

»Your competent child«

Jesper Juul

CHAPTER ONE: FAMILY VALUES

We are at a unique historical crossroads. Across many different societies, the basic values that secured the foundation of family life for more than two centuries are undergoing a period of disintegration and transformation. In Scandinavia, women have been in the vanguard of these changes, abetted by advanced social legislation and the comforts of the welfare state. In other countries, civil war or economic hardship has sparked this development.

The pace at which change is occurring varies, but the cause is the same: the hierarchical, authoritarian family, headed by either a matriarch or patriarch, is becoming extinct. As a result, the map of the world is teeming with many different types of families. Some make a desperate attempt to maintain the standards of "the good old days," while others experiment with new and more fruitful ways of living together.

From a mental health vantage point, there is every reason to welcome this change. The traditional family structure and many of its values were destructive for both children and adults, as these scenarios will illustrate.

A café in Spain:

A father, mother and two sons, ages three and five, have just finished eating their ice cream and cake. The mother takes a napkin, spits on it, grasps firmly the youngest son's chin and begins to wipe his mouth. The boy protests and turns his face away. She grabs hold of a handful of his hair and tells him in an angry whisper how naughty he is.

His big brother looks on, grimacing – but only for a moment. Then his face settles into a neutral mask. The father also has a pained look, but then he turns with irritation toward his wife – why can't she make the boy behave himself! Why does he always cause such a fuss?

By the time they leave the café, the boy has recovered. Window shopping, he notices a new toy in a store window and points to it enthusiastically. He wants his mother to look. But she is ahead of him, and when she walks back to him, she grabs his arm and him away without even glancing at the toy in the window. He begins to cry, begging her to look at it, but she is unrelenting in her determination to win. "Pontela cara bien!" ("Make your face beautiful!"), she repeats, over and over again.

A café in Vienna:

Two young married couples, one with a son about five, sit down outdoors to have a cup of coffee after shopping. When the waitress appears, the boy's mother says to her son, "We're having coffee, what do you want?"

The boy hesitates a little and says, "I don't know."

Irritated, the mother says to the waitress, "Give him some apple juice."

The coffee and juice arrive, and after a while the boy says, politely and cautiously, "Mommy, I would rather have Coke with lemon, if that's possible."

"Why didn't you say that to start with!" the mother replies. "Drink your juice!" But in the same breath, she says to the waitress, "The boy's changed his mind. Give him a Coke with lemon, so we can have some peace!"

For about ten minutes, the boy sits quietly while the adults chat. Suddenly the mother looks at

her watch and says angrily to the boy, "Drink your soda!"

"Are we going?" the boy asks, visibly excited.

"Yes, we've got to hurry home. Now drink up!"

The boy swallows his Coke in large gulps. "I'm finished now, Mommy," he says happily. "Wasn't I quick?"

The mother ignores him, and begins talking to the other adults. Once again, the boy sits quietly. After half an hour has passed, he asks cautiously, "Mommy, are we going home soon?"

"Shut your mouth, you little brat!" she explodes. "Another word from you, and you'll go straight to bed when we get home. Do you understand!?"

The boy withers and resigns himself. The other adults look at the mother with approval and the boy's father lays an affirmative hand on his wife's arm.

A bus stop in Copenhagen:

A grandmother and two grandchildren – a four-year-old boy and a six-year-old girl – are waiting for a bus. The boy tugs at his grandmother's coat and says, "Granny, I have to go to the toilet."

"You can't go now," she replies. "We've got to get home!"
"But I need to go, badly!" the boy says.

"Look at your big sister, how big and sensible she is," the grandmother says.

"Yes, but I need to...really bad!"

"Didn't you hear me? You can go to the toilet when you get home. If you don't behave yourself, I'll have to tell your Mommy. And then you won't come into town with me again!"

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The adults in these scenarios are not bad people. They love their children and grandchildren, are delighted when the children behave themselves, and appreciate their funny and cute comments. But they behave in unloving ways because they have learned to regard unloving acts as loving, and loving acts as irresponsible.

For several hundred years, what we really taught children was to respect power, authority and violence - but not other human beings.

