



**BECOMING
PARENTS**



Stay Yourself! **- Compass for Parenting**

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Introduction

The idea for the Becoming Parents project came from a series of civil conversations between parents in different European countries who in many ways face similar difficulties. We recognized that although we have different parenting patterns, different parenting strategies, different ages and circumstances, and even our children are not necessarily the same age - we have something in common. Parenthood is certainly one of the most defining aspects of our lives, and it affects every other aspect of life. If we are comfortable with it, because we can choose the right framework within which to run the family, parenthood can give us wings. However, if we misjudge our own strengths, energies and personality, and place unrealistic expectations on ourselves for the sake of our children, we can put a heavy burden on ourselves by parenting.

In recent years, more and more young people have become hesitant about having children at all. "In 2022, 3.88 million babies were born in the European Union, a slight decrease from 4.09 million in 2021. The number of children born in the EU has been declining since 2008, when 4.68 million children were born." (Eurostat)

Long studies have been written on the reasons for the decline in the birth rate in Europe, but it is beyond the scope of this guide to discuss them. However, our own non-representative research suggests that certain issues related to parenthood are of strong concern and negative influence on today's 20-35 year-olds. Some of these issues stem from our own bad patterns experienced as children, but most are related to negative events in the world around us. Many people think that it is harder to see a positive future today than it was a few decades ago, when in fact it has never been easy to see a beautiful future throughout history. Our aim is to help young parents and parents-to-be find their own answers to these pressing questions, while supporting them in their efforts to become stronger parents.

Parenting is definitely a helping role. For years, for decades, it is our job to help physically, mentally, spiritually and financially and to give as much support as

possible to another person. In the early years, we are, in the strictest sense of the word, doing for them things they are not yet mature enough to do, teaching them about the important things of the world, while constantly looking to set a good example. Let's face it, this is a challenging, difficult task. To cope with this, we must first face ourselves, our fears and desires, clarify our insecurities and find answers to uncomfortable and stressful questions. Just as in an emergency plane, we must first put on our own oxygen mask, and only then can we care for others and help those in need.

In preparing the materials for the Becoming Parents project, we have drawn primarily and fundamentally on positive psychology as a basis for our thinking. Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) research has shown that positive emotions can be associated with evolutionary benefits in the same way as negative emotions. In other words, positive emotions are not merely signifiers, but active builders of personal resources and, through them, of physical and mental well-being." It is important to emphasize that the positive adjective in this context does not mean excessive, unrealistic optimism, but rather a stable emotional balance, which includes the management of negative emotions.

And when we are parents, we carry a lot of emotional baggage. We feel on a rollercoaster of worry, anger, happiness, despair and countless other emotions that arise from one moment to the next - it is an emotionally demanding challenge. For young parents, finding support can help. That's why the Becoming Parents project aims to shift the focus from the child to the young parent, addressing their difficulties, building their self-awareness and developing their skills. We believe that by helping the parent, we help the whole family and society benefits. A more balanced parent will be more successful in the parenting role, which in turn will make the children more balanced. It will be easier for family members to really connect with each other, so family functioning can be more effective.

In our project, tools are designed using methods of positive psychology, (symbolwork), emotional intelligence and mindfulness as well as coaching, character education and motivational techniques (drama). This guide is mainly for young

parents, while there's also a Resource Guide which consists of tools for professionals - check it out, if you are working with peers or clients.

We are also organizing a set of workshops for both parents and to-be parents, as well as for professionals. Check our partners' websites and our Facebook page for details.

In this guide, we address young parents directly, offering them exercises. Before each set of exercises, we will raise a topic that research has shown to be a sensitive or difficult issue for young adults today. Our themes touch on the role of parenting. We suggest that not only individually, but in a self-organizing group, several people try the suggested exercises together.

Young people's opinion on becoming a parent

Becoming a parent is becoming less and less of a foregone conclusion in Europe today. Individualism is giving women and men a free choice that offers them more and more opportunities to step out of their archaic roles. But as the range of options has grown, paths that used to be the smoothest, such as owning your own property, have become increasingly difficult to follow.

Many countries in Europe are experiencing a serious housing crisis, with high rents and even higher property prices, making it completely out of reach for many young people to secure and long-term housing stability, making it much more difficult to commit. Of course, the path paved in the past does not only mean owning a house or a car, but also gender roles and building a traditional family, which for many provides a comfortable and liveable life, but for others it is an obstacle and a difficulty.

The concept of family today is quite different from that of previous decades, even centuries. This is precisely what gives it its value; ideally, acceptance takes the place of confinement to roles, thus giving room for the freedom, security and support of modern families. But in many ways, we are still a long way from that point. Society has been moving away from traditional roles for a long time; gender roles, for example, had already broken down at the point where both parents had to work to maintain a household, so the tasks traditionally assigned to women, mothers and wives in the home, in addition to work, upset the balance of family maintenance based on cooperation. This balance can be rewritten by the members of a mutually respectful family according to their own individual needs, if they have the space to do so, but many paths are still difficult to follow, such as gender roles, the role of the woman as mother in the home, the working man and the children.

