

Don Chipp Foundation Ltd

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Having Children and Sharing the Parenting¹ **Lawrie Maloney**

Have you ever thought about why we choose to have children? On a recent television “sit-com”, a man asks his partner why they had had kids. You could sense the danger in the question. She looks at him. “Don’t you remember”, she almost hisses? “You promised me you’d show me a good time.” We used to talk about children “arriving” or “coming along”, as if parenthood remained connected to “showing each other a good time” but in ways that were somewhat less than predictable. At a time when it was unacceptable to have children “out of wedlock”, roughly one third of first-born children within marriages were nonetheless conceived prior to the wedding day. The phrase, “they had to get married”, once so common, now sounds a little quaint. Nowadays, most young people see the issue of marriage as separate from the issue of living together. More critically, perhaps, most young people assume that decisions about when and if to have children are decisions firmly within their control. Making a formal decision to have a child and to commit to that child’s development is perhaps the most long-term, irrational, exciting, challenging, uncertain, and necessary thing that we do as a species. It’s like leaping from a diving board in the dark and trusting that everything will be OK in that moment, for the next nine months, and for the next 20 years.

When Michael Faraday was asked to justify his discovery of electromagnetism – the mysterious force that had yet to prove itself useful – he is said to have thought for a moment and then replied with a beautifully insightful question of his own. “Of what use is a child?” he asked¹. I like to think that Faraday must have understood that like electromagnetism, children also harbour mysterious forces. I like to think that even in the first half of the nineteenth century, Faraday had a sense that the development of children would be enhanced if we interacted with them thoughtfully and treated them with respect.

In the past 30 years or so, developmental psychologists have shown more formally, how exquisitely children are tuned in to the world. We think we are in charge of our infants, but in truth they are in charge of us. They demand our attention. Over and over again they will invite us to facilitate their development.

They are trusting, though their trust can be betrayed by action or lack of action. They are resilient, though their resilience is not inexhaustible. Children are full-on hypothesis generators. Do the trees move because the wind blows or does the wind blow because the tree waves its arms? Does the moon follow me? If it follows me, how can it follow somebody else who is traveling in another direction? Children also

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threaten our sense of social order. They are fascinated by the sort of bodily functions not mentioned in polite society; they keep asking awkward questions; they have a habit of resisting attempts to put order into their living spaces and their lives. They need, of course, to make their own discoveries about all these things. Perhaps it is not surprising that historians of childhood report much that is confused, paradoxical, and of course, shameful with respect to adult responses to children. When children don't act predictably, some of us have the wisdom and the humility to know that we must be part of the accommodation. I recently heard the parents of a child with fragile X syndrome, a very challenging condition, say that although Emma was difficult, "We wouldn't want her any other way. Emma is Emma", they said. "She can be difficult, but she is a great mimic. People get so much out of her. We love her."

But when children don't act predictably, others of us seek to control them and turn them into something else. If they "belong" to us, we might, for example, project onto them the burden of carrying our hopes for our own immortality, or perhaps the expectation that they will be what we think we didn't have the chance to be. That, of course, is one of the classic migration stories in this land in which more than 90% of us are migrants. We have variously thought, as some early Calvinists did, that children need the evil chastised out of them – spare the rod and spoil the child; or that they need "behavioural modification" – rewards for "appropriate" behaviours and non-rewards for behaviours that are "inappropriate"; or that their education is not about wonder, not about "leading out of" (which is what the word "e-ducare" means), but about containment, conformity, and the imposition of "facts".

The problem is that, like adults, each child is different. Research shows what I suspect many of us already knew – that a child comes into the world not as a "tabula rasa", but with a ready made temperament. Ask any parent who has had more than one child. One may seem at peace with his surroundings; another may seem to fight and struggle as if she belonged elsewhere. One may form attachments easily; another may form a strong attachment to one parent and not the other; yet another might seem to struggle to form attachments to either parent. It's a delicate issue and modern day parents are bombarded with advice on how to "do it right". Are kids better off today than in the past? Historians of childhood like Lloyd De Mause claim that down the centuries we have largely abused and neglected children. Others like Phillippe Aries claim that until recently we simply did not take a lot of notice of children until they reached an age when they were likely to survive (until the 19th century, about 50% died before reaching the age of 2 years). At the same time, historical stories of parent-child relationships do provide us with evidence of great love and affection. Thomas Moore, for example wrote of his children with great tenderness. And in the wonderful stories of the De Cameron, Giovanni Boccacio wrote of the agony felt by parents whose children had contracted the plague. If they stayed to care for them, they too were certain to catch this dreadful disease. But how could they leave them to die without the comfort of a parent? Phillippe Aries found records of parents who wrapped infants in swaddling clothes and hung them on a kind of hook whilst they worked in the fields. Perhaps before we got beyond the struggle of subsistence level living, there

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was a crude evolutionary wisdom to practices that more or less allowed children to sink or swim. Perhaps we simply couldn't put too much emotional and physical energy into infants who were just as likely to die on us anyway.

