



Family Trees Are Emotional And Helpful — But Schools Should Stop Assigning Them

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A family tree seems innocent enough.

It's just branches above branches with names of relatives — and the further you go, the more distant those relatives get.

But when my daughter brought home what I thought was a family tree assignment from her Jewish studies program, I panicked. It turned out to be an assignment to create a family tree for a family in the bible, but before I knew that, I had a lot of thoughts.

That's because my family includes divorced parents and two step-families. And on my daughter's family tree, it's a little more complicated.

Family Trees Can Be Emotional

You see, I had my daughter on my own with a sperm donor — a known donor who is a friend and who has never had a parental role in my daughter's life. My donor's family isn't involved, either.

The tree gets more complicated because I started co-parenting my daughter when she was a toddler, and she now refers to her other parent as her dad and is close to their relatives. The branches keep growing, but it's not too clear who gets put on the tree and who doesn't.

From that co-parenting relationship, my daughter grew close to cousins and great-grandparents. But she has less of a relationship to aunts, uncles and grandparents, who weren't supportive in the beginning, and didn't take roles as relatives until it was too late. By the time they had come around, she didn't view them by their generational roles (aunt/uncle, grandmother/grandfather).

My side of the family doesn't make the exercise any easier. My mother and I were estranged until her recent passing, and my stepfather hasn't been in my life for even longer. My father died when I was nine, just a bit older than my daughter is now. And his second wife, my stepmother, stopped being in my life when I was in my teens. While I may have had strained relationships with my parents, my daughter and I both view their relatives as ours. I have a living grandmother and we see her. Sometimes I wonder if my daughter considers her, her great-grandmother, a grandparent.

Family Trees Can Be Draining

While I could include my parents on a family tree, they're very much not her family — in fact, I'm pretty sure my daughter doesn't know any of my parents' names. I remember her school having a "Grandparent's Day" event once and her asking if she had grandparents. (It's for the best that they've not been in her life, but still emotionally complex territory.) Including them on a family tree or not isn't a clear-cut decision. It's draining to consider, and a lot to talk to an eight-year-old about.

As innocent a project as a family tree is for some kids and families, there are other families like ours who might find it complicated to put something like this together. Like a friend who adopted her daughter when she was school-aged, and her teacher asked how she could not have any baby photos to bring in for her project.

In our case, the family tree assignment turned out to be a misunderstanding, but that doesn't change the very real response I had to it or the things it forced me to consider.

Sometimes I wish there were more opportunity for parents to be in conversation with teachers and instructors about the realities of our situations and the sensitive topics that may come up. Other times I just wish that it was assumed that at least some children would have related complexities. I think

things are slowly getting better in terms of representation of less conventional families, but there's still a long way to go. But I still think that these sorts of assignments are tricky to navigate with young kids in schools and early education programs, and that they're maybe best left as prompts for families to look at together at home, without deadlines or grades associated.