

# We'll be better people if we're adaptable —within the family

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It is very important for the Italian-American father today to be flexible of thought and deed in attempting to negotiate the trying times and philosophical changes the future brings to bear on our decision-making process, and at the same time be the mediator, arbitrator, and interpreter of the current state of the art of living with grandparents and elders that have so richly given of themselves that we may be more than just Italian by heritage.

As a father, even with the tremendous devotion and participation I have with the family unit, I am not and cannot be fully prepared to deal with the thirst-filled minds of my two daughters concerning who they *really* are. You see, my knowledge and concept of the "other side"—the true Italy, the mountains of Naples—was given to me by my parents and in-laws. Having the past communicated from grandparent to grandchild, with the support of my wife and I, offers a far better experience of family interdependence and love that will foster greater unity.

## Beware 'rewards'

Advancing on to still another thought, the Italian-American father today must not be fooled by the rewards and benefits the Industrial Revolution has provided. Much of what we call rewards and benefits are really items of family degeneration and destruction. If we can learn anything from our heritage, we must be sensitive to the need and execution of an extended family.

I needed my extended family when I took a paternity leave. I sold my home, took my money and moved in with my in-laws. We were able to cut all our housekeeping bills in half and, more importantly, had each other for help.

Two real advantages of the extended family I experienced were:

1. Being able to teach respect and love, not only by giving it to my kids but by having my kids observe the way I inter-acted with my in-laws on a daily basis, and
2. Having the grandparents experience a new sense of need for their existence and becoming contributing individuals in helping to get the kids to school, babysitting, cooking, supervising house activities, and the like.

When I was commissioned to testify before the White House Conference on Families on November 30, 1979, I indicated the family is being helped to death. We have been dictated to by numerous professionals, and not had the chance to learn through trying. Let us here today understand unequivocally that the Italian traditions of managing one's own family and providing the support needed for a child to grow and learn the good values of life is sound thinking and should not ever become the exclusive responsibility of the school or some social agency; active intervention by the father and mother supported by the family is a must.

We must also remember, however,

that when a crisis does arise, we are not so proud as Italians to camouflage a problem and put our family into further jeopardy. Rather, we should think like Italian-Americans and seek outside community support.

Consider also, that the Italian-American father of today must be particularly sensitive to the explosion of information that surrounds him. Included in this are the sociological advancements being made by women as major contributing forces in the survival of mankind. Do we as solid Italian-Americans—maybe, in this matter, more than just Italians—participate in specific role playing for men and women, or do we realize our children must be able to reach their full potential?

Understanding the significance of why our Italian heritage, along with the heritage of many other ethnic

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groups, needed a more rigid role playing system for men and women, we can feel comfortable today knowing that the dreams and aspirations of our youth can become a reality. For us as parents, to deny this creative flow of energy to our children is to produce a human energy crisis: A mind lost can never be retrieved.

And let today's Italian father also realize that his special relationship to his wife, and the way he encourages her to pursue her goals of life, will become shared conversation with the kids, and in short order they will develop perceptions and attitudes accordingly.

## A pluralistic culture

Thus, the father of today must be a unique navigator of making good use of the great things that Italians and Italian families are noted for, evaluate them in relation to the times in which he lives, and be intelligent to assist in the transfer of this information to the next generation on a level that will foster appreciation and not rejection.

We are, after all, Italian-Americans, and another dimension of the family must be considered. As Italians of the past or Italian-Americans of the present, we are surely, curiously and intently moving toward a pluralism of the future, and we must stand up and say to the world that the Italian culture must be incorporated into the value system and custom of this new pluralistic society; the world will be richer and better if we can be a little of every culture, including Italian.



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