

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®



*Fixing*  
Family Friction  
*Promoting Relative Peace*

*David & Claudia Arp  
and John & Margaret Bell*

*Fixing Family Friction*

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This book was originally published as *Loving Your Relatives: Even When You Don't See Eye-to-Eye*.

A Focus on the Family book published by  
Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

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Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920, [www.alivecommunications.com](http://www.alivecommunications.com).

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ISBN-10: 1-58997-477-8

ISBN-13: 978-1-58997-477-7

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 / 13 12 11 10 09 08

The authors recognize rightly that life in the family is not always easy. They have captured the truth that God designed family life, not simply for our happiness, but more importantly for our holiness. And with that in mind, the Arps and the Bells show throughout this book that family life can and should be satisfying.

—W. TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN AND GIGI GRAHAM TCHIVIDJIAN,  
Grandson and daughter of the Reverend Billy Graham

This book will not only equip you to handle unique family relationships gracefully, but will also give you practical ideas to help you bring resolution to difficult family disputes. A must-read, must-do guidebook for all!

—GARY AND NORMA SMALLEY  
GREG AND ERIN SMALLEY  
Smalley Relationship Center

Wow! This book helps us where we need it! Helpful, powerful, and realistic answers for the tough issues that face every family.


—DR. KEVIN LEMAN  
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To the memory of those family members  
who have gone before us,  
in appreciation for the steadfast love  
of those who are with us,  
and in hope for those who follow us,  
we dedicate this book.



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# *Acknowledgments*

We are deeply indebted to the many people who contributed to this project and gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the following:

The hundreds of people who took time to respond to our survey with their suggestions, thoughts, and concerns about being family.

All the many couples who have participated in our Marriage Alive seminars over the years and have shared with us their struggles and success stories dealing with extended family.

Those who have pioneered family and marriage education and on whose shoulders we stand, including James Dobson, David and Vera Mace, Gary Smalley, John Trent, Les and Leslie Parrott, Mike and Harriet McManus, David and Jan Stoop, Sharon Hart Morris, Norm Wright, Dennis and Emily Lowe, and Scott Stanley. We especially thank Diane Sollee for all she has done and is doing to encourage family and marriage education.

Our Focus on the Family team who have believed in and supported us in this project, for your encouragement and excitement about this new resource. We especially thank Mark Maddox, Tom Spitz, Julie Kuss, and our editor, Larry Weeden, and his in-house team. You are fantastic and fun to work with! Thanks also go to Jane Terry, Susan Graham, Ken Roth, and all the great Focus Over Fifty team who encouraged us along the way.

Michele Bartlett, who provided excellent editing just when we needed it the most.

Laurie Clark and John and Jane Bell, who offered insightful suggestions.

Our literary agent, Greg Johnson of Alive Communications, for being our advocate and encouraging us along the way.

## *Foreword*

The late, brilliant thinker Francis Schaeffer used to say that the greatest challenge for Christians is to exhibit the love of God and the holiness of God at the same time. Or, as one of our favorite preachers Dr. Stuart Briscoe once said, “Christians are to be both sweet and strong.” While these men were talking in general about all of life, we can also think of no better counsel with regard to maintaining healthy family relationships.

I (Tullian) was blessed to grow up in a solid Christian home. The middle of seven children (four brothers and two sisters), I saw authentic faith lived out before my eyes. My dad, a well-known and respected psychologist, has always put his family before anybody or anything. My mom, the eldest daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham, is an award-winning author and speaker whose commitment to discipling her children surpassed any other ambition. Yet, while my brothers and sisters rarely gave my parents any real trouble, I was a different story!

For various reasons (some of which are presented in Challenge Six of this book), my parents had to kick me (Tullian) out of the house when I was 16 years old. Because my destructive lifestyle was so harmful to the rest of the family, my parents had to exercise tremendous “strength,” to exhibit the “holiness of God” and flex their parental muscles. They did not do this, however, with an absence of love. In fact, the love of God compelled them to action. They loved me, and the rest of the family, too much to let the destruction continue. Their strength was sweet and their sweetness was strong.

I did not come back to the Lord until I was 21 years old. But



during those “wilderness years,” my parents maintained this simultaneous exhibition of God’s love and God’s holiness, of sweetness and strength. They never allowed me to move back into the house because of the way I was choosing to live (strength), but they never shut me out of the family (sweetness).

