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In a Nation Desperate for Unity, Could Families be the Answer?

By Emma Todd

Introduction

“And so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.

We close the divide because we know to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside.

We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.

We seek harm to none and harmony for all.” – Amanda Gorman.⁷

These powerful words were spoken on the steps of the United States Capitol on January 20, 2021, two weeks after our nation’s lack of unity was made very clear and potent. Many individuals on both sides of politics recognize how damaging hate and division have been to our country, but the solution to such a divide isn’t obvious.

Families might be the answer to creating a country that’s simultaneously diverse and unified.

How Does One Create Unity?

Because unity is abstract, the word can be hard to fully comprehend. There are many definitions that describe unity as being “homogenous”, but a more appropriate definition might be “harmony.” Harmony is learned through perspective-taking, conflict resolution, and prosocial behavior in the home.

Perspective Taking

Seminal research conducted by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg explains the elements of a child's moral development.

The stages of moral development include the following:

- Before the age of 9, children's morals are first based on punishment (if they're punished for something, they know it to be wrong), then on a somewhat selfish concern for others (if they get rewarded by another, they know it to be right)
- In adolescence, morals are developed first through social conformity (going with the flow of the majority), then on a duty to society (obeying laws and enforcement without question). Most adults don't get beyond this stage.
- For the adults that do develop morally beyond adolescence, personal values take reign and they recognize when laws don't fit within those values. Beyond the recognition of one's personal values, a key element to this stage is the recognition that others have personal values that may be different from your own.⁵

The third stage is crucial when it comes to teaching and promoting unity in a society of diverse individuals and ideas, and this level of development is the core of perspective-taking behavior. Unity would be easy to teach if everyone had the exact same values, it's a whole other ballgame when accounting for differences.

Widely cited research from Lawrence J. Walker and Karl H. Henning shows that the style of parenting is influential in the moral development of children, and this includes the types of interactions and discussions parents have with their children. If a parent provides interactions that are highly opinionated or intense and hostile, those interactions might actually hinder their moral development.

The opposite is also true. When parental interactions are child-centered (they ask their child what their opinion is on a matter is before sharing their own), children are able to practice moral reasoning, and in effect, develop morally.¹¹

Some research has suggested that there might be a gender gap when it comes to teaching principles of perspective-taking in the home. Girls tend to be encouraged to adopt values of care-giving and satisfying others. Boys tend to be encouraged to adopt values of autonomy and power.¹

When it comes to unity, having a mix of these values is essential. If parents encourage their children to be both autonomous and care-giving, we might be taking a large step forward to creating a country that's more unified because when children adopt values of care-giving and satisfying others, research has specifically shown that they're better perspective-takers^{1,12}. So, if one is to develop a sense of unity, or in other words, morally develop to an

extent where they can recognize both their own personal values and others', families are the keystone.

Conflict Resolution

One of the best ways to put a principle of unity in practice is to look at conflict resolution and conflict management--more specifically, looking at how families can influence conflict resolution skills and strategies.

One study found that teenagers will take conflict resolution behaviors that they've learned through conflicts with their parents into other relationships¹⁰ and this is consistent with basic research of attachment theory.³

Teenagers also learn from conflict resolution behaviors from interactions with friends and peers, but research has shown that conflict resolution with parents was a more powerful tool of transmission. In other words, the most effective place for teenagers to learn conflict management skills is within the walls of their own homes.¹⁰

Prosocial Behavior

Finally, prosocial behaviors might be the final key to creating unity. Prosocial actions are actions centered on being helpful, being generous,

When parental interactions are child-centered (they ask their child what their opinion is on a matter is before sharing their own), children are able to practice moral reasoning, and in effect, develop morally.

and being kind to others⁴. Prosocial behavior appears to not only be a unifying act in and of itself, but prosocial behavior is also associated with better perspective-taking and less aggression.⁸

Prosocial behavior can be taught as early as age 2,⁹ and mothers have a unique capacity to help children learn to be sharing, kind, and exhibit prosocial behavior (hastings). Research has shown that if parents discuss

others' feelings in an environment of warmth, the practice promotes prosocial behaviors in teenagers.

Other parenting practices that promote prosocial behavior include encouraging reasoning, allowing for autonomy, and warmth within the parent-child relationship.⁸ The practices and environment that parents create in their home can be one of the most effective building grounds of prosocial behavior.

To echo the sentiment of the Bible, "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required." The same familial power that can instill unity in youth can also instill division. It's crucial that parents are aware of the influence they have on their children.

When it comes to fostering unity, I think the United States would do well to turn its focus from the marble Capitol steps to the paint-chipped ones on the front porch.

Endnotes

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