



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Family Matters: Using Children’s Literature to Explore How Families Function

Curriculum Unit 90.05.05
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A unit centered on the American family is especially applicable to my classroom. I teach at the New Haven Urban Youth Center, an alternative school for students in grades 5-8 with special emotional and academic needs. These children come from backgrounds of drug abuse, violence, economic deprivation, and experiences of loss. They lack the things so amply provided in an intact, well-functioning middle class family. They need attention, a sense of belonging, a sense of worth, and concrete strategies for developing relationships with others. Their academic levels vary, but are characteristically below the level expected at their age. They may have short attention spans, low intelligence, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, poor learning habits and behavior problems.

My two chief aims will be to help my students improve their skills in communicating with family members, and to extend their reading and thinking skills using stories and a book or books on the theme of family dynamics. The goal of better family interaction comes first, because at Urban Youth Center we focus on improving behavior. In some ways, our staff acts as a surrogate family situation. I hope behaviors modeled in school will carry over into the home. While the literary content is a secondary objective, important skills will be developed in the process. I expect incidental learning to occur as well. Students will realize that reading or listening to stories can be pleasurable and that one can learn alternatives for behavior from this vicarious experience.

I have heard a sort of “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” debate among my fellow teachers in Milford where I taught previously. Some believe that a maladjusted child cannot learn until he/she develops a positive self-image. Others say that a positive self-image develops as a result of successful experiences in academic areas. This controversy is no more likely to be resolved than the nature/nurture one. What is clear is that my students need to bolster their self-esteem, and in my unit, I will use both strategies. Focusing on family dynamics will help them look at themselves as members of their families, and as someone who can influence interactions. Taking part in activities such as reading, writing, and presenting what they have learned in a culminating activity such as a puppet show or improvisational drama will give them opportunities to see themselves as capable people.

The communications skills presented will include:

Actively listening to another person

- Ability to state one's opinion without insulting the other person
- Ability to state the problem
- Ability to generate several ideas as solutions to problems
- Recognition of when it is helpful to bring in a third party to solve a problem

The reading and thinking skills will include understanding vocabulary and concepts, making inferences about the motivation of the characters, predicting what they might do next, stating opinions about the characters and their behavior, and comparing and contrasting the situations of the fictional characters with each other and with the students' own lives.

In my curriculum unit, I will address the needs and limitations of our students using children's literature. I want to find stories and activities on the theme of family life which will capture their interest and be a way to present relevant concepts. Materials will be selected and modified with their needs and limitations in mind. My students can experience vicariously both functional and dysfunctional family situations. Activities could include reading or being read to, viewing films, role-playing or playing games. The family situations could be used as a stimulus for class discussions. Students will be helped to make the connection between what happened in the stories and their own experiences. Members of dysfunctional families may not know what "normal" is. It is therapeutic to discover that other families have similar problems to one's own. Members of functional families may likewise accept what goes on as normal, and may not be consciously aware of what they're doing "right." My students could benefit from observing new ways of behaving and of relating to people.

Through my reading I intend to identify and clarify areas of family life to be discussed with the children, find books or stories to illustrate these areas, and devise methods of presentation appropriate to the children's needs.

The objectives and content of the unit dictate a topical rather than chronological organization.

Areas of family life to be explored are:

Continuity—the family (ideally) is with you through many experiences, good and bad, and provides stability.

Roles—Healthy—parents and siblings can be good models, support in exploring careers etc.

Unhealthy—roles reversed, child cares for parent or siblings, child made scapegoat etc.

Communication—Can be good, or can be negative, incomplete, or confused (double messages or ineptness).

Ideally

Love

Acceptance

Sense of belonging

Respect, manners

Pride

Communicates general information, culture, ethics

Deals with issues of becoming a person in your own right

When things go wrong

Hate

Rejection

Lack of rootedness

Disrespect, no manners

Shame

No communication of culture, ethics

Doesn't deal with issues of becoming a person in your own right

Effective Communication—Use of words, attitude, body language, writing.

Recognizing Problems—Alcohol and drug abuse, physical abuse, health problems, family conflicts, divorce and blended families, step parents, etc.

