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Is parenting about care or protection?

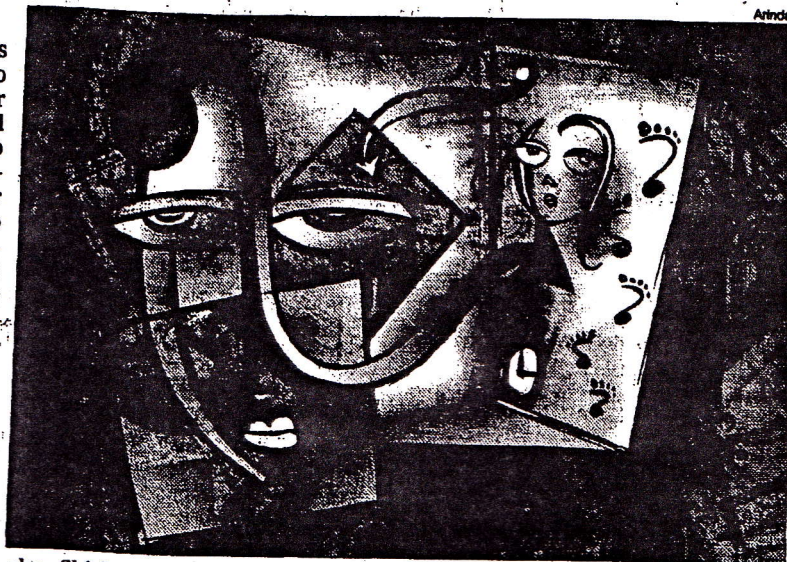
By Swati Desai

Two decades ago the business woman grandmother in the US who was too busy to help out her daughter by babysitting her granddaughter had shocked me. So had the parents who couldn't care less that their son was becoming left-handed and the daughter who was unhappy that her well-to-do parents could not pay for her university education. I was very judgmental about the entire American parenthood as self-centred and uninvolved.

As I began to get a glimpse into American psyche through my friendships and later as a psychotherapist, my judgments fell apart. In my work I also came across tonnes of research around mother-child attachment which shed light on the range of emotions experienced by parents in the US, the same way as parents in India. Over the years, I met people like Shirley, Debby, Angela and Mark.

Shirley had switched from her high pressure high profile job in the entertainment industry to part-time marketing position because she could not bear the guilt of disengagement in her children's activities. Debby started therapy after her 26-year-old son died in an accident because she could not get over her enormous grief that a mother is supposed to die holding her son's hand, not the other way round. Angela had made personal sacrifices as a single mother to ensure that her daughter gets educated in the top private high school in town. Mark's only regret about his highly successful legal career was that he missed out on watching his children grow. I came to know several fellow professional mothers who go through hoops to keep involvement in their kids' elementary schools and their music lessons.

Two important revelations dawned upon me. First, the underlying feelings and attachments parents in the US feel are the same for parents anywhere



else. Shirley's guilt and satisfaction, Angela's pride, Debby's enormous grief, Mark's regrets are the same as in any other culture. The enormous gratification felt by mothers after childbirth is universal.

The second realisation was that the parental attachment in the US in the early part of the child's life until mid-teen years is the same as it is for Indian parents. Once the child turns 16 or 18-years old, that is when the differences in the manifestation of "caring" becomes apparent. Cultural psychology attests to such differences in manifestation of underlying universality. Consider the following two points.

First, Western psychology believes in the developmental stages in which a human child grows more independent and moves away from the parental protection. This journey towards taking care of oneself is viewed as "healthy". In our culture, a son could remain under the parental guidance till the end. Such influence is valued. Second, in the US, children are not supposed to be raised as investment for the old age but

as current source of enjoyment and pride. The prosperity and the social security system have allowed parents to bear minimal dependence on children in their old age. The combination of these two factors could result into parental reluctance towards selling their house to pay for the children's university education. Factor into this the high cost of education and availability of student loans and other such mechanisms.

Of course there are problems with this model. However, as a culture, I want to present a question to the over-involved Indians: if it is fair to impose the expectations, the guilt, the resentment, and the disappointment on grownup children, in today's age when risk-taking by children pays and opportunities for personal growth for parents are abundant.

(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to ISB, Hyderabad)

Job profile: Look before you leap Down Under

By Prathima Nandakumar/TNN

Vadodara: Seema Shah, 20, a BSc in chemistry is hoping to pursue masters degree in information systems (MIS) in Australia. She gives her plans of studying pure science a go by, a dream she had nurtured for long.

Rajat Patel, a commerce graduate was in a dilemma in choosing his subject for a masters degree from a university Down Under. A Masters in Professional Accountancy is a logical progression in his area of studies, but Rajat has settled for an MBA.

For, both Seema and Rajat, it wasn't

their core competence that guided their choice of subjects for higher studies Down Under. They are examples of a growing breed of youngsters who are giving proper career planning a go by to pursue their only goal immigration and finally, permanent residency (PR). In the process, experts say, they are turning square pegs in round holes.

Most Indian students are choosing subject that are giving them a better job option rather than worrying about their core competence, say experts.

For students heading Down Under, the dilemma is to choose an appropriate course out of the 300-odd courses. Espe-

cially because more than 98% of students plan for PG courses and not under graduate courses abroad, says consultant Radhika Khachar.

According to counsellors, as a majority of students aim at employment and in many cases, PR, it has become mandatory for them to opt for courses that can ensure employment.

But often, it is a wild goose chase, say experts, who have been increasingly counselling students to opt for courses which can earn adequate points for the candidate to stay put in the country after completion of course, says another consultant Ashok Dhruva.