

## A FAMILY ENRICHMENT PROGRAMME: COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE FAMILY

J. JEFFRIES McWHIRTER

*Professor of Education, Arizona State University, U.S.A.*

We are not born as the partridge in the wood,  
or the ostrich of the desert, to be scattered everywhere;  
but we are to be grouped together, and brooded by love,  
and reared day by day in that first of churches, the family.

Henry Ward Beecher

Family ministry begins with announcing the Good News to those within the immediate family circle. In addition, members should be aware of the Christian family's authentic mission to evangelize the wider community.

In a family which is conscious of this mission, all the members evangelize and are evangelized. The parents not only communicate the Gospel to their children, but from their children they can themselves receive the same Gospel as deeply lived by them. And such a family becomes the evangelizer of many other families, and of the neighborhood of which it forms part.<sup>1</sup>

As the Church in miniature, the family is called to serve the needs of its own members, other persons and families, and the larger community. In it, evangelization, worship, catechesis, and Christian service are clearly present.

Within families, there is need and opportunity for spouses to catechize each other and for parents to catechize children. There are several possibilities: e.g., parents can educate their children directly, they can participate in parish catechetical programmes which serve their children, and spouses can educate each other by trustingly and openly sharing their insights concerning the gospel's relevance to their lives. Since the Christian family is a "domestic Church," prayer and worship are central to it. Christian family life involves prayerful celebration within the family, as well as liturgical celebration in the parish community of which it is an integral, active part.

Parent education programmes have mushroomed during the last decade. These programmes are based on the belief that parents lack adequate and effective training in dealing with their role as parents. Parent education programmes seek to provide such training and a variety of educational experiences have been helpful to parents in increasing their child-rearing skills.

It would appear that the needs for religious education, for catechesis, and for telling the Good News in families, might be supported by methodologies that have been developed in the secular literature. As the quotation from Beecher which begins this article suggests, the family becomes the first Church. As family life is strengthened and supported by religion, so too is religion strengthened and supported by families.

There is evidence from research that points to the value of religious orientation in families. Stinnett, Chesser, and DeFrain<sup>2</sup>, in their study of 130 intact families with at least one child living at home, found six factors that identify "strong" families. These factors were:

- (a) Appreciation — ability to give each other positive strokes;
- (b) Spending time together — sharing enjoyment, trivia, and crises of life;
- (c) Good communication patterns — sharing all the dimensions of one's awareness and being accepted and understood;
- (d) Commitment — the willingness to invest time and energy in the relationship and to promote each other's welfare;
- (e) Ability to deal with crises in a positive manner — to see some positive elements in discouraging crises, and to unite in dealing with crises rather than being fragmented by them; and
- (f) A high degree of religious orientation — religious people have an awareness of a higher power that gives them a sense of purpose, support and strength and helps them to be more patient and forgiving. These qualities seem to play a very important role in the strength and happiness of families.

It would appear then, from both a religious and a psychological perspective, that families can be strengthened by mutual involvement. Further, in a recent article, Remer, Niguette, Anderson, and Terrell<sup>3</sup> indicate the importance of the church as a vehicle for primary prevention of mental distress. That is, as an important transmitter of social values, the church represents an important force for the application of humane values.

The purpose of the present article is to outline a family day programme<sup>4</sup> that is designed to highlight positive mental health principles within a Christian context. It appears to be a useful model for religious educators, pastoral care workers and counseling personnel in working with families. The model suggested here is essentially an educational one. The assumption is made that lack of knowledge, information, or experiences, rather than illness, is the basis of family friction and discord. Further, the assumption is made that most families are "well" families that have need of and can utilize enriching experiences. Increasing numbers of programmes are now appearing in the literature which support the usefulness of family enrichment approaches.

Utilizing strategies, techniques and skills that have been successful in a variety of settings, family enrichment programmes enable the family to function more positively in its communication patterns, enhance individual strengths of its members, and, in those with a religious focus, aid in the instruction of religious education and values transmission for family members. Hereafter, the current programme will be referred to as the Family Enrichment Programme (FEP).

### *Background to the programme*

Several years ago the author was requested by the Family Advisory Council and the director of the All Saints Newman Centre at Arizona State University to design a programme that would attend to the needs of the families in the congregation. The Newman Centre at A.S.U., as with most Newman Centres attached to State Universities, has as its primary mission the service and support of the University student body. Consequently, faculty, staff and students with families who choose to worship at Newman Centres often have needs that are not met due to the primary commitments of the staff.

