

Addressing childhood concerns for a healthy family and community

* Juliana Lazarus

Abstract

The UK riots in 2011 left Britain in a state of shock as they saw their youngsters robbing, vandalizing, looting, thieving... Where had they gone wrong, parents wondered? Prime Minister David Cameron had the answer in no uncertain terms. "Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort. Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities. Communities without control..." (The Guardian)

Britain's malaise is actually a global malaise. Last year, The Indian Express reported how two young people took out their mobile phones to capture the ghastly scene of a train ramming into a woman who had fainted on the railway tracks. There was no thought of saving her. Where have we gone wrong, Indian society wondered.

This study aims to show how dysfunctional families will lead to a dysfunctional society. How childhood insecurities could result in dangerous consequences later in life. How a teen's obsession with selfies could actually point to deeper unmet needs. A need so great that it's not uncommon to see young people whipping out their phones at a scene of accident.

To quote Cameron: "Teamwork, discipline, duty, decency: these might sound old-fashioned words, but they are part of a solution to this very modern problem of alienated, angry young people." (The Guardian)

The solution to a better future, therefore, lies in the hands of every parent. This study aims to look at some of those solutions.

Keywords: Families, Youth, Dysfunctional, Discipline

Introduction

It was the summer of 2011 when riots in cities and towns across England wreaked havoc on that nation. It all began with the shooting of 29-year-old Mark Duggan for an alleged gun crime. What began as a peaceful protest in Tottenham ended up

* Head - Dept of Journalism, Mount Carmel College, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.
Email: Juliana.lazarus@gmail.com

as a full-blown riot leading to looting, arson and deaths. If the riots were a shock for a fairly peaceful nation, what came after was even worse. The case of Ashraf Rossli illustrates this. Rossli was a 21-year-old Malaysian student who had been in London for about a month and was enjoying his time there till tragedy struck. As Britain was being battered by the riots, Rossli found himself being beaten up in Barking, East London. They broke his jaw and robbed him of his cycle, leaving him bruised and bleeding. Just as Rossli was giving up hope, two young men - John Kafunda of Ilford and Reece Donovan of Romford- approached him. Here was hope, Rossli's brain seemed to tell him as the "good Samaritans," appeared to shepherd him away from trouble.

But seconds later, the pair began rifling through Rossli's rucksack behind the victim's back. They went on to rob him of a PSP games console and 10 games worth £500.

As police hunted for the offenders, the footage was posted on YouTube and broadcast on news channels, causing global outrage.

What had gone wrong? Britain wondered.

Four days into the riots, British Prime Minister David Cameron called it a "wake-up call" for a "broken Britain" suffering "moral collapse."

"Do we," Cameron asked, "have the determination to confront the slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations? Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort. Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities. Communities without control. Some of the worst aspects of human nature tolerated, indulged - sometimes even incentivised - by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally demoralised."

"These riots were not about race," he continued. "The perpetrators and the victims were white, black and Asian. These riots were not about government cuts: they were directed at high street stores, not parliament. And these riots were not about poverty: that insults the millions of people who, whatever the hardship, would never dream of making others suffer like this. No, this was about behaviour. People showing indifference to right and wrong. People with a complete absence of self-restraint. People with a twisted moral code."

Sometimes, that twisted moral code could result in two young men robbing another who had already been robbed and battered.

Cameron said the priority of his government was to improve conditions in which children are raised to drain the conditions for rioting in future.

The message was loud and clear. GDP and per capita income were all fine, but if Britain wanted a peaceful and secure future, it had to invest in its children. Parents had to be role models, the beacons.

Britain's malaise is not just Britain's. It is actually a global malaise. For instance, On 9 April 2015, The Indian Express reported how two young people took out their mobile phones to capture the ghastly scene of a train ramming into a woman who had fainted on the railway tracks in Kottayam. There was no thought of saving her. More recently, a mob in Bangalore stripped a Tanzanian national and paraded her naked on the streets because they "thought" that she had mowed down a woman while driving. It turned out to be a case of mistaken identity. Even if it wasn't a case of mistaken identity, there was no excuse for the behavior of the mob.