In the eighteenth century, we see the beginnings of a clearer articulation of the idea that while children are biologically oriented towards self-development, they also need to be adequately nurtured, emotionally as well as physically. Rousseau probably represents the most romanticised version of this notion. In *Emile*, he writes

Tender, anxious mother, I appeal to you. You can remove this young tree from the highway and shield it from the crushing force of social conventions. Tend and water it ere it dies. One day the fruit will reward your care. From the outset, raise a wall around your child's soul; another may sketch the plan; you alone should carry it into execution².

Charles Darwin was probably the first person to attempt a systematic inquiry into children's development. Darwin began a biography of one of his own infants in 1840 but as with his "Origin of the Species", he was slow to publish. Indeed the book did not see the light of day until 1877. The excitement caused by Darwin's work was connected to the still emerging idea that adults could only be fully understood by examining their origins in nature and in childhood. For example, Wordsworth's 1802 Prelude, "Child as father of the man" composed within the romantic tradition of Rousseau, is said to have been especially influential in inspiring the scientific study of childhood.

It's interesting to reflect on Wordsworth's language. Today, I'm afraid it wouldn't get past the average university Ethics Committee. We'd be told to "find a more gender-neutral way of stating the nature of our inquiry." Yet there was a time, when we had little formal understanding of child development, when our laws simply assumed that children must be in the care (or perhaps "control" is a more accurate word) of their fathers. It's ironic, then, that as child development became a legitimate subject for scientific inquiries (conducted almost exclusively by men), something was happening that largely excluded fathers from child rearing and simultaneously exalted the role of the mother. It's a complicated story and scholars argue over the details. But the weight of evidence suggests that this profound shift had its origins in the structural changes that came out of the industrial revolution. This is the way Natasha Cabrera and her colleagues sum up the situation as it occurred in North America:

In the second half of the nineteenth century, fathers ...left their small farms and businesses to seek employment away from home in an emerging industrial economy. In so doing, they left responsibility for rearing children largely to mothers and, not surprisingly, the predominant construction of fatherhood in the twentieth century had at its core fathers' instrumental or breadwinning role in the family. The

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constant presence of mothers as primary caregivers fostered the implicit assumption that father-child relationships had little impact on children's development, and this popular belief was reinforced by developmental theorists throughout most of the century⁴.

Cabrera and her colleagues are right in drawing attention to the fact that many early psychologists mirrored the social changes around parenting. For example, even late in his life Freud⁵ continued to describe the mother's role as "... the prototype of all later love relations." And John Bowlby⁶, whose work on childparent attachment has had such a profound influence on the way we now think about parenting, did his research work on young children and their mothers. Fathers featured in Bowlby's work, as "support acts" to what was seen as the primary parenting relationship, which was between mother and child. It's really only in the past 15 years or less that psychologists have engaged in a concerted research program on the capacity of fathers to parent more directly. As recently as 1976, Michael Lamb, who has been conducting research on fathering for more than 30 years, concluded that social scientists in general, and developmental psychologists in particular, doubt that fathers have a significant role to play in shaping the experiences and development of their children, especially their daughters⁷. Twenty-three years and a lot of hard work later, Lamb had changed his view:

We do know ... that mothers and fathers are capable of behaving sensitively and responsively in interaction with their infants. With the exception of lactation, there is no evidence that women are biologically disposed to better parent than men are. Social conventions, not biological imperatives, underlie the traditional division of parental responsibilities⁸.

Most of us are familiar with these social conventions. We also know that the formula of the breadwinner father and the homemaker mother (or what the Italians call, "La Casalinga") began to shift in Australia in the 1960s. Whether from economic necessity or desire or both, women began to enter the workforce in ever increasing numbers. We know that all political parties now struggle to get balanced policies on the work and childcare mix. What gets insufficient attention in most debates on this issue is what fathers are doing or could be doing or even should be doing with their children.

