



## What does your family value?

Fifty-odd years ago, family values were something that you probably wouldn't have had to think too hard about. Nor would you have questioned them. Nowadays, it's a different matter. Many people are better off than their parents and grandparents. They have far more freedom of choice about how they lead their lives. For better or worse, family values have changed. The boundaries of our beliefs have become blurred and confused. And so too has the way that parents go about bringing up their children.

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It's easy to think that issues like family values only matter to parents or grandparents – in other words, those who are closely involved in caring for a young child. That's not necessarily the case. Family values are central to the shaping of future society. Certainly, children are the ones who will be central to that process, so how they are raised is going to affect us all. However, we are all part of society, and we will all make our own unique contribution to that society in future – whatever our age, and whether or not we're parents. So, we can all add to the debate.

We only have to watch a news programme or read a newspaper to be reminded that society isn't exactly how we'd like it to be. We often wonder whether there is anything that we can do to help improve the world in which we live. Parents hope that their sons and daughters will grow up to become independent and useful members of society in the future. But unless they make a positive decision as to what they want for their children, and indeed for their whole family, they cannot be sure of this.

Establishing a set of values is essential if families – and society – are to function more effectively. It's possible to argue that, without this, families cannot have a stable foundation on which they can base the countless decisions that have to be made in a lifetime. Values free us up to cope with difficult decisions and tricky situations. Imagine a family as a ship sailing on a long voyage. At times, the water may get choppy. Without a firm set of values, that family may find itself anchorless, pushed and pulled by the waves from one challenge to another, with no firm point of reference to guide it back to a safe, calm harbour. In short, values are the engine that drives a family forward, acts as its internal anchor and its rudder, all rolled into one.

Of course, just as no two generations are alike, no two families are alike. So, whilst there may be some values that everyone can agree on, it's likely that some will feature higher on some people's lists than on others. What is important is to feel genuinely connected to your values. Likewise, it's wise to move away from thinking about values exclusively from your own viewpoint – or indeed your family's viewpoint. People are encouraged to think of themselves as individuals nowadays, so it's not quite as easy to think of yourself as part of a wider community. However, families who sit down together and talk through what matters to them as well as to others in the community are the ones who will be able to move positively through life.

So what exactly do we value? Again, it pays to think widely here. A value may be seen as something



worthwhile or desirable, perhaps a certain standard of behaviour, or a principle that's worth fighting for. Maybe something that allows us to enjoy a certain quality of life. A list of values could include, for example, achievement, consideration for others, honesty, loyalty, stability and self-respect.

Achievement is something that most people want their families to enjoy. The problem is that in today's world, we tend to measure achievement only in terms of being successful, whether academically or materially. Economic security matters, of course, but sometimes it's too easy to see this as the be-all and end-all of family life. By placing material demands top of the list – or the only item on your list – of family values, they will be seen as the only thing that matters.

Consideration for others. We often hear people complaining about a lack of consideration in society today, or about children not having respect for others. It was something that existed once, but has fallen out of fashion. Consideration is something that we can all try to encourage. Even young babies can be taught consideration, although they cannot yet talk. Having consideration for others is about stopping and thinking about others people's feelings before you act. Your small acts of kindness, for example, will allow others around you to develop a sense that such neighbourly consideration is the norm, and that other people really do matter too.

Honesty is another value which is often labelled 'old fashioned' and, hence, perhaps not relevant to society today. In fact, being able to recognize the difference between right and wrong has never been more relevant.

Family values give us an internal security and stability that is just as important as that which makes us safe on the outside, such as economic security. Get the balance right and values can translate into self-respect. What's more, a set of values can act as a blueprint. When a new problem comes along, just take it back to the blueprint. You'll have done the hard bit in decision-making by working out what's important in advance. Bear in mind that your blueprint can be adjusted slightly every now and then, keeping pace with your life and that of your family through its many different stages. You won't need to dig up the metaphorical plant to check the roots, and so your plant will flourish. Likewise, it's better to take small steps in the right direction rather than not attempt to have a go at all.

When your values finally match the reality of family life, you'll feel a certain sense of calm and satisfaction. At last, you can look forward to making a positive change to the world in which you and your family live.