Schaeffer went on to say that when we show either God’s love or God’s holiness without the other, we exhibit “not the character of God, but a caricature of God.” My parents’ accurate exhibition of the character of God is the tool God used to bring me back, not only to Himself, but also into a healthy relationship with them and the rest of my family.

Dave and Claudia Arp, along with John and Margaret Bell, have provided a practical blueprint for those of us who are trying to exhibit the love of God and the holiness of God at the same time within our families. They show how we can, and should, be both sweet and strong as we deal with our immediate and extended families. They recognize rightly that life in the family is not always easy, that there are crooked branches in every family tree, whether they be in the form of persons or circumstances. They have captured the truth that God designed family life, not simply for our *happiness*, but more importantly for our *holiness*. And with that in mind, the Arps and the Bells show throughout this book that family life can and should be satisfying.

Thank you, Dave and Claudia, John and Margaret, for this practical guide that will, we’re sure, prove to be of tremendous help to all who read it.

—W. TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN AND GIGI GRAHAM TCHIVIDJIAN

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*Part One*

*The Extended  
Family of the  
Twenty-First  
Century*

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# *Welcome to the Extended Family*

Everyone is part of an extended family, and most everyone will readily admit to some tension somewhere in their extended-family tree. One reason might be that you can choose your mate, but you can't choose your relatives. You can't choose your parents, your siblings, or whom they decide to marry. When we write about the extended family, we're thinking of parents, grandparents, offspring, siblings, in-laws, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, and even step- and adopted relatives.

For most of us, our extended family is a mixed bag. Some relatives we adore and make great pains to connect with, while others may give us such great pains that we avoid them. But deep down most of us would admit that our heart's desire is really to "be family"—to belong to, connect with, enjoy, and be comfortable with our relatives. And that's what this book is all about.

We know extended family issues can be tough, so we want to give you practical helps and hope that things can get better—can actually be great! We’ve done our homework and have surveyed hundreds of family members around the country. When we asked, “What are your major concerns that you would like to see addressed in a book?” one participant wrote: “I need some effective tools for relating to my extended family. I’m looking for something beyond the ‘suck it up’ or ‘you really don’t need to do that’ advice. In other words, how do you lovingly confront in-laws and even your own parents? How can you foster better understanding between the generations and build healthy relationships even in the midst of different views and perspectives? Please tell me. I need help and I’m all ears!”

This is precisely why we wrote this book, and in what follows we want to give you the necessary tools for understanding and relating to your extended family. But first let us introduce you to the Scott family.

## MEET THE SCOTTS

Use your imagination or maybe your memory. Try to visualize that exciting, anticipated, yet often dreaded Wednesday before Thanksgiving when people across America embark on an annual pilgrimage toward some sort of family gathering to celebrate this major holiday. Many Americans have in mind a Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving, but the reality is generally far different from that in the mind’s eye.

Perhaps your experience is not so unlike the Scott family’s . . .

### *Say Hello to Paul and Gloria Scott*

Paul and Gloria Scott are the parents of four grown children, grandparents of five, and soon-to-be stepgrandparents of two. Paul and Gloria are retired and have recently downsized to a condominium in

a gated community. Today they are busy preparing for the arrival of their extended family for Thanksgiving.

Paul has quit fiddling with his new digital camera that he got last Christmas from his eldest son but has never used. He decides to let one of the children figure out how to make the blasted thing work, so he can e-mail this year's Christmas card picture, which he is sure to get this weekend. He has just made his umpteenth trip to the grocery store for Gloria while she double-checks her list—her eldest son's favorite chai tea has been purchased, plenty of snacks are on hand for her son-in-law, Steve, who has such an appetite! In addition, she had the piano tuned for Sean; bought puzzles, videos, and comic books for the grandchildren; and made Hayley's favorite green bean casserole, dinner rolls, and pies for Thanksgiving dinner.

Paul and Gloria have worked hard to make things perfect. They are already exhausted but are very excited and—truthfully—a little anxious: They don't want a repeat of their summer vacation when everybody got mad (for reasons no one can now remember) and some family members left early. Mainly, they pray that this year everyone will experience a happy and harmonious extended-family Thanksgiving—just like the Thanksgivings Gloria remembers from her childhood.

### *Meet J. Paul Jr., the Firstborn*

Their firstborn child, J. Paul Scott Jr., and his wife, Julia, pull out of their downtown loft in their Range Rover with their two children, Trey (14) and Kaitlin (7). It is only a 45-minute drive to his parents' house in the suburbs, but they still tote along a gourmet picnic purchased at a local upscale deli.

