Roles Within the Family

Families are not democracies. Each family has its own ways of deciding who has the power and authority within the family unit, and which rights, privileges, obligations, and roles are assigned to each family member.

In most families parents are expected to be the leaders or executives of the family; children are expected to follow the leadership of their parents. As children in the middle years grow older, they will ask for, and certainly should be allowed, more autonomy, and their opinions should be considered when decisions are made; however, parents are the final authorities.

Of course there will always be disagreements among the generations. Your child may want to go to the beach on a family vacation; you may want to go to the mountains. He may think he has too many chores to do; you may think he has just the right amount. Let him speak his mind, but the ultimate decision is yours. Explain why you've made the judgment you have, without becoming defensive or apologetic. You won't always be popular in these decisions, but your youngster is still going to love you.

Although generational hierarchies are the most obvious ones within families, other types of hierarchies exist as well. Sometimes they depend on gender. In patriarchal societies such as ours, men have traditionally had power over women, including within the family. Traditionally, fathers have been the providers and authority figures, but while they may be the final decisionmakers, they often have assumed only limited functions beyond that in the family. Mothers have been the caretakers, responsible for the emotional side of the family; they have kept the family together and functioning smoothly. What this means is that mothers and fathers are likely to hold different positions in the family hierarchy, that mothers take primary responsibility and that fathers may have only partial responsibility for day-to-day parental decisions.

Today, however, there are challenges to this traditional gender-based structure. In many families both fathers and mothers are bringing home paychecks. And while women still seem to shoulder the larger share of responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the family, more fathers are assuming greater roles in child-raising and household duties.

It is useful to consider what roles each family member takes within the family, and whether everyone is satisfied with the current arrangement. For example, the oldest children in the family may take on the parental role of caring for their younger siblings. Or grandparents may acquire an important place within the family by assuming a central child-rearing role while parents work.

Think about who is responsible for what within your own family and how the current arrangement is working. Some responsibilities may be open to negotiation, particularly if the family does not seem to be functioning optimally. For example, an older child may be resentful of having too much responsibility for watching over the younger children, while the younger children may also resent the older child playing a parental role. This will result in arguments whenever the oldest child is left in charge. Parents need to review what is going on, discuss how the children are feeling about it, and come up with some alternatives.

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