

The new challenges of parenting

October 15 2014, by David Elkind



Parents in 1964 were gatekeepers: they could monitor the media so that their children heard, watched and read only what was deemed appropriate for them. Credit: Corbis

In 1964, when the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development (then known as Child Study) became part of Tufts, a family was generally understood to consist of two parents, one of whom was employed, plus two or three children. This cozy group kept its private life under wraps, presenting itself as happy no matter what. The authority that parents wielded over the children was unquestioned. And

there were clear boundaries between the workplace, the home and the school.

Today, as the department marks its 50th anniversary (see the timeline below), none of that is the case anymore, largely because of the role technology has come to play in our lives. What we used to refer to as the nuclear family might now more accurately be called the "permeable" family.

Thanks to Facebook, issues that used to be strictly confidential are on public display. Television, which once glorified the nuclear family à la *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, now delves into its most thorny problems à la *Modern Family*, *Glee* and reality shows like *Judge Judy*. Meanwhile, 24/7 broadcasting has brought newscasters, comedians and other folk into our living rooms at all hours, so that there need never be a minute when [family members](#) depend only on each other for company. Through the roving lens, as well as improvements in air travel, more people experience foreign countries and other cultures, and as a result, the family has become less insular.

Children today are often more adept at using technology than their parents are. Parents in 1964 were gatekeepers; they could monitor the media—the radio, the five- or six-channel television, and to some extent printed material—so that their [children](#) heard, watched and read only what was deemed appropriate for them. Kids were not brought into discussions of topics such as family finances, divorce, mental illness and sexuality until their teens. In 2014, it's almost impossible to protect them from these realities for that long.

In addition, the mass media's reportage of child abduction and abuse has compelled parents to inform children of disturbing dangers. People are expected to be self-reliant from an early age. Parents and other adults don't even dress like authority figures anymore—they wear the same

jeans and T-shirts as teenagers.

Finally, computers and the Internet permit many parents to work at home, and for many of those who still report to offices and factories, daycare facilities may be nearby or even in the same building. Just as the home and the workplace have begun to blur together, so have the home and the school. Information technology lets teachers interact with students in their homes and even present whole courses remotely. At the same time, the library has been all but replaced by Amazon and Google.

Changing Roles

Fifty years ago, many people's idea of home jibed with that of Ralph Kramden from the old sitcom *The Honeymooners*: it was a man's castle, a place where the husband reigned supreme, even if he was a subordinate at work. By the same token, children back in the mid-60s often thought of home as a refuge where they could relax and play, sprung from the strictures of the classroom. Now such notions seem almost quaint.

For adults, the new permeable family has been a blessing in several ways. Many who, in an earlier time, might have stayed in unhappy marriages to avoid the disgrace of divorce now feel free to cut their losses. Gay people find it easier to come out, and can marry. Women are seizing opportunities to join the workforce, while many men are playing a much larger role in childcare, if not in housekeeping. And as the home has become one with the workplace, adults have compensated by creating more health clubs, spas, malls and other common spaces in which they can get together with each other for a little downtime.

Even their loss of authority has largely worked to parents' advantage, because they now have a whole range of other caregivers, including coaches, trainers and music and art instructors, to share responsibilities that would otherwise have been completely their own.

To a limited extent, children have benefited from the permeable family, too. The greater acceptance of racial and ethnic differences has been a boon to children of color, for instance. Likewise, many children with special needs have a better life than they would have in 1964. Back then, many parents cared for such children—as best they could—on their own, partly because they were ashamed, believing that disability reflected poorly on the family, but also because society offered little or no support other than institutionalization. Today the stigma of disability has diminished, and more services are available as well.

On the whole, though, children have suffered considerable costs—costs that parents ought to try and mitigate. Take the higher divorce rate. Children thrive on constancy and consistency, and even the best of divorces causes enormous disruption. This does not mean that parents should never divorce. But it does mean that they have to be sensitive to the emotional stress divorce places on children.

Becoming Themselves

Parents should also understand that children need adults who have been a constant presence for them and can help them reflect on their life's progress. That need is less likely to be met when parental authority is shared with many adults who play only a transient role, and the result may be problems with identity and self-esteem.

Children's struggle to bring together all their disparate feelings about who they are may help explain why there is now a new stage of life, "young adulthood," and why many college students return to live with their parents after graduation. It seems to be taking longer for young people to establish a sense of themselves. Parents can help address this issue by spending regular time alone with each child, perhaps having a meal, going to a movie or taking a trip. Time alone with a parent helps a child feel that he or she is an individual and that the parent appreciates

and values that individuality.

The lack of space apart from school or their parents' work has been hard on children, too. Home is no longer a place for leisurely socializing with playmates, and playing outside is often not an option, either. Many schools have little access to outdoor areas. In urban environments it is no longer possible for kids to play in the streets. And playgrounds are few and far between—according to a 2010 report from the Centers for Disease Control, only one out of five American children lives within a half-mile of a park or playground. So now children find privacy and companionship through their handheld devices, or through their cell phones, as they talk to or text friends. Or they may participate in organized play dates.

One positive note is the movement toward "natural playgrounds"—spaces where kids can play with sand, water, plants and other natural materials in a self-directed way. Another is the increasing recognition that children need play areas in restaurants, airports and train terminals. Parents should give their children the chance to enjoy these spaces. They can also alternate taking small groups of children to playing fields, where the young people can create their own games and make their own rules. And we all must avoid deluding ourselves that organized sports can help kids unwind.

It should come as no surprise that the shift to the permeable family has served parents better than children. Society does tend to adapt more readily to the needs of adults. For example, Medicare, controversial as it once was, is now a given of American life, while initiatives that benefit children, such as Head Start, face ongoing pressures. But we can offset the toll that the changes of the past 50 years have taken on children. Although technology may have altered the landscape, [parents](#) can still make sure that their children's developmental needs are met, and set them on the path to a rich, full adulthood.

Provided by Tufts University

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