

Parenting and gender factor

OP-ED

One laments the fact that in our blessed city and country there are perhaps hundreds, if not thousands so-called driving schools, but not one place where one could learn the skills necessary for bearing and rearing children. Skills like carpentry and masonry are formally taught, but skills to bring up children are not taught anywhere, at least not formally, in a structured, programmed manner.

The buzz words these days are 'globalisation' and 'market forces' etc. all different descriptions of an ever-changing world. These changes are also impacting the family structure and function, such that families are slowly but surely moving away from the joint to the nuclear system. This movement away from the joint family system has its own fallouts, both negative and positive.

One of the positive fallouts of the break up of the joint family system is the availability of more individual freedom; a negative fallout is lack of back up or a support system in case of the breakdown of such experiments in freedom. The joint family system provides the necessary cushion, the air bag, to absorb the shocks that life may throw one's way. With the break up of the system that cushion is no longer available to soften the impact of failure in one's pursuits in life.

The joint family system not only provided the shock absorbing system, it also provided a learning paradigm where one learnt one's, behaviours, norms and beliefs, in fact the philosophy of life. The elders, the experienced warriors, the battle-hardened heroes and heroines, were available to young inexperienced parents, to offer advice and an ever-willing hand to share the responsibilities of parenting.

The sheer velocity of globalisation has smashed the joint family structure and, along with it, has dissipated and made unavailable the informal learning stations where the young learnt the tricks of the trade, including parenting. When the grandmother insisted that the expecting bride, the *bahoo*, not watch scary films, or read terrifying story books at night, the old lady was teaching 'proper' parenting to the young lady. And when the old grand uncle insisted upon including the child in the family cricket team playing the match against the *Mohalla* team, he was teaching the young parents the art and science of parenting.

Research shows that expecting mothers who avoid heightened emotionality give birth to healthier babies. Research also

Gender



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shows that children who spend 'quality time' with parents and elders, are more emotionally mature than those who are denied this opportunity. Hence the grandmother and the grand uncle provided the young parents invaluable advice and opportunity for a better, and healthier parenting style.

But the joint family system has its own drawbacks and some terrible fallout in terms of mental illness. Here one would cite a research undertaken in Lahore, some years ago to ascertain the incidence of mental illness in the city. The research findings clearly indicated that the prevalence of mental illness was significantly higher amongst people living in the joint family system than among people living in nuclear families. These research findings were in consonance with others undertaken elsewhere. Life in a joint family system may take its heavy toll by churning out more mentally ill people than the nuclear family system. The flip side of the coin is that the joint family also provides a learning paradigm for young parents to learn 'good parenting'.

As good, effective parenting needs to

be adjusted in view of the age of the ward, it also needs to be modified according to the gender of the ward. As age-specific parenting ensures its 'effectiveness' so does gender-specificity. In a society like ours where a large majority of parents still hold on to and practise tribal/feudal belief systems and norms, parental gender specificity expresses itself in a most jaundiced manner — the girl child is considered inferior, a lesser child, to a boy.

The psychological and the material resource allocation that the male child commands is far more than what is allocated to the girl-child. The process of socialisation of the male child is different, shall one say superior, and biased in his favour, as opposed to that of the female child. Reams of empirical research data are available to support the parental bias in favour of the male child. And that is where gender-specificity in parenting manifests itself to the detriment of the girl child in particular, and the society in general.

Our young parents, elders, teachers and the significant others, particularly the media people, need to be aware of this parenting bias in favour of the male child and highlight it so that effective strategies may be adopted at the familial and social levels to correct the bias.

A quick look at gender-related differences in children's development will bring home the point that parents need to keep the gender of the child in mind. Research shows that the girl-child is more sensitive to colour than the male-child; the male-child is more prone to mental illness, including stuttering, stammering, and bedwetting. Research also shows that the male-child is cuddled more than the female-child. Cuddling is an important input for healthy psychological growth. According to research, the period of 'stresses and storms' — the teenage — impacts the female differently than the male as the hormonal change in the female is sooner and more acute than the male.

A gender-specific parenting style is required because the psychological needs, expectations and motivations of male and female children are different. These are of course just the surface-level gender differences that require different parenting. One would like to delve deeper into the topic, perhaps later.

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