

[We Are Family](#) Season 2, Episode 17: Aasif Mandvi

Aasif Mandvi:

My name is [Aasif Mandvi](#) and to me, family is your origin story. It's where you come from. It's what shapes you. It's who you are even though you don't always consciously know it. It's the reasons that you're extraordinary and the reasons that you're incredibly dysfunctional and screwed up. It's the origin point at which you decide what the world is about and your place in it.

Julia Dennison:

Hello, this is *We Are Family* and today, we're speaking to actor, comedian, podcaster, producer, and writer, Aasif Mandvi, and you'll know him as a correspondent, of course, on *The Daily Show*, and he's also the lead actor, writer, and producer of the web series *Halal in the Family* as well as the HBO series *The Brink*. He's the author of the book [No Land's Man](#), he has a podcast, [Lost in the Smithsonian with Aasif Mandvi](#), and he's currently playing Ben Shakir in the CBS drama *Evil*. You've also seen him on TV in the series *Younger* among many other things. He's now dad to son, Ishan, with his wife, Shaifali Puri. You guys have a beautiful family from what I've seen from afar. Aasif, welcome to *We Are Family*, thanks for coming on.

Aasif Mandvi:

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Julia:

As we're talking now, I can hear the dulcet tones of a toddler in the background.

Aasif Mandvi:

I know, I know. My dad got him this car that he can sit on and I push him around on it and it's basically, every morning he wakes up and just the first words are now, "Car, car, car." All he wants to do is just ride around on this car. So all I do all day long now... My back is out because of this. The car is really the most important thing to him. He looks at me and he used to say, "Dada," and now he just comes to me and goes, "Car." So you may hear a horn and the screaming of, "Car," in the background, so I apologize.

Julia:

No, it would not be a *Parents* podcast episode if we didn't have some kind of child sounds in the background. We're all there all the time but yeah, it feels like you need to build some sort of lawn mower handle contraption to be able to push the car or something like that.

Aasif Mandvi:

Yes, that would be great, right? Yeah, I'm hoping that by the time he turns 5, I still have all of my muscles available to me. Literally, I feel like I'm throwing my back out all the time. The other day I was like, my elbow was hurting. I was like, what the hell? Because now he's also at that age where it's like juggling. When I pick him up, he doesn't just sit still or be still when I'm holding him. Now he's going in 45 different directions. It takes a lot of core work.

Julia:

What is he like 1 and a half right now?

Aasif Mandvi:

He's about to be 1 and a half. Yeah, he's just at that point now where he's deciding, I can push the envelope and see what happens here. If I throw all my toys off the balcony, what will happen? Will they go pick them up or will they just lay in the hallway?

Julia:

Right, they're testing their boundaries. I've seen, some of these child psychologists do these charts where they map out these 1 and a half year olds when they're running around playing and they're just all over the place, no standing still.

Aasif Mandvi:

Yeah. He doesn't want to eat anymore. We literally chase him around with food because he won't sit still to eat and so I feel like me and my wife are just, I'm on one side of the room, she's on the other side of the room, we both have a piece of food on a fork or a spoon and whichever way he goes, we shove the food in his mouth. And my wife will be like, "He hasn't eaten, what are we going to do?" I'm like, "He'll eat. He'll eat eventually. He's got to eat." But you do, you have that stress of like, I'm somehow neglecting my parental responsibility. I have one job—just to keep him alive.

Julia:

Keep him alive.

Aasif Mandvi

And it's like...if I don't feed him, that's kind of 101, you know.

Julia:

So he's 1 and a half now, he really is a child of the pandemic. Can you talk me a little bit through the whole journey of him coming into the world? What that's been like and what it's been like the last year and a half as you've adjusted to parenthood?

Aasif Mandvi:

So it was bizarre because I feel like... he's our only child and I'm a first time parent and so I don't know what it's like to have a child not in a pandemic. I imagine it's very different. I mean I think one of the big differences for us was that he didn't get to see any of his family. In a normal world, my mother-in-law would've been here. My dad would've been here. My sister. We would've just had family here.