THE FAMILY AS A POWER STRUCTURE

For centuries the family has existed as a power structure in which men have absolute power over women, and adults have power over children in terms of all social, political, and psychological aspects of life. The hierarchy was unquestioned: the man was on the first rung, the woman below him -- if there were no adolescent sons - followed by sons and then daughters. A successful marriage depended on the woman's ability and willingness to submit herself to her husband; the clear purpose of childrearing was to make children adapt to and obey those in power.

As in all other totalitarian power structures, the ideal was a situation in which no open conflicts occurred. Those who didn't cooperate met with physical violence, or found their already restricted individual freedom further limited.

For those who understood how to adapt themselves, the family provided a secure foundation, but for those whose individuality was more robust, the family and its pattern of interaction could be alarmingly destructive. Those who suffered and developed symptoms were treated – by

educators and psychiatrists – so that they would quickly readapt to the power structure.

When those in power (spouses and parents) tried to “resocialize” women or children who acted out, they were encouraged to show understanding, love and firmness -- but never to surrender their power. As a result, many women and children were admitted and often re-admitted to institutions, and forced to take medication.

Of course, this description is both incomplete and unfair. Admittedly, there were aspects of traditional family life that were pleasurable and happy. People loved each other. On another level, those who submitted successfully enjoyed a special form of security similar to that experienced by well-adjusted citizens in totalitarian societies.

Some of us may even feel nostalgic for "the good old traditional family," but only rarely did it exert a positive influence on the well-being and development of the individual. In other words, from a social point of view, traditional families often looked successful, but the pathology it caused lurked just below the surface.

Only towards the end of the last century did we begin to take an interest in children as individual beings. That’s when we realized that meeting children’s intellectual and psychological needs was important for their wellbeing and development. Recognition of women’s rights came even later -- in the 1920's – when women began to demand to be taken seriously as human, social and political beings. Thus, in the first half of this century, the family gradually became less totalitarian although the actual power structure, which served as a basis for family life, remained unaltered.

One of the legacies of the traditional family exists in our language, which originated during a time in which successful families were defined as conflict-free, and when our ideas about what constituted a healthy family were vastly different than they are today. I’d now like to update the definitions of many of the terms and concepts that we use when we speak about families and children.

Methods of Upbringing

In Scandinavia we discussed *methods* of childrearing with great confidence right up to the middle of the 1970s. We believed that children were asocial and potentially animal-like; therefore, adults had to associate with them and use “methods” that would ensure their individual and social development. The methods varied along ideological lines, but the notion that it was necessary to use a “method” went unchallenged until very recently.

Now that we know that children are real people from birth, it is absurd to speak of “methods.” Think for a moment how we would sound if we applied this concept to adult relationships. Imagine, for example, a man saying to a friend, or to his therapist, "I’m in love with a tall, black-haired woman from Portugal, but I have many problems with her. Can you give me a method so that she will be less difficult to live with?" Clearly, no adult would think of approaching another adult with this idea in mind. But this is how we have approached our relationships with children since the beginning of the 18th century.

When children are born, they are fully human – that is, they are social, responsive, and empathic. These qualities are not taught, but are inborn. Yet for these qualities to develop, children need be with adults who behave in ways that respect and model social, human behavior. To use a method – any method -- is not just superfluous but also destructive because it reduces children to *objects* in relation to those who are nearest and dearest to them. It’s time, according to both clinicians and researchers, to change how we relate to children – to move from a subject-object relationship to a subject-subject relationship.

The Age of Defiance

Around the age of two, children gradually begin to free themselves from their total dependence on their parents. They want to be able to think, feel and act on their own. There’s never any doubt as to when this *independent age* begins. One morning, as you dress your two-year-old

daughter, she tugs at your arm and says, "Me can!" or "Me do it!"

And how do most parents respond? They say, "Stop it! You can't do it, I have to. We haven't got time to play games!" In other words, when children become independent, many parents become defiant!

Yet this brief anecdote also illustrates how clever children are at cooperating! If a parent meets his two-year-old's burgeoning independence with reluctance and defiance, the child will, in the space of a few months, become either defiant herself - meeting defiance with defiance - or lose her initiative entirely and become even more dependent.

