Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad Ibne Sayed

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