Julia:

Right, that village.

Aasif Mandvi:

It would've been a village and I do think that human babies are meant to be raised in community and one of the things that I think children of this pandemic have been deprived of is that community. You know, the good thing was that we just got to spend a lot of time with him. Like, he got our undivided attention because neither me or my wife were going anywhere and we were just with him 24/7 so in a weird way, that was good. I felt like I got, as a father, I got a lot of real quality time with him in those first six months that I might not have gotten had the world not been the way it was.

Julia:

I do think it's been one of the most stressful times to be a parent and then for you to learn what it is to be a parent in the midst of this is an added challenge. Can you talk a little bit about whether or not you feel like fatherhood has changed you and in what ways? Do you think that you're the dad that you thought you'd turn out to be?

Aasif Mandvi:

I think fatherhood has definitely changed me. It is by far one of the most transformative things that happens to a person. Look, I'm a guy who... I'm an actor, right? I'm like this narcissistic, self-involved guy who basically was all about my career and all that stuff and then you have a child and something... It's fascinating and it's kind of amazing how there's this DNA change that happens inside of you where you suddenly, you take care of this creature, this human being that has arrived and is helpless and so much of your... I mean I find that things don't matter as much in the way that they used to and also I'm incredibly emotional now. I cry all the time. Also, I'm an older parent, so I think there's always that feeling as well, of, I created a human being and I'm older. I want to be there for him and I'm trying to... So now it's like, oh my God, I've got to really stay healthy and I've got to be around for as long as I can.

Julia:

It's not just about you anymore, it's very much about another person.

Aasif Mandvi:

Yeah. To be here for him. One of the things I noticed right away was that I could not hear... I mean it was already devastating. When he was born, there was all that stuff with the kids at the border and all that stuff and in the news and I can't hear anything about children or anything bad happening to children. Maybe lots of parents talk about this.

Julia:

Yes, yeah. You need a trigger warning at all times.

Aasif Mandvi:

Yeah. If there's anything happening to children, I'm just incredibly like, "No, no, no," I can't even-

Julia:

Hear it.

Aasif Mandvi:

I can't even deal with that, you know. I'll cry at commercials with kids in or something. It's that. It's really getting in touch... Also just this feeling of just being present with him in a way that I don't think I have been, often. It's interesting. My wife said to me the other day, she's like, "When you do something and he laughs, your face lights up in a way that I don't ever see." But it's true. I realize, when he laughs at a goofy face that I make or just something, if I get him to laugh, it's the greatest thing. It makes me so happy.

Julia:

He's your best audience. He's the audience of your life.

Aasif Mandvi:

Yeah. And he's not always. Sometimes he's like, "I'm not laughing." Sometimes I'm like "blah blah blah" and he's like, "Yeah, OK, what else you got?"

Aasif Mandvi:

And also, when you're doing it as a performance, there's a coolness to it all. In the times I've done standup, and I don't do standup all the time but I know when the audience is going to laugh. It's a little bit more mathematical, right? I know, this is where they're going to laugh and I kind of feel like I'm in control of the whole situation. Whereas with Ishan, I never know. Also he's at that age now where the thing that made him laugh three days ago is not the thing that makes him laugh anymore.

Julia:

He's like—bring me the car!

Aasif Mandvi:

Yeah, I'm trying material and he's like, "Dad, that material is like three days old. What are you talking about? That's like, from Tuesday. It's Friday, dude."

Julia:

He's like, I've already seen that sketch in the proverbial YouTube channel of my brain!

Aasif Mandvi:

So for me, I'm like, "You loved this a couple of days ago. This was your favorite bit," and now he's like, not so much. And I'm like, I've got to come up with a new bit.

Julia:

I feel like it's always going to be like that, too. So on this podcast, we talk about family as well as parenting and we talk so often about how our own upbringings influenced us as parents. I'd love to hear a little bit about yours. You were born in India but then you moved to England when you were tiny, like 1 years old, right?

Aasif Mandvi:

Yeah.

