

the FUNCTIONAL FAMILY

by James D. MacArthur, Ph.D.

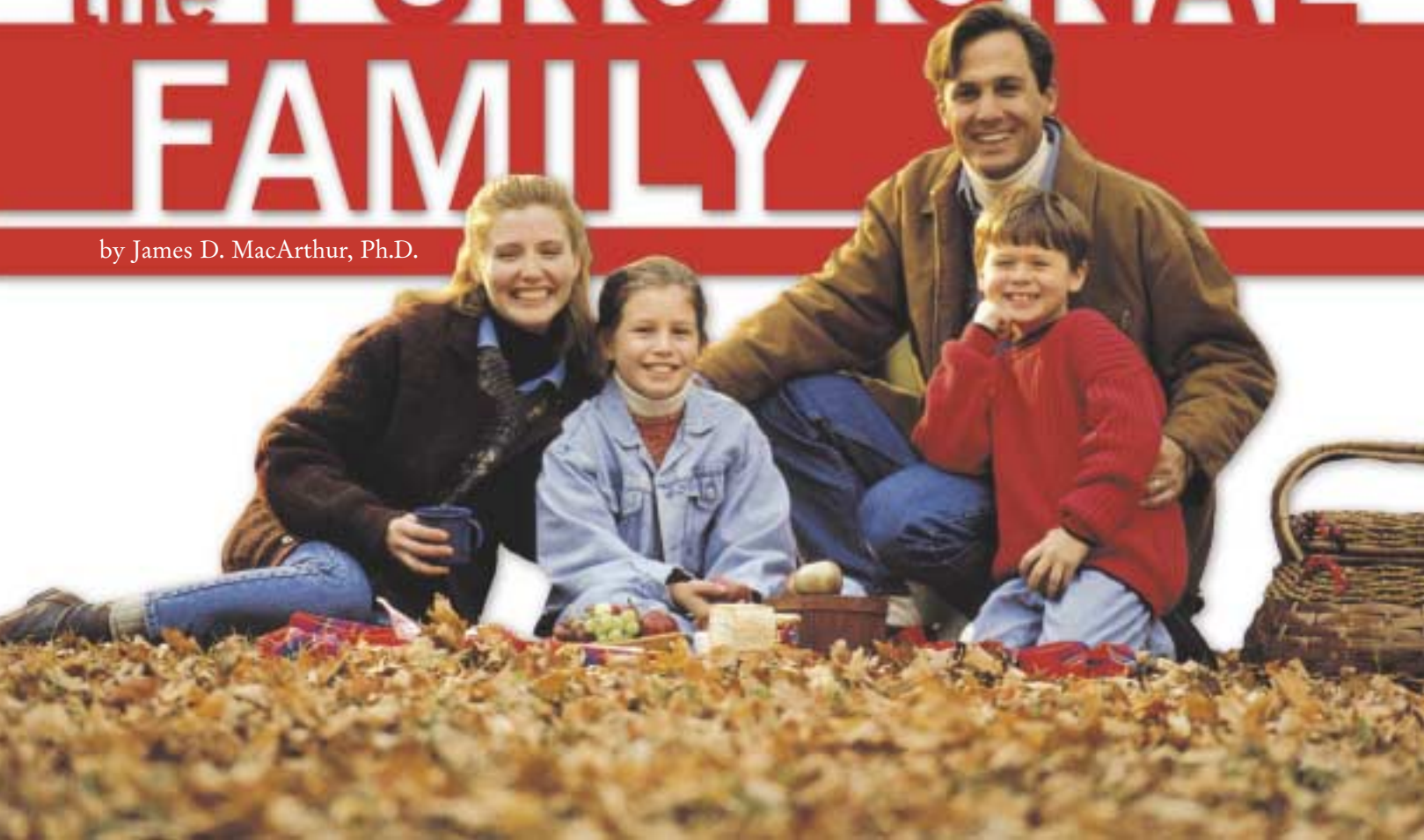


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I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE a very personal conversation with you about families. Though written, it will take the form of a chat, a heart-to-heart talk about families. Because I want to discuss families in the first person rather than the third person, I'll share some personal experiences from my own family. The whole idea of family is so personal that I can tell it that way best. The greatest privilege of my life is to be a husband and a dad in a family. To me it is a sacred responsibility, standing

above anything else I am asked to do in my life.