Where we have gone wrong, Indian society wondered.

This study aims to show how it is families that determine the kind of society we live in.

Review of Literature

"There are two views of children," writes Duncan Helm in *Making Sense of Child and Family Assessment: How to Interpret Children's Needs*. "On the one hand, they are innocents who need to be protected. On the other, they are portrayed as demons who need to be controlled. We see in them the embodiment of social decline."

Between the age of innocence and the age of decline is a huge chapter called the family. What the family invests in a child will determine how the child turns out and in turn, how communities and societies shape up.

Sue Miller writes in her book, *Supporting Parents Improving Outcomes For Children, Families and Communities*: "Where we choose to invest our resources is an indication of our beliefs and priorities.... If we accept that our children are the greatest resource we have for the future and if failing to make the most of any resource is wasteful and problematic, then making a mess of our children as a resource is downright wrong. Parents need to do all they can to create the conditions in which our children can thrive.

According to Terence P Thornberry's Interactional theory of intergenerational transmission and Marvin Krohn's Interactional Theory of Offending, people who were involved in delinquent behaviour during adolescence will face problems making successful transitions into adult roles including parenthood. This in turn will impact their children's development.

Sytske Besemer sums up the theories saying that people involved in antisocial behaviour "are more likely to have children at a young age, experience structural adversity, are likely to continue antisocial behaviour and substance use, experience more stress, and have weak prosocial bonds all of which might lead to problems in raising their children. Parents' delinquency has a strong effect on their own development, transition into adult roles, parenting styles and thereby the effectiveness of their parenting, which in turn will increase the risk that their children will develop criminal behaviour."

The cycle of parenting can therefore become a vicious cycle, broken either by offering support to parents by way of a course or by counseling.

"Children need confident parents and positive memories of parenting from which to draw strength. From this perspective, parents matter in terms of the legacy they leave to the next generation. It is our children who will take the world forward," writes Sue Miller.

The importance of parents as role models has been stressed by Albert Bandura in Social Learning Theory (1977) Children observe them, encode their behaviour and then imitate it. Even if it is bad or criminal behaviour.

Similarly, Edwin Sutherland's Differential Association Theory (Principles of Criminology) is a seminal work in the field of criminology. The theory proposes that through interaction with others, especially parents, individuals learn values, attitudes, techniques and motives for criminal behaviour. Conversely, they also learn acceptable behavior in the same manner.

According to these two theories, children with aggressive parents will imitate aggressive behaviour and will learn that it is acceptable to engage in such behaviour. However, even when parents do not seem to openly support their children in being criminal, children can still observe and imitate parents, despite parental disapproval.

Sytske Besemer adds to these two theories in her book, *Intergenerational Transmission of Criminal and Violent Behaviour*. She writes: "Intergenerational transmission or continuity means that some characteristic or behaviour is seen in both the parent and the child. It can be wide-ranging, from socio-economic status, education, mental health status, parenting behaviours, substance use, to criminal behaviour."

Quoting David P Farrington, Besemer further writes that criminal behavior can be transmitted in six ways:

- a. Intergenerational exposure to multiple risk factors such as poverty, living in a bad neighborhood, poor parenting practices, and so on. (A risk factor is 'a characteristic, experience, or event that, if present, is associated with

an increase in the probability (risk) of a particular outcome over the base rate of the outcome in the general (unexposed) population.'

- b. Mediation through environmental risk factors: A mediator is 'the generative mechanism through which the focal independent variable is able to influence the dependent variable of interest'. The factors mentioned above can also be mediating factors which are a link in the causal chain between parents' and children's criminality.
- c. Teaching and co-offending: When parents initiate their offspring into the world of crime, teach them the tricks of the trade and "work" together.
- d. Genetic mechanisms. According to Farrington, several studies have suggested that there are physiological bases of criminal and aggressive behaviour, such as high testosterone levels and a low resting heart rate. A genetic predisposition for aggressive behaviour does not necessarily mean that someone will actually develop this behavior. The environment will influence how the genetic potential develops.
- e. Official bias: According to this mechanism, official justice systems pay more attention to criminal families, which means that family members are more likely to be caught and thus appear in official statistics more often. An important concept related to official bias in intergenerational transmission is labelling. Howard Saul Becker's book *Outsiders* (1963) was extremely influential in the development of the Classic Labelling Theory which proposes that people will act in accordance with the label attached to them by society.
- f. Assortative mating where children with two criminal parents have an increased risk of showing antisocial behaviour; they experience a 'double whammy' effect - they inherit an antisocial phenotype twice and grow up in a criminogenic home environment.