Julia:

And then you were brought up in Bradford. Can you paint us a picture a little bit of what your childhood was like and how you feel like it might've influenced your parenting today?

Aasif Mandvi:

It's interesting. My childhood... Obviously, like you said, I moved to England when I was a year old. And my parents moved to England. I didn't do it on my own. I just went with them because at that point, I had to go with them. And then, one of the things that happened to me as a child was that I was sent away to live with my grandmother in Bahrain when I was a year and a half. Because my parents moved to the U.K. and they were in the north of England and really just trying to start. They were very young. They were really young. I mean not really young but they were like 23 and 25 but they were also starting a brand new life. My parents, when they had me, they had moved to a new country, they were starting out. They didn't know what the future held. They had left their country and their home and their family and their parents and all that stuff and they were kind of in this new world. My mother was working in a factory. My dad was working in the university and they couldn't really take care of a child so they sent me back to live with my grandmother in Bahrain and I lived with my grandmother until I was 3 years old and then came back to the U.K. from Bahrain.

Julia:

You were so young, do you have any memories?

Aasif Mandvi:

I don't have any memories of actually going to Bahrain but one of my earliest memories, is at 3 years old, coming back to Heathrow airport in London and meeting my parents for the first time and I had forgotten who they were and I didn't recognize my mother anymore, so I remember my grandmother being like, "This is your mom." And I was like, "Who is this woman?" And I remember her in a white sari and she's like kneeling down, she's reaching out for me and I'm hiding behind my grandmother, her sari, and being like, I don't want to go to this person, I don't know who she is. I basically just forgot who my parents were.

Julia:

Well you couldn't FaceTime, obviously, so-

Aasif Mandvi:

Right, there was no FaceTime back then, yeah. I think one thing that's different for me is that I had a child much later in life than my parents did and I feel like the pros and the cons of being an older parent are there but one of the things that I think has been good for me is I was finally ready to have a child. I probably couldn't have had a child in my 20s and 30s. I think I was trying to figure out too much stuff. So I didn't have a child until I was in my 50s but I think that I am just so much more available and present and ready to do this. You know, where my parents were, they were just trying to start their life. They were trying to figure out what to do and I don't have that and so... I also think that I'm very much aware of what

happened to me psychologically and how it affected the rest of my life, in terms of being sent away from my mother and then being brought back to her and I think that those abandonment issues plagued me for most of my adult life. For me, I'm very aware of raising him with a deep sense of security around that and not wanting him to ever feel like we're not there for him. In a way that I maybe didn't have that sense of security.

Julia:

Right, we talk about that a lot in psychology, the attachment styles and secure attachment and that's the goal, to raise a child with that really secure attachment to other humans.

Aasif Mandvi:

I'm hoping that... I mean, I'll fuck him up in other ways.

Julia:

Well I mean, I always say as parents, we've got to give them something to talk about in therapy, so... So then the rest, you were 3 years old, did you grow closer to your parents? What was your relationship like with them after you moved back?

Aasif Mandvi:

I mean I imagine so, yes. I mean I did. They were my parents.

Julia:

Did you stay in touch with your grandmother? Did you see your grandmother a lot?

Aasif Mandvi:

Yeah. My grandmother, until... My grandmother moved back, they went back and then my memories of my life as a teenager and a young adult and all that are similar to everyone else's, I imagine, in terms of these are my parents. I think the issues, the stuff that I think, whatever I dealt with, didn't come up until much later when I was getting into a relationship, I was dealing with that kind of stuff. So that's when all those things reared their head. They lived deep in a nonverbal, unconscious place.

Julia:

You've talked before about how you said your family had kind of given up on you getting married and finding the one. So talk to me about how you met your wife. How did you know you were ready for marriage?

Aasif Mandvi:

It's funny. Sometimes in my life, I've had to do things in order to know that I'm ready for it. I don't think I knew I was ready for marriage until I got married, in a weird way.

Julia:

I guess, was parenthood sort of similar do you feel like?

