

by Melinda Blau

# What's Your Family's E.Q.

## (Emotional Quotient)?

**S**HEER DELIGHT MINGLED with abject fear the day Brenda and David Simon of New York City brought their daughter, Michelle, home from the hospital six years ago. "I remember thinking, 'How are we going to keep her alive during the night?' Little by little, the fears dissipated but not the sense of being responsible for another human being's life," Brenda Simon says. "We still worry a lot."

Many adults, even mental health professionals like the Simons—she's a clinical social worker, he's a family therapist—are not emotionally prepared for the new experience of becoming parents, let alone developing an emotionally healthy family.

"You spend nine months focused on the birth, but you hardly talk about what it will be like to be parents," says Craig Martin of Easthampton, Massachusetts. "That's what they should teach you in Lamaze class, not just how to breathe!"

The vanguard of professionals who study family life recognizes that functional families simply don't

conform to a one-size-fits-all mode. "We need to help families create new dreams to fit new realities," insists Froma Walsh, Ph.D., a family therapist, professor, and co-director of the Center for Family Health at the University of Chicago.

**Most parents know how important a healthy diet is to their family's well-being, but here's how to make sure yours is getting the right serving of emotional nurturing, too.**

At its best, a family can be a haven for its members, say therapists George Doub, M.F.C.C., and Virginia Scott, M.S.W., of Santa Cruz, California, who have presented Family Wellness seminars for 12 years. We want the family to function as a unit and to forge a lifelong connection with our kids, but we also need to encourage them to be independent and successful outside the family. The key is balancing both goals.

The foundation is laid when two people first commit to each other. Indeed, research indicates that the better the couple's relationship, the better the prognosis for a sound family life. Children of couples who make a successful adjustment to parenthood do better academically and socially five years later than do children of couples whose lives are derailed by the transition, according to a 10-year study by Carolyn Pape Cowan, Ph.D., and Philip A. Cowan, Ph.D., psychologists at the University of California at Berkeley, and authors of *When Partners Become Parents*.

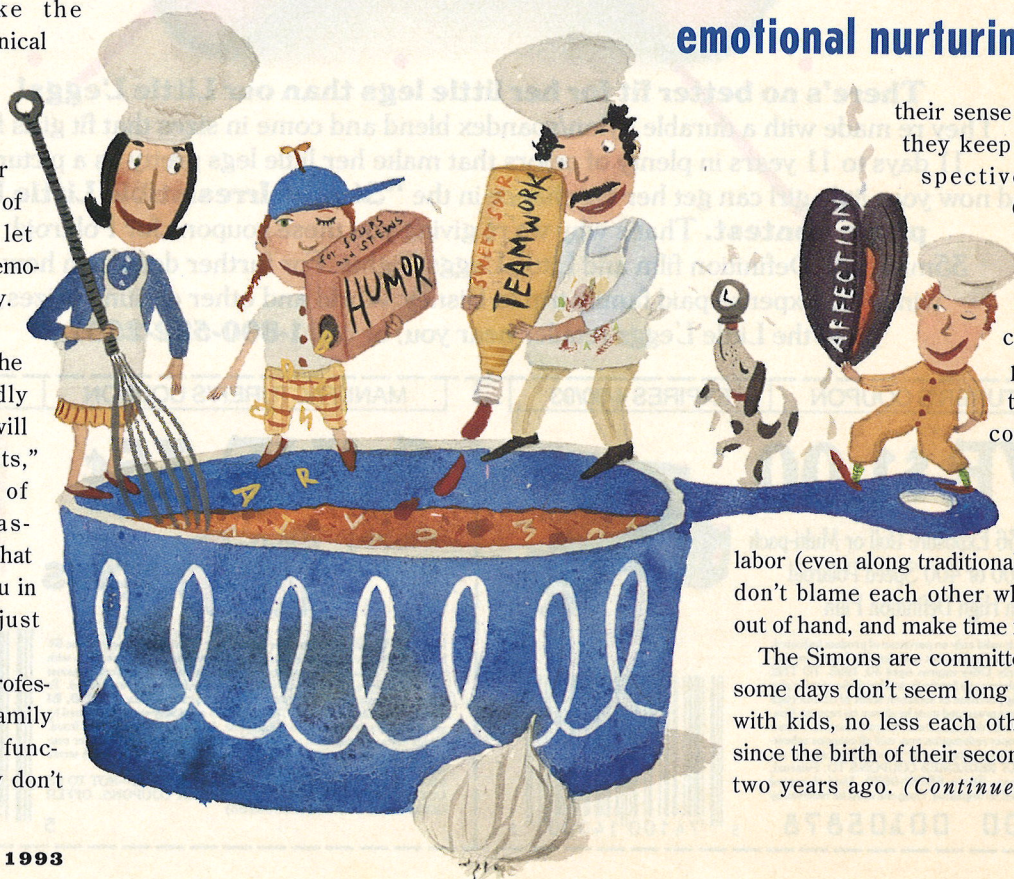
"Successful parents seem able to keep

their sense of humor, and they keep things in perspective," Dr. Pape Cowan says.

