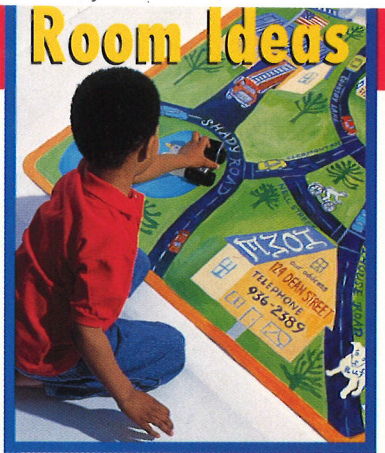


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# child

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR TODAY'S PARENTS



August 1995

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# GENERATION X PARENTS

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## Child exclusive

Xers have been called everything from slackers and whiners to cynics and twentynothings, but *not* Mom and Dad. A look at how this open-minded, family-oriented generation is bringing up their kids and redefining parenthood.

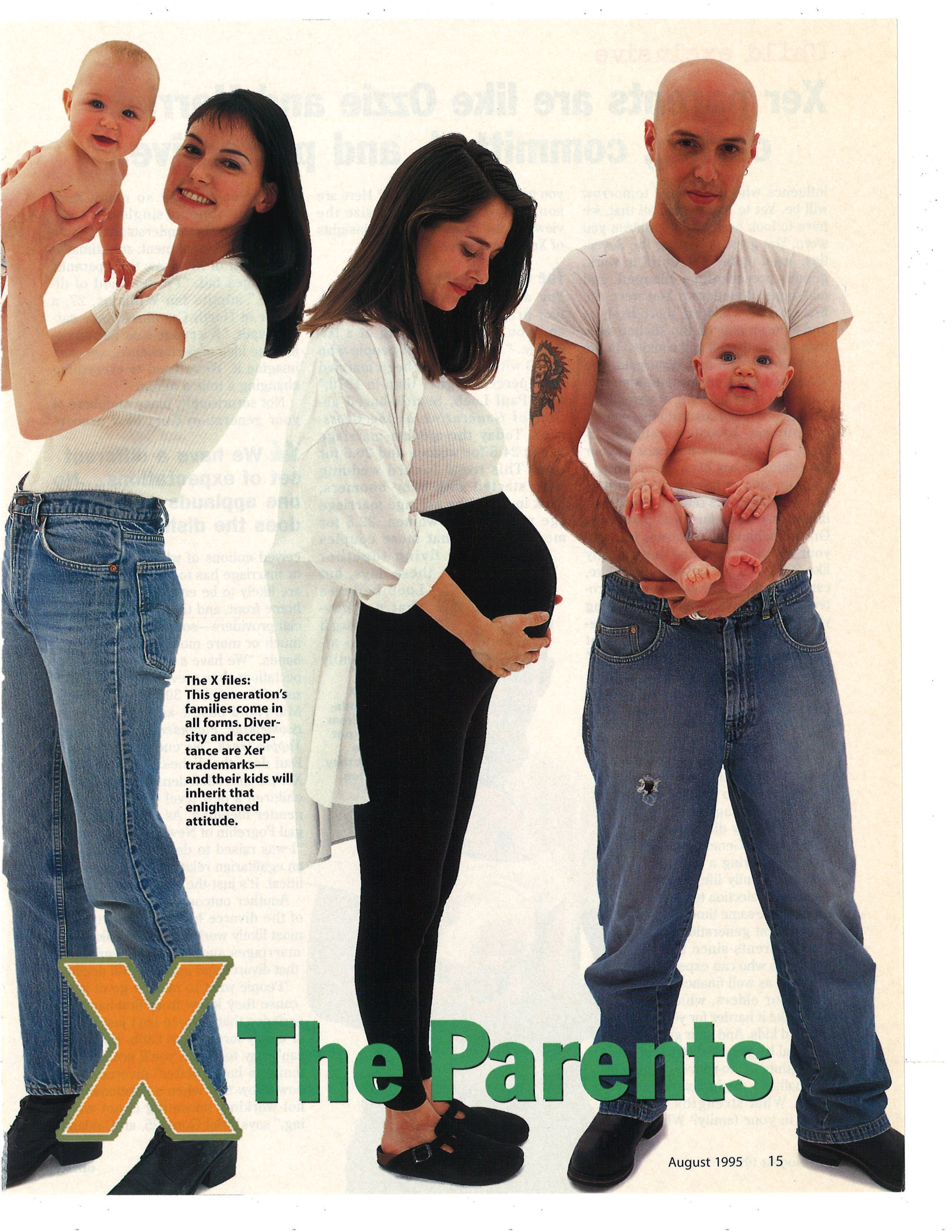
by Melinda Blau

If you're between the ages of 19 and 30, you probably share one quality with the 45 million other Americans your age: You don't see yourself as part of a generation. And why would you want to? The collective "you" has been categorized as a bunch of churlish malcontents and underachieving Bart Simpsons who would rather veg out in front of MTV than look for a McJob. The reality is anything but. A surprising 44 percent of you already have children, a trend that is sure to escalate in the next several years. And positive attitudes and ideals—not negativity—seem to personify your mindset as parents.