My theme has to do with functional families. We hear the term *dysfunctional* applied to families frequently, meaning one that does not work right. But what does a functional family mean? Simply that "it works right." A functional family is not intended to be a perfect family; as a matter of fact, such families are quite aware that perfection is not the goal. In a functional family, everyone is aware of the existence of weaknesses in the

family. Those weaknesses are not considered to be something to hide. Children and parents acknowledge them and work on them over time. The functional family is a place where people feel like they can grow together as individuals within the family environment. There is love and unity, but also individuality among the family members. They like to be there. Being home feels good most of the time. There is not a lot of criticism in the home. People take time for each other and offer

support and guidance to each other. The parents care about the family and make its well-being their top priority in life. They teach their children and set a good example for them to follow.

Again, a functional family is not a perfect family, but it is one where its members feel that, with all its strengths and weaknesses, their family is a unified organization that is intended to strengthen each member. There is a substantial amount of consistency in the functional family, but it also has its ups and downs. Any family can get off track for a time. The members of a functional family sometimes have such difficult episodes, but they can recognize them, join together in problem-solving, and offer their best thinking and caring toward producing some redirection so that the family feels better about where it is then going. In the functional family, all of this is viewed as part of a long learning and growing process that is experienced together. Parents and children learn from their own individual experiences and also vicariously from the learning experiences of others in the family as they are shared with each other.

Amitai Etzioni, a Jewish writer, once said, “Making a child is a moral act. . . . We must make parenting an honorable vocation again.” The family is where the most important events in our lives take place.

As my contribution to strengthening the family, I will describe a group of important characteristics of the functional

family. Where did I get them? From much pondering about my own experiences growing up, from over 30 years of raising ten children of my own, from my church leadership experiences trying to help families struggling to faithfully raise their own children, from my over 25 years as a psychologist and marriage and family therapist, and from a number of years owning and running a treatment program for troubled adolescents. From all of that, here is an overview of some of the key characteristics of healthy, functional families.

You are likely now asking yourself if your family is dysfunctional or functional. Neither, probably. All families have strengths and weaknesses. So, instead of trying to categorize your family as one or the other, let’s take a trip together as I share with you a group of characteristics of families that seem to work fairly well. (As I discuss each one, I would encourage you to rate your family on a 1-10 scale, with 7-10 indicating strength and 0-4 suggesting that you lack something in that particular area. And I would suggest you save your answers to evaluate your family’s progress down the road.)

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In the functional family, there is an inviting, comfortable, and loving atmosphere in the home and family. The atmosphere in a home is somewhat intangible but is at the very center of the family soul. In a functional family, there is a good feeling, and it feels good to be together. The atmosphere is “easy” and “not tight.” People like to be there. It is kind of like ice cream—you can’t seem to get enough of it!

As a parent, you might find it interesting to ask each family member to write down five or so words that describe the atmosphere in your home over a period of time. Then take some time to discuss together your “findings” and see what you can learn from each other’s observations. In some families, parents try too hard to “produce” a certain desirable atmosphere. They work at it too hard, and the result is often an uptight atmosphere that no one likes. Sometimes you can learn about the type of atmosphere you want and how to produce it by observing pleasing and uplifting atmospheres in the homes of others you know. But be careful not to try to imitate someone else’s style too closely. Your own

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children will do with what they are offered.

family “style” and atmosphere is uniquely your own.

Although I’ve mentioned atmosphere first, it really grows out of the other characteristics I’ll now discuss.

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In the functional family, parents are mostly interested in what they can offer their children—and pay less attention to what their children will do with what they are offered. You will be less tense, stressed, and troubled when you realize that is all you can do anyway: offer your children whatever you can, and accept that the results of what they do with your offering are beyond you. Since that became clear to me as a parent, I operate differently in my family. Now, I put my thought and effort into doing my very best to offer as much love, teaching, sharing, concern, help, guidance, and attention as I can to my children and grandchildren—and leave what they do with it up to them. Then the path they travel after that is their path to choose. I see myself as a teacher, coach, consultant, and guide—and not as a manager who must get

results. If you see yourself as the latter, you will likely try to control your children and will get worse results. If, instead, you offer what you have to give them from your heart and let them govern themselves, I think you will like the results you get even better.