After discussion and consultation with the council, the director, members of staff, and a number of families, several principles were identified as important. These principles were:

- (a) A desire to build a sense of community among families.
- (b) A need to build unity within families.
- (c) An interest in fostering service of families to each other.
- (d) A desire to blend principles of good mental health within a religious context.
- (e) A need to help families accomplish religious instruction within their families.

The Family Enrichment Programme was the result. The structure and content of the programme reflects an attempt to adhere to the above principles.

### *Family Enrichment Programme Format*

The FEP was conducted over eight consecutive weeks with six content sessions and with two additional sessions included for social interaction to offset the perceived fragmented community of families. It was decided to keep the families together as units as much as possible with instruction, activities and content directed to everyone in the family.

For the youngest children, a nursery school experience was provided and families with children who had not made first communion were asked to have those children attend the nursery school. Readings and activities corresponding to the daily theme were provided for these children and they returned to their family group for the puppet show and closing music.

Because of the age differential, the individual sessions were held to one and a half hours and a variety of teaching methodologies was employed. An outline of the daily format follows:

Theme Music  
 Session Music  
 Introduction  
 Lecturette  
 Cartoons  
 Readings  
 Activity  
 Discussion  
 Homework Suggestions/Announcements  
 Puppet Show or Skit  
 Session Music

Each daily session had a content theme which provided focus for music, activity, lecturette, and puppet show. Music was selected from the *Glory and Praise* books<sup>5</sup> and was used to open and close each session. The Lecturette included a short oral presentation (15 to 20 minutes) with cartoons, discussion, secular and religious readings. The activity was designed to involve the entire family in either an experiential exercise or a skill practice session and homework was provided to extend the content of the session to the home environment. Finally, the puppet show or skit was developed to present the material in another way. While the puppet shows, skits, cartoons, and music were initially included to hold the attention and interest of the children, reports from parents suggested that they benefitted from these pedagogical tools as well.

#### FAMILY ENRICHMENT PROGRAMME: SESSION OVERVIEW

The following outline is provided as an overview of the FEP programme. The content of each session is then discussed.

Session 1: Building Community: Get Acquainted  
 Session 2: Sending Messages: Perceptions  
 Session 3: Sending Messages: Feelings  
 Session 4: Sending Messages: Wants  
 Session 5: Listening to Messages  
 Session 6: Cooperation

### *Session 1: Building Community*

The theme of this session was "building community". The inter-relationship of self to family, of family to local community, of local community to Church community, and of Church community to the Body of Christ was established.

The purpose of this session was to help participants get acquainted with one another and with the coming schedule. A number of get-acquainted activities were utilized including name games activities for peer-age groups. Later, families were asked to work together to make up a family shield that was used throughout the sessions as name tags. The session closed with a puppet show. The narrator introduced a family of puppets consisting of Father, Mother, Sis and Junior. This puppet family was utilized throughout the programme to reinforce the content of each session.<sup>6</sup>

### *Session 2: Sending Messages/Perceptions*

The session this week introduced the concept of open and honest communication. Complete and single messages were contrasted with incomplete messages on the one hand and with double messages on the other. A complete and single message<sup>7</sup> include a perception, a feeling, and a want or desire from the sender. Emphasis in this session was given to the perception component of the message focusing on the different perceptions individuals have of the world.

Overhead projection pictures were used to stimulate discussion about perceptual difference within families. Oral readings provided examples of perceptual difficulties in scriptural stories, e.g. Abraham and Sarah (Gen.18:1-5), Zacharias and Elizabeth (Luke 1: 5-24), and Mary and the Annunciation (Luke 1: 28-38). The puppets returned to finish the session with a skit. This skit demonstrated the different perceptions in the puppet family.

### *Session 3: Sending Messages/Feelings*

Developing further the concept of open and honest communication, this session concentrated on the need to communicate feelings between family members. Affective and emotional issues of communication were highlighted.

Two activities were used. One was the emotional card game<sup>8</sup> which generated discussion in families about non-verbal expression of feelings. Also, an activity was used which asked family members to identify feelings expressed by other family members. Several short readings from Scripture and from secular literature were read and discussed. Again the puppet family returned to demonstrate the different feelings which exist within families.

#### *Session 4: Sending Messages/Wants and Desires*

This session concluded the skill of sending messages. The concepts of wants and needs were contrasted. The wants, wishes and desires of the sender were considered and highlighted. Reasons why people have a hard time asking for what they want were explored.

Activities included (a) expressing wants in families, and (b) responding with complete and single messages. Families were asked to practise both skills. The idea of expressing wants was related to concepts of prayer and the scriptural readings emphasized this topic. The puppet show demonstrated the problems in making requests. It concluded with specific examples of using complete and single messages.

