CHAPTER ONE

Families are fascinating

> Families are terrible things – I've got one myself.
>
> [Dr J. Morris, psychiatrist]

> Families are communities in which each member is affected by what happens to each of the others.
>
> (Marriott, 2003)

For centuries, storytellers and writers have found families a great source for their sagas, poems, ballads, short stories, plays and novels: cruel, demanding or inadequate parents, ugly bullying sisters and wicked stepmothers are a regular feature from earliest times. Unusual or horrible behaviour is much more interesting, exciting or fascinating to write about than nondescript folk going about their ordinary lives.

As Andrew Marr, writer, journalist and broadcaster, puts it:

> To work the alchemy, journalists reshape real life, cutting away details, simplifying events, 'improving' ordinary speech, sometimes inventing quotes . . . it isn't only journalists. Everyone does it, all the time, mostly unconsciously. We hear a piece of gossip and as we retell it, we improve it, smoothing away irrelevance and sharpening the point; we turn experiences of friends and relatives into bolder more heroic or tragic episodes.
>
> Remember that news is cruel. Reading the awful things that people apparently say about each other, or newspapers say about them, can be depressing.
>
> (Marr, 2004)

Given the makeup of each individual with a unique mix of personality traits, and qualities such as optimism, empathy, generosity, resilience, honesty and curiosity, each family group will also have its own unique flavour, added to which will be effects of the particular society, culture and century.

Other factors include:

- age and generation of parents, single or a couple, or living with other carers – who and why
- siblings, ages and spaces between them, position in family
- further pregnancies and births within the family
- physical, mental and emotional health of mother

- physical health of the child
- health of other close family members
- death of a sibling, deaths of other close relatives and friends and effects of these on self, on parents, on siblings
- religion/atheistic/secular
- war or peace
- status, financial resources
- accommodation – flat or house, rural, urban or inner city
- community? nomadic? several family moves? reasons?
- parents' work/family commitments (caring for other family members?); experience of pets/other animals; culture – society – century; parental and society attitudes to discipline, to status, materialistic or idealistic; television/technology access and availability; leisure pursuits; exposure to advertisements; pressure to acquire and 'keep up with the neighbours'; expectations – of parents/society/self; physical affection or reserve
- genetic vulnerability (for example, hearing problems, Huntingdon's disease, Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia and spina bifida also run in families).

Only after the publication of my book *Anorexia and Bulimia in the Family* in 2004, which triggered discussion within my extended family, did I discover that two other young women in the same generation as my daughter had also suffered from anorexia nervosa/bulimia nervosa. They too recovered. Three young women in three different countries with thousands of miles between them, and the only common link one set of great-grandparents.

Like father like son?

Like mother like daughter; like father like daughter? Watch and listen at any family gathering, large or small, and it's impossible to miss likenesses between relatives, likenesses of feature and build, gesture and movement, voice and intonation, attitudes and approaches to life.

He's sure got his grandfather's temper!
She's her Aunt V all over again.
Should stick up for herself more; just like her mother.
Awkward from first to last, just like Uncle P.
Pity, he's inherited that from his grandfather.
As alike as two peas in a pod . . . they could be twins!
He is so like his father – attitudes, personality, not taking responsibility for his own choices, not following through. No perseverance, no determination. Blame the

> universe or others for all problems large and small . . . But his father left us when A was two, he's hardly ever seen his father. [K, senior social worker]

And when I asked how and why a friend had survived various major upheavals during childhood, the response was: *I have my father's temperament*.

Then there's peer pressure. And education, formal or otherwise; encouragement or otherwise. Even the weather may play a part – people are more vulnerable to depression in dark northern climates than in warmer places with more sunshine.

In every case, family and background will play a huge part in forming the adult. But what any adult makes of their life will depend just as much on how they cope with all their experiences and resilience to adversity and struggle. Two children experiencing similar difficulties in, for example, mathematics or language may cope in very different ways: – one giving up very quickly before 'going under' and the other perhaps struggling for a while, but eventually those difficulties are overcome and used towards becoming stronger emotionally.