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In the functional family, parents consciously and intentionally parent. You cannot afford to allow your parenting to become casual. You must be very serious about your responsibilities as a parent. Not uptight, but serious and focused. If I could convince parents to do one thing that would make all the difference in their families, it would be to set aside a specific time once a week or perhaps every two weeks (but not further apart than that) to sit down together and discuss family matters. For those who are single parents, set aside a time to think about each of your family members and your overall family needs. Some single parents have taken this advice and joined together with friends at a regular time each week to discuss family issues and help each other. If you need convincing, think about an important meeting that you

attend regularly—and that you make sure you never miss, such as a meeting at work where the goals of the workplace are discussed. Then ask yourself

why you would miss the time set aside for thoughtful consideration of each child’s needs, overall family needs, marital needs, and the personal needs of you as parents in the family? Intentional parenting means regularly taking some private time to think about each child and what he or she needs.

If you still can’t see how setting aside a time once a week to talk together about family needs, goals, and plans can possibly make that big of a difference, consider that it does so because parents have no forum for regularly discussing their family needs unless you create one. I call this crucial, once-a-week meeting *Family Discussion Time*. Only parents attend it.

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In the functional family, parents are very aware of the impact they have on their children. They understand their children are like “human blackboards,” standing in front of them as they hold up their personal blackboards and say, “Write what you think of me!” This reality has the potential of being so powerful—or very counterproductive. You, as parents, from the minute your children are born, begin to write messages about them on their personal blackboards, whether they are intentional or unintentional.

Unintentional messages may be written as a parent ignores a child, shows impatience, or cannot find time to be together. What message might appear on your child’s personal blackboard if you are too busy for them?



The family is a garden where we

grow healthy people – or try to.



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Could it be “You are not very important to me” or “You are not worth me taking time to show an interest in you”? Some parents may respond, “Well, when I am too busy that is not the message I intend to send!” That may be your view, but it might be the message that is received anyway.

Be particularly mindful of the patterns of messages you send. Don’t get so paranoid that you feel you have to watch every word or deed with your children. You don’t need to be that wary, but you do need to watch for patterns. To be too busy once in a while or impatient occasionally is unlikely to inscribe a negative message on your child’s blackboard. But a regular pattern of being too busy or too impatient could.

The more important issue is, what messages would you like to intentionally write on your child’s blackboard? Suppose, because you leave for work so early every morning, you never see your children until you return home in the evening. But you want them to know you are thinking of them and they mean

a lot to you. So on several mornings you make a little sign on colored paper and tape it to the foot of their beds so when they wake up it’s the first thing they see. And the sign says, “Hey! Daddy loves you! See you at dinner. We’ll eat lots of chocolate ice cream together.” You’ve just written a very powerful message on those blackboards.

Or, what might you be writing on their blackboards if you consciously take time to play games with your children—together or one-on-one. “You are fun. I like you. You are worth it.” Those are good messages that won’t be erased.

I would love to see you write many more intentional and uplifting messages on your children’s blackboards—regardless of their age! In fact, there is no reason, when you’re 80, that you can’t write a significant message on your child’s blackboard who is 50!

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In the functional family, parents understand that the best place to address basic human needs is within the family. A basic

human need is something a human being must have to grow and develop and be emotionally healthy. In my view, there are three basic human needs we each have: The need to feel

- Significant and Important,
- Loved, and
- Capable and Competent.

The family is a garden where we grow healthy people—or try to. Not coincidentally, children believe what they hear and learn within their families—whether it be for good or ill. What can you do to help your son or daughter feel significant and important? Or loved? Or capable and competent?

One of my colleagues recently left a significant career to stay home with her newly adopted son. What does her decision write on her son’s blackboard about basic human needs? Perhaps it speaks to all of them: You, my son, are significant, important, loved, capable and competent—and that is why I made that decision to stay with you.

What about the single parent who works long hours and still consciously parents? What is she communicating about how much she loves her children?

I’ve known of mothers who stay up into the early morning hours doing computer data entry in order to support children in their schooling, missionary service, and other worthwhile pursuits. What is the message being written on those blackboards? “You are worth it. You are important to me.”

Parents who recognize the powerful effect they have in their children's lives will seek out a particular child and sit down with him or her and talk together about how things are going. Those times together are not coincidental, they are intentional; and parents do it because they want to write a message that says, "You are important and are worth the time for me to stop whatever else I am doing and talk to you and see how things are going for you." What a great message to put on your children's blackboards.

