

The Family as Teachers and Learners

As we are discovering, learning transcends our lives. Indeed, the idea of learning throughout life is deeply rooted in all cultures but it is becoming increasingly relevant in today's fast changing world where the norms of earlier generations are constantly being redefined.

In the beginning ...

Whilst learning is the key to transitioning between one set of circumstances and another, it is in the family environment that the learning journey begins. Our parents are our first teachers and together we explore the challenges and opportunities that come with participating in a voyage of discovery of which, often, neither parents or newborns have previous experience. It is here that we are totally dependent upon the boundaries parental guidance sets and left with no alternative but to learn the lessons that parental nurturing affords. that accompanies the support and security of an environment with very clear boundaries. Those boundaries are physical, mental and social and enable us to make mistakes, absorb instilled values and begin to become little people in our own right with our own emergent characters and distinguishing personalities.

New parents like their offspring , start from a zero base with little or no experience of the commitment and responsibility that parenthood entails. Thus, parents have become both teacher and learner, sometimes looking to their own parents for advice but, as often as not, preferring to go their own way and learn on the job.

As children grow they explore and experiment under the tutelage of family role models, their parents becoming substituted by their siblings and an increasing number of outsiders whose interventions will test both their early values and their response to danger and boundaries of activity. Gradually they learn to build relationships and acquire the resourcefulness, persistence and resilience that will come to underpin their performance as learners.

Beyond the nest ... a new world

Formal education introduces a further set of role models ... teachers, peers, those we come across day to day. The young person begins to challenge and to experiment but when school comes, learning becomes more structured, more demanding and is reward-driven. Then, eventually, comes the freedom of choice that accompanies the transitioning from structured learning to self-direction_where we succeed or fail depending on our response to instruction and observation.

Family and the home have taken on a new and evolving role. They remain a safe haven but now learn to absorb the stresses and strains that go with preparing a young adult for life beyond their immediate management and control. From examinations to educational choices, from exposure to drugs and alcohol, from simple life support activities such as preparing meals or doing laundry to living on a budget, again the support and tutelage of family plays an essential role in re-engaging with family values and creating the necessary self-sufficiency of a responsible citizen.

Chances and choices ...

Family and the parental home now play a less well-defined role in adult life and it is, primarily, the experiences and lessons of the past that are taken into providing for the future. Suffice to say that every young person entering the workforce now must remain marketable for some 50 years. They must be disciplined, optimistic and opportunistic as they take their chances and make their choices.

From Independence to Dependence

Despite having to remain in employment until our 70s our responsibilities within both family and society have changed immeasurably. Children have children of their own and as grandparents we are no longer in the front-line of parenting ... we have a choice as to the role we play and then with retirement comes one of life's steepest learning curves. Occupation and time management are truly self-directed and our roles as both learners and teachers in our own hands.

Finally, whilst the majority resist it for as long as possible, we all eventually have to come to terms with the loss of our independence and learn to put our trust and care into the hands of others. We must learn to build relationships with those whom we have not known previously and allow them to invade our privacy.

Our power to learn becomes the secret to maintaining our self-respect and enjoying the quality of a quite different way of life.