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Can Your Family Beat the Odds?

IT'S A WORLD THAT IS NOT FAMILY FRIENDLY

“THE ODDS are definitely against the average family.”

I mutter these words every day as I drive home from my office after counseling:

- a couple about to separate because she had found a very explicit letter from his “new friend”;
- a sixteen-year-old who had tried to commit suicide because her parents “didn’t care”;
- a single mother at the end of her rope because two of her four kids (all of them under twelve) are on drugs.

And that’s just a typical morning shift! As I look at my counseling caseload, I can see that the red-throated warblesnipe is not really our most endangered species. The family is. If you doubt this, all you have to do is look at what the odds keep saying:

Today, researchers estimate that about half of all marriages will end in divorce, and about a third of all babies are born to unwed mothers.¹

The odds say that most couples about to get married will

be married about eleven years²—less than the life of their washer, dryer, or refrigerator.

The odds say that you and your kids will be approached by drug pushers, or at least by peers who want you and your family to light up and be part of the fun.

The odds say that if you have two or three kids, at least one will be a “powerful little buzzard” whose behavioral problems may threaten to drive you crazy.

The odds say that in your family, Mom is already working or will choose to go to work in the near future. And when Mom works, she is an odds-on favorite to become stressed out while she tries to have and do it all.

THE EPIDEMIC OF DYSFUNCTIONALISM

There are many causes for the family’s turmoil today. The media constantly reports the tragedies of divorce, delinquency, inadequate education, and unwanted pregnancies. Crime is on the increase, often connected to alcohol and drug abuse. Clinical terms like *dysfunctional family*, *codependency*, *enabling*, *toxic parents*, and ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics) have become standard vocabulary. In fact, from the number of articles and books written on these subjects, it looks as if we have an epidemic of dysfunctionality and codependency on our hands.

The best definition I have seen of *codependency* simply says: “An addiction to people, behaviors, or things.”³ According to the Minirth-Meier Clinic, the term *codependent* has been around for several decades now, originating with efforts to help alcoholics and their families. The best known of any of these organizations or movements is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

As AA began having some success working with problem drinkers, it made an interesting discovery. As soon as it managed to get an alcoholic to stop drinking, his or her family

would often come apart at the seams. As AA workers sought the reason, they learned that just as the alcoholic had been dependent on his alcohol, his family had been dependent on helping him with his alcoholism. They had adjusted their entire lives to dealing with the alcoholic's habits, and they didn't know how to function without this problem in their midst. In other words, they became dysfunctional (unable to function normally), caught in a vicious circle of codependency.⁴

I know the epidemic of dysfunctionality is real—inside the church as well as outside—because I work constantly with families who have been infected by its deadly virus, and not all of them are involved with alcohol. A wide range of problems creates and affects dysfunctional families, including physical and emotional abuse, infidelity, eating disorders, sexual addiction, and incest.

One easily overlooked but every bit as devastating addiction that ruins many marriages is workaholicism. Until recent years, husbands were the major culprits, but now more and more wives are falling into the same trap. Yes, "We've come a long way baby," and now women are increasingly complaining of stress disorders such as ulcers, anxiety attacks, and heart problems.

The impact of "recreational drugs" alone is monumental. I regularly see the results of the use of cocaine sitting right before me in my office. These people aren't sniffling, bleary-eyed, ragged junkies, fresh out of the alleys of New York or some other asphalt jungle. They are bright, articulate community leaders, people with good jobs and responsible positions in major businesses.

I've had to restructure my vocabulary and interview techniques. Rather than ask a patient, "Have you ever taken drugs?" I now ask, "When did you start doing coke?" And then I hear the sad story again. It was supposed to be just a little recreational fun, I'm told, but now it's a major priority—

in some cases, *the* major priority in that person's life. And his or her family? They come in a very distant second.

Recently, a mother of four small children sat in my office and told me what it was like to be married to a man who had become a heavy user of cocaine. She had taken a job as a waitress to help support the family while her husband, a sales representative for a major firm, had gone through "intervention treatment" twice. She described him as a "nice guy but very compulsive." Coke had taken over his life, and he was now abusing not only the drug, but her and the children as well. Theirs is only one case of the many I see that confirms that abuse of cocaine and other drugs cuts across all economic lines.

HOW DID FAMILIES GET INTO THIS MESS?

The question I am always seeking to answer is "Why?" "Why does a family become dysfunctional and even codependent?" And right along with that, "Why are a lot of other families at the brink of having the same kinds of problems?"

All the handles or labels, such as *codependency* and *dysfunctional*, are useful in describing the problems affecting families, but I am just old-fashioned enough to reduce these problems to some pretty basic causes and effects.