Such couples view "each difficulty as a challenge and put their heads together to come up with a plan." They also agree on the division of

labor (even along traditional gender lines), don't blame each other when things get out of hand, and make time for themselves.

The Simons are committed parents, but some days don't seem long enough to deal with kids, no less each other—especially since the birth of their second child, Adam, two years ago. (Continued on page 56)





"Sometimes, David and I have to say out loud, 'We are *not* going to talk about the kids now! This is *our* time!'" Brenda says. "Every Saturday night, we go out, even if we have nothing to do!"

A standing date is important, but parents also need to "make time and space for themselves in little ways," Scott stresses. "They should get their kids used to their taking time out *in the house*." When children are young, Scott says, announce parental time-outs by telling the kids, "Mommy and Daddy will be sitting in the kitchen and talking while you play in the living room."

Since 40 percent of divorces occur before children enter kindergarten, pay special attention to your relationship when your children are young, Dr. Pape Cowan says. Poor communication can polarize parents and obscure real issues, like differences on schoolwork or discipline. That's exactly what happened to Craig and Gail Martin. They were on the brink of divorce when Nathaniel was 4 and Tricia was 1.

"We thought the fighting was because of how we felt about each other," Craig says. "But when we went to a family therapist, what came into focus was that we had pretty much let our son run the show." An essential rule of parenting is to "be in charge," Doub says. But by the time Tricia came along, the Martins were locked in a prolonged bedtime routine with Nathaniel, who couldn't sleep unless his father lay on his bed with him.

With the support of their friends and coaching from their therapist, the Martins can now support each other's strengths and warn each other when they slip into old, nonproductive ways of dealing with the kids. When children see parents work together, each resolution is a lesson, Scott says. Parents who don't interrupt each other are teaching their children how to listen. And parents who can talk out their differences are demonstrating an important axiom about relationships: It's not conflict but how you deal with it that matters.

### Rolling With the Punches

An obstacle for many parents is that they want not just healthy families, but "perfect" ones, says Constance R. Ahrons, Ph.D., professor of sociology at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Parents *can* change a child's orientation to frustration, disappointment, and crisis. But they shouldn't try to make the child immune to change or take away the pain of going through it. Suppose a family is moving. Instead of saying, "Don't worry, you'll make plenty of new friends," it's better to empathize: "I remember moving when I was your age; I hated the idea, too."

While you shouldn't allow behavior that's off-limits, you should certainly encourage your children to express their feelings. That's what Dr. Ahrons advised the parents

of a girl who was angry about her father's impending remarriage. Her parents were looking for something to "cure" her anger, like changing the custody arrangement. "This is a normal reaction to change for a 7-year-old," Dr. Ahrons told them. "She has good reason to be angry. She wants Mommy and Daddy all to herself."

### Beyond the Myth

Children are keen observers. It's not so much what you *tell* a child that matters, but how you *act*, says William J. Doherty, Ph.D., a therapist and professor of family social sciences at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul. So, if you value togetherness, spend time with your kids. David Simon takes Michelle to the same restaurant every Saturday; and every Sunday, they make brunch. These consistent rituals give Michelle a sense of belonging.

Stephanie Coontz, author of *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, laments that TV in the Fifties "airbrushed" all the problems from the face of family life. On *Leave It to Beaver*, the "kids were so easily malleable that all you had to do was say one wise thing and that turned them around," says Coontz, who is also a professor of history at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Many parents today, she adds, "blame themselves for not living up to those myths."

But it's not enough to have "good values." Parents need luck, too. Regardless of whether they are working parents, single parents, divorced parents who work as a team, or stepparents, Dr. Walsh says, all parents should be applauded for trying to meet the challenges of family life in the Nineties. And all families should be supported for what they are doing right and helped to learn what they can do better—in their own relationships and in dealing with their children. ■

*Melinda Blau, a Child contributing editor, specializes in family and mental health issues. She is currently writing a book about co-parenting.*

## Ingredients of an Emotionally Healthy Family

**BE IN CHARGE** Family members can take three positions when they interact—above, below, or beside.

"Families work best when parents take the above position," Scott notes. Parents make the rules and inform kids of the consequences. And they aren't afraid to be firm when setting or enforcing limits.

**SPEND TIME** Be affectionate and attentive, and make children feel like they belong. When you're folding socks together or playing a game, you can be in the "beside" position or, if your kids are better at it than you are, in the "below" position!

**ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO BECOME GOOD AT SOMETHING**

Expose them to experiences that might pique their interest. Pay attention when they show interest or display a natural aptitude. Offer help when asked.

**MODEL GOOD COMMUNICATION** In healthy families, members express what they need, they know how to listen, and they solve problems together.

**ANTICIPATE AND PLAN FOR CHANGE** Expect reverberations throughout the family when there's a crisis or during developmental transitions. How you react to change hones your children's coping skills.

**GET SUPPORT** All parents need feedback, ideas, and validation. By staying in touch with other parents, you learn that you're not alone and that your "problems" are simply challenges that everyone faces.