



Family Life in America: Past, Present and Future

Curriculum Unit 82.06.10
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Introduction

The narrative that follows presents goals and strategies for a four-week unit on “The Family” taught at the ninth-grade level, and is an introductory unit for the “Family Life and Sex Education” curriculum presently used at Lee High School in New Haven. It is designed to be useful at every ability level.

Historically, the family in America has performed basic social and economic functions. Family survival, on the farm for example, depended on each member performing necessary duties; even children played vital roles. With urbanization and the industrial revolution, family units became more independent and intra-family relations less cohesive. Business and economic conditions determined to a large degree how and even where families would live. Stability became less characteristic of American life in general and of family life in particular.

Mass production, mass consumption and mass media brought together America’s urban and rural people, its rich and poor, and its foreign and native elements. Mass advertising often created a desire for the new, the different, the convenient, or the exotic. Laborsaving inventions and a shorter work week created more leisure time for the pursuit of happiness. In many ways, American families have never had it so good; yet some people fear that the family as we know it is faced with extinction. Is the American family on the “endangered species” list? What are the serious internal and external pressures that threaten American families? Are there “survival techniques” for dealing with the inevitable stresses and strains that modern American families are facing?

This unit is intended to challenge the student to come to grips with his or her own attitudes toward family life, past, present and future. To get students deeply immersed in the real questions and the gut issues of family relationships is the goal of this unit of study. Making students aware of typical family problems will not be productive unless there is also an awareness of possible solutions. This unit is predicated on a problem-solving approach, which I have found effective in generating student interest. One reason for my interest in teaching this unit to urban youngsters is expressed by Edith Schaeffer in her book, *What is a Family?*

Any one family is an oasis . . . The mere existence of a family is important to people—even from the viewpoint of being aware of what they have *not* had (p. 118).

I. UNIT OBJECTIVES

The obvious beginning for any unit on family life is to explore the concept of family. As discussion continues throughout the unit of study several areas will be explored:

1. What are the functions and activities of family life? Or, what is the work” of a family group?
2. How does a family operate in carrying out its work”?
3. What necessary roles are part of any family?
4. How are family roles interrelated?
5. How are people treated within families?
6. What is meant by the natural life history of a family in its stages of growth and development; and how are people influenced by and how do they influence families at each stage?
7. What is meant by a “successful” family unit? What are the signs of good family health?
8. How do families deal with the pressures, internal and external, that are placed on them?
9. What kind of families are there other than nuclear and extended families?
10. What are some signs that a family may need help? What help is available for struggling families?

The teacher will want to try to prepare to discuss student questions and comments about family life. A sample of possible student questions follows:

1. Why do families spend so much time fighting?
2. Why do parents seem so strict? Don't they trust their kids?
3. Why does my family hardly ever talk?
4. What do rich families do that are different from poor families?
5. Why are so many couples splitting up?
6. How come families on welfare seem to do better than a lot of working families?
7. What are the chances of a teenage marriage making it?
8. Why is there so much child abuse?
9. What are some activities families used to do in the “olden days,” i. e., before television?
10. Why do some families never have any fun and others are always doing things?

A. Behavioral Objectives

During the four weeks covered by this unit, each student will participate in: (1) at least one class presentation (roleplay, debate, oral report), (2) one small group project with other class members, and (3) one interview or opinion survey on the topic of family life. Also, each student will maintain an orderly folder containing all assignments and will hand in a research report on some aspect of family life. There will be many opportunities for students to become involved in a variety of classroom activities and assignments.

B. Learning Objectives

The student should be able, by the end of the course, to define certain key concepts related to the unit (genealogy, sibling, generation, etc.); to describe the different kinds of family organization (nuclear, extended, one-parent, "blended," etc.); to understand some of the specific and general causes of family friction and misunderstanding; to become aware of strengths and weaknesses of family life. The teacher is urged to stimulate the students' thinking process such that skills learned may be transferred and used beyond this month-long unit. This unit is designed to encourage both teacher and student to explore new and exciting ways to practice learning skills in both the affective and cognitive areas.

II. UNIT SUMMARY

A. Week One: The Concept of 'Family'

During the first week we explore the so-called family unit in a variety of forms and functions. Students will discover how various kinds of families are organized; they will explore concepts such as the extended family, the single-parent family, the "blended family" (where previously married spouses with children remarry), and the "part-time-parent" family (where a parent is only with the rest of the family for weekends). Questions to consider include: What roles do family members play in the various kinds of families; how are they different or similar? What expectations would you expect these families to have? What family traditions may or may not be present? What bonds hold families together? What makes families function effectively? When do families begin to break down?