Aasif Mandvi:

Parenthood was similar. I didn't know that I wanted to be a dad until I had a baby. With my wife, it was less about "getting married" as much as it was, I knew that I had met this remarkable woman and I didn't want to see her get away, you know what I mean? I think it was that. It was like, I just didn't want to lose her and I knew that I would and I think that I had probably fucked up enough relationships... Can I swear?

Julia:

Go for it, yes. This is a podcast for adults.

Aasif Mandvi:

It's for families but it's a filthy, filthy podcast.

Julia:

It's filthy, yes. Yes.

Aasif Mandvi:

I think I had fucked up enough relationships in the past and wasted time going down roads that I probably shouldn't have gone down and didn't feel like... When I met Shaifali, I think it was A, I was at a place where I was really like, OK, I really think I do want to meet someone. I think, Shaifali and I, I joke about the fact that Shaifali and I both had commitment issues and so we decided to get married... because-

Julia:

Neutralize each other's commitments.

Aasif Mandvi:

You know, because you just want to find someone who has... You know what they say about relationships, it's like, you're not going to find the perfect person. You've just got to find the person who is complimentary to your dysfunction. And that's really what it is. You're not perfect, they're not perfect. As long as your two imperfections work together, that's fine, that's it. So I think in our case, it was like, we both had commitment issues and we both decided we were going to take a chance with this person because... I don't know, you'll have to ask her why she married me but I married her because I just didn't want her to get away and there was a moment when we were sort of ... We spent a good deal of time, are we friends? Are we lovers? Are we more? You know and I remember she was like, "I don't know if I want to date an actor." And I was like, "I don't know if I want to date someone who doesn't want to date an actor."

Julia:

She has a really impressive job. Tell me what she does again.

Aasif Mandvi:

She's a brilliant woman. Right now she's taking some time off of her career to be a mom but she has run organizations. She was running the global initiative at the Nike Foundation, dealing with young girls in third world countries. It's called the Girl Effect and she started at an organization called Scientists Without Borders, she was a lawyer by training. She's like this

very accomplished woman and has done a lot of different things in her life and when we met I think we went to a party one night and somebody came over and asked for her number and she gave her number to this guy. And we at this point had been hanging out for a while and I was like, wait a minute, and suddenly dumb me, I was like, wait she might date someone.

Julia:

"I could lose her."

Aasif Mandvi:

I don't think I really put it together. I just saw her give her number to a guy and him ask for her number and her give her number to him and be like, "Call me." And then I realized, oh shit, Aasif, you need to step up otherwise you're going to lose this woman to some guy in a bar. So at that point, I believe I said, I think I was like, "You just gave that guy your number." She was like, "Yeah." And I think she was like, "Yeah, what do you care?"

Julia:

Yeah, what are you going to do about it?

Aasif Mandvi:

Right. Then I was like, "Huh," and then I was like, "I'm kind of jealous." And she was like, "Oh," and then that opened the door to that whole thing and then we started dating and then never looked back. It was one of those kind of... It's a very rom com moment.

Julia:

I love that though. I love that. And you had what looked like a beautiful wedding. It was an interfaith wedding, Hindu/Muslim, right?

Aasif Mandvi:

Yeah.

Julia:

So what I'm curious about is, you both have these two faiths, how do they come together when raising your son? Are there values and traditions that you're trying to pass onto him from your respective religions or are you very religious as a family?

Aasif Mandvi:

Yeah, it's one of those things that we... There's no way to navigate this because neither one of us have done it before. I think the agreement that we have is that he will be exposed to both of our faiths. Shaifali is from a Hindu family but not religious really, not very religious at all. I come from a Muslim family. I'm not really religious either but maybe I'm not so anti-organized religion as much as my wife is. But it's interesting. When you have kids, that becomes, even if you're not a religious person, suddenly you're like, "Wait but I'm Muslim and you're Hindu, so what do we do?" It's like, it never came up in our dating life. It never came up even when we really got married, we were representative of both faiths in the wedding and stuff and then suddenly you have a child and you're like, "Oh. Do we take him

to the mosque and then we also take him to the temple or does he..." How do we navigate this thing? Suddenly there's an ownership, something you feel like you're more religious than you actually are because you feel like there's this thing you have to impart on your offspring.