When one of your children brings home an improved report card, you take the time to sit down and enjoy it with them. You might even ask if you could share the good news with others in the family. If you can spread the good news, then many family members can write on the child's blackboard a message of love and encouragement.

However you do it—and the possibilities are limitless—the principle to remember is that every human being needs his or her basic human needs met. And, as a parent, you can consciously and intentionally find ways to help your children meet theirs. Don't simply hope they will receive the messages they need by chance; make sure they know, at least from you, that they are worthwhile, important, loved, and competent. There is no greater gift, in terms of personal well-being, that you can offer them. As a child I knew the pain that accompanied an absence of feeling important and valuable to someone. Don't let

that happen to any child in your family. Discuss your intended efforts each week in Family Discussion Time.

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In the functional family, relationships are of supreme importance. It is within the context of a good relationship that you are able to write on your children's blackboards and help meet their basic human needs. You must be willing to regularly assess the condition and needs of each relationship in the family. Don't assume the relationships are okay. I've found it helps to rate each one on a ten-point scale, with a high number representing a strong relationship and a low number a weaker one. Do that in Family Discussion Time also and compare notes.

When you can see that a relationship is weak, how do you begin to improve it? First, begin by paying attention to the rela-

tionship in obvious ways. Talk, play together, spend one-on-one time with the person, send love letters, cards or notes, give compliments, try some surprises, ask for forgiveness, say "I love you" or "I like you," listen to the other person, ask for their help in some area of need you have, share personal feelings, and simply "notice" the other person. You will find that just by paying some attention to the person, things will begin to change.

Relationships usually don't improve accidentally. In counseling and therapy, I ask clients working on relationships to get a small notebook and keep track of what they do specifically to enhance the relationship and then share it with me in our counseling sessions. If you will do that for a month or two on a specific relationship, it will help you stay focused on what you are trying to do and whether or not your efforts are working.

In the functional family, parents have clearly defined roles and responsibilities they mutually agree upon.



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Also, remember that you don't have to completely "fix" a relationship for it to feel much better to you. Just do something that will alter it or improve it "a little bit," and enjoy that improvement for awhile. Most often, relationships improve in stages, not overnight.

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In the functional family, the parents are the teachers. They consciously and intentionally plan what they want to teach in the family. Don't just hope your children will learn important things—teach them the things you feel they should know. In your Family Discussion Time with your spouse (or, if you are single, by yourself), ask, "What do we want to teach in our family?" And, "How, when, and where do we want to teach it?"

Of course, there is direct and indirect teaching that takes place within in the family.

In a given month, you should decide

specifically what you will teach directly in the family. If you plan for it to happen, it will more likely happen. Some might ask, "Teach what?" The answer is simple: Anything your family needs to learn about. Topics might include courtesy, how to develop a friendship, finances, getting out of debt, how to use time effectively, the importance of education, mutual respect in the family, the need for everyone to do their share within the home, honesty, faith and religion, how to manage angry feelings. There are an endless number of topics you could teach in the form of a very short lesson and then have a discussion where everyone shares their thoughts and participates as they choose. What you teach is not as important to me as that you teach. And that you do it regularly!

Of course, you also teach indirectly through means other than your own words. Although generally not planned, indirect teaching allows you to be more consistent and regular in conveying those principles you want your children to learn. Often, you are trying to teach the same topic you taught directly—but this time you do it indirectly. It is a double dose through two different methods.

Indirect teaching in my own family has happened in many ways:

- We have hung pictures and paintings representing

principles and ideals we would like to convey

- We put up family pictures of all types.

- We put a sign that read "The Family Is Where the Most Important Things Happen" on the bulletin board in our kitchen.