J. Paul Jr. is talking animatedly on his hands-free cell phone to his stockbroker while trying to program the GPS system—his new electronic toy. Julia is still upset that they aren't going to her mother's for the holidays. Also, her nerves are frazzled because she is responsible for the annual zoo charity benefit next week, so she cov-

ers her ears with her new Bose headphones and listens to relaxing waterfall sounds.

Meanwhile, Kaitlin pretends to watch a DVD—*The Parent Trap*—but silently pouts about leaving her new hamster for the weekend. Finally, Trey focuses more intently on his Game Boy, refusing to watch the aforementioned “chick flick.”

J. Paul Jr. is thinking about what a waste of his time this is. He had tickets to the hockey game but had to pass. Julia is hoping that J. Paul Jr.’s youngest sister Hayley’s plane is delayed or that she gets sick. Kaitlin is already complaining about Grandmother’s food. And Trey is wondering if he will be pestered by his younger cousins.

### *Meet Jan, the Second Child*

Meanwhile, J. Paul Jr.’s younger sister, Jan, and her husband, Steve, have begun their journey in their eight-year-old minivan with 165,000 miles and bald tires, along with their three children, Derek (nine), Sally (eight), and Robert (four); their yellow Labrador retriever; and a cooler with ham sandwiches, apples, chips, carrot sticks, and Oreos.

Steve is singing along to his favorite country-western station. Jan is flipping absentmindedly through the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Derek and Sally are playing Auto Bingo, and Robert is trying to manage his Bob the Builder coloring book and the box of Crayolas in his lap without the crayons rolling everywhere.

They haven’t had any time to think about how things will be at Grandmother’s condo. Steve is fretting about his Sunday school lesson; Jan is wondering if she remembered to feed the fish.

### *Meet Sean, the Third Child*

Sean, the third child and a free spirit, is hurtling down the highway in his new BMW convertible with his friend Rafael, whom he met while backpacking in the Himalayas. They are listening to *Madam Butterfly* at a hundred decibels. The convertible top is down, with the

heater turned to max for the most advantageous and highly desirable tanning situation. The sporadic conversation is firmly centered on where the best gym to work out may be found, which of the boxes of exquisite chocolates from their recent trip to Belgium should be opened first, and whether the new gourmet coffee roaster/grinder/vacuum brewer they brought can handle the amount of beans necessary if everyone wants coffee.

Sean is excited about seeing all of his relatives even though he thinks they are all kind of old-fashioned. But he is really looking forward to going out on the town with Rafael to see his old high school pals after everybody else goes to bed. He also wonders if his parents can spot him some money until his new business starts to turn a profit.

### *Meet Hayley, the Youngest*

Hayley, the baby of the family and still in graduate school, is at the airport with her former professor and now fiancé, Bill. They are joined by his two children from his first marriage, Jennifer and Willie. Hayley is prattling on and on about how much she is looking forward to sleeping in, being waited on, and eating her mother's fabulous cooking—although she hopes her mother doesn't serve that ghastly green bean casserole.

Jennifer, age 12, is busy feigning indifference while she listens to Britney Spears on her personal CD player and making mental notes to share with her mother when this whole tragically awful weekend is over. Willie, age 10, has wangled 10 dollars from his dad to disappear into the airport video arcade while they wait to board.

Bill regrets not bringing his laptop as a carry-on so he could work on the book he is writing. Hayley is thinking only of herself and wondering how her parents will react to their future step-grandchildren.

This imminent extended-family Thanksgiving could be the setting for a movie, but we all wonder, will it be a comedy, tragedy, drama, or love story?

## WELCOME TO THE EXTENDED FAMILY!

Do you identify with any members of the Scott family? If we're honest, no one has a perfect family—or extended family. Within every extended family exists potential for misunderstandings, hurt feelings, anger, jealousy, fear, and anxiety. But the potential also exists for true communication, mutual understanding, healthy humor, joy, and love.

In the following pages we hope to help you understand the dynamics at work in your extended family and—with God's help—assist you in making your extended family as harmonious, healthy, and happy as it can possibly be. We will also consider some of the family dynamics that affect intergenerational relationships.