It is now taken for granted that young women need to work to support themselves, so while the conditions of the traditional 'world order' have changed considerably, its expectations are still relevant for most people today; this generation is caught between two worlds; there is no going back to the older roles - and there

is usually no need for them - but the new ones are still met with social resistance, condemnation and even law.

But parenthood is not just a social expectation or an outgrowth of animal instinct for humanity; the family provides basic human values such as love, cooperation, learning and development. All this entails a serious responsibility and requires all possible resources: time, money, mental capacity, adaptation. Having a child is almost the only decision in a person's life that, unlike work, home, friends and even spousal ties, cannot be undone in any way - there is no "it's not for me" option. In the current labour market, with its free competition, social media and rented housing that can be arranged on a virtually temporary basis, encouraging a generation driven by change and constant progress is therefore a contradictory message. Having children ideally requires tremendous stability - a safe home, a supportive environment that does not overstimulate children, while being able to sustain their ever-changing and growing needs. This idea is very difficult to promise ourselves when having children.

On top of the uncertainty arising from this world order specialising in change, generational anxiety caused by the events of global warming, and even the fear of war in Ukraine's neighbourhood, is pushing young people further and further away from the dream of their children growing up safely; for every parent's deepest fear is that their child will be harmed.

There are many fears and uncertainties surrounding modern parenthood, and young people need a lot of understanding and support from generations who have experienced parenthood, difficulties and challenges, so that they can learn from previous solutions and create their own solutions to the challenges posed by new

situations. They need to adapt to a changing world, fill the gaps and thus create the right environment for them to have children.



Personal tasks / discussion points

When the Becoming Parents project was being planned, we prepared a questionnaire for young people about their thoughts, feelings and experiences of parenthood. Just as the participants of the survey, we invite you to think over the following questions:

- What do you think is the best thing about having children?
- What are you most afraid of having children?
- Who can you rely on when you start a family?
- What positive things would you like to bring back to your own family from your childhood?
- What new positive things would you like to create in your family? (Something you didn't experience as a child, but wish you had or find useful.)

Challenges Faced When Becoming a Parent

Becoming a parent is a life-changing experience filled with joy and fulfillment, but it also comes with numerous challenges, especially for women. The decision to have children involves weighing various personal, social, and economic factors, and many people decide against it for compelling reasons. Here, we explore the problems faced by parents, particularly women, and the reasons some people choose not to have children.

1. Fears of the Future and Climate Anxiety

- **Uncertain Future:** Many prospective parents worry about the uncertain future, including global instability, economic recessions, and political turmoil. These fears can weigh heavily on the decision to bring a child into the world.
- **Climate Change:** Climate anxiety is a significant concern. The increasing frequency of natural disasters, rising temperatures, and environmental degradation make many people hesitant to have children. They fear for the kind of world their children will inherit and the challenges they might face.

2. Vulnerability of Being a Single Parent

- **Emotional and Physical Strain:** Single parents, particularly single mothers, often face significant emotional and physical strain. Raising a child alone requires balancing numerous responsibilities without the support of a partner.
- **Social Stigma:** Single parents may also encounter social stigma and a lack of understanding or support from society and institutions.

3. Financial Vulnerability

- **High Costs of Child-Rearing:** Raising a child is expensive, involving costs for healthcare, education, childcare, and daily needs. These financial burdens can be daunting, especially for those without substantial economic stability.
- **Lack of Financial Support:** Insufficient parental leave policies and lack of affordable childcare can exacerbate financial stress, making it difficult for parents to balance work and family life.

4. Career Problems for Women

- Career Interruptions: Women often face career interruptions or setbacks due to maternity leave and the demands of child-rearing. These interruptions can hinder career advancement and affect long-term earning potential, having an impact as long as into elderly age (ie. less pension).
- Work-Life Balance: Achieving a balance between professional aspirations and family responsibilities is challenging. Women frequently experience pressure to excel in both roles, leading to stress and burnout.

5. Less Time for Romantic Relationships

- Relationship Strain: The arrival of a child can strain romantic relationships as couples adjust to new roles and responsibilities. Time once devoted to nurturing the relationship is now often focused on the child.
- Communication Issues: The stress of parenting can lead to communication breakdowns and conflicts, making it harder for couples to maintain a strong and intimate relationship.

The Option for Being Consciously Childfree

Several people choose to stay childfree. Here are some of their reasons for doing so:

1. Personal Choice and Autonomy

- Personal Freedom: Many individuals value their personal freedom and the ability to pursue their interests, careers, and lifestyles without the responsibilities of raising a child.
- Life Satisfaction: Some people feel fulfilled and content without children, finding meaning and happiness in other aspects of their lives.

2. Environmental and Ethical Concerns

- Environmental Impact: Concern for the planet and the ethical implications of adding to the population in an overburdened world lead some to decide against having children.

- Resource Scarcity: The awareness of finite resources and the environmental footprint of raising a child influence decision about parenthood.

