



## Helping the Adolescent Cope with Family Life

Curriculum Unit 82.06.07  
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### ***INTRODUCTION***

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Sociologists have analyzed the family unit in many ways. They have examined the origin, structure, functions of families, and the roles of people as family members.

Prior to the nineteenth century sociologists studied primitive societies to determine the development of the family and its origin. After World War I, W.F. Ogburn, Joseph Folsen, Harvey Locke, and Ernest Burgess opposed the “evolutionary approach”. They thought that the study of anthropology had nothing to do with understanding the contemporary family. They initiated the analysis of social organization. Around the same time, psychologists reorientated their thinking to interpersonal relations and social roles.

A third influence on the theory of the family was the so called Chicago School of Urban Sociology. This was founded by Ernest Burgess. Chicago was chosen as the model because people moved there from the country to find employment. It appeared to these sociologists that the city “was the natural habitat of civilized man”. (Lasch 1977: pg. 34) This study concluded that urbanization was partially responsible for the breakdown of our traditional culture, and that the new family type should be studied as a group of distinct, interacting personalities. Interaction is the process through which one family member’s actions are directly affected by the actions of the other family members.

I think Ogburn stated it best when he said, “as the institutional functions of the family declined, personality functions took on greater importance”. (Lasch 1977: pg 35)

Enjoying one’s children means accepting them as persons in their own right. Parents should supply unconditional love for their children, and look upon them as people with the right to express their real feelings. They must value the personality of each of their children and recognize that children need to pull away from parents as they become autonomous individuals. But many parents cannot provide this type of environment. Parents may not have the skills, desire, or energy to deal with modern problems. They are subject to much stress, anxiety, and insecurity. After a hard day’s work, parents are tired, irritable, and want to relax. They seem to have accepted the negative family interactions which occur too often in many families today. This is a tragedy because children follow the words and actions of their parents. Parents have knowledge and wisdom which comes with experience, but they do not share it with their children.

Students are confused and frustrated in their attempts to cope with family stresses and difficulties. They have not learned the process of selecting the best and rejecting the worst elements for decision making. Frustration is the inability to fulfill a need. The need here is to interact in a positive and productive way with their parents and other family members. Frustration is both unnecessary and unproductive. Frustrations suffered by many teenagers produce unhappiness that directly affects academic performance.

Sociologists agree that members of the modern American family experience extreme stress and frustration from such “common” social problems as the increasing divorce rate, changing sex roles, lack of communication, and conflict of needs.

My unit will explore these social problems, their causes, and the effects they have on family members. This will help the student understand and realize that their parents love them, but are experiencing many stresses and strains. This understanding may bridge the “generation gap” and create a positive interaction with other family members.

## **RATIONAL**

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The family is one of the oldest human social institutions known to man. It has existed for thousands of years. Families cope with pressures put on them by changing to meet new conditions. In these times of rapid social change families will break under the strain unless they explore new ways of living in the world. Change in itself is not bad, but it puts demands upon each family member.

Children are dependent on their parents and, because of their lack of experience and abilities, are subordinate. On the other hand parents are protective and directive. But as adolescence is reached those family roles change. These changes inevitably lead to conflicts. Most teens dislike parental authority, yet are apprehensive about independence. Crises therefore develop for adolescents and adults, perhaps more so for teens because they must interact with adults who are unwilling or unable to adjust to the new situations facing modern families. It is true that teens today live differently than their parents did at the same age. This is not by choice; rather they are trying to cope in the world they were born into.

Teens ponder what and how to think, believe, and behave. They are too often left alone to make decisions. Many choices are made on the basis of peer pressure, propaganda, or submission to parental authority.

We assume that education is a process that will improve the mind regardless of what is happening to the rest of the person. Yet many times what goes on in the classroom is unimportant and irreverent to what is really going on in their lives—problems at home.

Today’s youth, like those of the generations before them share a fundamental human need—to love and be loved.

A recent analysis of the 1996 *Coleman Report* of data on 570,000 students in 4,000 schools, reaffirms its central finding that academic achievement depends much more on family background than on what happens in the classroom. This study determined that a family’s lifestyle—its emphasis on education, its economic well being, its child rearing practices and other factors—is likely to have an important effect on the child’s interest in and ability to carry out academic work. (Duvall 1977: pg. 101)

While it is true that some adolescents experience special problems with their parents, it is also true that all adolescents have relationship problems with their parents.

Teens are confronted with so many alternatives in today's society that they need more guidance than the generations before. We cannot expect our children to cope with the situation without making a conscious effort to help them.

## **STRATEGIES**

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This unit is designed for use with seventh or eighth grade students. I chose this age group because the students are entering the most crucial stage of their life—adolescence.

