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JOYFUL MUSINGS

By Joy Birnbach Dunstan, MA, LPC, MAC

Different Strokes

George Burns once said, "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city." For some, this belief has brought you clear to another country.

Many of us grew up with visions of family as seen in TV shows like "Leave It to Beaver" or "Father Knows Best." We were programmed to think of life as a harmonious, loving, and sometimes humorous voyage with two devoted parents and their adorable children. The reality off-screen rarely looked like the Hollywood version of the '50s.

How many of you grew up in a healthy family? How many of you know what that is? Here are a few characteristics of healthy families. See how many describe the environment in your childhood home.

- There is open communication in which a full range of ideas and feelings can be expressed and received.
- Conflict is acceptable and is worked through to a solution.
- Individuality is encouraged and privacy is respected.
- Mistakes are accepted as human and part of learning.
- There is mutual respect, support and affirmation.
- High levels of trust and safety between family members.
- A sense of right and wrong is taught by word *and* example.
- Rules are clear and yet flexible.
- There is an atmosphere of fun, safety, and acceptance.

Sounds good, doesn't it? If only parents-to-be got as much training for the parental role as they needed for their license to drive. When children grow up without the environment described above, it has a lifetime effect.

In addition to the above qualities, is the unique style of each family. Some families are loud. Everything is expressed in multiple decibels, yelling is the normal conversational tone, and arguments are forgotten as soon as they're over. Members live by the adage of the memorable Dr. Seuss: "Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind." Everyone says whatever is on their mind – after all, "we're family."

Other families are ever so polite. Keeping the peace is Rule One. Negative emotions are to be kept to oneself. Feelings are hidden and unspoken rules prevail, even if you're never quite sure what they are.

Courteous conversation accompanies every meal, but personal questions beyond reports of daily activities are considered nosy and inappropriate.

So many of the troubles I see within couples stem from the style each became accustomed to as a child. When partners from each of these kinds of families try to live together, it's often a recipe for trouble.

She complains that he's yelling, and she finds it frightening to talk with him. He says he was talking in a normal voice, and she just complains about whatever he does.

He thinks she's intrusive with all her questions about what he's up to and chatters on and on with all the details of her day. She's hurt because he doesn't show any interest in her and what's going on in her life.

These scenarios are but two of the myriad ways different backgrounds and upbringing can create disharmony and misunderstanding. Take the time to listen from your heart. Recognize style differences without judging them as right or wrong. Acknowledge the positive intentions behind your partner's sometimes unwelcome approach. If your styles are at odds with each other, don't take it personally. Learn to share your discomfort with your partner and ask for what you need without blame or counter-attacks.

Remember the wise words of Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*: "Families are about love overcoming emotional torture." Remembering the love abates the sense of torture.

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