Young children necessarily become increasingly independent and self-reliant – it's part of their development. Only a totalitarian system would view the natural and progressive development of a child's unique, inner-determined personality as a problem. Describing children as "defiant" is a typical ploy of those in power; it's intended to keep the children subordinate.

Puberty

Puberty is a neutral clinical concept that has, over the course of this century, acquired an extremely negative connotation. Conflict, argument and trouble – these are the qualities associated with adolescence. After the World War II, the equally-negative concept of pre-puberty emerged – alerting parents of younger children to the fact that trouble is just around the corner.

Viewed objectively, puberty is an intrapsychic (that is, it takes place within the individual), psychosexual period of development which causes many 12 - 15 year olds to experience internal uncertainty and turbulence. The idea that this development should in itself cause interpersonal conflicts with adults is rubbish. The number of conflicts and their intensity depend, among other things, on the ability of adults to acknowledge their changing parental roles, and on the way in which they approached the development of their child's integrity during the first 3-4 years of the child's life.

Teenage rebellion

Similarly, the teenage years are described in militaristic, political terms: rebellion, independence, revolution, lack of discipline, for example. This is not surprising. In a power structure in which adults represent stability and are invested with maintaining a conflict-free environment, every progressive development must necessarily be defined as an attack on the establishment.

The same dynamic exists with women in midlife. When they begin menopause, their every action and mood is attributed to "hormones." This excuses those in power (men) from shouldering any responsibility for disruptions that arise. In the same way, teenagers are blamed for being teenagers. What adults need to do instead is face up to their overriding responsibility in terms of structuring the interaction within the family.

Now, let's consider a number of concepts we traditionally use in connection with child-rearing that reflect how those in power view reality. Embedded within these concepts is the belief that maintaining the power structure is best for all concerned.

Limits

Within a power structure it is necessary to have law and order; therefore, limits were set to govern children's physical, mental and emotional pursuits. These limits - what children could and couldn't, and should and shouldn't do -- were enforced as if the family was a policing unit.

This led adults to assert that certain limits were healthy and good for children – a proposition many accepted although there is no evidence to support it. Let me elaborate: It is true that children develop in harmonious and healthy ways when the adults of the family set some limits. But, as I will explain later, it is important that both children and adults set their own limits. The question of setting limits for others is first and foremost an expression of power.

The question of limits inevitably arises whenever parents discuss children's upbringing. We tend to think that only our generation has difficulty setting limits, that our parents accomplished this with more ease. In fact, limit-setting has always been difficult. Parents have always asked experts for advice about how to get children to "respond" or "obey," as they used to call it. For as long as families sought to uphold the power structure, parents were advised to think about limit-setting in terms of four elements: unity, firmness, consequences and fairness. Let's explore each of these in turn.

Unity

"Unity is strength," as the saying goes, and that was precisely the reasoning behind one of the family's most important credos: "It is important that parents agree about how to bring up children." I have met countless couples who sacrificed their marriages in order to live up to this ideal, and who suffered from overwhelming guilt because they did not succeed. They believed, as many parents do, that children feel the most secure when their parents agree, and that they were harming their children when they failed to agree. A certain amount of disunity was tolerated – but only if expressed after the children had gone to bed. When children were present, nothing less than unconditional unity was demanded. However, this article of faith is only true if we insist on thinking of the family as a political unit. When those in power have to enforce law and order, it is to their advantage to agree, so that they can face their children as a united front.

Parents also perceived that disunity would allow children to play one parent off against the other - to drive a wedge in the family's leadership. Yet in practice, parents seldom agree. For example, in many families, dads dole out discipline only to have moms intervene for more leniency. In this situation, mom is viewed not as a disloyal soldier but rather as the family's first-aid dispenser whose job it is to tend to the wounded. Yet even as they performed this role, many women never questioned the necessity of limits, or thought to examine the reins under which they themselves lived.

To me, it is not important whether parents agree about upbringing or not. In principle, they need only to agree about one thing, namely, that it is acceptable to disagree. Only when they experience each other's differences as wrong and undesirable do children become insecure.

Firmness

The concept of firmness, which is related to "unity," is also necessary to keep the power structure intact. When members of a family voice different opinions, it is experienced as hostile opposition, and creates conflict.

What does it mean for adults to be firm? They have to be able to say, in unison, "NO!" when children disobey.