As twentysomethings enter parenthood, *Child* wanted to find out what you are feeling and experiencing. After all, your priorities, values, and concerns will



...and now, **Generation**



**The X files:**  
This generation's families come in all forms. Diversity and acceptance are Xer trademarks—and their kids will inherit that enlightened attitude.

# X The Parents

# Xer parents are like Ozzie and Harriet—caring, committed, and protective.

influence who the kids of tomorrow will be. Yet to understand all that, we have to look back at the children you were. You grew up during the Seventies, when mothers went off to work, gender prescriptions changed, and marriages floundered. You were the first latchkey children, more likely to find a Post-it note on the kitchen table than a plate of milk and cookies. In the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, you witnessed the transformation and, in some cases, devastation, of virtually all of society's major institutions—family, government, education, religion. Indeed, if there's any hallmark of your generation, it has been uncertainty.

An up side to having dealt with so many transitions is resiliency and flexibility, key traits for good parenting. On the subject of children, you and your fellow Xers sound surprisingly like Ozzie and Harriet—conservative, caring, committed, and fiercely protective. You're "worried about taking your kids through the same wide-open childhood experiences and want to do it differently and do it right," says Neil Howe, Great Falls, Virginia-based co-author of *13th-GEN: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* "This generation thinks there are all sorts of dangers—AIDS, drugs, violence, layoffs—and there's no real safety net, so they have to take care of themselves. They're going to try to create for their kids a magical, innocent world that they didn't have."

As parents, Generation Xers promise to bring a new sensitivity to family life, a new mantle of protection to childhood. At the same time, you are the first generation of young parents since the mid-1800s who can expect to not do as well financially as your elders, which may make it harder for you to afford kids. And your generational baggage—distrust of the establishment, do-your-own-thing individualism—might also weigh you down. What strengths will you bring to your family? What will

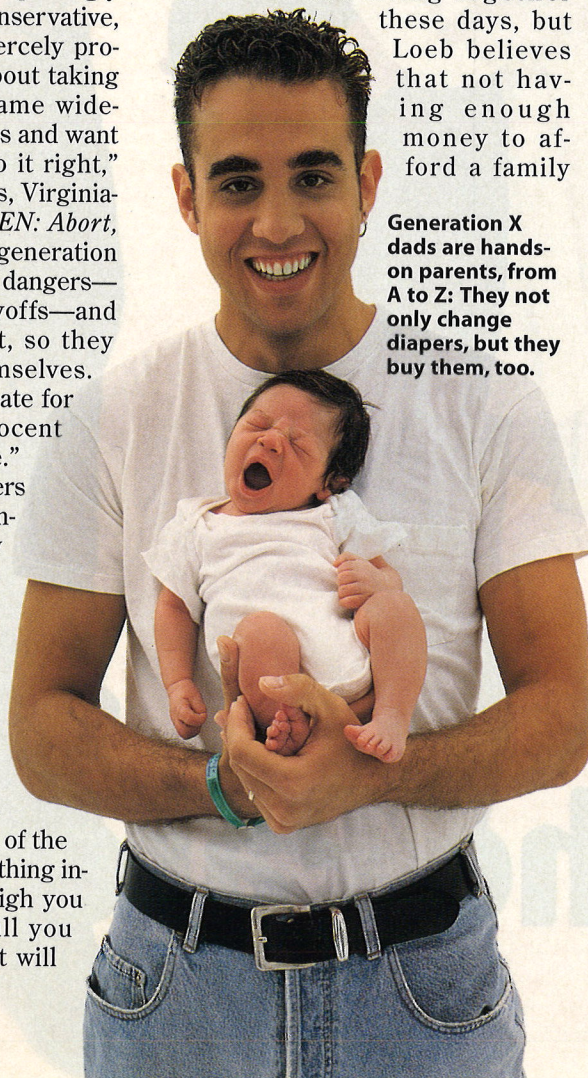
you pass on to your children? Here are some answers that synthesize the views of the experts and the insights of Xers themselves.