At the top of my list of basic causes is what I call "perplexing priorities." One major reason the families of our nation are in trouble is that *moms and dads are not really putting each other, or the family, first.*

Oh, they like to tell me they are. I've had many husbands and fathers explain that they are out there breaking their necks, backs, and other parts of their anatomy sixty and seventy hours a week for "Marge and the kids." And I have plenty of wives tell me that, though they'd prefer to be at home with the children, "unless I work, we can't cover all the payments."

I don't doubt the sincerity of my clients for a moment. The consumer society in which we live bombards the family

twenty-four hours a day with “Buy, buy, buy, buy now! Pay later.” Having it all sounded good, but a lot of people discovered that “having it all” can be very expensive, as well as time-consuming and energy-draining. By the time the eighties ended, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* was ready to be replaced by what Art Levine called *Lifestyles of the Tired and Obscure*.⁵

As we moved into the nineties, many families began to realize that “having it all” was a fantasy. They discovered that “just staying even” is a real challenge. I don’t think it’s any coincidence that in 1990, the rate of bankruptcies reached an all-time high.

Fighting the economic battles takes two paychecks in many families. In the majority of families I see, the “working mom” is a definite reality. Gone are Harriet Nelson and June Cleaver, the perfectly groomed mothers of 1950s TV fame. I’m not sure Harriet and June ever existed in the real world, but they do symbolize a bygone era when Mom spent her days on the home front instead of at the office.

I sympathize with working moms because I deal with so many of them. And I’m also concerned about what our present way of life in American society is doing to the family as it draws so many women into the workplace for whatever reason.

I’m not much for quoting statistics, but the numbers on working women have to leap up and hit anybody between the eyes. In the early 1930s, fewer than 20 percent of the women in the United States worked outside the home. By the year 2000, 59.9 percent of married women with children under the age of six were marching off every morning, briefcase in hand, to help bring home the bacon.⁶ That means leaving little Kyle or Katie at home with a sitter (if they’re lucky) or, more likely, at the local kiddy kennel (that is, child-care service or agency).

Not long ago, I talked with an upwardly mobile couple whose three-year-old son was having problems at preschool.

Both parents worked in important administrative positions, and they dropped their child off at the preschool at 7:30 every morning, not picking him up until 5:45 at night. They came to see me because the little boy had begun striking out at other children, pushing them down, and, in general, causing a lot of disruption for the preschool staff.

“We are trying to work on his facial expressions,” the mother started to explain.

“Excuse me,” I interrupted. “What do you mean by *facial expressions*?”

“We try to help him know there are really two faces—a positive face and a sober, sad face.”

“What about all the other faces and expressions we see on little children?” I asked.

They both gave me a blank look. Didn’t I understand that they were trying to help their little boy accentuate the positive? they seemed to ask. These parents meant well, but they had lost touch with their child. They were making him follow every bit as tough a schedule as they did—ten hours a day, five days a week. In my opinion, a three-year-old can handle preschool two days a week, perhaps three hours a morning. Anything beyond that and I’m not surprised by acting-out behavior—hitting, pushing, or worse.

I realize that in some cases—particularly when single parents have to work—leaving the child with extended care is the only choice. In the case of this acting-out three-year-old, however, the parents were able to make other arrangements and cut down the preschool time for their little boy. His behavior improved almost immediately.

We Have Liberated Mom, but to What?

In case you are thinking that working wives and mothers are a rather recent phenomenon, you should realize that back in 1975, Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner, a leading family authority,

reported that between 1947 and 1975, the number of working wives rose from 6.5 million to 19.8 million—a 205 percent increase! Bronfenbrenner called this development “one of the most significant economic facts of our time.” He also noted that this increase in working women “began before the so-called women’s liberation movement and has unquestionably brought many new opportunities and greater satisfaction to numerous wives and mothers. But it has also had a major impact on American child-rearing.”⁷

It’s interesting to note that Dr. Bronfenbrenner made this masterful understatement *more than twenty-five years ago*, before the goal of “having it all” really came into vogue. Yes, we have liberated Mom, but to what? True, she is no longer barefoot, pregnant, and chained to the kitchen. Now we might find her clad in Gucci shoes and putting off having children in order to pursue her career as she works her way up to the boardroom, then runs to catch the next shuttle to Boston. Or even more likely, she’s wearing Reeboks, manning the checkout counter at Kmart, and letting shoppers know about the next “blue light special.”