When children marry, have children of their own, or perhaps inherit stepchildren, family life gets complicated. Romantic visions are often quickly shattered, and it seems that none of us lives happily ever after: The devastation of divorce, the complications of remarriage, blended families, cohabitation, or choosing an alternative lifestyle distort the Norman Rockwell image of the happy family. Families that were close growing up may find that just because their nuclear family worked doesn't mean their extended family will. Further complicating the extended family, relatives often live all over the world in this modern age.

In the midst of such complexity, how can we develop our family relationships in ways that build each other up and glorify God? We encourage you to read on.

Wherever you are in your extended-family constellation, we invite you to join us as we explore that society called family.

### *Meet Your Guides*

Because this is a book about the whole family in all seasons of life, we want to introduce you to your extended-family guides. We (Dave and Claudia Arp) are the seasoned guides. We are parents and grandparents and have been growing our own family tree for many years.



We're here to give you insights for relating to your parents and grandparents and in-laws. And for those who are in our season of family life, we want to guide you in how to build better relationships with your adult children and grandchildren.

For the past 25 years we have worked as marriage and family educators, leading seminars across the United States and in Europe. We've also developed several marriage and parenting programs used by churches and community groups. We have three adult sons and eight grandchildren and have logged 40 years in our own marriage. We've been around the block a time or two and have what we hope is some sage advice to pass along. We'll be focusing on those of us who are in the second half of family life.

We (John and Margaret Bell) will speak for middle and younger generations. We have been married for 20 years and have two active teenage daughters, 14 and 17. We are in the very middle of our family tree: We are parents and adult children, siblings, and in-laws. As an ordained minister, I (John) have had the opportunity to work with extended families of all types. I (Margaret) have extensive service as a teacher, mentor, coach, and cheerleader for young parents in our church and community. Together we have been outspoken advocates for the importance of effective parenting.

In this book our primary focus will be on those who have children in the home, though we'll also relate to young adults who are single, engaged, or newlyweds. We feel that we understand your issues because that's where we are in life or where we can still remember being!

It is an honor to work with our more seasoned colleagues, Dave and Claudia. Along with them, we hope to reach across the years and help all generations understand the challenges we all face in our extended-family relationships, so that you might discover how to enjoy every season of life in yours.

Together, the four of us want you to know that we are not simply relying on our own understanding. We have tried to give voice to the many hundreds and thousands of people who share our concern

for the extended family. Since this is a book about extended families, we went straight to the source: you. Over the past year, we conducted a survey of people throughout the country who are at different stages of family life. In our survey we asked participants to share their joys, concerns, fears, and frustrations, and also to tell us what is working in their extended families. We wanted to know their common concerns and gain helpful tips about what works and what does not work. Whenever possible we will include what many of you have told us.

Also, though we are confident that we read Scripture through “a glass dimly,” we do humbly attempt to base our advice on the Bible. In the beginning, God created family, and the foundation for all great civilizations over the years has been the family. The extended family is prominent in the Bible. Families once lived in clans—often as many as 60 to 100 people. Today we call these family clans “the extended family.” So throughout this book, we will be referring to biblical principles that will help us relate to our whole family clan now in the twenty-first century.

### *Our Disclaimer*

This book is not about the generational divide or any other kind of divide. It is not about “us” and “them.” We are not going to choose sides in some kind of epic battle, because extended family, properly understood, is not about right and wrong or winning and losing. It is about health and harmony. Our hope is that extended families will celebrate the uniqueness of each member and in doing so build supportive, encouraging relationships.

Extending the family is an art, not a science—there are no fail-safe formulas. But just as a miner searches for diamonds, we can search for and discover precious gems in our own extended families.

Let’s get started!

# Surveying the Extended Family

What do you think of when you think of being family?

When people think of family, different pictures quickly come to the surface. Some might think narrowly about their own nuclear family—the family that they grew up in. Others might think about the family that they are in presently—especially if there are children in the home. And yet others might be single and even struggle to think in terms of family. Perhaps you have a pleasant image of being family. Maybe you see in your mind the old television show *Leave It to Beaver*, with visions of June and Ward Cleaver thoughtfully and successfully guiding Wally and the Beaver through the challenges of youth. On the other hand, some of you might conjure up unpleasant, darker images. Maybe the kooky family of Ozzy Osbourne, which strangely captured the attention of modern America in recent years, comes to mind—*hopefully not!*

In this book we want to challenge you to extend your vision of what you think of when you think of being family to include all the members of your family, not just those who live under your roof. When you think about family, we want you to think about all of your relatives—your parents and grandparents, your in-laws, your uncles and aunts, your cousins, your children and grandchildren. You might also want to include those who are like family—those folks who always have a place at your dinner table and a bed to sleep in whenever they are in town.

