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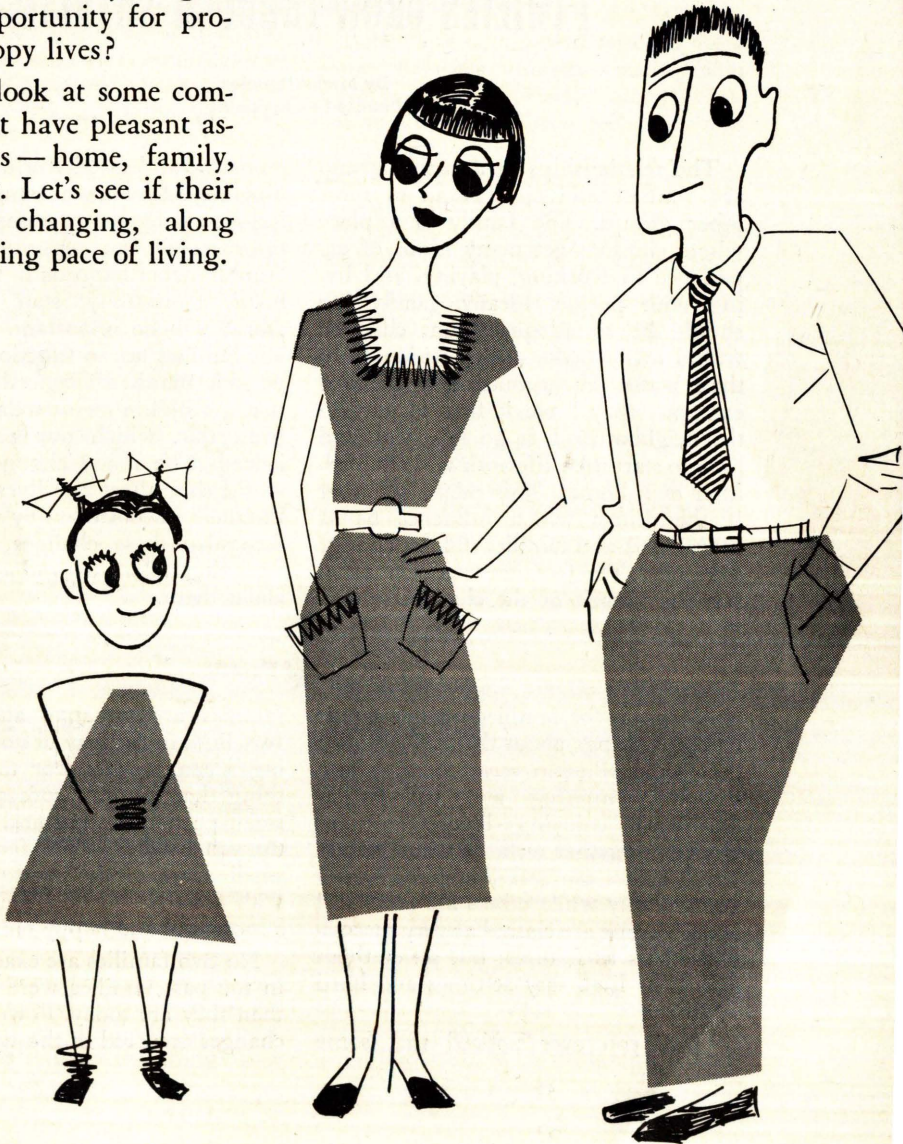
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FAMILIES GROW THROUGH SHARING

Getting along with people is one of the hardest things we have to learn. Our own family is the best place to begin. We want good homes for ourselves and our children. What are some ways to give them every opportunity for productive and happy lives?

Let's take a look at some common words that have pleasant associations to us — home, family, and democracy. Let's see if their meanings are changing, along with our changing pace of living.

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FAMILIES GROW THROUGH SHARING

By Merle Gunsalus
Family Life Specialist

The relationships in a family group are warmer and closer than in most other groups. The family is a place where children get many kinds of experience in working, playing, and living with people. Ideally, family life should be so adequate that children would easily make the transition from their homes to the outside world. For example, they leave it first to play in the neighborhood, to go to school, and later to start their lifework and establish their own homes. This might be easier if the things which influence us as individuals and families did not change so rapidly. The fact that we do not often recognize some of the changes in our

economic and social worlds adds to this difficulty. Because a family is greatly influenced by the customs, values and pressures of the community and the "times", what happens in the neighborhood, community, state, nation and world will be important. To see how our families are to function in the best possible manner, we need to recognize that family life for us today is different from that which our parents experienced. The many changes in today's world that affect our lives are in most instances uncontrolled by us. If we can recognize these changes, we can see how they affect us and do something about them.

