

**LIVING**  
 Edited by Susan Schwartz  
 susan.schwartz@scmp.com



Illustration: Wilson Tsang

From an early age, Cindy Wong felt unwanted in her family. The boys were loved; the girls weren't important. Three days after turning 14, she vowed to leave them at the first opportunity. "I was quietly doing my homework in my room when my elder brother stormed in. He'd had a bad day. He ordered me to take my homework into the living room and when I refused, he dragged me there by my hair. With my parents and sister looking on, he fetched the stick my father kept in the kitchen for beatings. He whacked me once, twice. I was biting my jaw so hard my gums were bleeding, but I refused to cry. My father was watching and he urged my brother, 'Hit her harder'. The pain from the third whack was so excruciating I couldn't control my tears."

Born in Hong Kong, with two older brothers and a younger sister, Wong learnt quickly how to fend for herself. "Whatever my parents did, the boys were always the priority. To make things worse, my mother was a compulsive gambler, so my sister and I became responsible for all the cooking, cleaning and washing. By the age of 10, I was a very good cook, preparing meals for the entire family. But this didn't mean we girls were allowed to slack at school. If we got a bad mark on our report card my father's stick would come out. One red mark, one whack, two red marks, two whacks. My brothers were exempt from housework and the stick. They could do no wrong. I accepted I was powerless and could only feel resentful and angry towards my brothers, but I knew the day I turned 18 I would run away from home."

Alice Yu Pik-lai from ReSource the Counselling Centre says that although many siblings say they weren't treated equally by their parents, they don't feel resentful because they understand that their parents loved them and tried their best. "It's not a source of grumbling unless the favouritism is obvious," Yu says. "If it is, there are definite consequences when a child feels their parents have displayed blatant favouritism or have treated siblings unequally."

"The result of favouritism can often be emotional difficulties and these usually take two forms: helplessness or anger. Helplessness can lead to a perception of low self-esteem. The child gets the idea she doesn't measure up. If it becomes the dominant emotion, the person can become depressed. Whereas, when you're angry it gives you motivation to move on and to excel. It gives you an attitude."

Simon Lassiter, 38, was never beaten by his parents, but feels as resentful and overlooked as Wong. "Because I was the youngest and

# Growing pains

Childhood can be difficult when parents play favourites, write **Tara Jenkins** and **Karen Pittar**

reasonably capable, mum and dad felt I didn't need much, so I don't think we bonded the way they did with my elder brother. I compensated by changing my personality to become a facilitator. I was always trying to smooth things over within the family.

"Dad always said the first-born son was the important one," Lassiter says. "I don't think he was being intentionally hurtful. He just didn't think about the consequences of what he said. It never really bothered me until I got old enough to realise that they see me differently – especially in the past 10 years – and this has had a profound impact. They don't view me as being as important as James, and they don't value my advice and opinions. I guess I'm the more financially successful, but in their eyes this only means I need even less from them."

"My parents have given James thousands and thousands of dollars. When they sold their house, they gave him furniture, paintings, family mementos. I got nothing because they didn't think I'd care. They

contribute to James' children's school fees, and are forever buying them clothes and toys. The one time I had to borrow HK\$20 from mum for a car park, she reminded me about it for six months. I don't care so much about the money, but I don't think they realise how much their affection means to their children and grandchildren. We all crave praise and recognition."

Lassiter and Wong have resolved to treat their children differently. "As a parent I've learnt that I don't want to love a child in a different way just because of their position in the family," Lassiter says. "You have to recognise that your children are different and love them for that. Love them for not being perfect. My parents were never brutal, but it was casual cruelty. As a parent, I realise you have to be careful how you treat your children."

Wong agrees, and says she wants her sons to have the childhood she never had.

Parenting expert Katherine Sellery says it's more common for people to transfer their unresolved

issues to other relationships. They'll often repeat these patterns over and over again. "The only way to move on is to see the pattern and break it," she says. "Change it by seeing what you're doing."

It has taken Wong years to confront her family and work

**Parents probably have favourites and hate themselves when they don't feel the same about their other children**

Katherine Sellery, parenting expert

through her issues. "Because of my childhood I always had low self-esteem, and this translated into being overly friendly and giving in all of my relationships. The result is that I'm always taken advantage of. Although I still have issues, I've

moved on. I understand it's nothing to be ashamed of. I've forgiven my father, but I don't love him. I uphold my responsibility as a daughter and sister, but that's it."

Is it possible to parent each child equally? Sellery says no. "Parents probably have favourites, and they hate themselves when they don't feel the same about their other children. But they need to realise that every child is different, and every child needs something different from them. It's impossible to treat them the same. Your behaviour to each child must be different."

Yu agrees. "A lot of parents don't understand that equality isn't always good. If you give a 10-year-old HK\$100 a week, it doesn't mean you give the same amount to a five-year-old. As long as children feel they're emotionally and physically taken care of, they don't need to be treated the same way. The issue isn't whether we're treated equally, but whether we feel loved, nurtured and cared for – whether we feel warmth and appreciation from our parents."