The healthy alternative to this power play is open, personal dialogue that takes into account the desires, dreams and needs of children as well as those of adults. To act in this way is to display true leadership.

Consequences

Suppose children still did not obey, even after we spoke with a united and firm voice. What next? Regardless of the particular conflict, parents usually select one of two consequences: either they resort to physical violence, or they limit children's personal freedom.

Neither of these is easy to carry out. Most of us cannot physically hurt our children or restrict their personal or social freedom with a clear conscience. That's why we resort to these familiar justifications:

- "It's for your own good!"
- "You'll understand when you grow up!"
- "You must learn to adapt yourself!"
- "It hurts me more than it hurts you!"
- "If you won't listen, we'll have to knock it into you!"

And what did children learn as a result?

- When a parent said, "I make the decisions here!" children learned that they had no personal freedom.
- When a parent said, "Children should be seen and not heard!" children learned that they had no freedom of speech, and that they needed to censor themselves.

Interestingly, after punishing their children, many parents begin to worry that they have harmed their relationship with them. Typically, they then express this fear as a demand -- "Give your Dad a hug now, and let's forget all about it" -- or, more indirectly, as a question -- "Are we friends again?" Ironically, this is what adults often say to each other breaking off a loving relationship: "Can't we still be friends?"

These feelings of awkwardness and doubt are justified. By dealing in consequences and punishment, parents gradually destroy their relationship with their children. These adults decline all responsibility for the conflict that has arisen, and turn the child into the guilty party. This not only erodes the child's confidence in his parents, but also in his own self-esteem.

Fairness

For many parents, a large part of childrearing was concerned with criticizing and correcting children when they acted incorrectly. Children, then, needed to admit to having done something wrong, or demonstrate genuine remorse. According to this model, adults are responsible for making children recognize that they were truly and seriously in the wrong. Only after this admission can children begin to improve themselves. This way of thinking gave rise to such well-known expressions as:

- "Shame on you!"
- "You should be ashamed of yourself!"
- "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

In this system, in which any conflict between parents and children can be explained by the lack or failure of a child's upbringing, the concept of fairness was introduced as a guideline for those in power. Practically, it allowed adults to ascertain that the child was truly guilty before the punishment was carried out. Thus, parents didn't focus as much on the initial act of violence, but on the unfairness that would ensue if they punished a child who was in fact innocent.

Paradoxically, this often meant that children only remembered (and protested against) those episodes for which they had been punished for something they had not actually done. The more general - and deeply unjust - experience of being "wrong" was repressed, because it was normal -- that is, it was the normal state of mind for children raised under a system in which criticism was considered the cornerstone of their education and upbringing.

The concept of fairness also surfaced in those families in which parents made a great effort not to treat their children "differently." According to this way of thinking, children -- regardless of how different they were -- should receive the same gifts at holiday time, the same rewards, same punishment and the same upbringing. As a result, some children received what they really needed and some didn't -- it was a toss-up. But parents could rest assured in the knowledge that they had been "fair".

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The set of values described above, emanating from an antiquated understanding of the nature of children, is still widely practiced in many parts of the world. Regardless of what one may think of them, we have to admit that the methods are highly correlated with success, or at least they used to be. Yet their goal -- to raise children who behave -- is insidious. It's summed up in a warning my friends and I heard innumerable times when we were growing up: "Now remember to behave yourself so that other people can see that you've been brought up properly!"

Our parents' priorities were based upon this external value -- that children learned how to "get on," "behave nicely," "fit in," "speak properly"; and that they say "Thank you," "How do you

do?" and "Thank you for having me." Children were not supposed to *be* themselves. They were expected to "act," precisely as one acts in a play. And just like actors, they were expected to learn their lines.

Years later, knowing so much more about children than our parents did, it is easy for us to be wise. We need to remind ourselves that those parents who still cling to the notion of the family as a power structure do so because they honestly believe that it is best for their children. They do not experience it primarily as an expression of power.

THE DEMOCRATIC INTERLUDE

About 25 years ago, when my generation reached reproductive age, we began thinking of families in new ways. It was the dawn of a circumscribed period of time during which families tried to restructure themselves according to democratic ideals. Much of this was spurred on by the women's movement. After centuries of suppression, women wanted real equality. The ensuing struggle was about changing sex roles and re-apportioning responsibility within the family, and about the inequality that existed in society with regard to employment and education.