Resources—Trusted adults such as teachers, counselors, church or Scout leaders, and doctors; hotlines, support groups, and social service agencies.

Ethnic Group—What does my culture tell me? What can I learn from ethnic groups different from my own?

Discussion will bring out the fact that no family, no matter how idyllic it appears from the outside, is without problems. The ideal column above is for discussion purposes. These are things to strive for, but no family is perfect.

Reading resources will come from four categories:

1. Book selection aides—Example: *The Bookfinder* to select books to be used with the children.
2. The books selected.
3. Readings in bibliotherapy or family therapy to identify and clarify the concepts to be taught using the books.
4. Methods for modifying lessons for special needs children.

Activities that can be developed are:

Brainstorming in small groups to develop lists such as the above comparison of functional and dysfunctional families. The groups come together to share with the whole class. Later sessions could generate lists of suggestions for strengthening the family; resources that supplement the family (adult friends, Scout or Church groups etc.); and ideas for activities with a family.

Use of photographs in a “show and tell” to start a discussion of the issues.

Role playing can be used in several ways. Students can be given roles and situations to play out. Ex.: “You are the mother of a teenaged boy. You think he’s been using drugs and are about to confront him” “You have been drinking on weekends, now your mother wants to talk to you.” After good communication techniques have been presented, students can do conversations the “right” and “wrong” ways, and can critique the performances.

Guided reading of the books and stories can include questions relating experiences of characters to students’ own experiences.

A film, filmstrip or cassette recording of the book or story can spark interest.

Students can make families of finger or hand puppets, produce a play, and present it for another class or at an assembly.

I have chosen *The Shimmershine Queens* by Camille Yarbrough because it meets the needs of my group. They need something close to their own experience. I looked for books about contemporary black families in the city. In addition to meeting this criterion, this book addresses the needs for affection, belonging, self-worth and concrete strategies for developing relationships I mentioned in my introduction.

The Shimmershine Queens fills the need for affection. Mama, Cousin Seatta, Michelle, Mrs. Moore and Ms. Collier all show affection and concern for Angie. Her sense of belonging to her family is reinforced by the conversation with Cousin Seatta, and by her father coming to the play. Through this and discovering her acting and dancing talents, Angie begins to feel that she belongs among her peers as well. The importance of a sense of worth is a major theme of the book. Cousin Seatta attributes poor attitudes and lack of achievement to ignorance of one’s heritage. Ms. Collier leads her students through a colorful depiction of that heritage as one of courage and dignity. Both women tell Angie specific things she can do in relating to others.

Ten-year-old Angie Peterson thinks she is unattractive. Her schoolmates say she is too black. She looks down and doesn’t say anything, although her family and her best friend, Michelle Moore, have told her she should stand up for herself. In addition she is unhappy because her father has left the family to live elsewhere. She confides this to her mother and her Great Cousin Seatta. Seatta, ninety, tells her she shouldn’t wish for lighter colored hair and skin. All cultures have their own kinds of beauty and she has the “African beauty look.” She should remember her “get-up gift,” the ability to strive for things, which she got from the elders, who gloried in learning as soon as they were freed from slavery. When you use the gift and do your best you get a warm, golden feeling Seatta calls the “shimmershine.” You should be proud of yourself, and speak up. She says, “I don’t let Mr. Fear set down in me, take his shoes off, and make hisself to home.”

Bolstered by these words, Angie resolves to glory in learning, and speak up for herself. At first this does not go well. Angie is involved in a fight. A new teacher rescues her and takes her home. The teacher, Ms. Collier has

come to teach dance and drama. Angie and Michelle persuade the other children to behave so the new teacher will stay. Angie's mother is depressed over her husband's absence and makes Angie stay home to care for the younger children. Angie does well in rehearsals, earning the respect of the others. She desperately wants her father to see her in the play. In her despair, she finds herself shoplifting, and almost dropping out of the play at the last minute.