## The Commitments

You are going into marriage with feet firmly planted on the ground, and you're also marrying at a later age. "The number of people who hit 30 without having been married is 40 percent higher than in 1970," says Paul Loeb, Seattle-based author of *Generation at the Crossroad*. Today the median marriage age is 24.5 for women and 26.5 for men. This trend toward wedding later started with baby boomers; back in 1950, the average marriage age was 20.3 for women, 22.8 for men. It's true that more couples

are living together these days, but Loeb believes that not having enough money to afford a family

**Generation X dads are hands-on parents, from A to Z: They not only change diapers, but they buy them, too.**



is one reason why so many Xers bide their time as singles.

Some are also understandably cautious about commitment; an estimated 40 percent of Xers saw their parents' marriages fail. "I'm terrified of divorce," admits Ian Williams, 27, a writer in North Carolina whose parents split. "Everyone's so gun-shy—just the idea of permanence...we can't imagine it. We're used to everything changing a mile a minute."

Not surprisingly, many members of your generation don't have precon-

**“ We have a different set of expectations....No one applauds when Dad does the dishes. ”**

ceived notions of what a relationship or marriage has to look like. Xer men are likely to be equal partners on the home front, and the women are financial providers—sometimes making as much or more money than their husbands. "We have a different set of expectations than previous generations," says Steve Gibb, 30, Silver Springs, Maryland-based author of *Twentysomething, Floundering, and Off-the-Yuppie-Track*. "No one applauds when Dad does the dishes." Consequently, Xer parents often demonstrate to their children a new level of comfort with gender blending. As 30-year-old Abigail Pogrebin of New York City puts it, "I was raised to demand and respect an egalitarian relationship. It's not political. It's just the way I am."

Another outcome of being children of the divorce boom means you will most likely work harder to make your marriages succeed; Howe predicts that divorce and infidelity will decline.

"People want to make a go of it because they know from first-hand experience that divorce isn't just another family form," says Gibb. But if you can't stay together, you'll probably attempt to have "better" divorces. "We now know that when a relationship is not working, parenting is not working," says Ariel Gore, 25, an Oakland,

# As children of the divorce boom, you will work hard on your marriages.

California, mother of a 5-year-old and founder and editor of *Hip Mama*, a parenting 'zine. "People I talk to who are contemplating divorce are conscious of how to make their breakup a smoother transition for the children."

## Reality Bitters

In the past, it wasn't so politic for new parents to discuss just how much of a strain parenting could be. But your generation seems unwilling to candy-coat any situation—you want nothing less than the Whole Truth about the parenting experience. "Everyone is spreading the word," says Pogrebin, an associate producer for *60 Minutes* whose husband is an investment banker. "Friends with kids tell me that having children is a tremendous joy, but it's also very draining and stressful for your relationship."

That doesn't mean, however, that all of you are delaying childbirth. "I felt like I had a lot of energy that I wanted to put into my family now," says Gore. Some women, she points out, grow disenchanted with the yuppie track and discover that there's more to life than a career. And others, swayed by the heightened awareness of infertility problems, worry that waiting too long might decrease their chances of getting pregnant.

One commonality among Xer parents is Dad's hands-on role; he is expected to be a real partner in parenting. Becky Larson, a 30-year-old who recently left her job as a software programmer analyst in Sudbury, Massachusetts, to become a full-time mother to her three kids, recalls, "When we first talked about my getting pregnant, we had discussions about this being a team thing—it wouldn't be just me doing everything." And it hasn't. Her husband changes diapers, bathes the kids, and does the food shopping.

Sandra Rodman Mann, Ed.D., a New York City family therapist who has been running parenting groups for the last 20 years, says she sees a lot of guilt among Generation X parents, especially dual-career couples. "Unlike baby boomers, they don't suffer guilt

about having to work. They know they have the right to pursue a career," she says. But Xers are especially "anxious about making sure that their kids have the best opportunities—the right child-care, the right school, the right after-school program." Many of you know what it feels like to grow up with two working parents.

As part of the most racially diverse generation in history, you tend to be realistic about the diversity your children face. You have no illusions that ethnic groups may only "stick to their own kind." Xers are already beginning to demand toys for their kids that reflect the real world, like multi-ethnic

**“ Xers want to provide a special innocence for their kids. ”**

and female Power Rangers, says Susan Mitchell, Ithaca, New York-based author of *The Official Guide to the Generations*. "Xers were raised with women doing nontraditional things, and people of all races; they're going to raise their kids with greater concern and awareness of equality."