In this initial week of discussion we will complete several assignments, beginning with an evaluation of different statements that others have made about the family. Various aspects of family life should begin to take on meaning for the student. Beyond its reproductive function, what social and moral purposes does the family serve? How does it transmit values to its family members? Students will be challenged to rate his own perceptions of what a family is by trying to explain what it is that a family is supposed to do. In the process, he or she should gain insight into personally held values about the family.

To get students thinking about their own families, a "family tree" assignment will be made; some of the better ones will be utilized in class to illustrate the concept of a family history. Discussions about family holiday celebrations and vacations will be used to encourage discussion of family traditions. Students will be given an interview assignment to explore attitudes toward the family as an institution, and asked to tell about family experiences (relationships with parents, siblings, relatives, etc.). Interviewees will be classmates or family members. Reading assignments for the week will include one story about a young girl in a matrilineal society in Africa, and one about a Hopi boy growing up. These readings bring out differences in family structure and values, as well as socialization practices. How do these families operate? Could such systems be adapted to work in the United States? Short readings on the different types of family (other than the nuclear family) will be discussed in class.

Students will be asked to react to other classmates' and various writers' definitions of and generalizations about family. Is the main ongoing job of the family to socialize its members, as Nathan Ackerman (p. 59) maintains? What about the family's role in providing its members with a "bond of affection and identity" (Ackerman, p. 62)? What about the family as a shelter, as a relayer of truth and tradition, as a center of creativity and education, as a museum of memories, as a transmitter of values, and as a place where problems are discussed and solved, (summarized from Chafin, pp. 18-28). Students will be asked to evaluate the following thesis in regard to difficulties that families face:

(The family) is not a place without problems. There are no perfect families, nor are there any families without problems. Many of the problems are quite predictable. They are built into the complex nature of the relationship of marriage and the family . . . (p. 28).

Problems are a normal part of family life, and always have been. Chafin warns, however, of destructive prevailing societal attitudes toward marriage, sex and parenthood, which threaten the effectiveness of the family and greatly affect the family's potential as a force for good. What factors keep families from creating and maintaining a balanced environment for the growth of human beings so that families might reach maximum potential? Students will be encouraged to describe TV shows and popular songs that illustrate family life in America, as a way of discovering the social forces and other conditions that are limiting American families from reaching their full potential. Throughout the course, each student will be required to keep a file folder or scrapbook of articles and advertisements which illustrate family life in America, with the goal of evaluating messages about the family presented in the media.

B. Week Two: The Historical American Family

During the second week of the unit, students will be exposed to a variety of American family experiences from the past. The chief objective is to perceive and appreciate the various kinds of family structure from the American experience, and in doing so to build an appreciation for the important tasks families have been performing for nearly four centuries in North America.

To implement this goal, students will research (either individually or in groups) various types of families from America's past. Dittoed and printed material will be available from the teacher, e. g., the Puritan family, slave families, communal families, Mormon families, Amish (farm) families, immigrant families (Jewish, Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican), and perhaps others. Students will then report their findings back to the rest of the class.

Students will be asked to look for various tasks that families do, and will be asked to comment, based on their readings, on how the families studied performed these tasks: (1) values and traditions passed down to children; (2) instruction and education of children (including discipline); (3) problem-solving; (4) responsibilities of children at home; (5) recreation; (6) religious training (if any). Other tasks or functions may be suggested by students.

Students will participate in class discussions and group-work throughout this week of data-gathering and reporting their findings. Students should begin to learn about the variety and adaptability of family life, including changes in role of husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and certain family traditions, such as eating three daily meals together. Do any of these historical family forms still exist today? Why or why not? What were some of the difficulties families in the past had to endure? Compare them to difficulties today. The Puritan, slave, and one of the immigrant families will be highlighted in class.

C. Week Three: The American Family Today

After having looked into America's past, we should now be ready for the present. During this week's work, the students will explore the various "social forces" that have affected and continue to affect the modern American family. What post-industrial changes in American society have affected family life and in what ways? Have these changes had negative or positive effects on intrafamilial relations and family stability? If so, what are they?

This week, students will be examining views of the American family as presented in the entertainment media, on television and radio programs and in advertising. What do modern songwriters and poets have to say about family and family relationships? Through interview-surveys (from week one), videotapes, film and filmstrips, and readings we will explore the women's movement and the affect it has had on the family and on family-oriented roles. We will examine new strains and pressures placed on the family by rising expectations in career and consumer gratification. By examining television family situation comedies, popular magazine articles, and the ever-popular soap operas ("the stories"), we will try to bring out the pressures that are placed on families today, and we will discuss possible ways to cope with these pressures on an individual family level.