My students will identify with Angie and her classmates, who talk and act like inner-city kids. They cuss, insult each other's mothers, jump on desks, run in the hall, and fight. Cousin Seatta's words would be just another lecture in my students could not see Angie working things out in a concrete situation. Angie has to fight other students, conquer stage fright, and live with her mother's depression. She is inspired by her cousin and motivated by Ms. Collier, but this doesn't solve her problems instantly and miraculously. Although there are problems, Angie's mother is both strict and loving and her father does come to the play.

In discussions on communication in the family, I will use the Social Development Skills curriculum currently taught in the sixth grade, as well as some children's books on the family. The Social Development program teaches children to stop and calm down, state the problem and how they feel, think of many solutions, consider the consequences, and choose the best solution before acting. Posters with stop signs are in all our classrooms, and this is a good starting point. This program gets children thinking about their behavior and focuses on control. In addition, I would use *Getting Along In Your Family* by Phyllis Naylor, and *When Grownups Drive You Crazy* by Eda LeShan. Both books are written in simple language and give concrete examples of problem situations in families.

I am looking for a book featuring an Hispanic American family. This has been somewhat difficult to find, but I expect to have found something before I teach the unit.

This unit is intended for use with fifth grade students who are socially and emotionally maladjusted. It would take a marking period, approximately two months. Second marking period would be a good time. The students will have had time to adjust to our expectations for their behavior, and we will be better acquainted as a group than we would first marking period. Our classes have large ability ranges. My more able students can read extra books and report to the rest of the class.

I can picture this unit being adapted for use with older students, and with those with greater academic ability. For older students perhaps other books could be used or the same ones in more depth. More gifted students would not need the simplification of presentation. The same stimulus would evoke different issues and more sophisticated insights. Middle class white children may be more successful academically, may have different problems, but may be just as needy emotionally as my black and Hispanic, disturbed inner-city students. Parents of any social or economic class may have problems with substance abuse or other problems which impair their effectiveness. Some well-to-do parents are guilty of neglecting their children's emotional needs. Even members of functional families can benefit from awareness of their interactions and of ways of improving their communication.

Lesson Plan # 1—Introduction

Preparation The students have been asked to bring in pictures of families. I want them to bring photographs of their families, and many will do so. However, some may be uncomfortable or not have pictures, so the assignment will also include options for bringing in magazine pictures or drawings of their families. I will bring family pictures and magazine pictures myself.

Objectives

1. The students will use images of families to discuss their perceptions of what a family is.
2. The students as a group will write a definition of a family.
3. The students will compare their families with the definition and discuss their reactions.

Procedure

1. Sharing—The group will take about ten or fifteen minutes to look at the pictures and discuss them. My students may not react well to taking turns making formal presentations. We may spread the pictures on a table and ask each other questions.
2. What is a family? Solicit suggestions from the group about types of families, size, whether they live together, etc. and write them all down. See if suggestions can be combined or modified to make one or two sentences that all can agree on.
3. Reactions—It's easy to find references to families, isn't it? There are family restaurants, movies intended for family viewing, family cars, and even family-sized cereals and detergents. How is your family like or different from those you see in magazines and on television? How does it feel when your family isn't like that? Would you feel left out if you are part of a single-parent family, or if you were a single person?

Summary We've looked at some different kinds of families. We have written what we think a family is. In the next few months we are going to read and do activities about families. We'll keep a copy of this definition and see if we want to make any changes later. Some things about our families are very personal. Here is a suggestion box. If there is anything you would like us to discuss and you don't want us to know who asked the question, you can write it and put it in the box.

Lesson Plan # 2—Reading *The Shimmershine Queens*

This lesson will take at least two class periods to complete.

Preparation The students have read Chapter One pp. 7-29.

Objectives

1. Students will identify the characters introduced in the chapter.
2. Students will state the problems and feelings of Angie and Mrs. Peterson.
3. Students will state what Great Cousin Seatta's advice is.

4. Students will attempt to predict what the characters will do.

Procedure

A. Vocabulary: Discuss the meaning of the following words as used in Chapter One: boogaman, compliment, whoosh, submerged, swished, dislodge, commence, extended, shimmershine, surging, ignorant, ridicule, shriveled, craved, maimed, and get-up gift.

