



All the Problems in the World Either Begin in Families or End Up in Families

DeFrain John

Department of Child and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA

Since the title of this editorial is the first two Big Ideas that are going to be discussed here, let me say it once more, with emphasis: *All the problems in the world either begin in families or end up in families.*

That's not my idea. That's from a long-time and dear friend, Dr. David H. Olson, professor emeritus of family studies at the University of Minnesota – St. Paul, USA.

What David is implying is that sometimes the roots of a problem in life can be traced back to the family, because families can be really good at making problems for themselves: alcohol and other drug problems; physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; extramarital affairs; an inability to manage financial resources effectively; poor communication skills and endless conflict among family members; gender discrimination and an imbalance of power; on and on and on. Make your own list, if you would like. It is easy to do.

What David is also saying is that there are many other problems that families are forced to face that are not of their own making: war; famine; racism, ethnocentrism, tribalism, hatred; overpopulation and subsequent environmental degradation; economic collapse; hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis; global warming and the destruction of ecosystems; waves of coronavirus variants crashing into families from every direction; on and on and on. You can make your own list of these problems that begin outside the family, also. Your list will be as good as mine.

Now stay with me here: What David H. Olson is also implying is that whether or not a family causes the problem or the problem is imposed upon the family by the world around them, the family, in the final analysis, ends up stuck with the problem. The family ends up dealing with it. Think of the pandemic: We have been attacked by miniscule viruses – so small that if you were able to line them up in a row, 2,500 of them would *fit between the end of this sentence.* And the beginning of this next sentence. Go back two sentences to the period on the last sentence (.) and then move your eyes right to the capital (“A”) of the very next sentence and think about that. So small that 2,500 individual viruses if lined up fit in the tiny space between the two sentences. It seems surreal, doesn't it, that something that small but in vast, incomprehensible numbers could kill and physically and emotionally damage billions of people around the world and bring human civilizations to a halt. And, this little virus cannot think and scientists don't even know for sure whether it is “alive” or “not alive”. It is an accident of billions and billions of years of evolution and mutation. Is this a bad disaster movie everyone in the world is living in? Could Hollywood or Bollywood have dreamed this madness up?

So, we are attacked from all directions and every institution in the world and every individual is affected in countless negative ways: our health care systems; our businesses; our social welfare systems; our educational institutions; our religious organizations. Terrible negative effects of which we are all well aware. You know what I'm talking about.

But in the final analysis, in countless ways, the problem has not begun in the family, but the problem ends up in the family: When you go home at night, you go to your home where, most

Received: February 4, 2022

Revised: March 21, 2022

Accepted: March 25, 2022

Corresponding author:

DeFrain John

Department of Child and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1400 R Street Lincoln, NE 68588, USA

Tel: 1-402-423-5035

E-mail: jddefrain@yahoo.com

© 2022 International Society for Problem-Based Learning

© This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

likely, you live in some kind of family – we all live in a family, one family among literally billions of families in the world and these families are so remarkably and beautifully diverse we will never ever be able to even describe a tiny fragment of this diversity adequately.

All these wonderfully (and sometimes disturbingly) diverse families are forced whether they like it or not to deal with the global pandemic. I could make a stab at describing this, but it would take thousands of pages and I would, in the end, fail in my task. Better yet: Just think about how the pandemic has affected your beautiful (and sometimes curious or disheartening) little family. You're stuck with the pandemic, aren't you? Right up to your neck.

That brings me to the next *Big Idea* in this brief editorial: *When you're thinking about a family, look for their strengths.* Don't waste a lot of time focusing on what's wrong with the family. That gets you nowhere. Focus on the qualities that make the family work well.

Now, of course, not all families are strong families. But all families have strengths. So, look for the strengths of your own family, and the strengths of the families you are working with. All families in the world face innumerable challenges in life. That's a given. No one gets out of life alive. But if we spend all our time thinking about what's wrong with a family, we get nowhere. Look for the strengths, because families use their strengths to meet life's inevitable challenges and disasters.

And what are these strengths? Since the mid-1970s, I've been working with a team of a couple hundred researchers, clinicians, family educators and counselors, and community-oriented specialists around the world to better understand strong families and family strengths. We look at families who believe they have significant family strengths to deal with life's challenges; who love each other, who care for each other, who are satisfied with their family relationships. We have studied how families use their strengths to meet life's challenges in 39 countries of the world. Sound and diverse studies have been done in Australia, Austria, China, Fiji, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, Qatar, Russia, South America, Switzerland, Tunisia, USA, and other countries. Literally in all the seven major geocultural areas of the world: Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East, North America, and Oceania.

Each country and each culture and, literally, each family has a different constellation of family strengths and use these strengths in different ways and in different contexts. We are all unique. But, paradoxically, we are also all so very similar. Our research team has created a useful general model to give you an idea, broadly speaking, of the major strengths of families around the world. We call this the International Family Strengths Model. There are six critical

family strengths in the model, with 85 sub-categories, that we have seen in every culture we have studied, from contemporary urban cultures to traditional rural cultures: 1.) appreciation and affection for each other; 2) commitment to the family; 3) positive communication in the family; 4) enjoyable time together; 5) the ability to manage stress and crisis effectively; and 6) a sense of spiritual well-being and shared values.

So, when you are working with families in your career, or thinking about your own family, remember two things: 1) in the final analysis, the misery of the world falls upon the shoulders of families and, thus, families need to be valued and better understood; and, 2) the solutions to these problems can be traced back to the strengths of these families, and the support these families receive from strong communities and good and dedicated professionals. Like you.

Many professionals provide services that involve or respond to the needs of the family. Therefore, in contemporary education and practice, learning events need to cause students to focus on the nature and extent of contributions that families can make. In recent times many services have been 'outsourced' to family members who may or may not be fully prepared for the level of responsibility that is expected. Working with families, professionals can add value to their approach to the provision of care or services. This is clear for example in the case of health professionals, educators, lawyers, architects.

To highlight the 'strengths of families' implies that real partnerships with them can lead to optimal outcomes. Learning events that focus on family involvement in various situations are thus worthy of inclusion in a range of program offerings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Asay, S. M., DeFrain, J., Metzger, M., & Moyer, B. (Eds.). (2014). *Family violence from a global perspective: A strengths-based approach.* Los Angeles: Sage.
- Cacciatore, J., & DeFrain, J. (Eds.). (2015). *The world of bereavement: Cultural perspectives on death in families.* Switzerland: Springer International.
- DeFrain, J., & Asay, S. M. (Eds.). (2007). *Strong families around the world: Strengths-based research and perspectives.* London and New York: Routledge.
- DeFrain, J., Brand, G., Burson, M. H., Fenton, A. M., Friesen, J. L., Hanna, J. S. et al. (2012). *Getting connected, staying connected: Loving each other day by day.* Lincoln, NE, USA: University of Nebraska Extension. Retrieved Month Date, Year, from <https://marketplace.unl.edu/extension/eb4.html>.

DeFrain, J., & Stinnett, N. (2012). American Family Strengths Inventory. To better understand the strengths of your family, take this test. Retrieved Month Date, Year, from <https://extensionpublications.unl.edu/assets/pdf/g1881.pdf>.

Olson, D. H., DeFrain, J., & Skogrand, L. (2022). *Marriages and families: Intimacy, diversity, and strengths* (10th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

Skogrand, L., DeFrain, N., DeFrain, J., & Jones, J.E. (2007). *Surviving and transcending a traumatic childhood: The dark thread*. London and New York: Routledge.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declared no conflict of interest.