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### Kids – Today's or Yesterday's

If you have ever watched an old movie, you have seen how dramatically different today's culture is from that of just seventy years ago. The evolution of the family – specifically the change in the behaviors and attitudes of children – over this time period has been quite a notable change. We will examine this change in children by inspecting two versions of the movie *Cheaper by the Dozen*. The original came out in the 1950's and portrayed a family living in the 1920's with twelve children. The new film came out in 2004 and depicted a modern-day family, likewise having twelve children. We will examine three aspects of child behavior and attitude that have evolved since the 1920's – obedience, respect, and responsibility.

Of the three areas of child behavior, obedience had the least dramatic differences. Obedience, as it will be discussed, occurs when a child carries out the direct instructions of one of his/her parents. Analysis of obedience includes not just whether the action was performed, but how quickly the child began obeying, what other responses were given, and what sort of attitude the child displayed while obeying.

In the original movie, children nearly always carried out their parents' wishes with no hint of intention to do otherwise. There were exceptions, of course, including the way the children continued to talk over their father during a family council meeting, and the fact that the oldest daughter refused to grow her hair back, as her father had told her to. When the children did obey, they nearly always did so with no hesitation and with a respectful acknowledgement of

their parents' requests (e.g. "Yes Mother"). In addition, while they may have at first disliked the instructions they were given, they quickly resolved themselves to the fact that their parents must be obeyed, and cheerfully did what was asked of them.

In the new movie the children generally followed their parents' instructions, but the obedience was not immediate. The children often seemed to contemplate, case by case, whether they should obey their parents in a given matter. Just like in the original movie, there were cases of explicit disobedience, although those found in the new release seemed much more extreme. For example: all the younger children, after being grounded and told they could not attend a friend's birthday party, proceeded to sneak out of the house and attend anyway. In another case, the oldest daughter, while back for a visit, was told that her boyfriend could most definitely not stay in the same room she was in. However, she proceeded to admit him to the house in the middle of the night, which brought about extreme disapproval from her father. When these children did obey, they often waited to do so until it was convenient for them, such that they had to be told a second time. They consistently failed to verbally acknowledge their parents' wishes, and if they didn't appreciate the assignment they were given, they would make their preferences clear, often remaining upset about the task even after it was complete.

The varying levels of respect that the children showed their parents was undoubtedly one of the most dramatic differences between the two movies. The children in the original film had a huge level of respect for their parents and would rarely even play a joke on them. The most disrespectful occurrence in the original movie involved the oldest daughter telling her father at the dinner table that she would not grow back her hair which she had cut against his wishes. It was only the mother's pleading that prevented the father from disciplining his daughter for defying him in front of the family; such a thing was a serious offense. Probably the next most

disrespectful thing occurred when the other children laughed at their father upon discovering that he was sick with the whooping cough, just like the rest of them.

In the new release, disrespect was rampant, which was evidenced by the careless attitude the children displayed toward disobedience. The children deliberately listened in on conversations they knew they were not supposed to hear; they mumbled among themselves about the poor decisions their parents were making, or about how their father was being a selfish jerk and not keeping his promises. To their credit, the father was making many poor decisions. However, such a thing is no excuse for disrespectful behavior. The oldest son frequently told his parents things like “Did I ever tell you I don’t like you very much?,” “Thanks for ruining my life,” or (when being given a car) “Are you trying to bribe me?” Such comments were taken in stride by the parents, while the same comments would have shocked the parents of the original movie beyond belief. In both versions of the movie the parents decided to move – against the will of their children. The new movie shows how the children continued to sulk about the decision even after the move had been made. This is in sharp contrast to the original movie, in which the children, despite their dislike of the situation, resolved to make the best of it once their father made it clear that his decision was final.

Responsibility – a result of willing obedience and respect – was another major difference between the movies. Being responsible is making the right decisions and following those decisions up with the right actions. In the case of children, it is making decisions that their parents would approve of – it is the carrying out a parent’s wishes even when those wishes are not explicitly stated – it is being mature even when there is no one there to set an example for you. Since the children were rarely seen alone, there were few explicit demonstrations of responsibility or irresponsibility in the first movie. However, just in the ending sequence there is

enough information to give one a good understanding of the responsibility level of the children. At the time of the ending sequence the father had died and the mother was asking the children whether they would prefer to move to their grandmother's house in California or to stay together. Staying together would have involved the children running the house while their mother took a trip to Europe to continue her husband's work. The fact that the mother was willing to let the children run the house without her speaks volumes to the immense amount of faith she had in their responsibility level. Her opinions were confirmed by the children's instant agreement to run the house, their promises to do what was necessary, and their actions that immediately followed those promises (e.g. the oldest daughter went to begin planning dinner). These aspects of the ending sequence make it quite evident that the children were thought of as highly responsible by their parents.

The new movie contained more obvious instances of responsibility (or irresponsibility, as the case was). Even with the parents at home, the younger children would do things that they knew would not be acceptable, such as tormenting the oldest daughter's boyfriend. One of the boys ran away from home; watching the movie, you couldn't help but feel sorry for him, but leaving the house without anyone knowing about it is, nevertheless, irresponsible. Another instance of irresponsibility was found in the oldest daughter, who moved out of the house so that she could live with her boyfriend before they were married – something that her parents had obviously been adamantly against for some time. The overall irresponsibility of the children became quite evident when the mother left for a book tour, leaving the kids with their dad, who was only home part of the day. Instead of stepping up and helping to run the house, the kids began taking advantage of the lack of parental authority; they began to do things that they would have normally been taboo. To be fair, the children in the new movie's family were not always

acting immaturely, and some of them hardly did so at all, but overall their actions screamed irresponsibility.

It is clear that the modern family fell short of the original family in these areas of obedience, respect, and responsibility. Clearly our culture is changing, but is it really changing for the better? Are we as a culture letting our next generation slide into irresponsibility? Perhaps if we are not so afraid to discipline our children, they will begin again to obey us, respecting our authority and ultimately making our values into theirs, producing that responsibility that is so lacking in the modern child.