3. Transgenerational issues

- Health Concerns: Individuals with inheritable health issues, and genetic conditions would like to prevent this condition to be transferred to a next generation.
- Transgenerational Trauma: several individuals decide that due to their traumatized childhood, and experiences non-acceptable parental role models, it is better not to become parents themselves.

4. Economic Factors

- Financial Instability: Economic uncertainty and the high costs associated with raising a child can be prohibitive. People may choose to remain child-free to avoid financial strain.
- Career Prioritization: The desire to focus on career development and professional goals can lead individuals to decide against having children. However, it is often the case for women workers that, in the process of building their careers, time slips away, unintentionally missing the optimal time to have children.

5. Social and Cultural Influences

- Changing Norms: Societal norms around marriage and parenthood are evolving. Increasingly, there is acceptance of diverse life choices, including the decision not to have children.
- Support Networks: Lack of supportive family structures or community networks can influence the decision, as the perceived isolation in parenting can be daunting.

Conclusion – shall we become parents?

Becoming a parent is a complex decision influenced by a myriad of factors, including personal values, societal expectations, and practical considerations. For

women, the challenges are often magnified due to traditional gender roles, career interruptions, and the pressures of balancing multiple responsibilities. Additionally, fears about the future, climate change, financial vulnerability, and the impact on romantic relationships play significant roles in the decision-making process. Understanding these challenges and respecting the reasons why some choose not to have children is crucial in fostering a supportive and inclusive society where all life choices are valued.

We believe the answer is Yes, being a parent is worth it!

We have collected a lot of personal testimonies and videos on this topic, available on the project's website and Facebook page. Here we share just a few sentences we collected about the many positive feelings, thoughts and experiences that having children can bring:

- We create a person, and then we are helping them on their journey to find themselves and we will support them until the day we die to help them enjoy their life.
- Personal learning and growth: teaching patience, adaptability and selflessness.
- Experiencing unconditional love.
- Parenthood equals change. The parent, the child and their relationship are constantly changing.
- Your child is the only human being who is curious about every inner treasure you ever put together in your childhood treasure box.
- With children you can play and relive the childlike wonder. I can give them everything I missed from my childhood, also everything I loved about it. Or at least I can try.
- I can create a home, a safe, loving environment in which I can then marvel at the blossoming of their soul. I can pass on what I have learned and watch it change and evolve.
- An opportunity to live a deep, ancient, feminine role. An opportunity to move on with life. An opportunity to become a better person.

- An incredible journey of self-discovery, constantly pushing my own boundaries.
- Being a parent is a challenge, an instinctive and conscious striving for the best.
- Your child learns and with them, you relearn what you have long forgotten
- You will be loved, hugged and happy without expectation.
- Everyday little joys make your life complete.
- It's a wonderful feeling to see/experience a tiny little person slowly growing up.



Personal tasks / discussion points

“My/ our personal SWOT”: take some time alone, or with your partner to make a short “strategizing” around having a child. In separate lists, answer the following questions:

- STRENGTHS: what are those strengths, internal resources, we as persons and as a couple have to raise one or more children? (It can be self-reflection, knowledge, financial resources, etc)
- WEAKNESSES: what are those weaknesses, internal struggles, we have to take into account? (it can be bad parental role patterns, financial issues, relationship-dynamical issues). What are our fears about ourselves? You can also use the above article for ideas.
- OPPORTUNITIES: what outside support we can have, what opportunities we can use? It can be friends, family, parental, state support.
- THREATS: what are those outside factors that make it hard to raise a child? What are our fears regarding the world around us?

When you are making a list, write down everything from the most seemingly insignificant to the big issues.

Choose your battles: Go through the above lists, and identify those 2-3 items in all lists, which you find the most important. For those think through:

- How you deal with that issue. In case of strength, how do you keep it and develop it further?
- For weaknesses, what do you do to face it, and counteract against?
- For opportunities, what are the next steps to ensure they will be available?
- For threats, how do you deal with the risks? What do you do if they come true?

Supporting and assertive communication

Supportive and non-violent communication are essential for fostering healthy relationships and resolving conflicts peacefully. The two most important influencing psychologists, Thomas Gordon and Marshall Rosenberg have made significant contributions to this field, offering practical approaches to communication that emphasize empathy, respect, and mutual understanding.

Thomas Gordon's Approach

Thomas Gordon, a clinical psychologist, developed the "Parent Effectiveness Training" (P.E.T.) program, which emphasizes effective communication skills between parents and children. His approach is grounded in the idea that open, honest, and respectful communication can prevent conflicts and build strong, trusting relationships.

- Active Listening: Gordon emphasized the importance of active listening, where the listener fully concentrates, understands, responds, and then remembers what is being said. This involves reflecting what the speaker has said, showing empathy, and validating their feelings.
- I-Messages vs. You-Messages: Gordon advocated for using "I-messages" instead of "You-messages" to express feelings without blaming or criticizing the other person. An "I-message" focuses on the speaker's feelings and experiences, reducing defensiveness and promoting a more open dialogue. For example, saying "I feel upset when the dishes are left unwashed because it makes the kitchen unpleasant" rather than "You never clean up after yourself."
- No-Lose Conflict Resolution: Gordon introduced the concept of "no-lose conflict resolution," where both parties work together to find a solution that satisfies everyone involved. This method contrasts with win-lose scenarios and fosters cooperation and mutual respect.