> . . . But there is also a huge random effect that rains down on even the best parenting efforts. If you are in any way typical, you have known some intelligent and devoted parents whose child went badly off the rails. You may have also known of the opposite instance, where a child succeeds despite his parents' worst intentions and habits.
> (Levitt & Dubner, 2006)

In *Freakonomics*, Levitt and Dubner (2006) describe the stories of two boys, one white and one black. The white boy grew up outside Chicago and had a 'solid' upbringing with smart, encouraging, loving parents who stressed education and family. The black boy from Daytona Beach was abandoned by his mother, beaten by his father, and had become a gangster by his teens. So what became of the two boys?

The second child, who experienced such a tough beginning, is Roland G. Fryer Jr, the Harvard economist studying black underachievement. 'The white child also made it to Harvard. But soon after, things went badly for him. His name is [notorious killer] Ted Kaczynski' (Levitt & Dubner, 2006).

Nature and nurture?

Nature versus nurture? Nature via nurture?

The debate about whether genes or environment, or 'nature versus nurture', are the causes of life difficulties such as mental illness, alcoholism and other addictive and compulsive conditions, autism or Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), post-traumatic stress disorder, reactions to various personal stresses – all frequently associated with 'challenging behaviour' – has been raging with ever greater intensity over the last century in psychiatry and other professional disciplines.

Quoting from a vast array of documented and referenced research in his 2003 book *Nature Via Nurture: Genes, Experience and What Makes us Human*, Matt Ridley outlines the effects of some of the more extreme views quoted by those who have denied any part for heredity.

> The schizophrenic is painfully distrustful and resentful of other people due to the severe early warp and rejection he encountered in important people of his infancy and childhood, as a rule mainly in a schizophrenogenic mother.
>
> (Fromm-Reichmann, 1948)

Others asserted a similar diagnosis for autism: that it was caused by an indifferent 'refrigerator mother'. According to this theory, homosexuality was caused solely by withdrawn, absent or weak fathers and a negative relationship.

Even today in the early 21st century, a few diehard supporters of this theory, often by quoting out-of-date and discredited research, feel they may assert that, for instance, manic depression, schizophrenia, eating disorders, depression, criminality, all may be laid at the door of 'unempathic care'.

Laying out the theories of either side on the nature/nurture debate, Matt Ridley notes the effects of some of these extreme views by intellectuals working in academia whose ideas were taken up with enthusiasm by the media.

> For the parents of schizophrenic youths, already under terrible stress, Freudian culpability was a blow they could have done without. The pain it was to cause to a generation of parents would have been more bearable if there was any evidence to support it. But it was soon obvious to any neutral observer that Freudian treatment was failing to cure schizophrenia.
>
> (Ridley, 2003)

Matt Ridley (2000, 2003), Judith Rich Harris (1998) and Levitt and Dubner (2006) all make the same point, that – while there is indeed a correlation between, for instance, divorcees having divorced children, criminal parents rearing criminal children, obese parents rearing obese children – this does not mean the same as causation. In Denmark, with its most detailed records of population studies, including criminal records of adoptees, research found 'a strong correlation with the criminal record of the biological parent and a very small correlation with the criminal record of the adopting parent – and even that vanished when controlled for peer-group effects' (Ridley, 2000).

> Not even lip service was being paid to this omission: correlation was routinely presented as causation.
>
> (Ridley, 2000)

Unfortunately the effects of the nurture theory, or assumption that all emotional or mental health problems – not only schizophrenia or autism – must have been caused by 'unempathic' care in childhood, have been far reaching, influencing several generations of parents. And, sadly, still do.

Is it true that there is research now which shows it's not always the fault of the mother? I read it in a magazine . . . is it true?

My daughter has been ill with anorexia nervosa, binge-purge type, for over 18 years. She is now 42 and has relapsed again following the death of her partner in a car accident. She's home again just now, I think she's heading for hospital again, and I still don't know how to help her even after all these years. I wish I did.

My husband died three years ago. We were told years ago that it's the mother's fault when someone has anorexia, but I've never been able to work out why or what I did. My husband always blamed me for our daughter's illness.

How I wish I could talk to my husband about the new research. It always caused such trouble between us before he died.