Because we will be studying family problems and preparing the students to examine family roles, the family to be studied should be the student's own family. This will be a very personal process. Teachers will find that students are usually hesitant to discuss their personal problems in front of classmates for fear of ridicule. A practical solution to this problem is that the students be allowed to write out their questions and thoughts about a particular topic on a piece of paper and hand it in unsigned. This will allow the students to share their feelings and emotions with one another, yet still remain anonymous. This strategy focuses on what is important to the students in their difficult role as a family member.

The first lesson is designed to stimulate the students to think about what a "family" is, and then write these feelings down on a piece of paper. Since music has a universal language that appeals to the emotions of all, I will use contemporary songs about the family and related matters as a positive way to introduce the unit and arouse student interest.

One song we will pay special attention to is *That's The Way I've Always Heard It Should Be*, sung by Carly Simon. This song expresses the composer's doubts about entering into marriage.

Teachers can also take advantage of television programs. Many are based on family matters and show interaction between family members, especially soap operas. Discussions of these programs are an excellent way to initiate a lesson.

Other lessons can be centered around current newspaper and magazine articles.

## **LACK OF COMMUNICATION**

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Communication breakdowns occur in families for many reasons. Family members who have conflicting beliefs and attitudes may simply stop talking to one another.

Family members get so distracted with personal problems and interests that they might neglect each other. Parents can become so involved with their work or social activities that they ignore each other as well as their children. Children can become so involved with school, sports, or peer groups that they don't have the time or want to make the effort to communicate. As a result parents stop trying because they find that they have very

little in common with their children.

The so called “generation gap” occurs when the parents and children have conflicting values and attitudes. What frequently happens is that these conflicts force the family even further apart. Each family member seeks peace and solitude and quietly withdraws. Neither party can relate to the other!

Verbal threats do much more harm than good. They may get the desired behavior but they will probably “turn off” or alienate the children from their parents. Conversely if a child threatens to run away from home when he doesn’t get his way, this may elicit a response of sympathy or anger but it will not establish any meaningful lines of communication. Families that do not communicate live in constant tension or stress.

Sociologists agree that open communication is important for family relations. However, excesses in communication, especially if negative, should be avoided while positive communication should be encouraged.

## ***DIVORCE***

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Divorce rates in the United States have been on the rise since World War II. There is no simple answer to why divorce is so widespread or what is in store for the family.

In the mid 1970’s, there were 16 million divorced persons in the United States. The United States has a higher divorce rate than any other country in the world.

Many children are involved in these divorces. In 1978 approximately 18.9 percent of children lived in single parent homes. (Rofes 1981: pg.117) Although this cannot all be attributed to divorce, it does indicate that more children than ever will live in single parent homes for at least part of their childhood.

The divorce rate is not too surprising if you consider all the external and internal pressures put on the adults of today’s society.

A common question asked by kids is, “Is it my fault that my parents fight?” or “Is it my fault my parents are getting a divorce?”. The answer is no!

Both adults and their children find divorce a traumatic experience. Adults have to worry about legal fees, a settlement, child custody, child support, and many other related matters.

Children should try not to be angry at their parents. Try to remember that they are upset also. They’ll need and appreciate your support. Don’t be afraid to cry. Crying is the best way to release anger and frustration.

There are also bad ways of dealing with your feelings. Don’t take out your anger and hurt on other people. It may help to find some type of hobby or sports program to take your mind off the divorce. The advantage of sports is that you can get out some of your anger by hitting balls or running. A divorce is hard, but don’t let it ruin your life, your fun, and your relationships with your parents and friends. (Rofes 1981: pg. 31-32)

Children are often forced to pick sides in a divorce. Then, as always, it is important for children to have someone to talk to about the emotions they are experiencing. Holidays, especially Christmas, are very difficult for

kids to adjust to after a divorce. It might be a good idea to relieve anxiety over this by letting the parents set up the holiday visiting schedule.

Whether in a positive or negative way, the children of divorce will be affected for the rest of their lives. It causes you to feel many things and causes many changes in your life. You have to think of your family and your world differently. But there will come a day when you will be able to look back without the intense pain you felt earlier. While divorce never ends, it grows easier to live with once you accept the fact that, for better or worse, you have survived one of the hardest experiences any child has to face.

## ***CHANGING SEX ROLES***

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Through the ages most women have been employed in some kind of economic production. However, in many societies such production was carried out entirely or mostly within the home, so that the mother could supervise young children and engage in housekeeping duties.

The Industrial Revolution drew single women to the factories, but married women did not become a major part of the American workforce, until after World War I. The employment of women with minor children increased during and following World War II. Today the percentage of women, married and unmarried, in the American workforce is at an all time high, and married women who enter the workforce do so at an earlier age than ever before.

