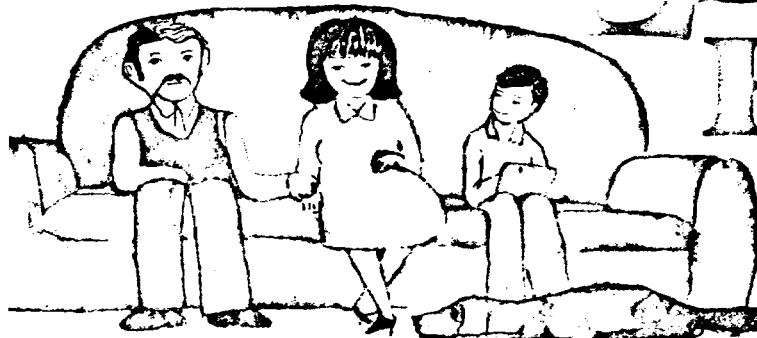


# THE ESSENTIAL FAMILY



by Amitai Etzioni

The family is widely considered the "first" institution, the elementary cell of social life. It is here that mutuality is first experienced and civility is first taught. In other words, the family is the first *educational* institution. All other institutions build on the family's educational achievements—or must remedy its failures—in evolving the personal foundation of relating to others (mutuality) and to community (civility).

The family is also the most elementary mediating structure; its members are the "others" most likely to rally to one's defense against the state. Moreover, the family, by setting patterns and providing services for its members, reduces the demands on the state—so long as it is functioning well itself.

The family Americans require for an era of reconstruction is one that *at least* attends to its educational mission and provides patterns of mutuality for all its members. Education, particularly character formation, is the essential family task, for the obvious reason that children are first formed by families, and undereducation there tends to have a "domino" effect in all the institutions that follow. **If the family does not lay the needed psychic foundation, schools become overloaded and less able to do their job, and they in turn overload the institutions of work and public safety.**

We have already seen that if the government is to be relied upon less for social services, other social units will have to pick up some of these services. The family was historically a main source of such services, patterned on mutuality, and it can become so again. But while providing patterns of mutuality is an essential feature of the family America now needs, it is second in importance to the education of children. Adults can find mutuality elsewhere, but there is no adequate substitute for the family in forming the basic character of the young.

The mediating mission of social institutions is not less important, but a family that is effectively held together for purposes of education and social service will most likely fulfill its mediating role.

The historical features of the nuclear family include two parents married to each other, one at home full time. Are these historical features essential to the educational mission of the family, or can education of the young be carried out effectively by parents who both work away from home, or by parents who are not married to each other, or, above all, by single parents? The question has two sources. The first is the general societal forces that buffet the traditional nuclear family. These include strong economic forces, especially the very considerable increase

in the proportion of married women gainfully employed outside the home, and therefore much less dependent on their husbands. As divorce has thus become economically more feasible, legal changes have made it much easier to obtain. The general withdrawal from institutions also affects the traditional family. So has a general rise in the ego-centered mentality, reflected in this area by the growing number of people who find singlehood preferable, not marrying and often living alone, and by the growing number who choose to have fewer children or none.

Second, the forces that erode the traditional nuclear family are egged on by a specific mentality that directly challenges the need for the nuclear family, and celebrates new, or newly popular, social formations such as living together and single parenthood.

When it is argued now that "the family" is down and out and, by implication, that it is too late to salvage the family and that on the face of it, the family is not necessary (if we have survived without it, who needs it?)—the argument mixes essential with nonessential features. A wife at home is *not* an essential feature, we shall see. Hence the decline of this feature is not indicative of the state or need of the family. On the other hand, for the educational mission of the family, it is essential to have active and involved parenthood, accorded sufficient time, psychic energy and commitment, at least for the formative years of the children, especially from birth until age six but preferably until the end of adolescence.

I call this essential feature *basic parenting*. If the family does not provide basic parenting, the youngsters it delivers to the doorstep of the school are underdeveloped persons. This makes it impossible for the school to function effectively and to develop the youngsters' personalities for the next set of institutions, those of adult life, of work and of community. Aside from delivering underdeveloped persons, such a family will not be able to collaborate with the schools, collaboration that is needed for their educational work. Such a family also will, on average, be less likely to provide a model for stable, continuous mutual relations.

Basic parenting does *not* require a mother at home. It can be provided, for example, by both parents' sharing the basic parenting duties, so that one or the other is at home while children are in infancy and when they return from child-care centers, kindergarten or primary school. This in turn can be achieved through paternity

From *An Immodest Agenda* by Amitai Etzioni © 1983 by Mrs. Gertrude Falk. Reprinted by permission of McGraw-Hill Book Company.

leaves, flexitime, shared jobs, and other arrangements.

What the child requires above all is someone who cares and educates, adults who have a commitment to parenting and the energy to back it up, and a relationship to emulate. It can be given by fathers as well as by mothers, nor does a parent have to be a person not gainfully employed. At the same time, basic parenting *does* tend to conflict with both parents' working full time outside the home, especially at jobs that are physically or psychologically exhausting.