### THE NEED TO FOCUS ON THE EXTENDED FAMILY

We think it is important to extend your vision of family for three reasons.

First, recent census data show us that fewer and fewer Americans actually live in traditional families. According to recent studies, the traditional nuclear family—a married couple with children in the home—is becoming less common. The *New York Times 2002 Almanac* reports, “The 21st Century American family bears less and less resemblance to the 20th Century American family.”<sup>1</sup> In 1960, married couples with children in the home represented 45 percent of the total number of households in America; in 2002, households that had a married couple with children represented only 23.5 percent of the total. Also, the average family size has shrunk to 3.17 persons per household. A startling 31 percent of households with children were headed by a single parent. A significant number of married couples are choosing not to have any children at all. Adult children now are often living at home well into their mid- to late twenties. And an increasing number of children are being raised by grandparents.<sup>2</sup>

Second, we believe that Scripture supports a broad definition of

being family. As we previously mentioned, the Bible frequently portrays large extended families, consisting of many smaller, nuclear families. During the period of the Judges, the Hebrew people were, in fact, divided into 12 very large tribes or clans. Today at the Passover Seder meal, the youngest child is expected to ask the oldest person present to recite their family story again by asking respectfully, “Why is this night different from the rest?” (What a wonderful intergenerational moment!) In the presence of his mother and his brothers, Jesus refused to define His family in narrow terms, by claiming that “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven” were members of His family (Matthew 12:50). In some Christian traditions, rightfully and helpfully, folks have long called fellow members of the congregation “brother” or “sister.”

And, third, we firmly believe that all families—and *especially* traditional nuclear families!—need the support of the larger extended family to thrive. As you will see on page 16, the number-one thing that people in our survey say that they receive from their extended-family clan is support and encouragement.

When Sharon Hart Morris’s sons were 10 and 12, the unthinkable happened. Her husband, Richard, was killed instantly in a car accident only a few miles from their home. Devastated, Sharon wondered how she would ever be able to pick up the pieces of her life. How could she be both mom and dad to her two boys who were just going into adolescence? Fortunately, Sharon’s parents lived nearby and came to her rescue. Here’s Sharon’s story in her own words:

The day Richard was killed I was home. I actually remember hearing the sirens, as we could hear the interstate from our home, but it was later in the day when I got the life-shattering news that my husband was in that accident and did not survive it. Numb and overwhelmed with grief as I was, my parents and the Lord were my comfort. While most parents would give

comfort and support during the initial time of crisis, my parents made such a commitment to me that looking back I know what it really means to have family stand in the gap for the long haul. My dad had just retired as dean of Fuller Seminary. My mom is from Australia, and together they could have relocated to many interesting places around the world, but they chose to stay in the area of California where we lived so they could be there for me and their grandsons. They told me they were committed to helping me raise my sons. They chose to be our adopted “nuclear family.” Nana and Papa tried to be as involved in my sons’ lives as Richard had been.

The first few months after Richard’s death, friends and family brought us meals, and my parents joined us for dinners, proving to me and my boys that we still had family. We then got in a pattern of sharing meal preparation. I had Tuesday and Thursday free, so on those days I prepared dinner; the other days Mom was in charge of meals. On the weekends Dad would ask what around the house needed to be fixed. We also shared vacations.

With my parents’ support and encouragement, I went back to school to pursue a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Mom and Dad rearranged their schedules to be available to my boys. Mom would pick up the boys from school, give them snacks, and help with homework. At times she attended parenting meetings in my place.

Dad was there for the markers in my sons’ lives. He taught them how to shave, how to tie a tie, and on their 13th and 16th birthdays gave them blessings. He was also there in the hard times when the boys were dealing with their anger and trying to make sense out of their dad’s death. When things got rough, I could call Dad. Once, one son decided to run away and asked for a ride to Papa’s house.

Dad willingly backed up my authority with the boys in the difficult times—like when one son came home with failing grades or another son wanted to pierce his tongue. The boys really respected my dad, and it was great to have a male there to back me up.