How might we then break the cycle of bad parenting, a cycle that will eventually lead to a moral collapse in society that David Cameron was talking about?

Objectives of the study

1. Find out if children consider their parents as role models
2. Find out if children's needs are met
3. Find out if they are satisfied with the parenting model

Need for Study

Listening to a child and catering to his/her needs is an important aspect of parenting. Through parenting, there is an intergenerational transfer of values, attitudes and beliefs. Apart from this, parents also pass on to their children the art of parenting. Children who look at their parents as role models will invariably carry their parenting style forward. As Sue Miller says, parenting is thus a legacy and it is important that the legacy one leaves for the future is a legacy worth being proud of and one that takes society forward, not back.

Methodology

The study looks at one case study and adopts a survey method in which a questionnaire is administered to teenagers. The questionnaire includes both open and close-ended questions in order to study the opinion of the respondents. Percentage analysis is used to analyse the data.

Findings

G is a 15-year-old teen who lives in a shelter for prisoner's children in Bangalore. Of the seven children who live in that shelter, G is by far the most aggressive. That's how most of the children who come to that shelter are, but on the whole they mellow down over time due to a disciplined life and a great deal of counseling. A child from an earlier batch went on to study law, another engineering and yet another counseling. But G is different. Even after 10 years at the shelter, she continues to be the most aggressive of them all, has difficulty adjusting with her peers and is barely able to focus on her studies.

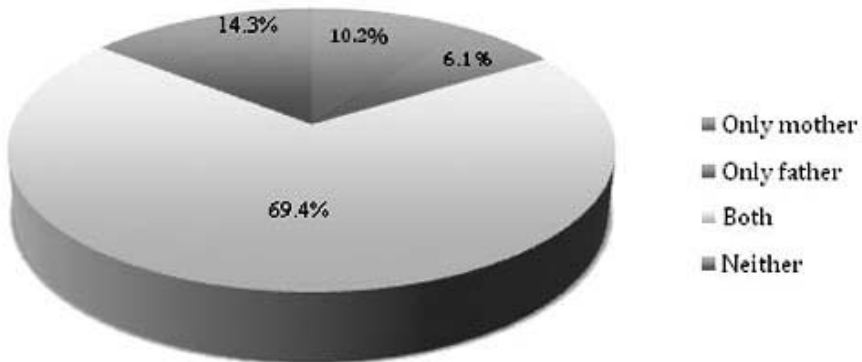
G's parents happen to be part of the infamous Dandupalya gang that created terror in South India between 1996 and 2001, committing murders, rapes and robberies. The women were just as notorious as the men. They were so tough that they would drink the blood of chickens and donkeys so that they stayed resolute while their victims bled.

After their arrest in 2001, G spent a couple of years in jail with her mother, imbibing the language and behavior of hardened criminals. Looking at G's case, it is clear that aggressive behavior begets aggressive behavior.