All Kinds of Families

A look at the families we know tells us many things about them. We notice that some of them seem to sail along smoothly, meeting and overcoming hardships, enjoying being together, working together well. Some are happy while others are sad. Some are loving and friendly while others are cross and hostile. Some are classed as very successful, others as failures; but all of them find their lives easy at times and hard at others.

Have you ever noticed that some

families are unhappy and experience very little in the way of good family living when they appear to have everything that suggests success and a very small portion of trial and trouble? On the other hand, some families with a small share of the world's goods and with countless trouble manage to have a successful and happy family group.

No two families are exactly alike, but in the past families were more similar than they are today. Fewer and slower changes occurred in the world. In most

cases, families are like their parents'. Tradition set the pattern for daily life and certainly for the training of the children in the family. Many of these patterns were good and may still be good. However, new, different and complex living situations call for like changes in today's living. The old ways of living can be discarded if they cease to serve a purpose and not because they are old. If they still serve a purpose, they should be kept. We need, then, to see if there are ways we can improve our training for living. To do this we need to look at methods of family control that have been prevalent in our society.

A generation ago most families were parent-centered. They were autocratic and dictatorial. Father, mother, or father and mother together, represented authority. Parents made rules for the entire family along with all the necessary decisions. Parents demanded unquestioned obedience. Chores and responsibilities were assigned. This was the day when children were seen and



not heard. Very often the parental authority was based on fear and use of power.

Later there was a change in the pattern—a shift to a child-centered family group. In this kind of family, the children are allowed to do the things they

want to do when they want to do them. The children quite frankly “rule the roost.” The children in this type of family do not share in the household chores. Parents in this kind of family often go without things they need so their children can have what they want. Generally, this family follows a pattern that is best described as an absence of pattern, rule or schedule.

Both of these kinds of families leave some members unjustly treated. Too rigid rules set in parent-centered families may leave children rebellious and uncooperative or else submissive and unpracticed in making decisions and assuming responsibility.

and pitfalls of these two types of family control. We want to know how to pro-

On the other hand, the family that works on the principle of complete individual expression soon finds that this is not adequate. No one has ever been able to live completely independent of others or without rules.

As parents, we see the inadequacies vide a happy and full life for each member of the family while still functioning as a family group. The problems which must be met in today's world call for better ways of satisfying ourselves in the family.

A family which practices democratic family living will come much closer to discovering a means for family growth and satisfaction. Today the “partnership family” shows us how families can have happy, pleasant everyday living through respect and consideration for each family member. In the family practicing democratic living, responsibility and control are shared by all. The family sets its goals together. Decision making takes place at all age levels although parents have the final “say.” There is a growing respect for each child as an individual with differences which

make him unique. There is an understanding of the needs of each individual in the family and a consideration of how they can be met. While individuals have

their own goals, the family goals can include many of these and at the same time be group goals which are arrived at and set together.

What Is Democratic Family Living?

It is easy to say we are practicing democracy when actual practice shows differently. Most people consider democracy to be a form of government when they need to think of it as a way of life. It is a form of teamwork which can be practiced at home or elsewhere. In a democracy an attempt is made to treat people fairly. Everyone can have a part in what is going on and in what is being decided. Too often we think of democracy as a dictionary definition. We give it lip-service but if asked to tell ex-

actly how to practice it, we would be hard-pressed to bring it right down to everyday terms.

Some people hesitate to adopt democratic practices in their families because they believe the children would outvote them on important issues. Mother and dad do not need to let go of their authority and children will not resent parental control if they are sure their parents have considered their views and desires in making that decision.

Basic Beliefs

In a true democracy whether it be in family, group, state or nation, two beliefs are basic:

1. We must believe that every human being has worth. We need first to respect every individual regardless of his age, race, economic or social status, or personal differences. We must recognize that each person has basic needs which must be met. Each person has traits and qualities which identify him as an individual and which permit him to make the contribution that is his alone. When we respect an individual we recognize that he has worth and dignity, that he has a right to a full and satisfying life and that he should have freedom to try to reach that goal.