B. Comprehension:

1. Identify: Angie, Amanda Peterson, Lavenia, Patrice, Daddy, Michelle, Mrs. Moore, Great Aunt Seatta, and Hector.

2. What are Angie's problems ? (a. She doesn't like her looks, b. When kids call her "too black," she looks down and doesn't defend herself, and c. her father has left the family to live somewhere else.) How does Angie feel? (a. Ugly, unaccepted, unattractive; b. Scared, unpopular, disrespected, ignored, unhappy; c. Sad, rejected, abandoned—or anything in their own words that gives the appropriate answer.)

3. What are Mrs. Peterson's problems? (a. Her husband left her. b. She worries about food and rent money.) How does she feel? (a. Sad, rejected, sick, depressed, b. worried, depressed, sad.)

4. What is Great Cousin Seatta's advice? (She tells the story of their African culture, the get-up gift, and shimmershine. You have to glory in learning and don't let Mr. Fear make himself at home in you.)

5. What will Angie do next? What will Mrs. Peterson do next? Why do you think so? Will it work?

Writing Fill in answers to the above on worksheet.

Conclusion Review main characters and summarize their problems. " In the next chapter we will see how Angie tries to use Cousin Seatta's advice."

Worksheet for Lesson # 2

1. Tell in a few words who each person is.

Angie
Amanda Peterson
Lavenia
Patrice
Daddy
Michelle
Mrs. Moore
Great Aunt Seatta
Hector

2. What are Angie's problems and how does she feel about each one?
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.
3. What are Mrs. Peterson's problems and how does she feel about each one?
 - A.
 - B.
4. What is Great Aunt Seatta's advice?
 - A. Angie should fight when the kids tease her.
 - B. Angie should try to do well in school and stick up for herself when she is teased by the kids.
 - C. Angie should straighten and lighten her hair.
 - D. Angie should ignore the other children.
5. What will these characters do next? Why do you think so? Will it work?
 - A. Angie
 - B. Mrs. Peterson

Lesson Plan # 3—Role-Playing

Preparation Before this lesson is taught, the class will have done some trust-building exercises. Example: Pairs of students take turns blindfolding and leading each other around the building for a period of time.

Objectives

1. Students will confront difficult issues in a safe environment. They will try out situations and think through possible solutions.
2. Students will develop an awareness that all people have problems and worries. It helps to share these problems with other people and talk and think about them. It is good to have thought out a situation before you are actually in it.
3. Students will develop confidence in their ability to communicate feelings and solve problems.

Materials File cards with situations written or typed on them, chalkboard and chalk or flip chart and marker.

Motivation/Introduction We've been reading about some families and the problems they faced. Today we're going to pretend that we are members of certain families solving problems. Did you ever wonder what it would be like to be your mother or father? Some of you will get to try that today and the rest next week.

Procedure Pick pairs of students and give them cards. If necessary explain the card privately. Each pair has five minutes to act out the situation in front of the class. The first situations should be non-threatening or less threatening ones. The teacher can go first if desired. The students may enjoy seeing her take the part of a child, and it will help to break the ice. The first pair should be volunteers or students the teacher knows will be secure and relatively comfortable "hamming it up." Time is called and the group discusses what they saw.

Example

Person 1—You are Latricia, age twelve. You and your friend Tanya are headed for the Mall. Your little sister, Amanda insists on going with you.

Person 2—You are five-year-old Amanda. There are no good cartoons on TV. You decide to make Latricia take you with her to the mall.

Criticism should focus on the situation. Remarks about the quality of the acting should be positive. Reference should be made to the social development curriculum steps. This discussion should be brief, as the activity goes best when it moves quickly. After the last pair finishes, ten minutes of class time should be reserved for

summarizing what the group learned.

This could be done once a week. After the first lesson when the process has to be learned, more students will be able to do skits in one period. As their comfort level increases, so can the seriousness of the topics. The students may suggest topics, perhaps anonymously in the suggestion box.