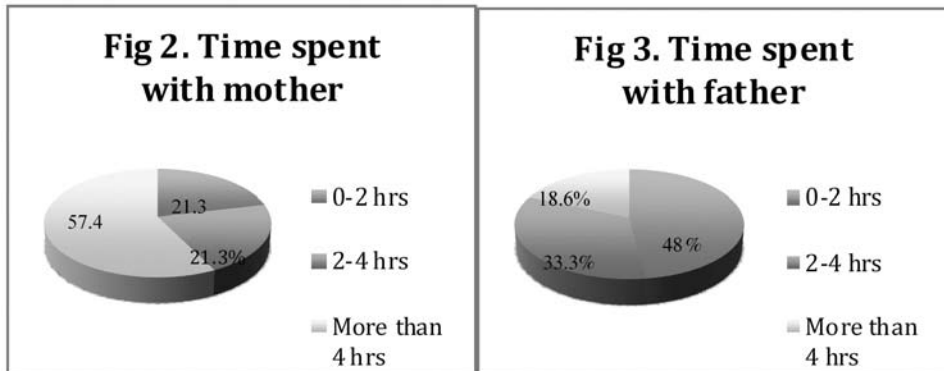
The very first role models children are exposed to are their parents. It is from the parents that they learn a certain type of behavior, attitudes and values. For instance, if parents use abusive language, children will not think it is wrong to use abusive language. If parents use physical force to resolve a quarrel, chances of a child carrying it through in life are high. As the child grows up and starts reasoning, he/she either continues to look at parents as role models or rejects them.

When a group of urban teenagers were asked if they looked at their parents as role models, 69.4 per cent of respondents said they saw both parents as role models (Fig. 1). While 6.1 per cent saw only the father as a role model, 10.2 per cent saw only the mother as one. On the whole, 85.7 of the respondents saw either one or both parents as role models. A small percentage of 14.3 per cent of respondents considered neither parent as a role model.

Fig 1. Do you see your parents as role models



Given the numbers who consider their parents as role models, it becomes important that the latter spend substantial time with the children. However, when respondents were asked how much time they spent with their parents, their answers showed that it was the mother who gave more of her time rather than the father (Figs 2 and 3).

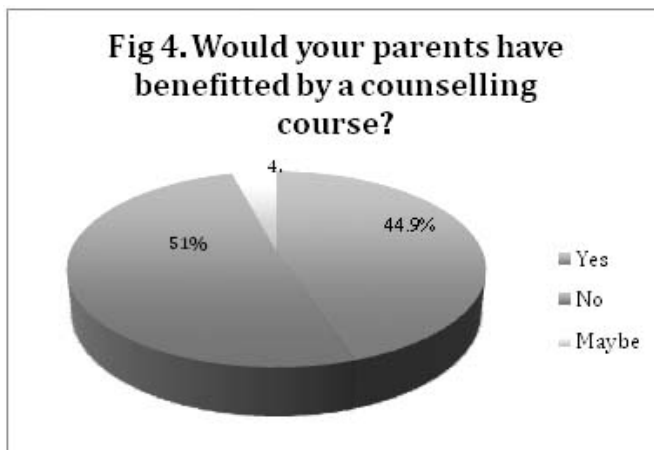


The study shows that while a majority of the respondents, 57.4 per cent spend more than four hours a day with their mothers, only 18.6 per cent spend more than four hours with their fathers. 21.3 per cent spend 0-2 hours with their mothers

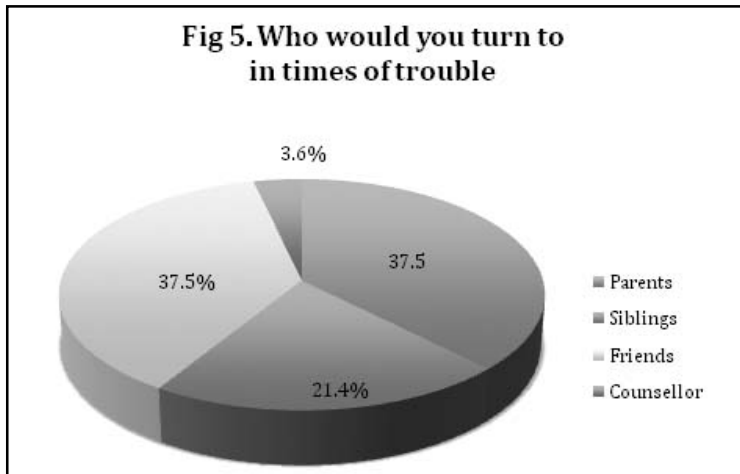
while it's 48 per cent for fathers. In the category of 2-4 hours, it's 21.3 per cent for mothers and 33.3 per cent for fathers.

