

# PARENTING ACROSS GENERATIONS

By Barbara King

Generational Theory suggests that there are value bases to each generation that have been shaped during the formative years and influenced by local events with a global reach. The theory offers a framework from which to explore and understand generational differences and similarities. If you apply the framework to parenting, you may find some interesting insights about your family.



## The GI Generation

From generation to generation, parents seek to advance or improve their families, making some significant improvement on the way they were parented. Take my family for example. My grandmother was born in Barbados in 1895, sixty years after the official end of 300 years of slavery there. According to Generational Theory, that generation is the GI Generation, because their values were marked and influenced by World War I.

Gran's approach to child rearing was, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." Licks were abundant. Children were to be seen and not heard; they were household help - cleaning, cooking and assisting in managing the animals that were critical to supplementing the family income. Her priorities for her daughters were a basic education, then learning a skill, followed by marriage and motherhood. From Mum's stories, her sister got the best of everything and was treated like a princess. The difference in treatment hurt her deeply and she vowed not to treat her children in the same way.

## The Silent Generation

My mother was born in 1926, part of the Silent Generation, so-named for the values emerging from the effects of the Great Depression and World War II. The Caribbean islands saw the growth and rise to power of home grown political parties and the journey towards national independence, so perhaps it was a Vocal Generation for our region. In rebellion at her mother's strictness, Mum went to live with her father and her older brothers. She was expected to wash the boys' clothes and cook for

them because she was a girl. She hated it, and eventually ran away and went back to her mother determined she was not going to be anybody's maid. In her twenties, World War II was drawing Barbadians to Europe and America. The American Base on the island provided exposure to the American lifestyle and tastes. Moving away from the colonies featured large in her imagination, she wanted to see what was beyond the Caribbean horizon. In 1962, she emigrated to England. These experiences shaped her values, perception of the world and her parenting choices. Her dreams were that her children get a FULL education and that we get opportunities to experience a bigger world than the Caribbean. I was just four when she moved to London, and it was three years before I joined her, but she saw her immigration as a way of opening doors for her children.

“Spare the rod and spoil the child” was still the thinking of Caribbean parents in the 1960s. My mother was as strict as her mother, because that was the way to make decent, law-abiding people. She hit first and asked questions later, if at all. She knew nothing about child development and never considered learning about how to parent. Women were expected to know. She aspired to be different to her mother by treating her children equally; showing equal value and love by giving us the best she could in terms of food and material things, two of the things she lacked in her childhood. And she succeeded.

## The Baby Boomers

As a female growing up in 1960s London, the era of the Baby Boomer Generation, women's liberation, women's rights and gender equality battles were raging and at the heart of political and educational discussions around me. I was a blossoming feminist. However, Mum was stuck in old notions about boys being waited on by females, which was hotly debated in our house. I refused to clean my brother's room, he got lots of burnt food and strong encouragement to cook for himself. He took the hint and has since become a much better cook than me. Mum ensured that my brother and I completed tertiary education, so another of her dreams was accomplished.

## Generation Y

When my children were born in the early-mid 1990s, I had missed Generation X. I bought *What To Expect When You Are Expecting* and every book I could find about foetal development. Having grown up in the age of information and pop psychology, parents of the twenty-first century were taking a more studied approach to parenting. Through print media and the Internet we

I learnt about child development. was hungry for information on how to do parenting “right.” I was determined not to make the mistakes of my mother and grandmother. I would not leave my children for long periods (as my mother had done to go to London) and I would never beat them. I would tell my children I love them in words. They would have a father present and active in their lives, which I did not, and because my childhood was marked by being of a minority in a white world, I wanted them to experience being surrounded by people physically like themselves– so I chose to return to the Caribbean.

## Insights

My parenting goals were based on what I needed for myself in my childhood, as were the goals of my mother and probably Gran too. When I asked my daughters what they would do differently as parents, they both responded based on what they wanted during their childhood.

We keep trying to give our children what we think they need, based on what we thought we needed or wanted, thereby parenting for the past. We try to heal our childhood wounds through our children, but miss the cues the current generation is sending.

I have had to address some of my unmet needs in the process of raising two daughters, and they have been able to benefit from affectionate, non-violent and communicative relationships with both parents. However, they are children of Generation Y, the digital natives. Their world is very, very different as will be their children’s. As parents we straddle two worlds - that which we have known and a new emerging one that our children are more familiar with. We need to stop and take a look at the world today and their needs now. Listen to them with our eyes, hearts and ears.

As I look back at my family’s attempts to evolve over the generations, I see that at the root of our wants and aspirations is the desire for evidence and experience of love and belonging. In spite of all the technological advances and the myriad of parenting philosophies being touted, maybe the secret to parenting success is:

**Let your child know that he or she is loved and wanted.**