Given the turbulence of your childhood years, you're also more likely to be fiercely protective of your children, restricting the TV programs they're exposed to and, as your kids get older, monitoring their comings and go-

ings more closely than your parents may have. "Xer parents want to provide a special innocence for their kids. Their children won't think they have to take care of themselves," says Howe. Mann sees this as a positive trend. "Allowing children to go through stages in a timely manner has to have a healthy impact," she says. "There won't be that accumulation of anger and resentment that comes from the imposition of premature adulthood."

## Part-time Worker Wannabes

As in any generation, a small proportion of Xers—perhaps those dubbed "slackers"—are opting for less stressful, nonconforming lifestyles. But many more of you are struggling with a problem that also plagued baby boomers, says Denver psychologist Irwin Matus, Ph.D., author of *Wrestling with Parenthood*: "How do I have a full life? How do I achieve a balance so that I can have a career and not ask my children to pay the price?" Having watched this drama play out, many of you—particularly women—don't like what you've seen. Meg Breslin, 28, a journalist in Chicago, has an older sister who made sacrifices for her career. "She has regrets about working so much and not seeing her kids."

"A big issue for Xer parents is quantity time," Howe points out. "They were raised on quality time, which was often a euphemism for 'I don't have

## Kid Stuff: A Generational Guide

### YOUR PARENTS

*Ozzie and Harriet*  
Pot roasts  
Buster Browns  
Candy Land  
Rotary phones  
45s  
Good & Plenty  
Coke  
Sears  
Slinky  
Howdy Doodie

### YOU

*The Brady Bunch*  
Big Macs  
Adidas sneakers  
Atari  
Touch-tone phones  
Tapes  
Pop Rocks  
Kool-Aid  
Sassoon  
Rubik's Cube  
Mister Rogers

### YOUR KIDS

*The Nanny*  
Turkey burgers  
Air Jordans  
Myst  
Cellular phones  
CDs  
Gummi Bears  
Snapple  
The Gap  
Game Boy  
Barney

# This generation wants flexible careers, part-time work, and at-home jobs.

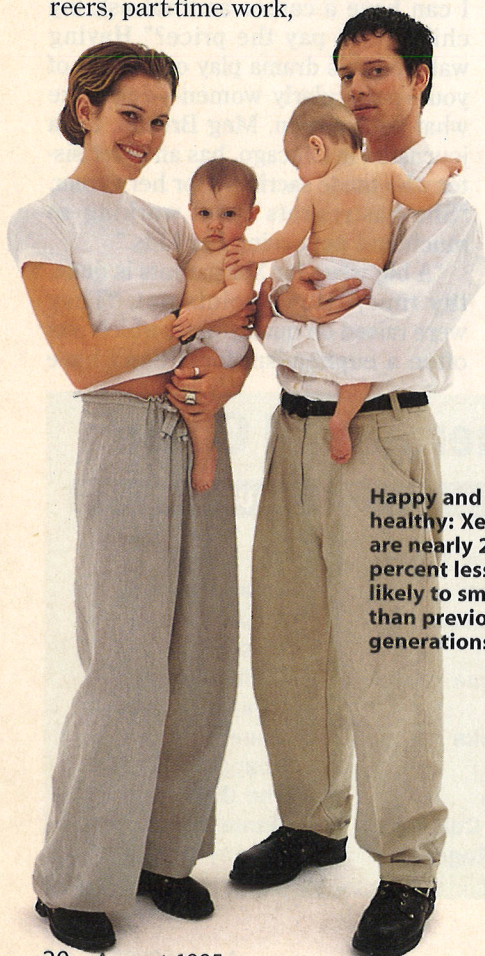
much time.' Forget about that five minutes of special love and attention. Can you put in the big time, can you do without the extra salary?"

For sure, many of you would *like* to

**“ We realize that when you die, it’s who you love, not how much money you made. ”**

stay home with your young children, but the reality is that you need two incomes. It's a thorny issue. "We realize that when you die, it's who you love, not how much money you made," says Jennifer Pontelandolfo, 25, an associate newspaper editor in Westport, Connecticut. "But that's tempered by the fact that you can't live on love."