The lack of time, especially with the father, seems to be a regret among at least a quarter of the respondents. When they were asked if there was anything they would want to change in the relationship, there were several answers, but the biggest changes were to do with spending more time with parents (25 per cent), wanting parents to be more understanding (20 per cent), open and communicative (20 per cent). Other concerns included lack of personal space, patriarchal attitude, lack of freedom, anger and patience (10 per cent). 25 per cent said they did not want anything changed.

What respondents pointed out as lacking in their relationship is actually some of the basics of good parenting. To find out how adequate parenting skills were, respondents were asked if their parents would have benefitted by a course in counseling (Fig. 4), 51 per cent of the respondents said no. However, 44.9 per cent said yes while 4.1 per cent responded with a maybe. Which means though most of the respondents looked at their parents as role models, almost half the respondents recognized the fact that their parents could have done a better job of parenting with some support, specifically a course. Again, good parenting is important because it determines the quality of individuals in society while also providing children with a blueprint for the time when they become parents.



The study also sought to find out who teens would turn to in times of trouble (Fig. 5). 37.5 per cent of the respondents said it would be their parents, while an equal number said it would be their friends. 21.4 per cent said siblings and only 3.6 per cent said counselors.



Some of the reasons the respondents gave for not wanting to approach a counsellor were trust issues, being judgmental, "not thinking from our point of view" and 'I don't like advice.'

The point to be noted here is that a substantial chunk of respondents turn to friends because they do not get what they are looking for in their relationship with parents. If there are communication barriers, lack of openness, not enough time, children will go to where they think they will find these qualities, namely friends. Bad parenting, therefore, can drive children away from parents. And that is where parents need to invest their time and energies.

Conclusion

The findings of the study show that children look upon their parents as role models. It is therefore necessary to ensure that parents spend time with their children, open up communication channels and ensure they are sufficiently equipped to impart the kind of values and attitudes necessary for society to move forward. This can be done in a variety of ways - through government support, roping in religious and educational institutions etc.

I would like to conclude with Sue Miller's views on parenting. Miller writes: "If we had a leaking roof, we would know about it. We could measure the amount of water dripping through it by catching it in a bucket. We might see a damp patch on the ceiling and monitor how far it spreads over time. There would be things we could do. If we had a ladder, we could get up on the roof and mend broken tiles. If things got really serious, we could contact our insurance companies and see if they would fund a new roof. Or we could just ignore the problem, cross our fingers and hope it would go away."

"We all know the risks involved in ignoring a small problem and hoping it somehow rights itself. Our experience teaches us that a leaking roof that is not dealt with early stores up a potentially much more expensive and potentially catastrophic problem for the future."

Mark Friedman (2005) applies the leaking roof analogy to a whole range of social issues which if not addressed early and fixed will escalate. The answer lies in "turning the curve." "We need to change the progress of a line on a graph that is heading in a particular direction and enable it to turn the curve towards the outcome we actually want to see," he says.

Turning the curve, for Sue Miller, is about offering parenting support. About the need to make parents see what a powerful influence they are on their children. To take time out for their children. To listen to them.

"Society is unclear about what good parenting is," writes Miller. Parenting today is different now than before. There are more choice, more models, fewer moral absolutes in terms of sexual mores etc, "but we still need to balance rights with responsibilities, freedom with respect and our interconnectedness and ever growing awareness of how what happens in one part of a global economy has an impact on the other."

Strangely, that almost sounds like David Cameron.

References

- Besemer, Sytske (2013): *Intergenerational Transmission of Criminal and Violent Behaviour*. Leiden, NLD: Sidestone Press, 2013. Retrieved from: ProQuestebruary.
- Duncan Helm (2010): *Making sense of Child and Family assessment: How to interpret children's needs*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Sue Miller(2010): *Supporting Parents Improving Outcomes For Children, Families and Communities*. Open University Press
- <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/youth-fail-to-save-womans-life-but-take-pictures-on-mobiles/#sthash.bGNkBV5P.dpuf>
- David Cameron's speech. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/aug/15/david-cameron-riots-broken-society>