The census bureau reports that one-fourth of the nation’s working wives now earn more than their husbands. Eight million wives are primary breadwinners today, compared with six million in 1981 and four million in 1977. Some two million earn at least twice as much as their husbands. Harvard University economist Dr. David E. Bloom has said: “It’s a fact the higher the woman’s earnings, the higher the chance of divorce.”⁸

Statistics like these aren’t conclusive proof of anything, but the evidence is there: When the woman leaves home to go to work, either out of expediency or out of a drive for a more fulfilling career, there is a price that must be paid. More to the point, there are new pressures that must be dealt with, and that is what this book attempts to do—help families deal with those pressures rather than just drift with the tide that has

caught millions in its grip. Yes, two-paycheck families may be the norm because economic times are tough—but while we’re busy paying the bills, what about the family itself? How can we rethink our attitudes, goals, and values to ensure the family’s security and survival?

The Rootlessness of the Nuclear Family

Another major reason for our perplexing priorities that often goes unnoticed or unrecognized today is the typical rootlessness of the American family. The term *nuclear family* has been around now for a long time. It simply means a family with a nucleus consisting of Mom, Dad, and the kids who have little or no contact with their grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. In many cases, all these extended family members live hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away—“back East somewhere”—from the single family unit that has established its little nuclear nest in the West.

The move from east to west is exactly what happened in my own family’s case. I grew up in the small community of Williamsville, New York, not too far from Buffalo, in western New York State. My father was one of four Lemman brothers—Irish immigrants who all grew up in Buffalo, dirt poor, with only an eighth-grade education. My mother, a Norwegian, came from an immigrant family of nine that had also settled in the New York area. At one time, I had thirteen aunts and uncles and 108 first and second cousins!

We didn’t get together every weekend, but we got together enough to keep everyone aware that there was tremendous support, interest, and concern in the Lemman clan. For Thanksgiving and Christmas, it would usually be just our immediate family, with only fourteen to sixteen people. But on a birthday or a special anniversary, there could easily be fifty to sixty people in our backyard, and on the special “family reunion” days, we topped one hundred.

Not only did I draw strength from our overloaded family photo album, but I also had the privilege of growing up in a community where people actually talked to and trusted one another. Neighbors would come over to borrow sugar, milk, or maybe just an egg. People came out at night and talked from porch to porch, or perhaps they met at the back fence to chat.

There was something about being part of all that that's difficult to explain, except perhaps with words like *stability*, *integrity*, *balance*—and spiritual values. I chafed under my mother's insistence that we march down to the little Covenant church every Sunday.

In fact, I often sneaked out of the balcony, when she was gullible enough to let me sit there with my friends, to spend my offering on candy at the dairy bar down the block. We were always back just as the closing hymn was being sung, and Mom was none the wiser.

Despite my rebellious antics, my mother role-modeled something that became a very real part of my life. Years later, it helped steer me back to the right path after I had flunked out of just about every opportunity life had sent my way.

Perhaps some would accuse me of sentimental nostalgia, but I think there's more to my childhood memories than that. Our families today are missing the boat in so many ways. My kids don't play out in the street as I did when I was young. Kick the Can and Red Light, Green Light have been replaced by high-tech gadgetry. PlayStation is the name of the game, and millions of kids sit for hours using only the muscles required to move a joystick.

There are nine families on our street, and we have only a nodding acquaintance with three of them. You might point out that this is our fault as much as it is theirs, and I'm sure that's true. But I'm only being honest in admitting that my family and I have been sucked into the isolated life of the

nuclear family, and that the huge extended family I knew as a boy is only a memory.

Nonetheless, I try to renew those memories by getting back to my roots as often as I can. My Aunt Ruthie lives in the Buffalo area, not far from Uncle Herbie, the last of the Leman brothers. Every time I go through the Buffalo airport, I try to arrange a brief layover so I can drop in on Uncle Herbie, who lives just a mile or two away. Uncle Herbie is my last link to my dad, who died in 1983. He is so much like his brother, it's almost as if I am talking to my father when we have our chats.

There usually isn't enough time to get down to see Aunt Ruthie, who lives at least thirty miles outside of Buffalo, but I still try to connect with her whenever I can. A few years ago, when I surprised my mother with a trip to Norway, I included, as part of the gift, an opportunity to take her little sister Ruthie along.

What I always remember about Aunt Ruthie is the Christmas wrapping she would use on all her gifts. Every year, Aunt Ruthie's presents were covered with little snowmen, and I knew that whatever she had given me would be something I would like—not a belt or a shirt but an-honest-to-Tonka-truck toy of some kind. Aunt Ruthie had a family of her own, and she knew what boys wanted at Christmas.