Role conflict and at least the possibility of conflicting personality needs generated many questions concerning the effects of mothers' working on the stability of marriage and the family, on the children, and on the health and well-being of the mother. This research failed to provide support to the alarmists and some attention shifted to more theoretically oriented issues, such as maternal employments effects on the parent as a model or the development of personality characteristics in female children relevant to success in professional and executive positions. (Burr 1979: pg.203)

Today females are competing with males in business, academics, and even non-contact sports. Sociologists disagree about the effects of these changing roles on the family, but one thing is certain, it is happening and our society must adjust to this change.

## ***A CONFLICT OF NEEDS***

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Many conflicts occur naturally as family members get older. Adolescents want the freedom to make their own choices without parental interference.

Six steps which may be helpful in resolving a conflict are: 1) change the needs of one or more of the conflicting parties; 2) find an alternative solution agreed on by both sides; 3) empathize with another's need; 4) change environmental factors which may be causing conflict; 5) explain your needs verbally to the other party (E.G. I am tired, and I would like to go to sleep); 6) identify your own emotional state (E.G. I am grouchy because I am tired, not because of the actions of my son or daughter).

## **LESSON PLAN #1**

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**OBJECTIVE** —The students will clarify their idea of what a “family” is.

### **MATERIALS**

1. A record player.
2. The record *That’s The Way I’ve Always heard It Should Be* , sung by Carly Simon.
3. A xeroxed copy of the lyrics to this song for each student and the teacher.
4. A small table and chairs where one or two students can sit, facing the class.

### **PROCEDURE**

1. Distribute the words of the song to the students.
2. Allow the students to read the words to themselves.
3. Play the song to the class.
4. Read the words to the song again, orally with the class.
5. Ask the students to write down their responses to one or two of the following questions:
  - A. What is the song about?
  - B. What kind of family image do you get from this song?
  - C. Does this song describe your parents marriage?
  - D. What is your idea of what a family is?
6. Allow the students to hand in their responses, unsigned.
7. Pick two volunteers to sit at the table and read aloud the various student responses.
8. The teacher will act mainly as a facilitator and will encourage students to express their thoughts and beliefs with one another, in an open manner.

*THAT'S THE WAY I'VE ALWAYS HEARD IT SHOULD BE*

My father sits at night with no lights on;  
his cigarette glows in the dark.

The living room is still;

I walk by no remark.

I tiptoe past the master bedroom where

My mother reads her magazines.

I hear her call "sweet dreams",

but I forget how to dream.

But you say it's time we moved in together,

raised a family of our own you and me.

Well that's the way I've always heard it should be,

you went to marry me—we'll marry—

My friends from college they're all married now;

they have their houses and their lawns.

They have their silent noons; tearful nights;

angry dawns.

Their children hate them for the things they're not.

They hate themselves for what they are.

And yet they drink they laugh,

close the wound, hide the scar.

But you say it's time we moved in together,

raised a family of our own you and me.

Well that's the way I've always heard it should be,

you want to marry me—we'll marry—

You say that we can keep our love alive,

Babe, all I know is what I see.

The couples cling and claw, and drown  
in love's debris.

You say we'll soar like two birds through the clouds,  
but soon you'll cage me on your shelf.  
I'll never learn to be just me first—  
by myself.

But you say it's time we moved in together,  
raised a family of our own you and me.

We'll that's the way I've always heard it should be,  
you want to marry me—we'll marry—

Carly Simon & Jacob Brackman. Copyright 1971, Quackenbush/Kensho Music. Used by permission. All rights reserved

## **LESSON PLAN #2**

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### *OBJECTIVE*

1. The students will learn the factors which can cause a communications breakdown between family members.
2. The students will learn how to relate communication skills to family life.
3. The use of role playing will help make the students feel more comfortable while discussing their personal problems.

### *MATERIALS*

1. A large, quiet area where students can act out "skits" without any disturbance.

### *PROCEDURE*



1. Divide the class into groups of three or four.
2. Give each group ten minutes to think of a short “skit” with the theme “communications breakdown between family members”.
3. Have each group enact their “skit” in front of the rest of the class.
4. After each performance, allow the students to discuss their reaction to the “skit”.

## ***RELATED ACTIVITY***

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### *OBJECTIVE*

1. The students will be able to understand the substance of the term “communications breakdown”.

### *MATERIALS*

1. A record player.
2. The record *She’s Leaving Home*, sung by the Beatles.
3. A copy of the song’s words or each student and the teacher.
4. A small table and chairs where one or two students may sit, facing the class.