2. We must believe in the value of participation and cooperation of all individuals in a group. Group cooperation helps individuals to reach their goals—it is a method. It helps give family members the feeling of solidness and belonging. In a family, each member depends on others in the group to

help meet his needs. At the same time, there are also the needs of the family as a whole to be met. Whether we are working for the good of one person or for the whole family, the solution arrived at through the thinking of all members usually gives a better answer.

More and more families are accepting the belief that democratic practices will give richer family satisfaction than other means. It is necessary for family cooperation and it gives important guidance for our contacts in the neighborhood, school, church, social group and community club. Each person in the family has his individual activities. Children have school, church, 4-H and scouts or other activities. Dad and mother have all of their church and organization meetings, often separately. No, it is not easy for families to live, work and play together cooperatively because outside demands take their time. There are, however, many family areas where family-centered projects can show true democratic action.

What Are Some Situations in the Home Which Can Help Families Live Democratically?

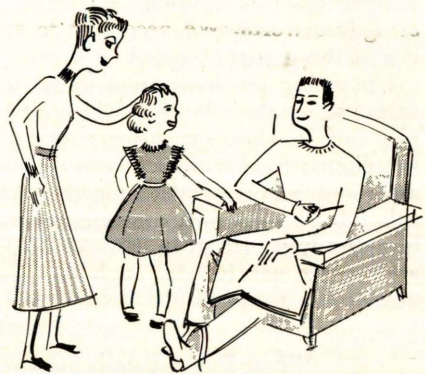
1. Opportunities to talk things over.
2. Concern for the feelings of every family member.
3. Opportunities for all to make choices and have a part in making decisions.
4. Parents set a good example in showing they understand democracy and democratic practices.
5. Opportunities to learn through mistakes.
6. Sense of responsibility toward the world.

Successful family living does not happen by chance. To develop satisfying relationships, each family member must work. Homemaking is the most important of professions and our changing times indicate to us that the responsibility for making it successful rests on the shoulders of the entire family. Mother can not be expected to do the job alone. In fact, the job cannot be done by any one person no matter how great his or her knowledge or skill. Either mother or father, or both, may take the lead, but the "doing" is the concern of every member. The importance of homemaking cannot be over-emphasized because it is the one force more than any other which influences all phases of our life.

There is authority in a democratic home. Some rules are necessary to make for smoother daily living. We can all accept rules or make compromises when they are made by the family for the benefit of the whole group if we have had a voice. This does not mean that a strong aggressive member of the family always has his way either. It means that when each person can state his views, express his feelings and accept some of the views and feelings of other family members, he is better able to understand and accept the group decision even when it excludes the thing he

wants. Feelings and emotions lie behind most of our behavior. Understanding our own behavior gives us more sympathy for the behavior of others. Sometimes a simple explanation of the facts by dad helps the children to respect his decision when he feels that he must make one. Strong dogmatic statements by a parent such as "you must" or "you cannot" breed defiance. Mother and dad of course keep a veto power because their knowledge and experience are greater.

Freedom of expression means that one has the right to express personal opinions in regard to the situation being discussed or to the opinions expressed by someone else. We only learn to say the right things rather than the wrong by having an opportunity to say almost anything. Parents can accept and understand an over-emphatic statement by



their teen-ager because they know that the feeling back of it is more important than the words. Sometimes children find it hard to express themselves freely at home but are very talkative at school or at the neighbors. Why is it that home muzzles ideas and spontaneity and the

youngsters become timid about sharing their ambitions, loves and fears? A family discussion helps to keep the confidence of the children. Talking over the family's problems helps the children to more easily tell their parents about their concerns. They may even come to realize that mother and dad are human and can sometimes make mistakes. If the parent can be big enough to admit a mistake, the child's love and belief in his parent grows. It is difficult to make home a place for self-expression but homes that recognize its importance and work at it can do it. With this feeling established, effort expended to do the work of the home becomes lessened.

A good family discussion can release tension as it helps bring hostility or differences of opinion out into the open. This relieves the pressures of hurt feelings and anger. Conflict cannot always be avoided but ways of handling it can be improved. Learning to live with our differences by acquiring respect and understanding for the other fellow's differences is as desirable as insisting on only one answer or compromise by one of the parties involved.