I have also made it a point to bring my family back to my roots every summer. We stayed in a cottage on Chautauqua Lake, near Jamestown, not far from Williamsville. When our children were younger, we spent a Christmas there as well, and it was the first time our Arizona-raised kids had seen snow on Christmas Day.

Back to Our Roots in a Graveyard

So intent am I to connect our children with the extended Leman family that I dream up special little field trips exactly for that purpose. One summer day, when our girls were just

starting into their teens and Kevin was still a little guy, I bundled the whole family into the car and headed from Williamsville over to a little town called Gowanda, about thirty miles south of Buffalo. My destination was a cemetery, but I didn't let everyone know that at first.

As we drove along, I pointed out various landmarks:

"That's where Daddy used to go fishing." "That's where Daddy played his first Little League game."

I fully expected my kids to be all eyes and ears. Instead, I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw one of my teenage daughters with her eyes closed in obvious bliss. She was all ears, all right—bobbing her head back and forth to whatever was coming in over the headphones she wore.

Undaunted, I drove on to the cemetery just outside Gowanda. As we pulled up to the gate and my kids realized that *this* was where I was taking them, there were cries of dismay. Dad had really lost it—probably eating too much oat bran again.

But I didn't mind. I knew my kids had never been to a cemetery, much less the cemetery that held the Lemman family plot. When I told them there was a headstone in that cemetery with our family's name on it, they perked up in a hurry. "You mean it actually says *Lemman*?" Krissy asked.

"Yep," I replied safely.

"All right!" they all chorused, and then they were off like a shot as if they were looking for gold. At least twenty minutes later, I heard cries of "We found it, we found it." Sure enough, there was the Lemman headstone, surrounded by many other smaller markers in the family plot. We wound up taking pictures with the kids draped all over "our" headstone.

My wife, Sande, didn't say much. She isn't keen on wandering around cemeteries; she'd much rather haunt antique shops. But she knew this cemetery expedition was important to me, so she was supportive, if not enthusiastic.

For me, it was a day I won't forget. Like my wife and

children, I had never visited this cemetery before. I distinctly recall the almost eerie feeling I got as we looked at the Lemman headstone and all those other grave markers that were mute testimony to how quickly life passes. There was Uncle Val, Great-Aunt Fannie, and my great-grandfather John Henry Lemman. Oh, yes, and there, in a corner of the plot, was my grandfather's marker—Joseph Lemman, who froze to death one night after collapsing drunk in a snowbank. All of them had been real people, living out their lives with their own families, and now they were gone.

I tell you this story not to indulge my own nostalgia but to remind you that your family's roots are very important, too. So many families I know are missing out on this. Do you think Alex Haley's book and the miniseries were successful simply on the strength of Haley's excellent writing? Of course not. Haley was a fine writer, but in *Roots* he struck a chord that goes much deeper. What *Roots* said to millions was: "If you don't know where you came from, you'll never get to where you want to go."

I'm afraid too many families have sacrificed something precious in the name of chasing the great American dream by pulling up stakes and heading across the country to a "can't-miss business opportunity" or a long-worked-for vice presidency in the corporation. I know economics are a very real part of life, but I still wonder if we are not sacrificing some basic things on the altar of "having it all" or at least "having our piece of the pie."

Not long ago, an editor from a magazine doing an article about the migration of families from the Northeast to the Sunbelt called me. I'm not sure why the magazine picked me. I guess the staff knew I live in Arizona, and they wanted my insight on the desirability of living in Sunbelt country.

"Well," I said to the editor, "I think that young couples today should live as close to one set of grandparents as possible."

After a long moment of silence, the voice on the other end of the line said, “I think you misunderstood my question.”

“No, I think you misunderstood my answer, and I stand by that answer,” I said.

Of course, all I was telling this editor was that in moving clear across the country, you can lose something, and when you lose both sets of grandparents, you have often lost an awful lot indeed.

GROWING UP ABSURD IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Another question I’m often asked is, “Do you think kids have it tougher today than they did back when you were young?”

My answer is obviously yes, for many reasons, some of which I have been touching on in this chapter. Kids growing up today are living in an absurd society that puts pressures on them that were unheard of one and two generations back. I’ve never seen a better summary of these pressures than the following letter sent to Ann Landers:

Dear Ann: The reader signed “Georgia,” who lived through the Depression and described how hard it was to be a teenager in the ’30s, said kids today have an easy time of it compared to teens in his day. You said you couldn’t argue with him. Well, I can.

Let me ask your generation a few questions.

Are your parents divorced? Almost every one of my friends comes from a broken home.

Were you thinking about suicide when you were 12?