Students will be encouraged to compare their observations from Week Two's models with the material gone over during Week Three. What, if anything, seems to be different about social forces affecting families today and in decades past? How can families adapt and adjust to the fast pace of American life today?

Students will be encouraged to role-play certain staged situations (husband or wife gets no respect from spouse) with the class offering suggestions on how to deal with the problem. As a guide students will have a list of family therapy goals to enable them to be constructive in their comments. The goals (summarized from Ackerman, p. 53) are:

1. to remove any disabling symptoms;
2. to strengthen the person's personality (encouragement of positive qualities);
3. to help the person reach his potential (specific tasks suggested); by helping the person to use his personal abilities;
4. to encourage the person to take on responsibility;
5. to encourage the person to share with others and learn to love them and make a positive contribution to the lives of family and friends.

D. Week Four: Bringing It All Together

During the last week, we will look at modern families at work and play; or, "Families That Are Working At Being Families." The goal is to have students build their own theory around the question of, "What makes a family a decent place to grow up in?"

The strategy is to draw on the insights gained in the first three weeks of study and to begin to evaluate the present condition of the family with an eye to the future. Speculative questions, such as:

“What do I want my family to be like?”, “How do I want to treat my kids?”, “What kinds of goals do I want for them?” will be assigned and discussed. We will review readings on the extended family, the single-parent family, the “blended” family, the large family, the family with young children and we will try to determine their chances for success over the long-run. During this last week, I will show a set of slides I have made called “A Day in the Life of an Untypical American Family.” Students will be encouraged to bring in photographs, album pictures and family memorabilia appropriate to our discussion. The scrapbooks they have been assembling will be shared and discussed.

III. CONCLUSIONS

This brief unit is designed to encourage students to think about the direction of American family life. Why has it often been said, “The family is the building block of any society.” Is it true that “If the family fails then all other institutions in society will fail?” Concern about the survival of families is evident everywhere. But what are people doing about it? The tone of this unit is decidedly upbeat. What the student should begin to see is that, despite alarming statistics and the pessimistic predictions, many successful families do exist and are working at ways to increase their chances for a vital, enriching family life.

By being exposed to creative solutions to problems they themselves have observed first-hand, students should come to recognize that although everyone falls short of the ideal, that is no reason to stop trying. Exploring the many pressures that society places on the family and that the family places on its members should result in a heightened awareness of the hard work that’s necessary to making a family work, and it should challenge us all to arrive at realistic ways of dealing with these pressures.

Resources for help are available for families. Students will be asked to consider specific family problems and what resources would be most helpful in providing aid. According to the preamble of the World Health Organization, “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity.” Clearly, no one person no one family is perfect and without flaw: to a certain extent all families need help. What sources of help, external and internal can we use productively to improve the success of our own home and family life? Elton Trueblood put it this way:

The tasks and responsibilities of parenthood are so great that it seems almost impossible for anyone to succeed in performing them. God, we often think, should have given parents more brains than have been given to any. Yet, in spite of the difficulty, and in the midst of failure, many families are being held together in a wonderful way. In this lies hope for our troubled yet exciting generation. (p. 108)

Put another way.:

The challenge (of meeting family needs) is one of mountainous proportions; it frightens us, but the mountain is there to be climbed and there is no turning back. (Ackerman, p. 57)

IV. SAMPLE LESSON PLANS

Lesson One: Persons Who Make Up A Family (Week One)

Goals :

1. to encourage students to think about family members’ roles and responsibilities;
2. to generate discussion about what a family is and does at different stages in its life-cycle.

Process : 1. Students are handed a sheet of quotations about what a family is and does and are asked to discuss several of them. Samples:

- a. "A family is one or more parents and one or more children."
- b. "A family is an experiment station where people learn how to live."
- c. "A family is a place where people feel secure."
- d. "A family is a place where people are busy doing their own thing."
- e. "A family is a garden where people grow."

2. Students are then asked to free associate (teacher writes on the board) the names of different kinds of relatives (aunt, cousin, brother-in-law) in preparation for the family-tree part of the lesson. The teacher may also use this activity to teach the concept of "gene ration," by pointing out the age differences between grandparents, parents and children.

3. The teacher hands out a sample "family tree" for the students to consider. Some of the difficulties in filling out a family tree are discussed (death, divorce, adoption, incomplete records, etc.), as well as some of the interesting complications posed by children born out of wedlock or as the result of a second or third marriage. After discussion, the students are asked to obtain family information for their family tree as an assignment.