Both of my parents were wise in how they helped us without overstepping boundaries. They stayed out of the politics of our family. When one of my sons had dyed white hair or a shaved head, they held their tongues. They let us set our own family rules and were true servants. They were my hands and feet—they were there when I needed them. And when I did need them, they bravely spoke up and told me, “I think your boys need you,” or “The boys are really tired and you’re being a little hard on them.” And they faithfully prayed with and for us.

During these years everything wasn’t perfect. At times, I imposed too much on them, and occasionally they overstepped their roles. We both had to resist letting our feelings get hurt. We worked hard at clearly expressing what we each needed and at problem solving when necessary.

I still need to acknowledge the limits of my parents as they age, and I need to continually affirm what they have done and are doing for us. But together we have developed healthy working relationships, and in a large measure my boys and I are emotionally healthy and happy today because of Mom and Dad living out their great commitment to us made five years ago. When tragedy hits, no one can stand in the gap like family.

We say, “Amen!” All types of families need support and encouragement, and the best place to be supported and encouraged is most often in your extended family.

However, you will find that when you broaden your vision of

being family to the whole extended family, the picture becomes cloudier and more complicated. As we conducted our national survey, we were able to get a clearer picture of what it means to be extended family and to better understand the real issues extended families are dealing with—and did we ever hit a nerve!

## WHAT THE SURVEY SAYS

We asked people all over the country what comes to mind when they think about extended family. Everybody we heard from—regardless of specific family configuration—seemed to have some kind of strong emotional reaction when they think of their own extended family. Almost no one was neutral on the subject; rather, we discovered that the phrase *extended family* almost always provoked a wide range of emotions—from joy, happiness, and fulfillment to disappointment, regret, and even anger. Here are a few of the typical responses we received:

- Fun family reunions at the beach
- Christmas at Grandma's house—how it used to be
- My mother-in-law and her demands!
- My daughter-in-law and her catty remarks!
- Aging parents and health problems
- Conflict and disconnection
- Love and security
- My precious grandchildren!
- Pressure, pressure, pressure!
- Manipulative relatives
- A refilled empty nest
- Cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, great-grandparents
- Fractured family relationships due to divorce
- Lack of communication
- Family e-mail newsletters and Web site photo updates. I love them!



- Norman Rockwell scenes and other fantasies
- Guilt!

### *The Best Aspect of Extended Family*

In spite of the wide variety of reactions and emotions that respondents had, there still was considerable agreement on the benefits of relating to extended family. The following chart shows that encouragement and/or support (dare we say love?) was most frequently listed as the best aspect. But there are numerous other benefits as well. Extended families also appreciate getting together and having fun, sharing spiritual beliefs, and more.

*What is the **best aspect** of your extended family?*

Support/encouragement	35%
Getting together/having fun	22%
Common spiritual beliefs	11%
Grandchildren	9%
Communication/understanding	8%
Holidays/celebrations/traditions	6%
Tolerance/independence	6%
Not much	3%

### *Major Tensions in Extended Families*

On the other hand, many folks admitted to struggling greatly with some members of their extended families. Read what some consider their greatest concern (or greatest problem) as they strive to relate to all members of their extended family:

- Letting go of failures and mistakes we made while rearing our own children.
- Dealing with our son's addictions and substance abuse.
- Dealing with aging, cranky parents at the same time I have to deal with an adult child in financial trouble.
- Lifestyle choices our son has made that we disapprove of.

- Differing value systems. I don't understand choices our daughter and son-in-law are making, such as giving up time with family in order to work more and have more "stuff."
- Watching one of my grandchildren get punished and verbally abused.
- Going through our 27-year-old daughter's divorce to someone we adored and then her remarriage to an older man with two teenage sons.
- Not feeling connected to our grandchildren who live so far away.
- My daughter is not bringing up my grandchildren in the Christian faith, and this greatly concerns me. What can I do?

Complicating the extended-family system are the multiple roles we each play. You are probably not just a mother but are also a daughter and a sister or a mother-in-law and a niece—or more. (Obviously, the same would apply to men, but we think you get the picture!) Boundaries, power struggles, and conflict with in-laws—which are all related issues, by the way—were listed as the main sources of tension for extended families.

