

Preparation for Parenting

This session about parenting is intended for all of us, since we all have had parents—whether birth parents or others who raised us or influenced us—even if we ourselves may have not become parents. If you do not have children, you can consider the topic of parenting as it relates to children in your life, such as nieces and nephews or children associated with your career or volunteer work. Both parents and non-parents can use this session to consider your view of parenting in our society or to re-examine your thoughts on your own experience of being parented.

Parenting is one of the most important jobs we can have in our lives. It is also one of the most difficult. We are responsible for the health, happiness, and growth of another person. It is full of joy, love, sadness, anger, forgiveness and so many other emotions. The experience brings out the best in us, as well as the not so best that we may not have even realized was there. It is a balancing act between protecting, guiding, and letting go.

We learn most of our parenting skills from our own parents. How distinct are we from our parents—the parents we know as our birth parents or perhaps the birth parents we never knew but the parents who raised us? To what extent do we inherit—by nature or nurture—the traits of those who raised us or influenced us when we were young? Are we uniquely ourselves? Are we our parents with a twist? Are we their exact image?

Whether or not you have children yourself, you are a parent to the next generation. If we can only stop thinking of children as individual property and think of them as the next generation, then we can realize we all have a role to play. *Charlotte Davis Kasl, Finding Joy*

There are times as a parent when you realize that your job is not to be the parent you always imagined you'd be, the parent you had always wished you had. Your job is to be the parent your child needs, given the particulars of his or her own life and nature. *Ayelet Waldman*

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
But seek not to make them like you.

Khalil Gibran

When the strongest words for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words I remember from my mother's mouth, then I either have to reassess the meaning of everything I have to say now, or re-examine the worth of her old words. *Audre Lorde*

As I look back on where we've been and where we are, what I sense and feel is that through all the turmoil and upheaval of the past five-plus decades, my parents did the best they could to protect and help me, to make my little world safe and secure. And as I listen and learn from others, I hear that they, too, for the most part, remember parents who did the best they could to protect and help them, wherever they were at the time. And that's maybe the single most important thing we all have in common: parents who did the best they could for us.

Bart J. Mindszenty, Michael Gordon, Parenting Your Parents

Questions to Ponder

1. What about you reflects who your parents are or were—birth parents or people who raised you or had an influence on you? What about you contrasts with who they are or were? This question will be used at the sharing.
2. Create an image or flow chart that represents you and any particular influences from your parents. If you have children, include an image of how you have influenced them, or how you hope to influence them.
3. What kind of influence do you want to be on children in your life?
4. As parents or as a member of a family, we have moments in our family life we are not proud of. Think of one of these moments you have had in your life. What did you learn from this experience? Were you able to forgive yourself? Why or why not?
5. In what ways is our society good for children? In what ways is it not very good?