## Signposts: Who are you?

Michelle Gabbe

Some of us appear to lead double lives. Have you ever known a hard-nosed, bottom-line-driven chief executive who terrorises his underlings but buckles to every demand of his toddler? Or a primary school student who's stubborn, loud and bossy around the house but is described by her teachers as "an introspective, co-operative follower"?

These extreme cases illustrate our common desire to seek fulfilment by expressing our true nature. Free online self-assessment tools that reveal your preferred communication style, personality type and primary energy channels offer a great way to start getting in touch with which environments bring out the best in you.

But how else can you identify the values that comprise the "who" in you? Values and morals are distinct. Although everyone has values, the same can't be said of morals. Values describe personally meaningful beliefs, standards and behaviours that represent the ideal you. We naturally operate according to our core values whenever life is running smoothly and there's more than enough time for fun and relaxation. Uncover your four core values with these three steps:

- Quickly write out, without too much forethought or judgment, as many values as you can think of. Allow yourself to include things that seem silly or too audacious. A starter list of 25 items might begin like this: honesty, compassion, creativity, modesty, fidelity, insightfulness, leadership, meticulousness, charm, and so on.
- Narrow down the list to 10 items by removing anything that would become unnecessary if you had all the love, job support and financial resources you desire.
- Finally, simply pick the four values that are most attractive to you.

It may surprise you to find that one or more of your core values appears to be missing from your personal or professional life. You might be striving to live your values unconsciously without realising it. A fellow coach who normally looks for the silver linings in dark clouds frequently complained about



Illustration: Catherine Tai

a persistent frustration at work. As a human resources manager, she knew that the lack of a definable company culture at work was the source of many staff grievances. Listening to her describe her participation in meetings, it seemed that her colleagues respected her opinions and routinely sought her guidance. My question to her was: How would you approach this situation if you were an executive with formal authority to make visionary decisions?

Seeing that she had pigeonholed herself into playing the support role she was expected to play, she felt motivated to assume power. Donning her leader hat, she excitedly initiated a plan to develop a company purpose and a set of organisational values.

Putting yourself on a purposeful path is a breeze when your core values are clear. Examine each of your personal and professional goals by asking: Would I still pursue this goal if my home mortgage was paid in full? If I was happily married with as many children as I want? If no one else would ever find out whether I achieved it or not? Answering "no" is a clue that the goal may be out of alignment with the true you.

Knowing your true values will arm you with a powerful tool when you find yourself faced with a difficult decision. Tally up the pros and cons and check them all against your four core values. How might the true you be compromised by taking that leap – or by not taking it?

Michelle Gabbe is a member of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community (info@coachinghk.org)

## Vet's casebook: They call it puppy love

**I'd like to get a small dog, but as I work full-time I'd only be able to take it out in the early morning and evening during the week. Is this enough exercise? Also, would it be OK to keep a small dog indoors when I'm at work, or do I need some type of outdoor space? Finally, what breed should I choose?**

The ideal environment for a fit, young healthy dog is lots of access to the outdoors: fields, beaches and hills to run around on and perhaps a few rabbits to chase. However, many small- to medium-sized dogs fit well into Hong Kong's space-conscious environment and can get by on a minimum 20-30 minute walk twice or three times a day.

They also need to be occupied during the day – playing with toys, interacting with family members, working for their food, listening to the radio and so on. Puppy classes and playgroups are great fun and highly recommended for all dogs – especially the small, intelligent, but sometimes dominant, pocket pooches. Smaller cross-breeds in Hong Kong are sturdy and healthy, in general, especially compared with some so-called pedigrees you see in a few of the less salubrious pet shops.

Dogs of the Yorkshire terrier up to cocker spaniel size fit well in most Hong Kong flats, but use common sense. Unfortunately, many pure-bred dogs have

breed predispositions to certain problems, so I'm loath to recommend one type.

Weekend exercise is great for dogs and their owners, and a good bonding time. Remember also that a dog is for life – so if you're not sure you'll be able to devote the necessary amount of time, space, love and care to a dog for up to 15 years, please think again.

We still get a lot of surrendered animals in Hong Kong. Try the SPCA, HK Dog Rescue, HK Alley Cats or SAA to give an animal a second chance.

If your hours are long, consider a cat or even two. Cats adjust well to whatever space is given to them, and will happily catnap the day away. Again, stimulation such as toys, music, a view out of a (closed) window and decent playtime are essential. Two cats will keep each other company and don't require any more work than one.

As an alternative to having your own dog, you could volunteer at one of the animal charities, such as the SPCA (spca.org.hk) or HK Dog Rescue (hongkongdogrescue.com). They're always in need of people to help out with dog walking, socialising, cleaning and so on. So you may find some fulfilling weekend work with them.

Alison Main is with Stanley Veterinary Centre. Send questions via susan.schwartz@scmp.com



Photo: Dickson Lee