#### *Session 5: Listening to Messages*

This session focused on the need for people to listen to one another. The attitude of listening with love was highlighted. Specific listening skills were identified and discussed. Time was provided to encourage listening in families. Two skill worksheets in active listening were used to give families practice with this important skill. In addition, scriptural references to listening are rich and were used, such as Proverbs 12:15, 18:13, 21:11; James 1:19; and Psalm 116:1-2. Oral readings of 1 Samuel 3:1-10, Mark 7:31-35 and 4:10-13 were also used.

The puppet family provided a short skit which showed problems which occur in families when listening is not effective. After identification and discussion of bad listening habits, the puppet show concluded with an example of improved listening.

#### *Session 6: Cooperation*

Issues of competition and cooperation were defined and highlighted with readings focused around the theme. Ways of increasing cooperation in families were stressed. The broken-square activity<sup>9</sup> was used to generate discussion of cooperation in families. Since this was the last session of this family day series, closing was accomplished. Family groups were asked to evaluate the programme.

The puppet family provided a skit which illustrated the advantages of cooperation in the family. After discussion the puppets returned to bid farewell to the participants.

### RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Thirty families attended at least six of the eight FEP meetings. In addition, 25 to 29 families were present each week. The range of individual family members was from 86 to 107 with average session attendance slightly over one hundred.

Families were asked to respond to a post-programme evaluation sheet during the final session. Of the twenty-eight families present, twenty-six returned usable forms. All indicated that the family programme had helped them feel more a part of the Newman community by helping them to get to know other families and by allowing them to participate as a family.

In addition, all families indicated that the programme had a positive effect on their own families. Parents suggested that the programme helped to reinforce their values and provided suggestions and tools for religious instruction and for better communication. There were also an increased consciousness of family relationships and interaction. Twenty families stated their belief that their family was closer and more unified after the programme. The children indicated that they spend more time with their family and at the same time got to know more children at the Centre. Several stated that they felt better about coming to a religious education programme, after first not wanting to attend.

In responding to the favourite and least favourite aspects of the programme, participants indicated that the puppet shows, the activities and the cartoons were most helpful. Some family members felt that the time was too long but others indicated that the diversity of age groups created not enough time for activities or in-depth information and discussion. Several families suggested that the music was overemphasized and a number of negative comments were directed toward the physical location and its space problems.

In suggesting areas for future directions, most families indicated a desire for additional communication skills within a religious and values context. Also requested, were programmes around Old Testament heroes and the sacraments.

These topics appeared particularly amenable to inclusion in an extension of the Family Enrichment Programme and, indeed, were implemented by other families in subsequent semesters.

The family enrichment approach appears to be an effective and efficient process that needs to be considered by pastors, religious educators, pastoral care personnel, and counsellors. Parents need to increase their role in religious education. Family interaction needs to be strengthened and improved. Religious and spiritual values need continuing articulation within the family. Family Enrichment Programmes appear to be a useful tool in accomplishing the above objectives.

## Endnotes

1. United States Catholic Conference, *Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States*, Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1979.

2. N. Stinnett, B. Chesser, J. DeFraim, eds, *Building Family Strengths*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979.

3. R. Remer, G.F. Niguette, G.L. Anderson, J.E. Terrell, "A Meta-system for the Delivery of Primary Preventive Interventions," *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 1984, vol. 63, no. 1, pp. 30-34.

4. In addition to being presented in Arizona this programme has been presented twice in its entirety in Melbourne, Australia. Segments have also been presented in Oregon and Georgia in the United States; Munich, West Germany; Toronto, Canada; and Sydney, Brisbane and Perth, Australia. The development and delivery of this programme has been an important family project for our family. I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Mary and of our children; Robert, Benedict, Anna, Mark and Paula as well as other families: The R. Cioleks, the P. Leonards, and the C. Vallejos of Tempe, Arizona.

5. North American Liturgy Resources, *Glory and Praise: Vol I and Vol II*, Phoenix, Arizona: North American Liturgy Resources, 1977, 1980.

6. Space does not permit a complete description of each puppet programme. An illustrative script of several combined puppet shows is currently under review for publication. This manuscript is available from the author at cost.

7. J.J. McWhirter, and M.C. McWhirter, "The Learning Disabled Child: Psychological Processes, Self-esteem, and Family Counselling Needs," *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, 1982, vol. 14, nos 1 and 2, pp. 114-120.

8. D.W. Johnson, and F.B. Johnson, *Joining Together*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

9. W.J. Pfeiffer, and J.E. Jones, *The Handbook of Structured Experiences for Human Relations Training*, vol. 1, La Jolla, Ca: University Associates, 1970.