Julia:

Responsibility again, yeah. Pressure

Aasif Mandvi:

And it feels like a legacy thing. For example, actually, it came up on his first birthday. So we have slightly different traditions around a first birthday. So we did a little thing where we did a little Muslim ceremony and then we did a little Hindu thing, a ceremony. I think it's always that. It's just making sure he's exposed to both sides of his religious heritage.

Julia:

Yeah, I can totally appreciate that. Also this is related, I feel like, you've been very passionate in the past about the visibility of South Asian and Muslim men on TV and in cinema. Can you talk a little bit about why this is important to you and do you feel like it's even more important now that you're thinking about your son growing up in this world?

Aasif Mandvi:

You know, I realize, we've come a long way in the last 30 years in terms of representation around South Asians and people of color in general in Hollywood and I think those stories are important because when I was a kid growing up, I never saw anyone who looked like me on TV, in films. And growing up in the West. I grew up in the U.K. and then I grew up in America. There was no representation and many people of my generation have talked about this, this idea that what I ended up doing a lot was aping white culture and trying to basically be a white person. I went to school in high school and college in Florida and I didn't really have any South Asian friends until I got to New York

Julia:

How old were you when you moved to America? You were a teenager, right? 16?

Aasif Mandvi:

I was 16 when I moved to America and then I was in my 20s, early 20s, when I got to New York and even then, it wasn't until I did my one man show at Sakina's Restaurant and that was when I was 32. That's the first time I started finding a South Asian community of my own that was not my parents' friends. When I was growing up as a kid, I had my friends and then I had the friends of my parents' friends, who were all Indian, and their kids, who I just inherited whether I liked them or not because we would just go to these Indian parties and then just become friends with these other kids that were Indian, like us, but they didn't go to my school. They weren't the same age as me.

So all my friends were essentially white people. It wasn't until I did Sakina's Restaurant in my early 30s that I actually—because all these South Asians started coming to see my show—out of that, I started making friends with other South Asians for the first time, that

were my adult friends, people who I chose in that way. So in that way, the world has changed for my son.

Julia:

That leads me to my last question that we ask everybody, but what are your general hopes and dreams for your family for the next few years?

Aasif Mandvi:

I mean, I don't know, it's a hard one. I just want him to be... I'm sure every parent says this, I just want him to be the best version of himself that he can be. I mean, I'm going to try to give him as few hang-ups as possible about things, but I'm sure I'm going to fail. I think one of the big realizations that one comes to as a parent is that there's an inevitability of failure.

Julia:

Totally.

Aasif Mandvi:

Failure is just inevitable and I say this to my wife all the time. As hard as we try, we're going to fuck it up. So you just try to fuck it up the least that you think you can. Because otherwise, we wouldn't be human. I think that's what it is. I think it's just, try to not fuck it up too badly so that he is actually able to be a productive and happy member of society.

Julia:

Totally. I totally agree with that.

Aasif Mandvi:

And if he achieves beyond that, then great.

Julia:

Well Aasif Mandvi, this has been such a great conversation. Thank you so much for coming on *We Are Family*. This has been a great chat and best of luck to your family and everything.

Aasif Mandvi:

Thank you so much.

Julia:

Thanks so much for listening to my conversation with actor and comedian Aasif Mandvi. Next time you'll hear from the parents of TikTok sensations Charlie and Dixie D'Amelio about what it's like when your kids, your family, and then your entire life goes viral. Be sure to follow *We Are Family* on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen so you don't miss an episode.

And we'd love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review, we'd really appreciate it. You can also find us online at parents.com/wearefamilypodcast.

We Are Family is presented by me, Julia Dennison, and produced by Sam Walker. Editing is by Vincent Cacchione, and thanks also to the rest of our production team at Pod People, Rachel King, Matt Sav, and Danielle Roth. We'll see you back here next week for more *We Are Family*!