Discussing problems prepares family members for the roles they will need to play in life. Marriage partners who do not discuss frankly their finances, their ambitions and their plans together are riding for a fall. Children who grow up in a family where all business dealings are a secret will have a rough time es-

tablishing homes of their own. Many lessons they should have learned second-hand as an observer in their parents' home will need to be learned by the trial and error method in their own home.

Families have found many ways to encourage freedom of expression and interchange of ideas. Some have an informal meeting. Others simply discuss family affairs at mealtime. A family council works best for some families. Some set up a regular grievance night when everyone hauls out his hurts, wants and complaints in an effort to find a way of dealing with them. Still others have a talk fest, or merely talk together when they are all in the car going some place or when enjoying recreation as a family group. Any method will provide a start but some may be better suited to one family than to another. Some families like to have a regular time and meeting place; others are much less formal and meet whenever they have a problem that they would like to discuss. Each family will need to try the way that best fits it. Strict parliamentary procedure will defeat the whole purpose of family discussion.

While no two family councils will work alike, they can accomplish the same ends. Two families with the same problem can come up with widely different decisions and still have the one that will be right for them.

Where Does a Family Start When It Is Interested in Developing A Family Council?

The actual planning together is the biggest function of a family discussion, or council, call it what you will. Carrying through on the decisions arrived at and checking back to see how successful the chosen plan worked are important also. Christine Beasley in **Democracy in**

the Home gives some good suggestions on helping the family interested in planning. She says we can:

1. Begin, if possible, with very simple problems.
2. Try to have some fun and pleasure out of the process.

3. Concentrate on people's feelings.
4. Remember that everybody has good ideas.
5. Avoid meaningless arguments.
6. Don't take yourselves too seriously.

What Are Some of the Things That Families Discuss at Family Council Meetings?

There are unlimited subjects and areas to be discussed by families. The following list may serve to help you think of some that your family might discuss:

1. Relationships between family members.
2. Radio and TV.
3. Use of the car.
4. Use of the family income and savings.
5. Work in the home and on the farm.
6. Family fun, recreation or vacations.
7. School problems.
8. Family food supply.
9. Education for children or other family members.
10. Individual wants and needs.
11. Clothing.
12. Health (protecting the family).
13. Neighborhood participation and social life.
14. Maintaining church membership.
15. Care of the children.
16. Establishing credit.

Nobody claims that a family council can settle any and all questions either definitely or forever. Every family will have some topics that would not be discussed simply because the individual members of the family are the individuals they are. Perhaps someone would feel badly to have a topic discussed because of extreme shyness or sensitivity. The family council cannot be the place for the discussion of all family affairs. Here are some things that will probably not be taken up in the family discussion:

1. Administering of discipline.

2. Personal matters involving one, or at most, two members.
3. Anything which might intrude too closely on an individual's personal rights.
4. Issues a parent has already decided.

While democratic practices of living in the family seem to provide one of the better ways of helping us to live, we must also look at its disadvantages. It is a slow process and it takes time. It is one that must be built and used. It is hard to use because people generally find it difficult to change their ideas and their ways of doing things. Some people will find it easier to follow the pattern of their childhood home than to try to use democratic ways. While we cannot foresee the future and what is best for family members, democratic practices earnestly adopted and worked at in the family promise us help. We must see that all members of the family belong to the family council and take part as soon as they are old enough to have opinions and can put them into words. An informal and free atmosphere should be encouraged. Acceptance can exist only if every person feels that his ideas will be heard and considered.

It is certainly easier as a dictator to arbitrarily settle immediate situations; but it is better for children to get in on the act. An individual cannot learn cooperation all by himself. He needs actual practice and experience in planning and carrying out activities according to his abilities. It pays to count the children in on these sessions because:

1. Gripes, complaints and discontent are reduced when the children feel they have been consulted.
2. Loyalty increases as the children acquire a feeling of "this is my family." The children are more interested in taking the responsibility to see that a job gets done.
3. It gives valuable experience for adult life in learning to make decisions, in taking responsibility and in living democratically.
4. The children feel like individuals. They feel better because their parents are considering them important people who help.
5. Mother and dad will have a richer experience and ultimately a better way with their families.

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