[Mary, eating disorders helpline, 2001]

I knew a couple who had a baby boy in the 1970s, born with spina bifida. When he was small he was very pretty and like a 'wooden doll'. Everyone wanted to cuddle him. As he got older the 'wooden doll' lost its attraction. The father's family blamed the mother, as this is what they were told. The father's family persuaded their son to refuse to support the mother and child as 'it was the mother's fault the boy was born like this'. The couple broke up. I don't know what happened to them afterwards. [GS, personal conversation]

The parents had a baby with a wasting disease – myopathy I think it was called – who died before he was two. They had another baby with the same condition and he died too. Both parents were tested by the doctor who said they both carried the gene so it was likely other children could have the same condition. The father's family were shocked to hear of the test results as until then they assumed the mother was to blame for the condition. [GS, personal conversation]

My mother didn't tell me until I was in my 30s that I had been diagnosed with a mild case of spina bifida; she said she too was told that It Was the Mother's Fault, and was worried that I might blame her for my leg and back problems. (Having no idea of what caused my leg and back problems, and therefore the reason for several major orthopaedic operations, I had a few (a very few!) advantages – I saw no reason why I shouldn't try to skip, ride a horse, dance, go hill walking, climb a cliff roped on top and bottom.) [GS]

With new evidence-based research becoming available, including brain scanning, and more rigorous scrutiny of current research, attitudes of the blame-and-shame 20th century are changing.

This is not to say that parents are always pure. There are indeed parents as well as other family members who treat their children – and other people – abominably. Even in my own small experience of 40 years as a primary teacher I have known of some who have, for instance, stubbed cigarettes out on bare flesh; kept a child locked in a cupboard; abused family members, including children, in all sorts of dreadful ways. A mother, addicted to drugs, lived in one room with her three children (see Chapter 2). Prostitution brought her money to feed herself, her children, and her drugs habit. Before being found those children suffered terribly, with strong suspicions that they were sexually abused, leaving all of them emotionally scarred for life. Trying to trust another human being, when every human encountered before the age of 5 years has inflicted pain and misery, must be almost impossible.

Emotional abuse occurs too. Across the world children are, for instance, sold sometimes for very small amounts and sometimes by their parents; in some countries orphaned children, who live on the streets as they have no other place to go, are targeted and shot by police or vigilantes; others are dragged or lured into exploitation and prostitution.

Parents' experience

Many parents are inexperienced in bringing up children – just as I was – and take decisions (e.g. divorce, education, move job/house/town/city/country) which turn out to have an adverse effect on one or more of their children, make many mistakes along the way – just as I did. I also believe that the vast majority do the best they can in whatever circumstances they find themselves in. Just as I tried to.

But no matter how hard anyone tries – parents, teachers, shop assistants, pilots, doctors, businessmen, psychiatrists, social workers, all walks of life – and no matter how good their intentions, the ones remembered, talked of and written about will be those whose actions give parents, shop assistants, doctors and all other walks of life a bad press. After all, a story about completely happy people in perfect circumstances and behaving always in impeccably loving and caring ways . . . interesting? Think of Dr Harold Shipman who murdered many of his patients; a nurse whose deliberate treatment of patients led to their deaths; priests who sexually abused children in their care; an aunt who kept a child in the bath and starved her because she believed the child possessed of evil spirits and social workers did not follow up on neighbours' reports of hearing crying; cruel and unfair teachers, and so on.

Watching only television news reports, reading only sensationalised headlines, it would be easy to form the opinion that all humankind is abusive

rather than the exception; if an alien flew in from outer space and read only these accounts, this could well be the picture taken back and broadcast.

> Is life really so writhing with distaste, failure and loathing? Acts of kindness, generosity, forgiveness and mere friendliness are hardly ever news. (Marr, 2004)

In adulthood, very few people can say they agreed with every aspect of their upbringing and have no issues at all with their parents, who have cleaned them as babies and small children, provided for them whatever food, shelter and living conditions, education, discipline, perhaps religious training, they could, depending on their circumstances – think of life for a 21st-century child in rural Ethiopia and another in the Australian outback; northeast Scotland and urban USA. But within their own situation and circumstances, most parents do their best to try to provide for their offspring.

Only gradually as we grow up do we come to realise that our parents – those all-powerful beings with often mysterious behaviour and decisions – make mistakes, are not always right, do not hold the key to life and a direct line to the Right Thing To Do In All Circumstances. Only gradually do we realise that our parents have faults and foibles, have views and opinions we may want to question, ideas bad as well as good. That they are not always strong and capable, that they too experience sadness and pain, feel tired and low, frustrated and despondent. And even weep.