Did you have an ulcer when you were 16?

Did your best friend lose her virginity to a guy she went out with twice?

You may have had to worry about VD, but did you have to worry about AIDS?

Did your classmates carry guns and knives?

How many kids in your class came to school regularly drunk, stoned, or high on drugs?

Did any of your friends have their brains fried from using PCP?

What percentage of your graduating class also graduated from a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center?

Did your school have armed security guards in the halls?

Did you ever live in a neighborhood where the sound of gunfire at night was normal?

You talk a lot about being dirt poor and having no money. Since when does money mean happiness? The kids at school who have the expensive cars and designer clothes are the most miserable.

When I am your age, Georgia, I won't do much looking back, I'll just thank God that I survived.

—Other Side of the Story in Indianapolis⁹

Other Side of the Story is obviously a member of the younger generation, which knows plenty about trying to cope in a world that is falling apart. Her letter to Ann vividly catalogs why the real world is so family unfriendly. In fact, the real world is just plain dangerous. Across the land, especially in larger cities, more and more football games are being played in the afternoon rather than at night. The reason? There is too much gang activity and violence at these games after dark.

Gang activity has become a form of warfare on our city streets, and they aren't necessarily streets in the large cities like New York and Los Angeles. According to *U.S. News & World Report*, "Disputes once settled with fists are now settled with guns. Every 100 hours, more youths die on the streets than were killed in the Persian Gulf."¹⁰

Protecting members of the family against violence is becoming a major concern. One set of statistics says that one out of four people will be a victim of a violent crime in his or her

lifetime. Recently, I read of door locks being developed especially for the working parents of latchkey kids. When the child arrives at home and unlocks the door, his key, encoded in some way with his identity, triggers a phone call to Mom's or Dad's office, and a recorded message tells the parent that the child has arrived safely at home.¹¹

We could go on wringing our hands about drugs, divorce, and dangers to latchkey kids, but it's time to ask if there is any way to beat the odds. What can we do to straighten out our perplexed priorities and get us back to basics? I don't have any instant miracle cures, but I do know of a way to beat the odds and win!

No family has to give up and resign itself to becoming dysfunctional because "that's the way things are." Your family does not have to be like everybody else's. You can change—in fact, you *must* change some basic ways of operating, or you could deteriorate or even self-destruct.

I know it can be done, because I've seen it happen in my family and in thousands of other families. People are successfully keeping their families together, and I'm not talking about idyllic households where problems never get any bigger than the ones Robert Young faced on *Father Knows Best*. In the real world, families have problems—and some of them are whoppers. As Scott Peck puts it, "Life is difficult. . . . Life is a series of problems."

But then Peck adds: "Do we want to moan about these problems or solve them? Do we want to teach our children to solve them?"¹²

I believe families can solve many of their problems by using the plan of action I describe in the rest of this book. It is a way of living that will make it possible to preserve your marriage and parent your kids with a minimum of hassle and heartache and a maximum of the fulfillment and joy the Creator intended when he designed the family in the first place.

What is my plan of action? I'm almost afraid to tell you,

because you may dismiss it as “too simple.” After all, your life has some genuinely complex problems and challenges.

I understand that. My life has a few complex challenges, too, and I’ll be describing them later. I am still confident, however, that the plan of action I call The Reality Rule of Relationships can make all the difference. When faithfully practiced, The Reality Rule brings all kinds of benefits to your family. For one thing, it fosters true love, mutual respect, and self-discipline on each person’s part. The family using The Reality Rule *together* develops balance and coping power to handle the stress of everyday life.

What is The Reality Rule, and how does it work? I’ll give you a brief survey in the next chapter.

Don’t Forget . . .

- Our nation faces an epidemic of dysfunctionality and codependency because too many husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, have not really been putting each other or the family first.
- Like it or not, we must admit that when Mother leaves home to go to work, a price must be paid.
- Family roots are important. They provide stability, integrity, balance, and spiritual values.
- Today’s children and youth face challenges, problems, and dangers that were unheard of two or three generations ago.

And Why Not Try . . .

- Talk with your spouse, and ask yourselves, “Are we putting our family first?” List evidence for or against how much you put your family (and that includes your marriage) first—ahead of career, community, or church involvement.
- Together with your spouse, think of one thing you can

do in the next week that will build closeness within your nuclear family—perhaps something as simple as playing a game of Monopoly together one night.

- If it's time your family “got back to its roots,” plan a get-together with extended family members, or plan to take a trip back to where Mom and Dad grew up. If a trip is not possible soon, plan ways to reach out more often to touch other family members—by mail or by phone.