

Introduction

Families matter. They play an essential role in the well being of individuals and communities. Throughout their lives parents, children, aunts, uncles and grandparents all depend on family for identity, belonging, and nurturance. Healthy families provide support to their members of all ages – from tiny infants to frail elders.

At the heart of the family is the development of healthy children. Families provide security, opportunities for experimentation and learning, encouragement and guidance to children from birth through formation and into adulthood. Children learn first through non-verbal communication, second by watching and copying parents and siblings, and third through open dialogue and debate.

Families serve as a cornerstone of society. Taoist philosophy suggests that when relationships in a family are in order, then society can also be in order. When there is an appropriate expression of authority in the family, so it will be in society. When there is respect for differences among family members, so too will there be respect for differences in society. When there is peace in the family, there can be peace in the world.

The notion of family changes with the times. Noted family therapist, Salvador Minuchin states, “The family has always undergone changes that parallel society’s changes. It has taken over or given up the functions of protecting and socializing its members in response to the culture’s needs.”¹ The twenty-first century ushered in a wide range of demands leading to great diversity in definitions and practices of family.

Never in history has family meant so many different things to different people. For many, a family is a heterosexual couple with two children and a dog. For others, family is the *tiospya*, the extended grouping of relatives within the tribe. For still others it is a single mom and three kids, or a gay couple who have an adopted child, or a lesbian couple with children from one’s prior marriage, or a two career couple without children, or three generations living in the same household, or people of different faiths, races or ethnicities bridging differences and raising children in multiple languages. In this book we define “family” as all-inclusive, embracing all permutations and creations of family life.