Marshall Rosenberg's Approach

Marshall Rosenberg, a psychologist and founder of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), built upon similar principles, emphasizing the importance of empathy, compassion, and understanding in communication. NVC is designed to help individuals express themselves authentically and listen to others with empathy.

- Observations vs. Evaluations: Rosenberg stressed the importance of separating observations from evaluations. Observations are objective statements about what one sees or hears, while evaluations are subjective judgments. For example, saying "I noticed you didn't put the milk in the fridge." (observation) rather than "You never care to put the milk in the fridge" (evaluation).
- Feelings: NVC encourages people to express their feelings clearly and honestly. This involves identifying and sharing one's emotions without blame. For instance, "I feel anxious when you don't come home on time."
- Needs: Central to Rosenberg's approach is the expression of needs. All feelings are linked to underlying needs. By identifying and communicating these needs, individuals can foster understanding and connection. For example, "I need to know who is bathing the baby today to feel at ease."
- Requests: NVC advocates for making clear, specific requests rather than demands. This involves asking for what one needs in a respectful and considerate manner. For instance, "Could you please let me know if you will be late?" instead of "You should always inform me when you're late."

Integrating Both Approaches

Both Gordon's and Rosenberg's approaches share common principles that can be integrated to enhance supportive and non-violent communication:

- Empathy and Understanding: Both approaches emphasize the importance of empathy and understanding in communication. Actively listening and trying to understand the other person's perspective is crucial for building trust and resolving conflicts.

- Clear Expression of Feelings and Needs: Using "I-messages" and expressing feelings and needs clearly can prevent misunderstandings and reduce defensiveness. This fosters a more open and honest dialogue.
- Collaborative Problem-Solving: Both approaches advocate for collaborative problem-solving. By focusing on mutual respect and cooperation, individuals can find solutions that meet everyone's needs.



Practical Applications

- In Parenting: Implementing these communication techniques can enhance the parent-child relationship, reduce conflicts, and promote a positive family environment. Active listening and empathetic responses can help children feel heard and understood.
- In Relationships: Clear communication of feelings and needs can improve intimacy and understanding between partners. Non-violent communication helps resolve conflicts constructively.

- In the Workplace: These techniques can foster a more collaborative and respectful work environment. Effective communication can enhance teamwork, reduce misunderstandings, and improve overall productivity.

Personal tasks / discussion points

My communication patterns: For one week, after you communicate with someone either from work or from private life, take a short break to assess your own communication:

- What was the goal of the communication (To share information? To bond? To get help? To provide help? To keep contact?) What needs you fulfilled with this communication? Something else?)
- What feelings / emotions did you have? List as many as there were. It's ok to have even conflicting feelings.
- How much did you listen to the other person? How much did you feel to be listened to?
- What was triggering you, and what made you feel good?

At the end of the week, look through your notes, and try to find returning motives, patterns in your communication and your reaction. Being aware of how we talk and react is an important part of effective communication.

Even if only on paper, in case of stressed situation, try to formulate sentences according to the Rosenberg model. Practice makes it better.

The role of boundaries in parenthood

As a parent, establishing clear boundaries for yourself and your child is essential for fostering a healthy, balanced, and respectful relationship. Boundaries are the limits we set to protect our physical, emotional, and mental well-being. They define how we interact with others and help us maintain a sense of identity and



autonomy. Here's why clear boundaries are crucial for both parents and children.

The Importance of Clear Boundaries for Yourself and Your Child

1. Promotes Security and Stability:

Children thrive in environments that are predictable and consistent. Clear boundaries provide a sense of security and stability, as they help children understand what is expected of them and what they can expect from their parents. This predictability reduces anxiety and helps children feel safe and cared for. When children know their limits, they can navigate their world with confidence, knowing there are clear rules and guidelines that will be consistently enforced.

2. Encourages Self-Discipline and Responsibility:

Boundaries teach children self-discipline and responsibility. By setting limits, parents help children understand the consequences of their actions. This understanding is crucial for developing self-control and making responsible choices. For example, a boundary around screen time helps children learn to manage their time effectively and prioritize other activities, such as homework or outdoor play.

3. Fosters Respect and Healthy Relationships:

Clear boundaries teach children to respect others' limits and needs. When parents model healthy boundaries, children learn to appreciate and respect the boundaries of others, leading to healthier relationships. This respect extends to understanding personal space, emotional limits, and social interactions, fostering empathy and consideration for others.

4. Supports Emotional Well-Being:

For both parents and children, boundaries are essential for emotional well-being. They help prevent burnout and emotional exhaustion by ensuring that personal needs and limits are respected. For parents, setting boundaries means recognizing their need for rest, self-care, and personal time, which is vital for maintaining their health and ability to care for their children effectively.