### *PROCEDURE*

1. Distribute the words of the song.
2. Have the students read the words to themselves.
3. Play the song to the class.
4. Read the words to the song again with the class.
5. Ask the students to write their responses to one or two of the following questions:
  - A. Why didn’t she talk to her parents instead of leaving a note?
  - B. Do you think this girl had good communication with her parents? Why or why not?
  - C. How can a child improve communication with his/her parents?
  - D. How can parents improve communication with their children?

6. Allow the students to hand in their responses, unsigned.
7. Pick two volunteers to sit at the table and read aloud the various student responses.
8. The teacher will act mainly as a facilitator and will encourage the students to express their thoughts and beliefs with one another, in an open manner.

### *SHE'S LEAVING HOME*

Wednesday morning at five o'clock as the day begins—

Silently closing her bedroom door—

Leaving the note that she hoped would say more—

She goes downstairs to the kitchen clutching her handkerchief—

Quietly turning the backdoor key, Stepping outside she is free—

### CHORUS

She (We gave her most of our lives) is leaving (Sacrificed most of our lives) Home (We gave her every thing money could by)

She's leaving home after living alone for so many years.

Father snores as his wife gets into her dressing gown—

Picks up the letter that's lying there—

Standing alone at the top of the stairs—

She breaks down and cries to her husband Daddy our baby's gone—

Why would she treat us so thoughtlessly, How could she do this to me?

### CHORUS

She (We never thought of ourselves) is leaving (Never a thought of ourselves) Home (We struggled hard all our lives to get by) Bye-bye.

Something inside that was always denied for so many years.

Friday morning at nine o'clock she is far away—

Waiting to keep the appointment she made—

Meeting a man from the motor trade—

### *CHORUS*

She (What did we do that was wrong?) is leaving (We didn't know it was wrong) Home (Fun is the one thing money can't buy) Bye-bye.

Something inside that was always denied for so many years.

She's leaving home bye-bye—

John Lennon & Paul McCartney. c 1967 Northern Songs Limited. All rights for the U.S.A., Mexico and the Philippines controlled by Maclen Music, Inc. c/o ATV Music Corp. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

## **LESSON PLAN #2**

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### *OBJECTIVE*

1. The students will learn about and will be able to express their opinions about the changing sex roles in the modern American family.

### *MATERIALS*

1. Make up an imaginary situation where Mr. and Mrs. Jones both have Sobs that pay well. Mr. Jones is told by his company that he must relocate. Mr. Jones breaks the news to his wife. As the "man" in the house he expects his wife to quit her job and come with him. Mrs. Jones, however, does not want to lose her job and the extra income.

### *PROCEDURE*

1. Describe the situation to the class.
2. Ask the students to write their responses to one or two of the following questions:

- A. Should Mrs. Jones quit her job? Why?
  - B. Should Mr. Jones quit his job? Why?
  - C. How would you solve this problem if you were Mrs. Jones (girls) or Mr. Jones (boys)?
3. Allow the students to hand in their responses unsigned.
  4. The teacher will read the various student responses to the class.
  5. The teacher will act mainly as a facilitator and will encourage the students to express their thoughts and beliefs with one another, in an open manner.

## ***LESSON PLAN #4***

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### *OBJECTIVE*

1. The students will be able to discuss their personal wants and will come to see how these wants may create conflicts with parents or other family members.

*MATERIALS* —None

### *PROCEDURE*

1. The teacher will discuss an episode of a current television program that dealt with family matters.
2. Ask the students to think of television shows that are based on families and the wants of the people on the show. (E.G. Too Close For Comfort, Little House On The Prairie, soap operas).
3. Ask volunteers for a brief summary of a particular episode—what was the conflict—how was it solved?
4. Break the class into small groups that will either make up their own skit or act out a conflict seen on a particular T.V. program or movie.
5. Ask students to discuss their “solutions” to some of those conflicts.

## RELATED ARTICLES

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The following movies are available through the Audio-Visual Department, Winchester School, Ext. 8688.

1. *FAMILIES* —Animated—The main theme is the interdependence of human beings everywhere. *Middle-school level* .
2. *MOM WHY WON'T YOU LISTEN?* —How can children get their parents to listen?

*Middle-school level.*

3. *MOTHER AND CHILD* —An examination of the physical and psychological relations between mother and child. The effects of two family crisis are shown. *Middle-school level*.
4. *CAN A PARENT BE HUMAN?*—Explains how parents make contact with children. Compares parents who frighten their children to a father and son who form a meaningful relationship. *Middle-school level* .
5. *TWO FAMILIES: AFRICAN AND AMERICAN* — *Middle-school level* .

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Brooks, Jerome. *Uncle Mike's Boy* . New York: Harper and Row publishers, 1973. A twelve year old boy named Pudge loses his sister when she is hit by a truck. His parents can't deal with his feelings very well, so he seeks out uncle Mike, a man about 33, who helps him through the crises.

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