Those who adamantly declare, "I don't want other people to raise my kids," often opt for more flexible careers, part-time work,



**Happy and very healthy: Xers are nearly 20 percent less likely to smoke than previous generations.**

or jobs they can do at home. Unfortunately, the business world has far to go in regard to easing the family juggling act. The power to change that is in your hands. As your children get older, if you work toward widespread reform (instead of cutting individual deals), you'll be the first generation to make the workplace family-friendly, says family historian Stephanie Coontz, Olympia, Washington-based author of *The Way We Never Were*.

At the same time, Mitchell's research bears out that few of you see staying at home as a prerequisite for having a healthy child: "Xer parents worry about daycare. But they don't necessarily believe Mom at home is better," she says. "If a mother is resentful about staying home, kids pick it up," says Gore.

Often, priorities do change once a baby arrives. "I was very much defined by my career," says New Yorker Joan Kagan, 26, a disabilities researcher who has a 2-year-old son. "But now that I have David, my identity is as a mother. My career has taken a backseat." It also may not worry you to step off the fast track temporarily. "I may have two or three careers," says Breslin, whose mother got a master's degree, became a high school counselor, and then a stockbroker while she was growing up. "I see through her that there are many options."

However you manage your career, when you're with your kids, you want to really be there for them. Generation Xers, says Howe, "like to separate their lives from their jobs. They think their kids are better off if they don't know what's going on in their parents' work. That's part of giving their children a happier, sheltered reality."

## Savvy Shoppers

More than any area of life, economics colors the choices of your generation. Thanks to the recession of 1990, you entered the work force during a fiscal crisis. "Compared to their own parents at the same age," predicts Howe, "Xers' poverty rate will be higher, their rate of

## Generation X Parent Traps

There's lots to be hopeful about if you're a Generation X parent, but experts point to some pitfalls:

- **Harsh economic times will be a constant source of stress.** Help your children appreciate things that don't cost any or much money—nature hikes, libraries, museums, cultural events.
- **You may not set enough limits for your kids.** Even if you feel guilty because you've been at work all day, when your 5-year-old has a tantrum because you won't let him watch *Beavis and Butt-Head*, stay in charge. Bolster your decisions by reading books about what's developmentally appropriate, and trust your instincts.
- **You may isolate yourself from other parents.** As kids, you may have been on your own, but now it's time to develop a solid support system. Join a parenting group or become involved in a civic or community center. Such connections are vital to the health of your family.
- **The fast-paced culture breeds insecurity.** Decide what values you want for your children—and stick to them.

home ownership lower, their pensions and healthcare benefits skimpier."

"For most Generation X folks, simply getting by is difficult," agrees Loeb. Still, you're struggling to save, putting cash into IRAs or some kind of nest egg. "We spend a lot of time thinking about paying for a home, saving for the kids' college," says Breslin.

Although many of you don't feel that great about not being able to give your kids the same kinds of benefits that your parents may have given you, you probably subscribe to Gibb's practical philosophy, "Living on less is not living less good." You're more likely to be creative in coming up with inexpensive ways to plan fun family activities and adventures.

You definitely know how to spend money wisely. Being exposed to a slew of brand names and television commercials as kids has made you the sharpest generation of consumers ever. You're (Continued on page 134)

## Child exclusive

Continued from page 20

also likely to help your kids develop the skills to make smart consumer choices. "I'm careful that my daughter doesn't stress out about the fact that we don't have much money, but I want her to be conscious of what things cost and what they're really worth," says Gore. "I try to teach her critical thinking."

### Fitness Fans (Not Fanatics)

The health craze that was launched by baby boomers isn't likely to die out in your generation. "Maintaining yourself ensures a healthy old age, and that's how I'll raise my kids—to take care of themselves," says Laura Kellison, 30, of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, who is getting a degree in social work.

Not surprisingly, Xer parents are not rigid about nutrition. "I'll encourage fruits and vegetables without being overly crazy about his diet," says Lauren Resnikoff, a principal in Commack, New York, referring to her 1-year-old son, Andrew. Other Generation X parents admit that they're definitely not above an occasional trip to McDonald's.

Exercise is a regular part of your lives. Some of you work out at the gym several times a week; others spend time outdoors, hiking or bicycling. And you're introducing your children to these pleasures in all sorts of ways, whether it's through jogging with strollers or biking with baby.

A more ominous shadow may be cast on your family health by changes in the healthcare system. Visits to the pediatrician may be more affordable, but "with managed care, the relationship between caregiver and patient will be de-emphasized," points out Moisy

Shopper, M.D., a St. Louis psychiatrist. This will put more pressure on you to monitor your children's health, to keep your own records, to be better informed, and to be more vocal about demanding services. Those of you who distrust institutions may opt for alternative healthcare—chiropractic, acupuncture, and homeopathy—a growing national trend. "Xers are very

Xers' parenting, both in terms of their ability to use resources and their attitudes," says Mitchell. "Educated parents, in general, are more active, more civic minded, more likely to vote."