Although many of us had grown up in families whose power structure was more or less totalitarian, we felt that families needed to become more democratic. We believed that children should have the right to an explanation about the norms and limits imposed upon them by adults. We also believed that children had rights – to contribute to and influence family decision-making. These concepts caused men and women, and adults and children to interact in new ways. For example, parents demanded fewer methods of upbringing. Instead, they wanted to understand children and young people. At the same time, sexual relationships between men and women were enriched because women were making decisions about their own bodies. This was abetted by the drug industry, which made effective contraception widely available. During this time, the rhetoric was highly politicized.

This noble experiment, though valid, proved insufficient; that is, it had only a limited impact on reshaping traditional family values. Why did it come up short? During this period, families turned to political definitions to describe the problems that existed between the sexes and between adults and children. This was a logical and necessary intermediate step. However, this political vocabulary cannot adequately describe internal family relationships. In fact, when used in this way, ideology tends to prevent rather than promise feelings of family closeness. Both ideology and totalitarianism provide a sense of security and meaningfulness for the initiated. However, this security never trickles down to those at the bottom of the hierarchy, or those who have a different perception of reality.

The Process of Family Interaction

That's why democratic values, while undoubtedly a healthy supplement to basic family values, are not, in themselves, sufficient. Believing that everyone has a right to participate in decision-making is helpful when we relate it to the content and structure of family life – such as deciding where to spend Christmas vacation this year, and who will be responsible for which chores. But this method does not affect the actual *process* of interaction, which is vital with regard to how the members of the family feel and how they get along during the Christmas holiday.

This factor, which we sometimes refer to as "tone," "spirit," or "atmosphere" (the Greeks philosophers called it "ethos"), refers to the quality of the interactions between the people in a family: how they relate to each other and how they feel. It is the decisive element for the physical and emotional health and development of both children and adults, and is influenced by many varied factors: the personality and life experience of the parents; their mutual relations; their individual ups and downs; their overview, perspective and philosophy; their awareness of conflicts and ability to handle them; their ability to be resourceful during times of stress and crises, etc.

It is a psychological fact that the adults in a family are solely responsible for establishing the quality of this ethos or tone. They can neither delegate this responsibility to their children nor share it with them. Children simply cannot handle this particular responsibility. They need adult leadership.

This does not mean that children do not influence this process in the family. Quite the opposite. They exert great influence by virtue of their lack of life experience; their logic; their handicaps, if any; and their sensitivity regarding conflicts combined with their lack of experience in resolving conflicts. They also influence it through their desire to cooperate, their vitality and creativity, and because they often function as lightning rods for conflicts between adults,

However, children cannot be responsible for the quality of the interaction. In families in which the parents, for various reasons, cannot cope with the responsibility, and in which the children end up "making the decisions," the result is always destructive: for the adults, the children, and their relationship. Tasks, duties and practical areas of responsibility can be delegated to children and young people, but not responsibility for the family's well-being: that belongs to the adults.

This does not mean that children should be denied the right to influence decisions in a democratic sense -- but only if the overriding purpose is to initiate them into the rules of democracy. In situations where children and adults have to function together, it is better for children if the adults *take the wishes and needs of children seriously*. In the family and in society as a whole, there is often an enormous and crucial difference between getting one's way and getting what one needs.

A family is only a judicial unit when it is launched and when it is broken up. Between these events, it is primarily an existential and emotional unit. We all do well when we respect each other's rights, but this respect is not sufficient for children's well-being and development. Healthy children demand more than equality in a political and judicial sense -- they demand to be treated with personal dignity as well.

The above-described transition from totalitarian to democratic families resulted in a series of clashes that left many people wounded on the battlefield. However, this transition took place during optimistic times: we believed that the future would prove our efforts worthwhile. We were more concerned to dispense with the "old" without any clear idea of how the "new" should be characterized. To this day, many parents of our generation still regret that the "modern family" has not yet evolved to the point where it can solve its own problems.