*What are the **major tensions** in your extended family?*

Boundary issues/power struggles/in-laws	21%
Differences in faith/values/beliefs	18%
Communication/conflict	17%
Lack of time together/neglect	9%
Divorce and/or remarriage issues	8%
Financial issues	6%
Aging parents	5%
Geography	5%
Drugs/alcohol	3%
Grandchildren	3%
None	3%
Holidays	2%

Some people thrive in one role and struggle in another. It's no secret that many of us often struggle with the broad category of in-laws. We won't repeat any mother-in-law jokes that reinforce negative stereotypes because we have uncovered some very painful situations. One frustrated survey participant wrote:

I am a 37-year-old female, wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. My greatest stress is with my in-laws, specifically my mother- and father-in-law, and their daughters (both married with three kids each). While these are my responses, my husband (the son and brother) would agree with most everything I have put down because our extended-family relationships are a periodic topic of discussion and a perpetual problem!

The major tension in our extended family comes from my bossy, selfish sisters-in-law (both are younger than their brother, my husband) and my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law is well-meaning but is so controlling and manipulative I can't stand to be around her. Both my mother-in-law and father-in-law disapproved of our marriage. My husband and I suspect that his divorce from his first wife (who ran off with his best friend) is an unspoken tension on his family's side, especially with his sisters—perhaps shame on their part in having a divorced brother. Fortunately, our marriage is alive and well, but no thanks to support from my husband's family!

You asked how we resolve extended-family conflicts. That's the problem; we don't! It's kind of hard when one or another member refuses to communicate with you for six-plus months at a time. But the best way I've found to communicate with our extended family is through e-mail or writing letters. Talking doesn't work well because others tend to interrupt, override, and don't have or make time to listen, even on the nonconfrontational issues. They are driving me crazy!

### *The Best Ways Extended Families Communicate*

The best way to deal with boundary issues is clear communication, so we asked our survey participants what is the best way to communicate. The responses were not surprising: Alexander Graham Bell's invention—the telephone—remains the most popular form of communication, but, sadly, people also told us that they tried to avoid communication with their extended family or that they only communicated with their extended family through a third party. Here is what they wrote:

*What is the best way to **communicate** with your extended family?*

Telephone	44%
In person	21%
E-mail	20%
Written notes/cards	6%
Very carefully	6%
Avoidance	2%
Through a third party	1%

### *What Pulls Extended Families Together*

Not only does good clear communication help bring families together, but so do certain events. Surprisingly, tragedy (e.g., funerals, illnesses) was ranked as the number-one thing that pulls extended families together. We were pleased to learn that most people (but certainly not all) feel that in tough times they can count on their families to pull together and work through the tragic circumstances.

*What kinds of things **pull you together**?*

Tragedy/illness/deaths/funerals	31%
Celebrations/birthdays/weddings	21%
Holidays/traditions	19%
Reunions/family visits	11%

Vacations/travel	5%
Grandchildren	4%
Spiritual values/faith/church	4%
Meals together	3%
Recreation/sports	2%

### *Extended Families' Favorite Activities*

We were also interested in what families like to do when they gather, so if you are the one planning the gathering, you might want to read this list carefully! Here are the tabulated results of our nationwide survey:

#### *What are your favorite extended-family activities?*

Holidays together	28%
Meals together	21%
Vacations/family trips/camping	14%
Birthdays/weddings	12%
Reunions/family gatherings	10%
Playing games together	7%
Sports/sporting events	4%
Movies/shopping	3%
Church	1%

## CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

As we compiled our survey results, we concluded that there are seven basic challenges of building positive extended-family relationships, and that their mastery will lead you to improving your relationships with members of your extended family.

The first challenge is to *develop realistic expectations and a clear vision* for your extended family. The Bible says that where there is no vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18, KJV)—and so it is with the

extended family. In this challenge, we will look at different components that complicate extended-family relationships. You will see that coming up with a realistic vision is a challenge! Most people have either no vision or an unrealistic vision for what the extended family might be.

The second challenge is to *move beyond chitchat and learn to speak the truth in love*. In our counseling sessions, our seminars, our survey, and our own personal experience, good communication is often hard to achieve. Many families settle for simple chitchat—rehearsing the same old conversations about the same old boring but safe subjects year after year. In this challenge we help you move beyond small talk to fulfill the biblical challenge of learning to speak the “truth in love.” You will see that this is not easy to do and requires great spiritual discipline.

You will discover, however, that once you have a clear vision for a close and healthy extended family, and once you try to move beyond chitchat, conflict and/or uneasy disagreements will erupt from time to time. These should not necessarily be considered a negative development: Reasonable minds will disagree, as they say. However, you will want to develop some skills for managing conflict and for dealing with disagreements in a way that does not lead to hostility. Therefore, the third challenge is to *be civil, calm, and clear when you disagree*.