5. Empowers Personal Autonomy:

Boundaries are fundamental in developing a strong sense of self and personal autonomy. For children, clear boundaries help them understand their rights and responsibilities, promoting independence and self-confidence. For parents, maintaining boundaries supports their identity and self-respect, allowing them to parent from a place of strength and clarity.

6. Prevents Power Struggles:

Consistent boundaries help minimize power struggles between parents and children. When rules and expectations are clear, children are less likely to challenge them constantly. This clarity reduces conflicts and helps maintain a more

harmonious household. It also ensures that disciplinary actions are fair and predictable, fostering a sense of justice and understanding.

7. Enhances Communication Skills:

Establishing and maintaining boundaries involves clear and effective communication. When parents articulate their limits and expectations clearly, they model good communication skills for their children. This practice helps children learn to express their needs and boundaries assertively and respectfully, an essential skill for their social and emotional development.

Practical Steps for Setting Boundaries

1. **Define Your Boundaries** Reflect on what is important to you and what you need to feel respected and secure. This might include personal time, privacy, and specific behavioral expectations.

2. **Communicate Clearly:** Use clear, age-appropriate language to explain your boundaries to your children. Ensure they understand the reasons behind these limits and the consequences of crossing them.

3. **Be Consistent:** Consistency is key in enforcing boundaries. Apply rules and consequences consistently to help your child understand and respect the established limits.

4. **Model Healthy Boundaries:** Demonstrate healthy boundaries through your actions. Show your children how to respect others' boundaries by respecting their limits and your own.

5. **Adjust as Needed:** As your child grows, their needs and abilities will change. Be prepared to adjust boundaries to reflect their development, ensuring they remain relevant and effective.

6. **Encourage Open Dialogue:** Foster an environment where your child feels comfortable discussing their boundaries and needs. This openness promotes mutual respect and understanding.

Conclusion

Clear boundaries are fundamental to healthy parent-child relationships. They provide structure, promote respect, and support the emotional and psychological well-being of both parents and children. By setting and maintaining clear boundaries, parents can create a nurturing environment that fosters growth, responsibility, and mutual respect. This practice not only benefits the immediate family dynamics but also equips children with the skills and understanding they need to navigate their world confidently and respectfully.

Personal tasks / discussion points

Think through what boundaries your parents had and used in your childhood! Write down in two columns, like this: your (or your sibling's) behaviour - parental reaction.

- How much were there clear boundaries?
- Were they supportive or the opposite?
- Differentiate between boundaries and overreactions and abuse. What parental boundaries would you like to keep with your children (eg. limited screen time), and what you would like to avoid. Keep a list, and consult it regularly in your parenthood.
- Make a list of your own needs in relation to your family and partner.
- Think through, how much you are open to give up, how much you don't. Discuss it through with your partner.

Romantic relationship with parenthood

You want to be a good parent. It's easy to think that this is a private matter for everyone, that everyone is free to decide how to bring up their children, according to what principles. How much time to spend with him, who to leave him with when he's busy, what to teach him, what to feed him - and on and on. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. It's easy to see the framework provided by society's rules. The rules for going to nursery and school must be respected, just as compulsory vaccinations must be given to all children.

What is harder to see is the unstated expectations that are being placed on parents about how to be a 'good' parent. These are, for example, the phrases of the previous generation, whose time was, of course, better and more functional - or so it would seem in the all-embellishing mirror of time. Advertising bombards us with expectations, the illusion of a perfect world and, of course, the need to spend money. We can believe that well-functioning families and romantic ideas are real on the screen.



Parents should be on their feet, who can rule all this out completely and can deal with real situations completely independently of these ideas. Who only sets expectations for himself that fit his own personality and accepts himself and his parenting performance as it is. Someone who can honestly make peace with being forced to formula feed their baby. Someone who can accept that they are a person who needs to spend time alone on a regular basis, and who can leave the grandparent or babysitter in charge of the child without any qualms. Someone who can calmly accept the importance of their job while having a small child.

Chasing after romantic ideals or trying to fulfil other people's expectations can lead to unhappiness - our own and, by extension, our child's. In this way we will never be ourselves, so we will never feel good about ourselves. If we do well in the role we are expected to play, exhaustion will make our lives miserable, as it will require a great deal of energy to be mobilised. And if we fail to live up to expectations, we will experience it as a failure.