Overall, however, democratic principles were soon shown to be of limited value when applied to real life. Too abstract to act as guidelines in everyday affairs, they proved more difficult to enact than to conceive, as I will now explain.

Conflict

To traditional families, the absence of conflict was an ideal. Consequently, when conflicts between adults and children arose, the parents were blamed for failing to bring up their children correctly, or children were blamed for their lack of good manners. As a result, the first generation of democratic parents was simply without role models and did not know how to constructively negotiate and resolve conflicts.

Naturally enough, they turned first to a political model -- that is, to the struggle for power. But this model is unsuitable for families because it unavoidably ends with a loser and a winner. In families based on this model, family unity emerges as the loser. It's no wonder that divorce and one-parent-families became more common than ever before in history.

Equality

In democratic families, the concept of equality manifested itself first as an attempt to abolish the old sex roles and remold them in a more equal fashion. These families wanted to erase the assumption that men were providers and women housewives.

However, many families -- especially those which effectively equalized the roles of the sexes -- needed to face up to an unpleasant reality: although "equality" was perhaps a noble goal both practically and organizationally, it did not create a healthier balance between men and women in other areas. As old stereotypes fell, others took root. Sharing the practical chores related to home and children did not solve the problem of how to divide emotional responsibilities and other issues related to family management.

Because men were the direct successors of the old totalitarian rulers, the role of men in the family was subjected to massive criticism. A great number of men experienced this criticism as a kind of castration. Yet there was a paradox coiled at the heart of the criticism directed at them: Men as fathers had never played an important role within the family, neither quantitatively nor qualitatively; subsequently, they were criticized mainly for what they did *not* do.

More or less obligingly, many men assumed more tasks and responsibility within the family at the same time that women began entering the job market. Taken together, these phenomena ended man's role as sole provider. Both men and women began demanding that men define themselves as partners, lovers, fathers and family members.

For a short while, equality was defined as "equal likeness" and the virtues of the "soft man" were extolled. Soon thereafter, the pendulum swung to the other extreme, and the "macho man" was celebrated. That's when both men and women realized that "giving women what they wanted" would not in itself create a more democratic family. The so-called feminine values, which for the main part are basic human values, could not be grafted onto men.

For thousands of years, women have been denied basic human rights, yet they have managed to maintain, to varying degrees, their human qualities. Men, isolated in their provider role, have distanced themselves from their human qualities. In that sense, the lack of equality is still conspicuous.

Respect

Both "respect" and "acceptance" were key words in the new equality between the sexes, but both words are ambiguous. That is, they can be understood in highly distinctive ways, depending on who is speaking.

For example, is respect something we human beings ought to have for each other simply because we *exist*, or is it something that we have to "earn"? Should I respect my partner's way of doing things (the way she brought up her children, for example), or should I wait can evaluate the results?

Suppose my partner says, "You have to accept that!" Should I conceal my disagreement? Should I agree or act as if I do? Can she "demand" my acceptance? Or is it a gift I can give her because I love her? What happens if I respect her and accept her the way she is, but realize that I cannot stand living with her? Is it necessary to understand another person before you can respect and accept him - or perhaps love him? Or is such an understanding superfluous?

To render these abstract concepts in concrete terms so that they can be helpful as we try to understand family life, we must first focus our attention inward. We must learn to accept ourselves as we are. This is how we acquire a degree of self-respect. Through this process, we learn how absurd it is to take it personally when other people disrespect us. Yet this brings us back to the starting point: are respect and acceptance prerequisites for love, or consequences of it?

Demands

Making "demands" is relevant when we speak of commerce, legal contracts and political power games, but not when we speak of families. It is possible for a woman to demand that her divorced spouse pay child support, but not that he take responsibility for or pay attention to their child. A loving relationship between a man and a woman or between parents and children is a gift and a privilege. It is not something we can demand from each other.

When a family member demands something – whether it's for responsibility, affection, regard, sex, attentiveness, duty, being together or respect – it is inevitably a demand for love. It's a legitimate longing – but an absurd demand.

Yet family life is strewn with demands. Sometimes, we are lucky enough to get what we ask for. But all too often we achieve it at the steep price of losing contact with the *person* we long for.