The second feature essential for a family to carry out its educational mission is a *mutually supportive educational coalition*. The educational agents must be mutually supportive primarily because the specific educational tasks are in part contradictory. One task is to promote achievement, the other to provide secure emotional support. In studies of small groups, Harvard sociologist Robert F. Bales found that groups that functioned effectively had two mutually supportive leaders, an instrumental leader who pushed the group to greater productivity and an expressive leader who provided emotional security and support\*. Morris Zelditch's studies of the family as a small group suggest that parents tend to specialize in a similar way, one giving children deep emotional support, the other, pressure to grow.†

These studies do not provide conclusive evidence—Bales himself has expressed some reservations about his findings—but they are highly suggestive as to the functioning of the family as a group. It seems that in their education, children need two kinds of parenting, the expressive and the instrumental. Given only emotional security, the child will tend to underachieve; given only pressure to grow, the child will tend to grow up obsessively driven.

Most parents or other educators are at best good at carrying out one of these educational tasks, not both, because the two tasks rely on conflicting personality types—the promotion of achievement is more a Type A, driven behavior, and giving emotional support is more a Type B, relationship-oriented task.

As part of the ideology that tries to legitimate absent parenting it has been argued that "quality" counts; that if you cannot spend much time with your child, you make up for it by making the minutes you do provide "count."

Pop psychologists who promote this notion do not cite any data to show that one can make minutes into quality time on order. Indeed, it is more plausible that quality time occurs when you have longer stretches of "quantity" time, at moments that are neither predictable nor controllable. Most important, there is no evidence that quality time can make up for long stretches of no time, of parental absence.

There is no definitive evidence that single parents cannot carry out the task of basic parenting effectively, but there are some signs that many cannot. There are good data to show that married couples who are in deep conflict with each other do not provide the needed parenting. The proper question hence is not whether parents are married or single, but whether they are able to provide energy and continuity for education, and a role model for mutuality. The small group data of Bales suggest that only 10 percent of the individuals in the groups studied were equipped to juggle differing kinds of social behavior and switch back and forth between the two kinds of leadership, expressive and instrumental; the rest were well able to give emotional support or to push for achievement, but not both.

The question then arises: In what institutional pattern is basic parenting most likely to be successfully provided? This is a statistical question, not an ethical one. Statistically, married people are more likely than single parents to provide basic parenting. Marriages are relatively more stable, on average, than couples living together or other partnerships; marriage is more legitimate and socially accepted when children are involved. Above all—all other things being equal—marriages provide more "availability" of parents (hours on the "job," psychic energy) than single parenthood. This is not to say that married couples are morally superior to single parents, or that all or most married couples are "good" parents, or that all or most single parents are "bad" ones. It suggests, however, that to the extent public policy and leadership affect these matters, they should encourage rather than undermine the institutional structure most likely, on average, to provide the required pattern: marriage.

Beyond a change of mentality and climate, there is a need for institutional changes. Here the concept of the *essential* family must be kept clearly in mind, so as not to overload the weakened family with nonvital demands.

Changes in work patterns could go a long way to sustain the relationships of working couples. Frequent relocation of employees, often not really necessary but part of corporate tradition, could be curbed. Despite tales of commuting couples who maintain their marriages over thousands of miles, and about husbands who accept less attractive jobs to accommodate moves required by their wives' careers, and vice versa, frequent relocations and geographic distance strain mutuality.

Scores of other steps have been suggested, from changing the Social Security rules that lead older people (role models for the young) to live together rather than to marry, to adding classes in school on how people may better communicate and relate to each other, a subject at least as important as home economics. (Churches have successfully developed such courses, but their benefits should not be lost for those who are not connected to a place of worship.) What is at issue here is not the details but the orientation: including the essential family in the reconstruction of community.

The family is a major social unit that will have to be reoriented and re-enabled if it is to pick up some of the social services the government is dropping. But while the family can play a role in setting patterns for—and actually providing—social services, this role is not as central as the educational one. As backup to schools, there is no substitute for the family. It is irreplaceable when it comes to first basic education. In contrast, social services *can* be provided by neighborhoods, voluntary agencies, even the government. Hence, even though drawing on the family for this purpose may seem desirable, it should not be allowed to take precedence over or conflict with the essential educational mission.

---

Amitai Etzioni, former Chairman and Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, is the first University Professor of George Washington University. He founded the Center for Policy Research in 1968 and has been its Director since that time.

---

\*Bales, Robert F., "The Equilibrium Problem in Small Groups," in Talcott Parsons, Robert F. Bales, and Edward A. Shils, eds., *Working Papers in the Theory of Action*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1953. And Robert F. Bales and Philip E. Slater, "Role Differentiation in Small Decision-Making Groups," in Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955.

†Zelditch, Morris, Jr., "Role Differentiation in the Nuclear Family," in Parsons and Bales, *op. cit.*