4. As they begin to fill in the charts, they will be asked to write about important persons in their family and what they do for the family.

Follow-Up: Students will be expected to write down their own definition of a family and a family's purposes. Also, they will be asked to think of things families do together at different stages, e. g., when children are pre-school age, when there are teens in the family, and when the children have grown and left home.

Lesson Two: Principles For Family Living (Week Two, two to three days)

Goals:

1. to expose students to various types of family structures from the American past;
2. to evaluate the ways in which these families operated;
3. to realize that families have always had to deal with problems;
4. to become aware of similarities and differences between families of the past and families today.

Process:

1. Students are assigned to small groups, each of which studies an historical ethnic family (readings are available on the Puritan family, the black American family during slavery, the Puerto Rican family, the Italian-American family, the Catholic-Irish family, the Amish, Jewish and Mormon families).
2. Students are asked to evaluate the family group they are studying according to how well the family is performing the following family functions:
 - a. values and traditions passed down;
 - b. instruction and discipline of children;
 - c. problem-solving;
 - d. children's responsibilities at home;
 - e. recreation;
 - f. religious training (if any)
3. Students will discuss their findings within their groups and record them as a basis of class discussion at the end of the week.

Follow-Up: Students will be expected to discover other tasks and functions accomplished by ethnic families in addition to the six listed above. A suggested list follows. "Families can encourage their members to . . ."

- a. Love one another;
- b. be honest and open with one another;
- c. set goals and plan activities together;
- d. be individuals;
- e. be creative;
- f. express interest in each other;
- g. respect one another;
- h. reach their potential as persons;
- i. self-discipline;
- j. family traditions.

Lesson Three: Family Problems: Help Is On The Way (Week Three)

Goals:

1. to have students become involved in simulated cases of family difficulty;
2. to suggest several models useful in dealing with family problems;
3. to perceive the inter-relationship between external pressures on family members and internal tensions;
4. to have students suggest specific ways in which individuals might begin to approach a solution, once a problem is identified.

Process:

1. Role play teacher- or student-created situations of typical family difficulty (siblings, parent-and-child, marriage partners, etc.) in front of the class.

-OR-

Have students rate the following list of family irritants, from most to least serious, and whether these are internally caused or externally caused, or a combination of both:

- a. Absence of romantic love in my marriage
- b. In-law conflict
- c. Low self-esteem
- d. Problems with children
- e. Financial difficulties
- f. Loneliness, isolation and boredom
- g. Sexual problems in marriage
- h. Fatigue
- i. Time pressure
- j. Aging and sickness

(adapted from Dobson, p. 21)

2. Students are given one or two models from which to approach a difficult family situation and propose a positive suggestion to help this family.

a. The "Four-B's" Approach for identification of a problem:

1. Being Do you know who you are?
2. Belonging Do you know how you fit into the family unit?
3. Becoming Do you know where you are headed?
4. Befitting Do you know how well your actions fit into your family and community?

b. The "ACT" principle of action for solving a problem:

1. A Affirm there is a positive solution to the problem
2. C Commit yourself to constructive action
- 3.) T Trusting that the outcome is assured

(from Peterson, p. 15)

Follow-Up: Students should also be aware of assistance that is available to families. This could easily be worked into the above exercise by having student-counselors refer “patients” to one or more of the following: a professional family counselor, a priest or pastor, a concerned neighbor or relative, a support group such as Parents Anonymous, books, tapes or other sources. In this way, students gain some practical knowledge of support that is available to families.

Students should see that a family can be helped but only if help is desired. Pressures are real. Depression is real. Strength and determination is needed. What is the source of this much-needed strength? Where can a family or its individual members turn?

Words of eternal truth were spoken by Spencer Tracey in the closing scene of the film in which he played the famous trial lawyer, Clarence Darrow: “He who troubles his own household will inherit the wind, and the fool will be servant to the wise.” (Proverbs 11:29)

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The American family is alive and well despite reports to the contrary. Good statistics and tables. Well-documented, yet readable.

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Delightful collection of illustrated short stories, articles and poems about the family. Of special interest are sections on immigrant families, slave families and the nuclear family. Student oriented.

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A Christian author’s positive suggestions to strengthen the family primarily by strengthening the husband-wife relationship. Feels that the family is society’s most durable unit, but in need of help.

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Excellent resource for any family life course. Articles range from family patterns, forms and values to ethnic families past and present, communal families and family life in the future. Highly recommended.

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To help troubled partners develop teamwork, leading therapists offer six tested guides. Recommended for classroom use.

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