Growing up in the Seventies, some of you were guinea pigs in various kinds of educational experiments, such as open classrooms; you were the first generation to be diagnosed with learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder. This honed your awareness of educational strategies, and you plan to keep a watchful eye on your own kids' schooling. Every interviewee answered "of course" when asked about involvement in PTA and after-school activities.

Because lots of you were weaned on Atari video games and did term papers on Macintoshes, you're also fearless, even aggressive, about exposing your kids to technology. Many of your 2- and 3-year-olds already have their own computers. "Technology is to Xers what TV was to the boomers," says Mitchell. "But Xers are going to be left in the dust by their children."

### Losing Religion?

"Xers do not particularly believe in organized religion," says Mitchell, who notes that only 59 percent say that religion is still relevant to life today. It's not surprising that religion, to some of

you, represents another institution to beware of. "To be spiritual, you don't have to be in church," says Chrystina Lunn, 26, a fitness specialist in Washington, DC, and mother of a 2-year-old girl. "My faith is based on trying to do what's right and not hurting others."

There's a wide range of possibilities available that generations before you didn't have. Old religious orders are

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likely to consider these options when their kids get sick," says Mitchell.

### Power PTA Parents

Xer parents are highly educated, especially the women. In 1992, among 16- to 24-year-olds, 63.8 percent of women had enrolled in college a year after high school; in 1975, 49 percent had. "Education definitely will impact

changing their practices in order to attract younger congregations. And new nondenominational faiths are springing up, which are heavy on the spirituality, light on the dogma. Some Xers are still searching: "I like the notion of church and having a community of shared ideas," says Kellison, "but I haven't found one that's comfortable to me." Others continue to join mainstream churches or temples, especially after their kids are born, although most tend to prefer after-school religious training to parochial schools.

Predictably, most Xer parents believe that children should be allowed a choice and that there are many routes to spirituality. Gore, for example, who "doesn't follow a specific religion," celebrates Christian and Buddhist holidays. "When questions come up—like, 'What happens when you die?'—I tell my daughter as many beliefs as possible and then ask, 'What do *you* think?'"

### The Next Generation

Despite all the labels that have been doled out to Xers, no entire generation can be categorized. But in looking at your potential as parents, some pretty wonderful qualities are already evident. From all indications, you will stabilize family life and strive to make the workplace more family-friendly. And because of your intuitive grasp of reality and your proven ability to deal with change, your children will get a great start in life. Xers, often forced to grow up too quickly, "will allow their children to behave like children," says Howe. "As a result, Xer kids are likely to be upbeat and cheerful. They will be aware that there are big problems that their par-

ents didn't solve; but as adults, they will be ready to step in and fill the gaps."

Of course, your children's future will depend most on your ability "to teach them to be kind and empathic, and, at the same time, make them zestfully curious about learning," says Alice Honig, Ph.D., professor of child development at Syracuse University in New York. "You want your child to

## custody wars

*Continued from page 81*

to assume custody, the 'tender years' doctrine that favored placing young children with their mothers is no longer being taken for granted," says Dr. Siegler. Most consultants heed the wishes of the children, bearing in mind that kids over age 10 have a more cognitive and emotional understanding of their situation.

### A Better Way

Due to the devastating impact that custody battles have on kids, experts are seeking routes to head off courtroom disputes or at least soften their blows. More judges are mandating counseling for both parties to ensure that tensions are not taken out on kids. Mediation—in which a trained professional helps couples hammer out a co-parenting plan and a lawyer legalizes their agreement—is currently court-required in over 16 states.

Even with coaching, divorce will remain a rocky process. Because there are no absolutes when it comes to which parent is the better custodian, custody is a matter to be decided based on the particulars of a case. In the long run, this approach will prove beneficial to children. Now that fathers have an equal shot at getting the kids, says Zorza, "parents, judges, and therapists will have an opportunity to determine with

whom the child *really* belongs." ■

*Sally Abrahms, a mother of three and author of Children in the Crossfire, lives in Boston. She specializes in family issues.*

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wonder how the world works and to work at it. And you want him to be an agent in life—not to expect the world to spoon-feed him." Certainly, few generations would understand this wisdom better than yours. ■

*Child contributor Melinda Blau, who lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, is an award-winning journalist.*