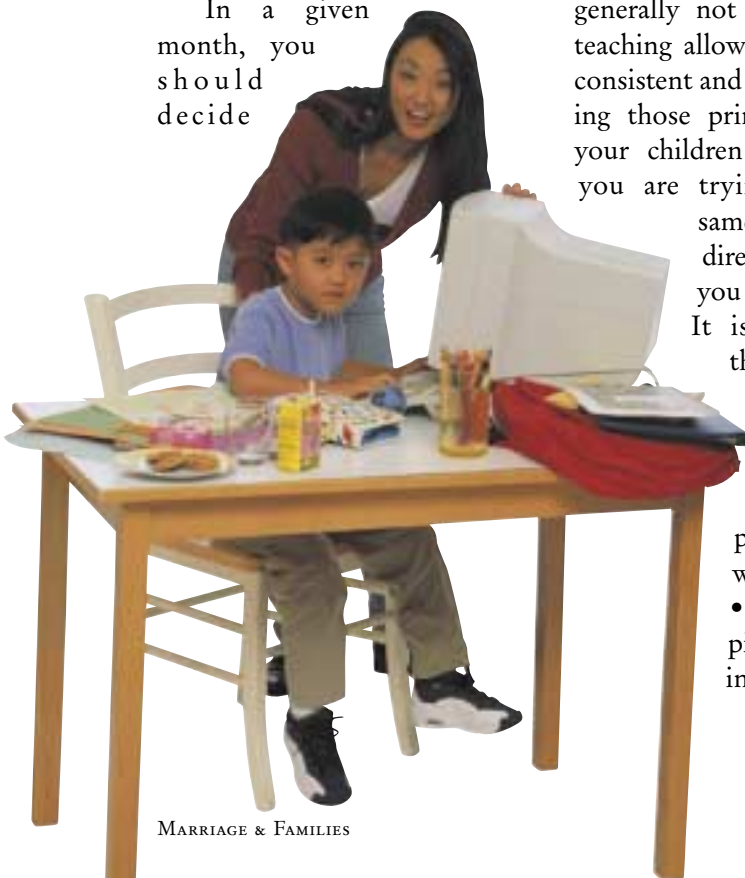
- My daughter made a computerized composite family photograph of all family members spanning from 1839 to 1997—158 years! We gave one to everyone in the family for Christmas one year. As my wife and I have visited our children and their families, we have noticed that extended family photograph in many of their homes in a prominent place, which tells us we've had success in helping our children realize the value of not only those now living but those who helped bring us to where we are.

- We have displayed awards and special recognitions in a prominent place for all to see.

- My son recently wrote a paper, together with his wife, that he presented at a conference. We were able to share it with the entire family via e-mail so we could all enjoy their great accomplishment.

- Also via e-mail we have shared many ideas and insights within the family.

Remember also that example is one of the best forms of indirect teaching. If you have concluded that courtesy is something you want to teach in your family, first teach it directly. Then act courteously in your family relationships and with others you encounter.



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In the functional family, parents have clearly defined roles and responsibilities they mutually agree upon. You need to know what your roles and responsibilities are within the family, and then accept full responsibility for them. These decisions should be made together, not apart. If you are a single parent, define what your major roles are so you are clear about what you want to pay attention to as a parent. Then you must do all you can to be psychologically and physically present as much as you can, both fathers and mothers. Make the well-being of your family your highest priority. Of course that includes your own emotional and physical health as well.

If you are not in good shape, you probably

won't have much to offer your family either.

Some areas to consider are which parent will take the lead on financial support, the management of finances, the various aspects of home management, teaching different topics, nurturing particular children in need, helping with homework or special learning or training. In some cases both parents will want to contribute to an area of need fairly equally. In other areas one will take the lead and the other will serve as backup. The important thing is to sit down together and make decisions you both agree on. Then make sure you regularly assess how you're doing, what particular needs have arisen, and how each of you is feeling about the roles. All of this is conscious and intentional—not vague and casual. Don't be vague and casual as parents! Use Family Discussion Time to plan intentionally.

I have a particular bias regarding roles, which is that fathers need to be willing to be nurturers. Some feel that is the woman's or mother's role. That is absolutely not true. Children need to see their fathers as nurturers. More specifically, children need to see their fathers doing whatever it takes to support and run the family. Fathers in functional families will read stories to children, help with homework, do dishes, vacuum,

change diapers, cook, go shopping, get up at night with a sick child, go to Back to School Night or Parent Teacher Conferences, etc. They need to consistently show their children that the family is so important that there is no limitation on what they are willing to do.

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In the functional family, parents exhibit strong and confident leadership and help develop a shared vision of the purpose of the family. In my role as a father, there is no question I ask myself more often than, "Can I recommend to my children that they follow my example and emulate how I behave, both publicly and privately?" Parents need to regularly ask themselves what they want their children to be like. Then they need to show their children how they should live through their daily actions and choices.

