

The social context for children and their families has fast been changing. Families now come in many shapes and sizes; it is becoming the norm for both parents to work outside the home; and the nature of the support to families given by the state has changed.

It thus seems timely to take a step back and reflect on how well our society is meeting children's needs and/or ensuring that families are being supported in their capacity to meet them.

*Tim Costello* takes a broad perspective on the family's position in society today.

## The challenge of caring for children



*Tim Costello*

In the past the idea of “family” has rested on the notion that parents and children not only share their accommodation, but that they share occasions together. Especially it has been assumed that they share meals. These days, with both parents working in the majority of homes, with shift work often spread over the 24-hour period, with 24-hour-a-day shopping, and with pervasive advertising concentrating on dividing us into age-based market segments, this assumption can no longer be made.

Further reduction of face-to-face contact with other family members is inevitable as the computer screen becomes one of our major sources of communication. The challenge for us is to give family members, especially children, a sense of belonging to their family without regular opportunities to come together physically as a group.

### *Meeting child-rearing responsibilities*

As far as I can see, parents still undertake responsibilities for their children, but because of work demands there is a trend to exercise these as single adults, regardless of whether they are married or single parents. They may be found caring on any particular occasion for at least one child of their own, or several children (often including some from other families). The challenge is that caring for children as a lone adult is more stressful than caring in the company of a partner: the load is greater and there is no one with whom to share ideas, strategies and frustrations.

My observation is that families who rear their children successfully together in a partnership take turns at sharing this often lonely but wonderfully rewarding task. I well remember the way my wife and I would take turns with the early, and I mean early, morning routine of changing a nappy and putting breakfast in front of our two other little ones who seemed to be bounding with energy as soon as light appeared. Healthy families also insist on giving priority to achieving at least some occasions together and they develop a subtle but effective way of communicating the necessary reassurance and support. I am confident that they celebrate and communicate the uniqueness of their own offspring with a passion.

Although such families do not always practise any religion, my intuition is that the religious traditions provide a rationale for the sharing of difficult tasks, for spending time together at shared rituals, and for an understanding that things unseen, expressed in such things as hugs or even prayers, can provide the essential glue within families. I don't need to add that such traditions play a powerful role in asserting the unique value of each person in the eyes of God.

One of the greatest mysteries in human experience is the magical commitment and love which seems to emerge spontaneously between a parent and his or her own child. Parents can love and care for their developmentally disabled child with a passion to the extent that their only fear is how that child will manage after their demise. The image of a parent's love is often used in the Scriptures to illustrate the intensity of God's love. If in our modern world we are going to allow parents to determine the genetic make-up of their children we may find that this intense parental love becomes more conditional.

The decision which now faces us is whether we want to jeopardise our experience of the unconditional love of parents with a more consumerist approach to our children. Such an abuse of genetic engineering may be the biggest challenge yet to parenting. I believe that it is the parents of today who should insist on being involved with the direction we go with our powerful newfound tool, genetic engineering.

### *Child-rearing an exclusive or shared responsibility?*

I am firmly of the belief that child-rearing is an intrinsic part of any community. It certainly does “take a village to rear a child”, and this village needs to include more than just the people who staff our official institutions such as schools, shops, sporting facilities and transport. A child needs the varying relationships provided by grandparent figures, aunts, uncles, adult family friends, children and old people in the neighbourhood and so on. In fact the child, in order to grow to be a global citizen, needs a circle of friends and contacts to provide him or her with a microcosm of the world.

With its tradition of suburban life and multicultural population, Australia is well placed to do this, but the idea of the allocation of responsibility for children firmly in

our communities needs much more discussion. With our increasingly competitive, consumerist and isolationist approach to life we seem to have lost any sense of this key role of our communities.

Borrowing from the Jewish tradition based on the “ten commandments”, I have actually drafted a list of “commandments” for neighbourhood living. One of these is that, once a week, each community member should share an informal occasion like a cup of tea or an informal chat in the yard with at least three households within walking distance of the member’s own home. Keeping even this one “commandment” would surely ensure that the need of a neighbourhood child might bring some community response. As in families, if we don’t share occasions in our neighbourhoods, then we can’t expect to know who needs care. Knowing and sharing our understanding of neighbourhood need is essential to the community care of children.

A few weeks ago my wife and I celebrated a friend’s birthday together with his partner and three other couples, all long-term friends of ours and most living or having lived within our neighbourhood as well. As the night wore on each couple took part in sharing how it really has been for them in their experience of parenting. Needless to say it became a very late night! We sought to understand the changes between our generation and that of our children and how we each were coping in the light of those changes. Painful experiences and losses were shared; anger and honesty emerged as perhaps they could only do in a circle of deep trust and genuine care. Reflecting back on it now I realise how much we all need that village, not just to raise a child, but also to support and love those rearing them.

### ***Shaping policies to foster family resilience***

I think that policy priority should be given to the reduction of family poverty, the regulation of workplaces and work schedules so that they are family-friendly, and the enrichment of neighbourhoods in terms of personnel who are responsive to children’s needs. Policies directed toward the teaching of new skills and strategies – in particular, in parenting situations – tend to single out families as “not coping”, when we know that overwhelmingly the best predictors of bad parenting are *social* factors like poverty, unemployment and the social and economic status of a suburb.

But I don’t mean to imply that there is no place for shaping “family resilience”. The pastoral work of a minister is almost always directed towards this goal. Usually I find that reducing the loneliness of the parent by hearing his or her pain, and by giving reassurance that we all feel defeated by our role as parents at some time or other, can foster such resilience.

I greatly admire parent groups who share such insights – and we need many more of them, be it through the schools, kindergartens, sports clubs or churches. Let’s create ways of communicating about the things that really count, such as setting boundaries, fostering discipline, coping with the pressure of daily life and most importantly good communication skills. I think parents need to realise that there are any number of ways of dealing with a problem and usually new approaches just turn up if they continue to share the problem with others.

As all human dilemmas – including those with our children – require our humility, acknowledging that we can’t fix everything brings us to the realisation that we need to share our problems at some more spiritual level. People like me call this prayer, but what you call it is not important. It’s doing it that makes the difference.

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