Only gradually do we realise that we may have misread or misjudged our parents' actions when we were children, their feelings and actions towards us.

My father, born in 1915 one of 12 children, was brought up on a farm in NE Scotland where hard work was simply part of life – there was no choice with beasts to be fed and mucked out, cows milked, eggs collected, fields ploughed and planted and weeded and harvested throughout the year. Holidays were not possible, and a lie-in unheard of. Warmth and affection, though there in the background, were rarely demonstrated openly. Praise for skills and abilities would be muted if shown at all, possibly mentioned by way of a jokey reference, for fear of someone getting 'too big for their boots' or being seen to show off and needing to be taken down a peg or two. Education was compulsory but with most children needed on the farm as much as possible, usually only the basics were completed; most children were delighted to finish school as early as possible, and educating girls beyond the basics at that time was seen as unnecessary.

Walking 2 miles each way every day to primary school carrying books, lunch and a piece of coal or wood for the fire, later cycling a much

greater distance to secondary school, my father was the only one of the 12 who went on to further education, later to university. My father saw education as Extremely Important – not only because of his love of learning but also as a way of escaping from a gruelling life of physical work, a way of 'betterment'. His own background and upbringing was reflected in his approach to his own children – to the extent that a spelling error in a letter to him would be corrected and sent back to the writer! Having no background in showing his feelings, he concentrated on working hard to provide a comfortable house, good food (he grew all our vegetables), expressing his caring through strong encouragement to do well at school, providing outings to archaeological sites and castles, camping trips.

It is only now, long into adulthood, that I can see that my perceptions did not always accurately reflect the reality. It is only now that I can see the doll's house he made out of an old orange box, hours spent sanding, painting and giving it windows, doors and stairs plus small carved wooden furniture, as his equivalent of many hugs.

And it is only with hindsight that I can understand the whole story of how my father's background formed his own approach to parenthood – he wanted to do better for his children through stressing what he felt was really important. Just as my own upbringing formed the background to my own years of being a parent and bringing up my son and daughter.

Depending on hindsight, consciously or not, we will decide to do similar in bringing up our own children, or reject and strive to provide different.

> My mother used to lock me in the coal cellar when I was naughty. I'd never ever do something like that to any child, let alone my own, no matter what they did to annoy me – I still remember my terror in the dark, waiting for the sound of the key in the lock to let me out. I still hate the dark and sleep with the light on.
>
> [A, personal friend of GS]

The jury is still out on just what the balance is on the nature/nurture debate, or how the two work together to form an individual with strengths, skills and weaknesses, with new technologies and research pointing the way.

Getting the balance right

Watching as a child or young person heads for what we think will be certain disaster is painful, whether it is smoking behind the bike sheds, finding

'unsuitable' friends who might have different values and might even lead into the start of wrongdoing, or actual mischief or crime. Say the wrong thing and it is possible that the young person will find the activity or friend even more attractive . . . after all, don't want to be a goody-goody, do we? Say nothing at all, and we could be seen as uncaring, or even condoning.

Personal parenting

I determined to do better than my parents with my own children. As a teacher I gave many talks on the importance of 'time and talk, not telly and treats', the importance of encouragement of strengths and interests, finding practical ways of overcoming difficulties, trying to consider and respect the feelings of others. In the brilliant light of hindsight, I know I made many mistakes along the way – I had been tired, cross and grumpy at times: working full-time to support them after my marriage failed, organising meals and a home every day, not to mention trying to work out best choices for all sorts of daily big and small decisions – not easy. I did not always manage to be as fair or to give as much energy as I'd hoped, for instance to encouraging my son's great interest in sport by going to matches to watch. But I loved my kids more than anyone in the world, we'd done lots of things together over their years growing up. Stories at bedtime, songs to keep us going while walking the long road home before I passed my driving test, camping, visits and holidays. From about 11 years on, showing them how to make simple meals for which they could choose the menu, or how to set and light the fire to heat the water. While there had been rows with my daughter about homework undone, staying out late in teenage years, disagreements with my son over tidying his room and lack of organisation – which at the time seemed much like what I heard from other parents with teenagers – I thought I'd been an OK parent, thought I'd done an OK job. Not perfect but, I thought, OK.