- Do you want them to be patient? Then show patience.
- Do you want them to relax, have fun, and learn to enjoy life? Then do it yourself.
- Do you want them to read and love wholesome books and the scriptures? Then sit in an obvious place and read in front of them or read with them!
- Do you want them to develop faith and follow the religious precepts that guide your life? Then show them how your beliefs guide your daily actions.
- Do you want them to care about family relationships? Then kiss, hug, smile, listen,



Children need to see their fathers doing whatever it takes to support and run the family.

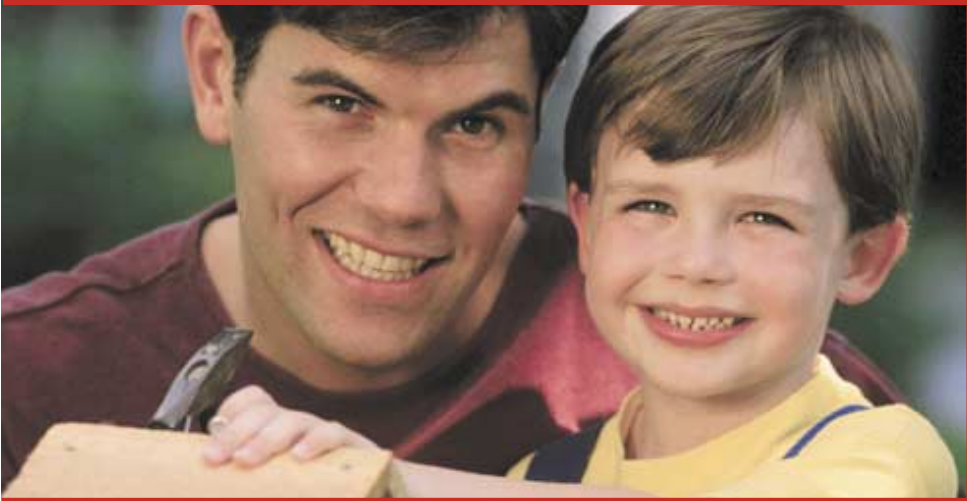


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and share personal experiences.

It is crucial that you do all you can to show strong and confident leadership in your family because children actually want to follow their parents. But they more easily follow parents who have integrity and who are credible. Your children watch you—and they want to see someone who has a clear sense of direction on personal as well as spiritual matters.

They look for someone who leads in the family willingly and not begrudgingly. They want clear but not rigid leadership. They want to respect you but not fear you. Lead them, guide them, but don't drive them. Your leadership needs to be fair-minded, and you should be able to invite the input, thoughts, and recommendations of your children in your family councils. If

you invite the help of your children, they will feel more like they are a part of the family team.

As an example, one of my older sons once made the observation that because our family was spreading out around the country and even outside the country, we should do a monthly family e-mail newsletter so we could all keep in touch and be closer. We have been doing it now for over a year, and it has, indeed, kept us all in touch with each other—even when we had a daughter in India! And that suggestion came from one of my children—not from me.

Some time ago I made a list of families I know that impressed me as being strong and healthy. Then I interviewed the parents and found an interesting thing: Each of these parents talked with passion about their family. Their family was a

big deal to them. I also found that, along with passion, these parents had made many sacrifices for their families—a testimony to their children of how important the family is to them. And, in many cases, this feeling of the importance the family had rubbed off on the children of that family, and they likewise viewed the family and the idea of the family as important.

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In the functional family, the family realizes it does not have to be perfect. Some parents need to put away the whip. They need to relax, ease up, and let go of any need they may have to present a “perfect” family to the world. Children are not going to be perfect. They are “projects under construction,” which I use to convey the idea that in the functional family, we understand that each family member is growing, developing, and learning, which is our purpose for living in this mortal realm. In the functional family, mistakes are okay. As parents, we should expect a certain amount of them. Then we should pull together in dealing with them and learning from them. In the more dysfunctional family, mistakes are bad and are to be hidden from public view as they are simply embarrassing. In the functional family, we do not go looking for mistakes and problems, but we understand they are a natural part of the mortal experience, and we love one another and offer support, keeping our heads up while facing them courageously together as a family.

In the functional family, the parents and children play and have fun!



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Some parents have actually rejoiced over their worst moments in the family because those are the moments that brought them together, deepened their love for each other, and allowed the family members to see that they could hold together in love through the worst of storms. Are the best families free from mistakes? Or are they the ones who face mistakes together arm in arm?

