

Strengthening Families Around the World

John Keefe helps moderate a series of courses called Family Enrichment, assisting parents to form happy families and couples of all ages to strengthen their marriages.

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It's been a while since my wife Patti and I had children below the age of nine. But then came the grandchildren (in photo above).

So I guess we are still in the education game, except that a) we are not raising them, and b) we are not their primary educators. But we *can* help.

Patti and I took a Family Enrichment course back in the late 70's when we had just one child. Jim Morgan of Boston had invited Raphael Pich, one of the founders of Family Development, to come to the U.S. from Spain and offer the course here. Inspired by the teachings of Saint Josemaria, Pich saw clearly the great need to defend and strengthen the family in today's society.

We had the benefit of taking the course with a mix of younger and older couples, a dynamic in which especially the younger couples enjoyed the comments and perspective of those who were older since they were speaking from experience.

We learned from Raphael Pich how to apply the case-study method to our family situations. With the case-study method, you read over a hypothetical case four times: first, by yourself; then with your spouse; next with a small group of couples; and then finally, with the moderator and all the groups together. During each review, you look at three things:

1. *FACTS*: People should be able to agree on the facts of a given case, with evidence in the text to support each of them. For our conversations, it is important that everyone be in agreement on the facts. Within a couple, there may sometimes be a person who "jumps to conclusions" by thinking that something is a fact, when in reality they are inferring or making an educated guess. Pich often used to say, "Where is that in the text? Do we know that's true? Is that a fact or a supposition?" One of the skills developed from breaking-down

the cases is learning to proceed with some caution. The facts are your foundation for assessing the problem. But if the facts are wrongly ascertained, your solution will solve a problem that isn't there. Often you know you have a problem, but you are not sure what it is. Study the facts. Talk to your spouse.

2. *PROBLEMS*: Identifying the problem presented by a case involves some interpretation and analysis, and on this people do *not* have to agree. In fact, two different people will see two different problems in the same case. Hearing someone out who is seeing something you didn't see or seeing it from a different angle can cause you to narrow your focus or broaden your scope or even change your view entirely. This happens hopefully within the couple, and in both small-group and large-group discussions. It is important to respect each other's opinions, but also to

make sure that a given opinion is grounded in the facts of the case. Are there *clear* difficulties with *specific* problems?

3. *SOLUTIONS*: Here we are striving for tangible, practical solutions that address *root causes*. If you've done the first two steps well, an effective solution is easier to find.

With the help of this method, Patti and I were able to develop skills for problem-solving in our own family setting. And we used these skills while doing our most important work: raising our children to be mature adults, passing on the faith and love for the Church. Among the skills learned, I would highlight the following as keys to good parenting:

1. How to speak to each other and to the children
2. To watch, wait and listen before charging ahead with a solution

3. To appreciate the positive value of freedom

4. To value the importance of the unity of husband and wife

All this, along with a fundamental idea: not lectures but *role models*; not words but *actions*. We applied all these things for the next 30 plus years across all 11 of our children.

Sometimes your wife will make an implicit "call for help" when interacting with the children. When your spouse makes a call for help, the answer should always be YES. *Unity in a marriage is a great gift to the children.* It is the great secret. Even if your wife is wrong, if you support her then you are right. Let me say that again, this time very slowly. Even if your wife is wrong, if you support her, then you are right.

Why? Because you need to be where she is on any question, so that as

husband and wife, mother and father, you are unified. Children thrive under this regime. So give in to your spouse, and stay united!

Here are the priorities for a happy marriage:

#1 priority: Spouse

#2 priority: Spouse

#3 priority (or lower): Children

It's not a question of being humble or meek or submissive; it's about being wise. The unity of husband and wife creates an umbrella in the home under which everything goes forward: discipline, meal times, bed time, get-togethers, etc.

A call for help is always an invitation for unity: "Be with me." "Come with me over here." All the problems can be solved if you are always with your spouse in unity.

The Family Enrichment course invites us to see that our interactions with our children need to be centered and focused on them as unique individuals at a certain moment in their physical, intellectual and emotional development. Therefore, we need to tailor our interactions to:

- Who they are
- What they are like *now*
- Where we want them to go

We are educating them as their *primary educators*--their parents--*for freedom*. Freedom from us, freedom to choose for themselves. We want them to choose the good, which will make them happy.

With this in mind, we want to work in close unity with our spouse to make a cheerful and happy home, with some order (not excessive),

some discipline (mild), and lots of fun!

By learning from other parents in the course, older and younger, we can come up with some suggestion for our own family situation, and then work on those one or two items. These are small steps in the right direction: a family plan with a clear resolution.

I highly recommend finding a *family enrichment course* near you if you have the opportunity.

For information about possible courses in your area and contact information, click *here*.