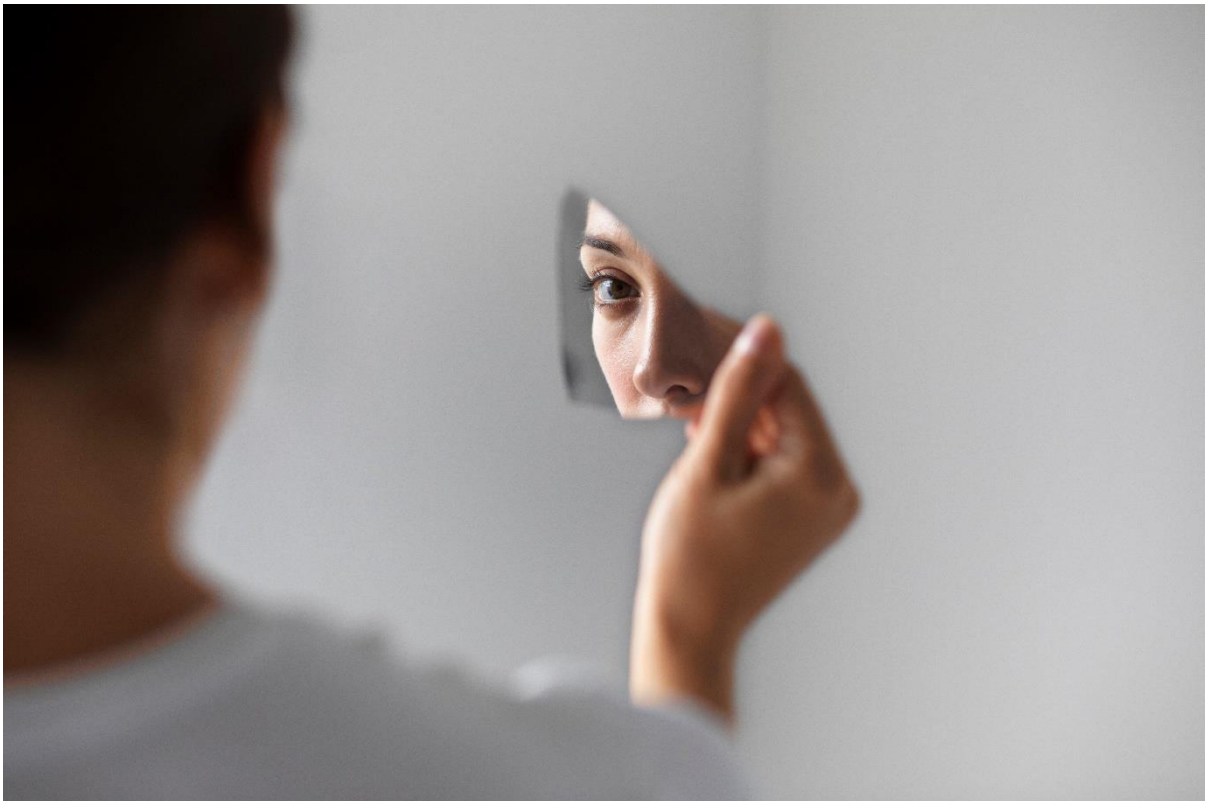
So let us try to see what distorted ideas surround us and fight them. Even if the reality is less colourful and less romantic.

Personal Tasks/ Discussion Point

1. Consider the expectations and romantic notions of parenthood. What do you think makes a good mother and a good father?
2. Make a map that represents these ideas as geographical units or landmarks. To the south should be those you would not like to identify with, to the north those you think would be good to incorporate into parenting.

How to stay myself

Becoming a parent marks one of the most profound shifts in an individual's life, characterized by its sudden and transformative nature (Terry, 1991; Cowan & Cowan, 1992, 1998). Even when parenthood is a deliberate choice or part of planned family expansion, it can still introduce significant stressors (Cowan & Cowan). As Chourdaki (1999, 2001) suggests, parenthood serves as a catalyst for personal growth and change. The evolution from a couple to a family unit fundamentally alters the dynamics within the household, particularly in terms of the roles assumed by each partner, with a primary focus on the nurturing and care of the child. The intricate web of parental responsibilities and the myriad functional roles parents undertake underscore the sentiment expressed by Georgiou-Nilsen (2002, as cited in Pappa, 2006) that "Being a parent is an art".



Mother

Motherhood and the role of mother are burdened with many expectations in public opinion and in the media. Partly derived from religious and patriarchist

thought, we associate sacrifice, self-surrender, and an idealized picture. As a mother, they expect you to always step back, give up your own desires, and do it with joy. Many also question whether you have the right to abort your pregnancy, since your body becomes the „carrier“ of another life. That is why many women do not dare to express if they are not well in the role of a mother, or any part of it, and they cannot ask for help, as they often receive judgment instead of assistance.

Recently, feminist perspectives on motherhood have started to challenge these traditional narratives. We need to reclaim the term "mom" in a way that reflects lived experiences and desires. This new understanding should embrace the transient, multifaceted, and contradictory nature of motherhood, recognizing the diverse ways it is experienced. It should acknowledge both the challenging and the joyous moments, detaching motherhood from essentialist, biological, and theological narratives.

"Mom" should signify choice rather than social pressure. It should not imply that all other aspects of a person's identity are secondary. It should not enforce exclusivity in caregiving or make talking about struggles, mistakes, or the need for personal space a source of guilt. Instead, discussing the connections, the small but significant moments, the love, tenderness, and joy of witnessing a new life should not be seen as boring, apolitical, or conventional.