Situations for Role-Playing

- Parent worried about child's drug use
- Child worried about parent's (or friend's) drug use
- Parent concerned about child's grades/attendance/behavior.
- Child concerned about his/her grades and afraid to bring up the subject.
- Older sister/brother conflict with younger brother/sister.
- Illness of family member
- Pressure from peers to use or sell drugs, have sex
- Fear of guns, violence in the neighborhood
- Older child taking care of younger
- Child staying alone in house
- Pregnancy
- Sexuality issues
- Lack of money
- Shoplifting
- Lying, cheating on tests
- Depression, suicide attempts
- Political issues—environment, nuclear accidents, floods, hurricanes
- Bullies

Student Reading List

Adoff, Arnold, ed. *I Am The Darker Brother, An Anthology of Modern Poems by Negro Americans* . New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1968.

Poems by Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wright, and others.

Cerf, Christopher, ed., *Marlo Thomas and Friends Free To Be . . . A Family, A Book About All Kinds of Belonging* . New York: Bantam Books. 1987.

Songs, stories, and poems about families.

Drescher. Joan E. *Your Family, By Family* . New York: Walker, 1980.

Picture book showing many different families-single parent, extended, adopted, foster, divorced and remarried.

Fufuka, Karamo and Mahiri Fufuka. *My Daddy Is a Cool Dude* . New York: The Dial Press, 1975.

Easy to read poems, the poems are ordinary but the illustrations are excellent and students can read this independently.

Hart, Carole, ed. *Free To Be . . . You And He*. New York: Bantam Books, 1974.

Songs, stories, and poems about feelings and relationships. Could be used to address topics as they come up in discussion.

Hill, Elizabeth S. *Evan's Corner* . New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967.

The theme is the balance between having time for yourself and togetherness, owning your own corner, and helping a member of your family.

LeShan, Eda. *When Grownups Drive You Crazy* . New York: Macmillan, 1988.

Written for children, stresses understanding why grownups behave as they do, and telling them in an appropriate way how you feel. Nagging, privileges, privacy, being compared to siblings, parents with substance abuse problems, and many other topics.

Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds. *Getting Along In Your Family*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976.

Presents typical family problems and discusses how to have good communication in the family.

Yarbrough, Camille. *The Shimmershine Queens* . New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1989.

Angie learns to be proud of herself and to deal with peers, her absent father, and depressed mother.

Bibliography for Teachers

American Guidance Services, Inc. *The Book Finder, A Guide to Children's Literature About The Needs and Problems of Youth Aged 2-15*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Services, Inc., 1989.

Examples of subjects indexed: Family, Death, Learning Disabilities, Separation, Abandonment. Synopsis of each book.

Carroll, Frances Laverne . ***Exciting, Funny. Scary. Short, Different, and Sad Books Kids Like About Animals, Science, Sports, Families. Songs, and Other Things.*** Chicago: American Library Association, 1984.

Source for books on black families.

Leslie, Gerald R. *The Family in Social Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Background and reference on family structure and family change.

Levitan, Sar A., Richard S. Belous, and Frank Gallo. *What's Happening to the American Family. Tensions, Hopes, Realities*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

Basic reference. Includes welfare, single-parent families, women working, and other topics that may arise.

Meltzer, Hilton. *Hispanic Americans*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1982.

Basic reference. Chapter 5 called "Family Portrait," has a story and photographs of an Hispanic American family.

Roets, Lois Schelle. *Incomplete Plays*. New Sharon, IA: Leadership Publishers, Inc., 1985.

Useful for ideas for role playing.

Piscitelli, Janice A. *Wings n' Things. A Handbook of Creative Crafts and Activities*. West Nyack, New York: Parker Publishing Company, 1983.

Finger Puppets I, p. 127, and Hand Puppets, p. 129. The finger puppets are made of felt and easy to do.

Trelease, Jim. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

Source for-books, techniques for effective use of reading aloud.

Weissberg, Roger P., Marlene Caplan, Loisa Bennetto, and Alice Stroup Jackson. *The New Haven Social Development Program. Sixth-Grade Social Problem-Solving Module 1990-91*. New Haven: Department of Psychology, Yale University, 1990.

Winn, Marie. *Children Without Childhood*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.

Children get involved in sexual activity, drugs and other problem behavior at an early age. Many parents assume child will turn into a "monster" as a teen, and don't try to influence the child's behavior. Addresses

one-parent families, divorce, and working women.

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