Our fourth challenge—*promoting harmony when you get together*—is geared more specifically toward particular family gather-



“Now that I am about to become a mother-in-law, I’d like to be a great one and avoid the many pitfalls I experienced with my own in-laws and those I see in the families around me. I don’t want to be the mother-in-law I had.”

—SURVEY RESPONDENT



ings. In this chapter, we try to give you good, practical tips for how to make those traditional get-togethers meaningful. What makes for a good vacation? What kinds of events pull us closer together as extended families, and what tends to pull us apart? You might be surprised!

In the fifth challenge, we turn our attention to various and specific relationships—*relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, or relationships with aunts and uncles, cousins, or adult siblings*. Sometimes relationships develop naturally because you live in the same neighborhood with other relatives, but more often, close relationships with specific extended-family members require work and are the result of an intentional decision to build those relationships.

In this book we do not want to give anyone the impression that all problems can be solved or that every family experiences the Hollywood happy ending. The Bible informs us, “In all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28), but sinful behavior has painful consequences. *How do you learn to deal with the hard issues?* is our sixth challenge. This chapter will be helpful to those not looking for quick and easy fixes to family problems but who instead are seeking coping strategies.

And finally, we believe that it is important to *understand and respect boundaries and to extend ourselves beyond family*. When we are involved in reaching out to others and pursuing interests beyond our own families, we can find balance in our extended-family relationships and also have lives of our own. And within our families we need to know how to extend our web of care beyond our immediate families. Where does your family end and your extended family begin? When do you draw a boundary or declare that enough is enough? Understanding where and when to draw lines with others is a difficult but important lesson to learn in life, and we want to help you do it with your own family.

With these seven challenges as your guideposts, it's time to start

our extended-family adventure. You may want to work through this book alone or with others in your extended family. You could also use this book as a catalyst for great conversations at your next family get-together. We hope it will be an avenue for open discussion and discovery and will foster better relationships between parents, children, grandparents, and all those who are part of your clan.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

To begin the adventure, we suggest that you reflect on the following questions, keeping in mind that your extended family includes parents, grandparents, adult children, grandchildren, in-laws, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces, and so on.

1. What is the best aspect of your extended family?
2. What are the major tensions in your extended family?
3. How do you resolve extended-family conflicts?
4. What is the best way to communicate with your extended family?
5. What are your favorite extended-family activities?
6. What tends to pull you together as a family?



## Notes

### *Surveying the Extended Family*

1. *New York Times 2002 Almanac*, ed. John W. Wright (New York: Penguin), p. 287.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 287-89.

### *Developing Realistic Expectations*

1. Evelyn Bence, *Leaving Home: The Making of an Independent Woman* (Philadelphia: Bridgebooks Westminster Press, 1982), p. 84.

### *Moving Beyond Chitchat*

1. Ernest Bramah, quoted in Nigel Rees, *Cassell's Humorous Quotations* (London: Cassell & Co., 2001), p. 93.
2. Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1953).

### *Being Civil, Calm, and Clear When You Disagree*

1. Adapted from Pier Forni, *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*, as excerpted in *Parade Magazine* (August 25, 2002), p. 8.
2. Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), pp. 86-87.
3. Adapted from Dianne Hales, "Why Are We So Angry?" *Parade Magazine* (September 2002), pp. 10-11.
4. Harriet Lerner, *The Dance of Anger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 4.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 123-24.

## *About the Authors*

**Claudia Arp and David Arp**, M.S.W., a husband-wife team, are founders and directors of Marriage Alive International, a groundbreaking ministry dedicated to providing resources and training to empower churches to help build better marriages and families. Their 10 Great Dates seminar is popular across the United States and in Europe. The Arps are conference speakers, columnists, and authors of over 30 books including the *10 Great Dates* series, *The Connected Family*, and the Gold Medallion Award–winning *The Second Half of Marriage*. Frequent contributors to print and broadcast media, the Arps have appeared as empty-nest experts on *NBC Today*, *CBS This Morning*, PBS, and *Focus on the Family*. Their work has been featured in publications such as *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Marriage Partnership*, and *Focus on the Family* magazine. David and Claudia have been married for over 40 years and have three married sons and eight grandchildren. They live in Northern Virginia. Visit their Web site at [www.marriagealive.com](http://www.marriagealive.com).

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