

What values are we teaching our children?

With the pressures of modern living, is the West Indian way of parenting starting to suffer? And as a result are our children growing up without a sense of their Caribbean roots? **Heather Barker** investigates

Hyacinth grew up in a sleepy picturesque village in Barbados, one of seven children. Times may have been challenging; it was during World War II, but she remembers her upbringing fondly. She was raised in a traditional Caribbean home – with many siblings, strict parents and attending church several times each week. “If we pretended that we had a headache or tummy ache we were given a dose of castor oil. At my age and during my nursing training, I am still trying to see the connection between a cure for a headache and castor oil!” the 70-year-old retired nurse says, laughing.





In addition to attending church, Hyacinth enjoyed excursions, frolicked at the beach and visited other relatives. "I am very glad for the training and discipline we received and the Christian values we were taught," she says.

THE ORIGINAL NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

There was something distinctly special about the West Indian way of raising children. Whether you lived in Kingstown, Mandeville or Gros Islet, or grew up in London, New York or Toronto, if your guardians were Caribbean it was quite likely that:

- * **You attended church... a lot.**
- * **You were respectful and displayed good manners – euphemisms for 'children are seen and not heard'.**
- * **You knew your neighbours and they cared for you like their own children. So you couldn't just pass them on the road or get up to any mischief around them, for your parents would know about it before you arrived home. The grapevine back then guaranteed better service than text messaging does now.**
- * **Your brothers and sisters were your guardians, snitches and playmates all rolled into one. With 12 siblings you had more than enough players for a cricket team as well as an umpire.**
- * **Your parents were extremely protective. Hyacinth recalls: "We had a sweet lime fence around our home. Daddy would say he was going to cut the fence but he would be back in only two minutes, because he'd only cut the sides, not the top because he did not want the boys to see us and call after us!"**
- * **You may not have had much but you appreciated what you did have.**

Olivia Maloney, 36 and mother to 7-month-old Michaela, had her share of challenges growing up. For example, she does not remember having a toy, until a family member from England left her doll at the family home. As the youngest of 13 in a single parent family, she "inherited" that toy. "We did not have a lot, so one of the lessons we learnt was to make do with what we had," she recalls. "It's amazing how creative you can be when you have very little."

All-in-all family life was special for her. "Even today family remains important. I prefer to spend my down time with family, just hanging out and being in their presence. We had rivalry but we would look out for each other. That remains special to me," Olivia says.

Church was also an integral part of her childhood. "I want my daughter to have an insight into that. I see spirituality as part of understanding that there's more to you than a pretty face, great body or being an intellectual. You need to understand there's something bigger and more powerful than you."

FROM ONE EXTREME TO THE NEXT

So what's changing now? Olivia believes that the basic values of Caribbean parenting are great, albeit a little

extreme. "I think today, however, we are going from one extreme to the next; we're giving the child too much rope and the child is hanging itself.

"Parents, because they are younger and don't want to raise their kids as they were raised, may be letting up too easily on children. But it speaks to what society is becoming. We've adopted a real liberal approach to parenting without realising there's a need for balance," she notes.

Anti-social behaviour among children is on the rise – fights on school buses and downloading and mimicking sexually-explicit music videos, for instance. Technologies such as cell phones and the internet may be doing more harm than good to youngsters. Additionally, it seems that the pursuit of a better way of life has spawned a bevy of Caribbean parents intent on providing all means of material support for their children.

A major independent report from the BBC found that, "the aggressive pursuit of personal success by adults is now the greatest threat to British children". And we in the Caribbean are not immune.

A phenomenon I call "extra-curricular activity excess" seems to be sweeping the Caribbean, with some families believing that having their children participate in multiple, high-brow activities such as ballet, violin, swimming, sailing, piano and karate will give them a leg up in life.

Getting the best education for our children is also bordering on the extreme, with some parents trying to book advance spaces at the "better" schools while their children are still crawling around the floor in diapers.

Sanna Allsopp, filmmaker and mother of three daughters, has lived in Barbados for less than a year, yet she's already noticed that "children here are under tremendous pressure from a young age to achieve well in school".

However, she does say that Caribbean culture is "generally, more child-friendly and safer". And one thing that she finds incredibly sweet is her daughters' ride on the school bus. "Every morning Dave the driver plays these lovely Bible stories [and] they sing all the way to school."

THE WAY FORWARD

What kind of mother does Olivia want to be for little Michaela? "I want the best of both worlds in our parenting style: the good values from the Caribbean as well as those from the West in which children are more confident. A balance needs to be met, though, with politeness and respect and the understanding that family is paramount.

"My mother's parenting style was based on fear; I want to teach Michaela the reverse of that. I want her to respect but not fear me as a parent. I want her to have a voice. But I want her to be respectful without being rude. I want to use the best of our Caribbean values to raise a wholesome and confident child." 🌱



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