For all these reasons, the attempt to remake families in a democratic mode is a step forward -- but not entirely successful. It omits one dimension of family life which is essential to the good health and development of its members – *dignity*.

The concept of treating people with equal dignity has existed in political manifestos for two centuries though it was rarely practiced. Similarly, it has been difficult to apply this concept to family life because we have so few role models and clear examples.

A FELLOWSHIP BASED ON EQUAL DIGNITY

Relationships between adults and children have been improving decisively and qualitatively in the past 25 years, as the concept of equal dignity within family life emerges. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the fact that children and young people are now able to function in the world with a much greater sense of naturalness and self-awareness. They are no longer automatically programmed to tolerate the infringements and violations inflicted by parents and adults which earlier generations were forced to accept.

At the same time, however, both the family and society still fail to fulfill a crucial need of children and young people: to see them – and encourage them to see themselves -- as valid members of a the fellowship.

The emerging concept of equal dignity has also affected relationships between men and women. There are clear signs that men's and women's traditional roles have outplayed themselves. True, men and women often think, experience and act in very different ways. To what extent these differences are biological or cultural-historical in origin is not important in this context. The principle of equal dignity stresses the fact that people are different, but it does not strive to equalize or resolve this difference. That is why this principle can be applied to personal relations between men and women, adults and children, Hindus and Christians, Africans and Scandinavians, doctors and patients or employers and employees.

What do I mean by "equal dignity?" Whereas "equality" is a static, measurable entity, equal dignity refers to a dynamic process. It is not a quality that is established and remains in place. Instead, it must constantly be adapted to new circumstances that arise. Equal dignity also differs from equality in that it is not necessarily reflected in any particular allocation of roles.

For example, the fact that a wife prepares food in the kitchen on a Sunday afternoon while her husband watches football on TV - or the other way around - does not tell us anything about the degree of equal dignity that exists between them. Even though this distribution of roles may appear very traditional, it does not imply that the roles are unequal – unless one partner feels coerced into assuming that role by the other. When a person assumes a new role, equality becomes relevant only if the person assuming these new responsibilities becomes more of a person as a result.

In other words, when fathers devote more time to their children, their wives may feel grateful to have one less responsibility. But the partnership between parents only grows to the extent that fathers experience themselves as more complete human beings as a result of their contact with their children.

Our ability to behave spontaneously with equal dignity in relation to an adult partner or a child depends, like so many other things, on the experiences we had in the family in which we grew up and the role models we encountered. It can be difficult to meet other people with equal dignity if we didn't experience it as a child. It can be especially difficult for those who have doted on because of their appearance, ability to cooperate or success at school. For most people, the ability to treat others with equal dignity requires learning and daily training.

Throughout this book, I have used children and their development as a starting point for my ideas because it is a natural point of departure – it will help us when we are with our children, and also to gain a better understanding of ourselves.

Psychology has as one of its cornerstones a belief in the need for people to treat each other with equal dignity; this is the only valid way of solving psychological conflicts and existential crises.

Concepts such as self-esteem, dignity, being true to oneself, expressing oneself, setting limits and drawing boundaries have always been central elements in the healing process. We know, therefore, that they play an important role not simply when it comes to psychological, social and spiritual well being, but also when we want to create loving and healthy families.

All children are either born with these qualities, or can develop them with encouragement. From a historical point of view, these precise qualities have lain dormant in most individuals from about the age of two until adulthood. For many people, this dormant state lasts their whole lives; for others, it results in a personal breakthrough - not uncommonly in the form of a breakdown.

Many of the families courageous enough to leave the past behind and experiment with more humane ways of establishing good feeling within the family are characterized by uncertainty and irresolution.

Throughout the 20th century, low self-esteem, abuse and other forms of destructive behavior (psychosomatic ailments, depression, etc.) have assumed the status of national diseases. On the threshold of a new century, we have an opportunity to make two significant changes in this picture. First, we are ready to alter our definition of what it means to be "well adapted." Second, our new knowledge of human health and development has turned our way of looking at human beings on its head.

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f a m i l y l a b . d e
die familienwerkstatt
Mathias Voelchert GmbH
Amalienstrasse 71
D-80799 München

T 089 - 219 499 71
F 089 - 22 807 200
info@familylab.de
www.familylab.de