Dr. Andrea O'Reilly argues that:

- Motherhood as a Legitimate Area of Feminist Inquiry: O'Reilly argues that motherhood should be a central topic within feminist scholarship. She critiques the historical neglect of motherhood in feminist theory, suggesting that the experiences and challenges of mothers deserve serious academic attention and analysis. By doing so, she calls for the inclusion of maternal experiences in broader feminist discourses.
- Redefinition of Motherhood: O'Reilly advocates for a redefinition of motherhood that honors women's lived experiences and choices. She emphasizes the need to move away from idealized and prescriptive notions of motherhood that are rooted in patriarchal and essentialist narratives. Instead,

she promotes an understanding of motherhood that recognizes its diversity, fluidity, and complexity.

- Honouring Lived Experiences and Choices: Central to O'Reilly's work is the idea that motherhood should be defined by the experiences and choices of individual women. This means acknowledging the varied ways in which women experience and practice motherhood, including the challenges and contradictions they face. O'Reilly supports the idea that mothers should have the autonomy to define their own maternal identities without being confined by societal expectations.
- Maternal Empowerment: O'Reilly emphasizes the potential for empowerment within the maternal role. She argues that motherhood can be a site of resistance and agency, where women can challenge oppressive structures and advocate for their rights and needs. This perspective shifts the focus from viewing motherhood solely as a source of oppression to recognizing its potential for personal and social transformation.
- Challenging the "Good Mother" Myth: O'Reilly critiques the pervasive "good mother" myth, which sets unrealistic standards for mothers and often leads to feelings of inadequacy and guilt. She calls for dismantling this myth and replacing it with a more realistic and supportive understanding of motherhood that acknowledges the inevitable imperfections and struggles.

It is also worth thinking about these issues for ourselves, either as (prospective) mothers or fathers, as we can create a much healthier, happier family life by taking the above into account.

Personal tasks / discussion points

Motherhood/fatherhood /parenthood:

- What shifts took place in your life after becoming a mother/father?
- Was it your choice to become a mother or father?
- What were the social expectations you had to fulfil?
- Did you face the good mother myth?
- Would you do something differently?

Harmonizing career and parenthood

There is no single, commonly accepted definition for the concept of "reconciliation of work and family obligations" in the international literature.

However, in an attempt to define its content, we can say that it means trying to create harmony between two important elements of life; trying to balance our work and family life. But it is not that simple. First of all, there is the visible work, that is to say, what is socially called work, the work for which you are paid. This is essential to the family's livelihood. Traditionally, it was the father's job as the breadwinner of the family. However, it is now seen, and we are now talking more and more about the invisible, unpaid work, without which the family cannot function, but it's still not really valued. From shopping to cooking to washing up, from laundry to cleaning to administration, we have to do a lot of work every day. Beyond running a household, there are also many activities that are specifically linked to parenting, and it's a feat for a full-time working parent to accomplish. Think about it: taking them to nursery, school, bringing them home, taking them to the doctor when they are sick, nursing them at home, looking after their clothes and shoes - the list goes on, and that's still just the physical needs of a child. This invisible work has been seen as a traditional female role for centuries. Then, sometime in the 20th century, women were needed in the labour market, so they started to go out to work, but the invisible work remained theirs just as much.

But back to the original idea. This particular literature has so far largely looked at work-life balance from the perspective of the working parent, although it has distinguished between the roles of 'working' and 'dependent' parent, but has not addressed the aspects and invisible work of the latter. A new approach is to include the needs and wants of people living with workers.

If we assume that this is not just a matter of time management and organisational problems, reconciling work and family is an option that is an important aspect of the quality of our overall lives. Because there are indeed many issues related to this topic. In order to really reconcile work and family life according

to our own needs, we need, for example, a well-functioning family support system, for example, to replace the salary of a parent who wants to stay at home. Or if one parent wants to work part-time or from distance - we need companies that allow it. Extended family links can also help, especially if both parents consider career development important or simply cannot live on a single salary. But leaving the child in the care of grandparents or uncle is not always a good option, so without a sufficient number of free or easily affordable facilities (crèches, nurseries) it is impossible to succeed in the workplace.



In the European Union, work-life balance policy, as early as the 1980s it appears incessantly linked to the systematic support of women's participation and staying in the labor market. In particular, this policy is acknowledged as a key parameter to promote the equality of gender in the labor market and is included in proposals and positions to promote, at least initially, economic objectives of the EU, which refer to the enhancement of women's employability and, secondarily, the promotion of equal participation of men in family life.

Although the concept initially appeared in parallel with the increase in women's participation in the labour market, i.e. it was primarily concerned with how working women could reconcile their domestic responsibilities with their jobs, this gender asymmetry has gradually been redressed, with the result that reconciling work and family life is now being redefined as a common need for all people, regardless of gender. The policy of reconciling work and family life is no longer communicated - at least institutionally - as a 'women's issue', but men are encouraged to take on family and domestic responsibilities. And indeed, it is a very important idea that work-life harmony is for everyone, regardless of gender and professional status. Understanding this can help us to plan for our own functioning of our own household, because, as the saying goes, 'as many houses, so many households'.