I often fear our children experience too much pressure to perform flawlessly so that we, as parents, look good. We place a tremendous burden on our children when we treat them like a merit badge we want to display. We need to ease up a little and not push our children so hard. We should encourage our children to do well, to learn, grow, and progress, because of what it will do for them rather than what it will do for us as parents. Parents should quit trying to be

perfect. Relax a little, loosen up, make life a little easier for everyone in the family. You will all like it more! Be serious about your family, but not so serious that you feel like managers of a business. There are things that work well in a business that are inappropriate in a family. For example, you don't easily fire family members for not doing their family jobs well enough! You keep working with them and encouraging them.

The approach you take boils down to what you believe the fundamental purpose of your family is. I recommend you consider this view: "The family is a place where there is love, support, and guidance while each individual in the family goes through 'project under construction' experiences." You have to help everyone in your family to try and do their best, but the overall purpose for a family is to give love and support while each

member goes through the learning and refining processes in their life. Everyone will "bump their nose" a few times and make their share of mistakes. We don't write our children (or ourselves) off when they do because mistakes are a normal part of the expected human experience for which we came to the earth.

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In the functional family, the parents and children play and have fun! Some of us are too serious too much of the time. Slow down, take it easy, laugh, play games, hold hands, take walks together, and just enjoy one another. We need to be fiercely serious and dedicated when it is time for that, but some of us are that way all the time. Put smiles back on your faces, close your planners, don't answer the phone for a few hours, give up your drive to success long enough for some release of tension and stress to occur. Make sure the atmosphere in your home and family is not too tight. Play, goof off a little, relax. You will do the important things of life much better if you don't forget to get down on the floor of your family room and chase your kids around on your hands and knees and tickle them! Be spontaneous, let your hair down, and just hang out together with no agenda.

I worry that some families are feeling too overwhelmed. So, put down the mop and play together, and you will feel better. You might even have a family council together where the subject of discussion is, "What are some ways we could have more

fun together?” I’ll bet attendance at that one will be high if you announce the subject of discussion in advance.

Here are some examples of fun things you can do to enjoy one another. Make up stories with your own children as the central characters. They will love it! With everyone there, tell the funniest, silliest, or even the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you. Play the “stare ‘til you laugh” game, where two people look into each other’s eyes and try not to laugh. If you laugh, you are out and the next person steps up to take your place.

Some parents hold the erroneous belief that spirituality and serious devotion to the “true” objectives of the family are incompatible with fun and frolic in the family. And yet what does playing with each other communicate? I think it says, out loud and clear, “We like each other!” If you like each other and it is fun to be together, then you will get together more often; and

then, when the serious times come, you will enjoy those, too. Think of the people in your life you have respected and looked up to the most. Did they have a fun side that you enjoyed when it presented itself?

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Finally, in the functional family, parents teach their children faith, together with the guiding principles and values we each need to live a full and complete life. In rural America some 150 years ago, it was common to have both parents in close proximity to the home much of the day. Then fathers had to go to the cities to find work, and only the mother was left at home with the family. Later, women also decided to work away from the home, sometimes by choice and sometimes out of necessity. Thus, the “family schoolhouse” was left unattended for much of the day. That is largely our condition today in much of the world: children are left in the home without parents too much of any given day. No one to teach, no one to supervise, no one to guide, no one to listen.

Parents, do all you can to be available to your family, and remem-

ber that there is nothing you will do of greater importance in your life than to be there for your family—to teach and guide them and help them. And among all the things you can and will do, teaching them faith in God and in the teachings and commandments he has given his children is the most important. Be sure they hear all the basic principles of correct and righteous living from your own lips—over and over again. There is nothing I want my children to remember more about me than my absolute, resolute, and unequivocal testimony of the religious beliefs I strive to adhere to.

And so I want to be remembered in my family as a parent who taught my children those beliefs and principles in my home! It is more important for you to teach those things personally in your home and for your children to learn them from you there than for them to be taught those ideals in any other place. When my days on this earth are over, I hope one or more of my children will say, “Mom and Dad worked hard and intentionally at setting an example for us, teaching us, caring for us, and enjoying us. We think we were their highest priority.” *mf*

James D. MacArthur is a clinical professor of student development at Brigham Young University and is the author of *Everyday Parents Raising Great Kids*. This article is adapted from a presentation made at the *BYU Family Expo*, April 2005.



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