I want to come at this question from my experience in the field of family law. What research and my own clinical practice in this field tells me is the following:

- Most children want to see more of their fathers
- Most fathers want to see more of their children
- Many mothers want fathers to be more involved
- Some mothers feel threatened by increased father involvement

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- Some mothers have a genuine belief that their style of parenting is right and that their partner or ex-partner is incapable of any more than “child-minding” - the “dumb dad” we see portrayed on sitcoms and nappy commercials.
- Some partners (mainly men) exercise control over relationships by maintaining a climate of fear

Part of my fascination with family law is that the issues dealt with by the mediators and the courts are the issues that are also covertly or overtly present in “intact” families. I have no doubt that in all families, an important way forward is to ditch our highly gendered ideas about parenting, to support policies that promote active parenting by mothers and fathers, to allow both women and men to breathe in their parenting roles, and to celebrate rather than worry about differing parenting styles, gendered or otherwise⁹. The relationship between each parent and each child is exquisitely unique. Gender is one aspect of that relationship, sometimes prominent, sometimes not.

Assuming personal commitment and reasonable financial and social supports, the two main things that destroy good parenting are, in my view, the belief that “I don’t know how to do it”, and ongoing parental conflict. Because of our different histories, the first challenge has a different face for men and for women. But the first step for men is to abandon the belief that they are somehow not biologically adapted to the task of nurturing. There is simply no evidence to support this. On the question of the impact of ongoing entrenched conflict and what it does to children, the evidence is unequivocal. How does a child deal with the fact that the two people he or she loves and depends on cannot depend on or show love to each other? The simple answer is, “very poorly”. In an earlier edition of the Journal of Family Studies, my colleague, Jenn McIntosh, described the plight of Rachael who was referred to her psychology practice when she was 10 years old. Jenn described it this way¹⁰:

(Rachael) came into my room as if trying not to let anyone know she was there. Never far from tears, she sat on the edge of the couch, clutching a worn piece of paper. It was a visiting schedule that she was trying to work out for herself, almost illegible beneath layers of white out and crossings out and arrows pointing here, there, and everywhere over the sheet, ripped in half and stuck back together with sticky tape, with a scrawled timetable overlaid with small, obsessively written notes to herself, an attempt at ordering her chaotic world. “Tuesday – bring gym clothes back from Dad’s; remember medicine; Thursday, Mum working late – go to Dad’s; Friday, meet Mum outside Dad’s, remember medicine; Saturday, call Dad; Sunday, Mum not home – stay at Dad’s, remember medicine, and so on. As I learned, the worn out paper was a self-portrait.

“Everything is wrong” – I could barely hear her – “Everything is wrong”, and the tears came and didn’t stop, through moments of pent-

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up rage. “I’m not allowed to even take my insulin from Dad’s house to Mum’s house. I’m not allowed to play the CD Dad gave me at Mum’s house. They fight all the time about who can have me – either they both want me or neither wants me. And when I’m with Mum, I don’t feel welcome; and when I’m with Dad, he just wants to talk about Mum.”

Really *sharing* the parenting takes commitment. I’ve barely scratched the surface of its history or of the changing question of the formal or informal contract entered into by adults when they plan (as we generally do these days) to have a child. It’s better, of course, if there are two parents in a child’s life, though not at any price and not for the reasons often trotted out. For example, you’re not more likely to end up gay just because you are brought up by a single mum or a single dad. It can be fine if you have only one committed parent around. It’s just harder. Everyone is more vulnerable when there is not as much back-up.

Most of us do parent with a partner¹¹ and most of us parent differently from each other. It would be good if we could relax more about that. It makes sharing the parenting with whomever our partner might be, so much easier. Trying to “parent by numbers” according to somebody else’s formula, no matter how eminent that somebody else might be, makes no sense. Parenting in a partnership involves individual intuition and backing the other. It also involves honesty and effort and fun and mistakes, and of course some anxiety. There will be tears and hugs and high times and flat times. Kids will always have friends whose parents give them more stuff, or more freedom, or take them on more holidays. These are not the really important issues.

It’s worth reflecting on the core things, like Emma, with fragile X? “Emma is Emma,” said her parents. “We love her”. Deep down kids know when you are on their side – not because you let them do anything they want, but because you listen, appreciate, love, share, gently guide, and if all else fails, put the foot down. At the end of the day, the rest is largely peripheral.

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Endnotes

¹Cited in Barzun (1964).

²Everyman's Library (1911, pp. 5-6).

³Cited in Coveney (1967).

⁴Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb (2000, p. 127)

⁵Freud, S. (1949, p. 90).

⁶Bowlby, J. (1987)

⁷Cited in Lamb (1997, p. 1)

⁸Lamb (1997, p. 120)

⁹At the same time, I acknowledge that this does not deal adequately with the question of overt manipulation that occurs in some families, especially where this is accompanied by violence or the debilitating fear that accompanies the threat of violence.

¹⁰McIntosh (2003, pp. 67-68)

¹¹McDonald (1995) found that 82% of all children were living in intact families whilst 12% were living in one-parent families.