

Couples and Families In the 21st Century
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Adlerians are not given to offering prognoses. In truth, no one knows how couples and families will behave in the future any more than we know with certainty how one of our clients will behave next week.

What I plan to do is briefly focus upon some of the chief mistakes parents and couples seem to be making now, and especially upon what they can do in the 21st century to ensure a happier, more productive life for families as well as for society in general.

The single and most troublesome mistake parents have been making during the last 35 or 40 years is over protection and other sorts of pampering of their children.

There is a very high likelihood that parents of the 21st century will greatly underestimate the psychological strength their children are capable of developing. In many cases, children are already being raised by parents who were themselves pampered.

It is noteworthy that parents who have themselves been pampered, have the tendency to believe that overprotection and other sorts of pampering is what good parents

do -- so they repeat the mistakes and greatly underestimate the spunk, the self sufficiency, the courage, and the caring about others that young people are capable of developing.

On the other hand, if today's parents were products of a critical, domineering, capricious, or conflict-filled environment, the tendency of those parents is to avoid such behavior at all costs, and often they also resort to permissive, pampering approaches to avoid every possibility of introducing disharmony and unpleasantness into the life of their children.

Due to these two sorts of reactions to their own childhood experience, it appears that the probability of the use of pampering approaches to parenting at this time in the life of society remains remarkably high.

What is required for substantial progress is much more broadly available parent education: through formal parent groups, by offering training in parenting techniques to students in secondary schools and colleges; as well as in graduate training programs for all varieties of mental health professionals. In such training, parents, future parents, and future mental health professionals can learn or be reminded of the enormous untapped potential a child possesses to solve problems and contribute to the welfare of others within

months of their birth; and how raising our children to function as problem solving caring adults by the age of 15 years is not one psychologist's dream, but rather a realistic objective that can be accomplished once we envision the practices we can institute or emphasize in family life.

I am speaking of family life wherein teenagers as well as adults may grocery shop and prepare meals; where possession of an automobile at age 16 is not regarded as a right of passage; where young people of 16 or older routinely work outside the home at the very least during the summer months, and certainly throughout the expensive college years; where parents have learned techniques to avoid allowing disrespectful treatment by children or teenagers to be useful; where children and teenagers are encouraged to experience activities away from adult supervision. I am speaking of a world where parents are not overwhelmingly involved in the homework and athletic activities of their offspring; a world where parents offer choices to a respectful degree, but wherein parents also realize there is a time to let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, regardless of whether your four or six year old is displeased or whines or pouts about your decision. We're speaking of a world where caring about others is routinely modeled by parents and

teachers; and where service to the community rather than possession of an automobile is a right of passage through adolescence.

... And finally, we are speaking of a world where selfishness and lack of training in social interest are recognized for what they are: the greatest obstacles to success in the social, love and work tasks of life, as well as the greatest obstacles to harmonious relationships among nations.

The better the job society does in preparing responsible and caring young people, the greater success these young people are likely to experience in relationships with the other sex. I don't envision a world where every marriage stays intact, nor do I think every marriage should, but a great aid to a successful marriage in addition to the characteristics which I previously noted, is commitment — the commitment that says: "this is the man or woman with whom I am going to spend my life ... That's settled. Now, let me get on with it and use the practices that will help me reach this goal." And especially, let me develop the high level of cooperation that this relationship calls for, and side step the competition that is so deadly to the relationship of couples. Another important asset to a healthy marriage as well as to a healthy family, is to place at the least as high a value upon your relationship

with your spouse as we do upon our relationship with our children. Selfishness and insecurity can lead us to compete with our spouse for the goodwill of our children.

Caring about others and self confidence stimulates us to solve problems in the home with a view toward helping others, not towards elevating ourself at the expense of our relationship with our spouse and the expense of the good mental health of our children.

It is truly an act of love towards our children and our spouse, and an act of courage and self confidence, when we are able to bring ourselves to make decisions that are in the interest of the children despite the fact that those decisions are not popular with the children.

I hope the ideas I am emphasizing with regard to strengthening couples and families in the 21st century are clear. It truly can be a new day for society when we are able to tap into the enormous potential of young people in some of the ways I've mentioned, and when we are even better able to establish a relationship with our partner that is respectful of our partner and ourselves.

Thank you.