My son went off to university to study engineering. My daughter wanted to stay closer to home to work, then to marry at 19 the young man she'd been seeing since they were 13 (the reason for the rows over undone homework and coming in later than agreed!). I continued to work full-time, write stories and plays, walk the dog.

All change. My daughter at 21 returned home, the imagined happy ending having turned out to be a nightmare. At the time it did not occur to me that, after sharing our meal at the table each night, she was going to her room via the bathroom where compulsive bulimia made sure she retained no nourishment from her food before then starting compulsive exercising all evening.

Skeletal, two years later she eventually told me of the diagnosis anorexia 'with elements of bulimia', and said she'd started having eating problems

while she was married and her husband was away from home; while he was away she was forbidden to go out apart from work. Then she repeated what the doctor had told her – that at 23, her potassium level was so low she was at serious risk of a heart attack. For the next several years I lived daily with wondering if this was the day I'd lose my daughter.

It came as a tremendous shock to discover among much other information about all sorts of conditions – as I had never come across the phrase 'an eating disorder', I searched far and wide – books devoted to the idea that all parents are to blame for their children's emotional problems. Autism? = 'frigidaire parenting'. Mental illness? = abuse (mostly unspecified) in the family. Anorexia nervosa? = sexual abuse, probably in the family (Jay & Doganis, 1987). And again like many other parents I've spent hundreds of painful hours going over all aspects of my children's upbringing to try to identify what I could possibly have done to inflict such suffering on my child, or perhaps not done to prepare her adequately for the extremely stressful experiences which triggered her illness.

My family, past and present – not perfect. Is it possible for *any* family, given its kaleidoscope of individual members, to function perfectly at all times? At just what point does an individual, or a family, become 'dysfunctional'?

Job description for a perfect family

Either alone or as a group, design a job description for a perfect family. You might like to think about the following:

1 *Knowledge* of childhood milestones needed?

2 *Nurture*

- How best to support healthy development physically?
- How best to support healthy emotional development?
- How best to educate a child?
- How best to encourage a child's strengths?
- What if anything could or should be done to identify difficulties, physical, learning or emotional?
- How best to support and encourage a child in weaknesses?
- What limits/rules/boundaries should be set?
- How best to set boundaries during early childhood?

- How best to set boundaries during puberty and adolescence?
- How best to encourage responsibility towards others?
- How best to encourage responsible financial management?
- How best to prepare a child for the world they will meet beyond the doors of home?
- Other?

3 *Preparation for life* in the future: What skills will they need?

4 *What qualities* do you think are needed to properly nurture a healthy child into adulthood? How important are these qualities? What are the consequences of lack of these qualities?

Perhaps ability to provide financial support or patience or organisational skills appear, among others, on your list? Are there any limits to the extent to which a parent can or should show, say, patience? What would happen if someone had absolutely limitless patience? Limitless tolerance? Or none at all?

What could or should be done when a parent does not possess a quality you feel is crucial to healthy development?

Can one parent offer qualities to balance the shortcomings of their partner? How could this be done? Identify a possible shortcoming and think how this could be balanced and by whom.

Are there any circumstances where shortcoming(s) might be detrimental to a child's health? What might be done to mitigate the effects of these shortcomings? And how?

Any other issues you feel important for this perfect family job description?

Preparation for caring role

> Even though we had professional expertise, personal resourcefulness and knowledge of community resources, we were not able to cope very well. We felt ill prepared and inadequate for our hands-on caregiving roles. These experiences made us wonder about the fate of other family caregivers who did not have the same professional advantage we believed we had.
>
> [Dr Jack Nottingham, Psychology Professor, Georgia Southwestern College, USA, quoted in Carter (1994)]

Whatever the family circumstances, and whether or not 'prepared' in any way, professional, family and other carers working together as a supportive team will provide the best hope of most effective care for the vulnerable person at the centre of all efforts.

Questions

- At what point does an individual or family begin to struggle and then become 'dysfunctional'? Is it possible for a family to be 'functional' in every circumstance?

Every family functions differently in good times and bad. Chapter 2 gives an outline of how several families currently cope with adversity involving challenging conditions and behaviours.