The Family Enrichment Program Manual

In 1998, faculty from the Brigham Young University School of Social Work began work on a family enrichment program manual. The effort was in response to a general call from the university president, that faculty focus on preparing students to make a positive impact on families throughout the world. The project was a natural response for the School because all social work students are required to serve families, as a part of their regular professional training process. What they lacked was a simple, viable tool to facilitate the implementation of such a system for weekly family interaction.

As they searched for an instrument that would be usable by students with families in a wide variety of cultures and family systems, Dr. Shirley Cox and Prof. Wendy Sheffield, Field Program administrators and authors of the program, examined the positive influence weekly family meetings had in strengthening their own families. As they shared personal experiences, they noted the strength and durability their families had gained through weekly family night activities. It became evident that a program, similar to what they had experienced, could be developed for their students to use with the wide variety of families encountered in the field internship program. On that basis, Dr. Cox and Prof. Sheffield began to write the initial ten family enrichment lessons.

The initial ten lessons in the manual were illustrated by Jenni B. Whitmire, and tested by BYU students during the summer of 1999. Two sites and two languages served as the initial testing ground: in Guatemala (Spanish); and in Zimbabwe (English). Their research at those sites, as well as other places in the USA, resulted in glowing reports of the effectiveness of the weekly family night process. They also found the lesson objectives, as stated in the manual, were accomplished through the model. However, there were many suggested changes in lesson order, language and graphics. Those minor but important changes were incorporated and the Family Enrichment Program Manual was republished.

In some implementations of this model, families beginning the weekly family meeting program, have secured assistance from people, outside their own families, to help them get started holding weekly family night. However over four or five weeks, the program directs that these individuals slowly move back out of the family meetings in order for the new family to take over the full responsibility. In most cases, however, families are able to initiate their own weekly meetings according to their own styles and agenda.

The basic process as described in the Family Manual and in the chart on the back of the Manual are: a Welcome, by the individual who presides over the weekly family meeting; an Opening Song and Prayer, chosen and led by family members assigned these tasks; a brief Family Business overview and discussion, usually led by the individual presiding; a short Lesson on a principle pertinent to the particular family system, led by a family member appointed ahead of time; an Activity for the whole family; a Treat especially selected or prepared by a family member; and the Closing Song and Prayer.

The materials in the ten lessons are highly flexible. The stories are designed for children, but can be revised for use with adolescents and even senior members of the family. The activities are primarily written for adolescents but, again, can be modified for use with any age group. All stories and activities are interchangeable. Individuals utilizing the manual usually choose not to use all of the material provided in each lesson. They select the visual aids, songs, treats, extra
stories and activities in the appendix that are most supportive of their way of life and the current needs of their families.

The first printing of 3,000 manuals was all in the English language. Of these 650 manuals were distributed to individuals attending the World Congress II in Geneva, Switzerland. Other copies were given for research and refinement purposes: to student individuals and groups, to public and private-non-profit community family agencies, to individuals attending Regional World Congress meetings, and to those undertaking LDS Humanitarian Services initiatives.

The second printing of the manuals (30,000 English and 12,000 Spanish) was undertaken in 2001. These volumes have been distributed with implementation training program guides and a research response mechanism at such places as: the 2002 World Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City and Park City, Utah; at the Juconi Program for Street Children in Puebla, Mexico; the regional training meetings for school administrators in two locations in Guatemala; at the national training for human service administrators in Nicaragua; at the state fair in Sacramento, California, USA; as well as, at family service agencies in Australia, Brazil, Japan, the Middle East and throughout the USA.

Responses from those who have used the Family Enrichment Manuals and the weekly family meetings as a tool to strengthen families have been extremely positive. Success stories have been reported on their use in individual family groups, in extended family groups, in neighborhood family groups, in church family groups, and in professional agency family groups.

However, despite the success of the Family Enrichment Manual to date, it is still considered a “work in progress.” New lessons have been suggested. New stories and activities have been proposed, and may be made available on a WEB page. The authors continue to refine and test the material’s value and application in different cultural settings throughout the world. The Arabic and Portuguese translations are already completed and plans have begun to test the manual in those arenas. Ongoing improvements and refinements will be incorporated into the family weekly meeting model and Manual as they move to further refine this useful tool.

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Limited copies of the Family Enrichment Program Manual may be obtained by sending request to wfpc@byu.edu