Thanks to the fact that it is now easier for both parents to be in the labour market, and that family roles are more nuanced, and we are more encouraged to share household tasks, we can build our own way of working with our partner and family. We can discuss how to share the work and home responsibilities so that everyone can remain happy and content, and neither party is overburdened by maintaining a life together.

Personal tasks / discussion points

- Write down what you do in a single day for your children /family /household.
- Write down what you do in a single day for yourself.
- Make a list of what you do from getting up until going to bed at night.
- If you have a partner - compare it.
- What are you going to say to your daughter about this topic, what tips are you going to give her?

Leaving the bad patterns behind

Like the animal kingdom, human life is based on patterns passed down from generation to generation. We carry patterns for survival, for reactions in stressful situations, for bonding, for life strategies. But today, we have to adapt to a world that has changed in many ways, and not all the old patterns work well - this is one of the problems with parenting patterns. The other part of the problem is that we all also carry parenting patterns that we suffered from as children. But parents are not always aware of these patterns, sometimes not even aware that we do something in a given situation because that's what our parents did. It can be very helpful to recognise, understand and, if necessary, change our own behaviour if we are consciously prepared to confront our patterns.



In this process we can confront our past, our parents and ourselves at different levels. We should be very careful and cautious, because we may find layers that need to be unravelled with the help of a professional. For example, if your attachment pattern is problematic, resolution will not happen without therapy.

However, if the goal is not so fundamental, "systemic" change, we can manage on our own. For example, we can work consciously to make our family holidays more meaningful, or give our children more freedom in their choices. If we want our children to start life with more confidence than their parents did, we can, for example, improve our own parenting by changing our communication, step by step, with a high level of awareness, and thus increase their self-confidence and self-assurance.

So let's set realistic goals and identify small milestones that we can achieve. Let's think about the areas where we can improve and the tools we can use to achieve our goals. Self-awareness and self-reflection are helpful in this work. And our child is a mirror for us at every moment, we just need to listen and interpret the signals he sends us. It's not an easy task, but if we get it right at least sometimes, we can improve the life and mood of the family and our relationship with our child.

Sometimes, someone may become aware of a bad parenting pattern and, not wanting to make the same mistake, do the opposite of their own parents. But this counter-pattern can easily be excessive and disproportionate, or alien to our personality. Let us try not to think in extremes. It may be enough to improve our received pattern just a shade, and it may feel transferable. Let's be conscious of that too!

Another important question in this process is whether we are raising our child alone or with our partner. In the case of a two-parent family, it helps if parents can talk to each other about the patterns they have brought. This way they can work together in a complementary way. It may turn out that they have similar tasks to do, or that their patterns complement each other well, and that what one of them is weaker at, the other is good at. Ideally, they can build a common strategy for parenting and, by supporting each other and, where appropriate, offering positive criticism, they can be more successful parents. Of course, there may be minor or major conflicts between parents because of different patterns and different ways of thinking and values. Assertive communication and a willingness to compromise can also help to address this.

Also bear in mind that most people who have grown up in families have patterns that they are happy to pass on to their children. Let's take stock of what was good for us in our own childhood, what values we received from our parents and want to pass on. Let's consciously incorporate them into our children's lives and tell them why they are important to us.

Personal Tasks/ Discussion Point

In order to raise our child in a self-identical way, according to our own values, we need to be conscious, not just avoid negative examples. We also need to be aware of what is on the positive side, what are the main principles we want to follow as parents, what are our priorities? Where are our limits: what are the most important factors and what are we willing to compromise on?

1. What kind of parent would you like to be? - Make a list of qualities, thinking about positive patterns that you would like to use in your family.

2. It's worth being aware of the expectations that say there is such a thing as the perfect parent. It is important to be able to articulate what qualities this ideal would have - if it really existed. By doing this exercise, we can make ourselves aware that we ourselves are close to this ideal in some areas, and that other qualities can be developed. However, it is not always worth following the ideal!

- Write a list of qualities in a certain colour - what do you imagine the ideal parent would be like?
- Circle in another colour the qualities you have.
- Using a third colour, indicate which qualities you would like to have as your own.

Practical links and books

In English

Chapman, Gary and Campbell, Ross: The Five Love Languages of Children – The secret to loving children effectively

Some youtube links (cinema therapy: Licensed therapist Jonathan Decker and professional filmmaker Alan Seawright discuss mental health topics with movies, for example parenting with The Incredibles, Harry Potter (Weasleys) and Finding Nemo):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9ZaCuxCfJs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwL39hhoIF4&t=703s>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_coxsEMfPpE&t=585s

Becky Kennedy TED talk: The Single Most Important Parenting Strategy:

<https://youtu.be/PHpPtdk9rco?si=bLwFRzy6CkZbSEaQ>

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In Greek

HBR Guide to Work-Life Balance May 07, 2019

Related Topics: Stress management, Personal productivity, Interpersonal skills, Workspaces design, Organizational culture

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