

Creating a Strong Family Life As A Soap Opera

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This is one in a series of NebGuides by UNL Extension Family Life specialists and educators who explore the attributes and experiences of strong families.

A 7-year-old boy was playing tag with his cousins. After slapping one on the back and happily screaming, “Tag, you’re it!” His thinking went out the door and his emotions exploded. He took off around the corner of his house at a dead run. It didn’t occur to him that right around the corner was his family’s hulking 1952 Chevrolet, packing a couple thousand pounds of steel and chrome.

He smacked into the Chevy head down at full 7-year-old speed. When he woke up on the living room couch soon after, he had a sore face, bloody lip and most of one front tooth chipped off, leaving a nasty, jagged opening in his dental structure.

Five decades later he still has a carefully reconstructed “thousand-dollar front tooth,” as his parents called it. His made \$350 a month at the time, and the tooth was no doubt burdensome to family finances. The tooth was, thus, woven into the family soap opera.

All individual’s believe their lives resemble a soap opera.

Human beings often tend to over-react to life. We get too wound up about things. We pump too much adrenalin, and little things become big too quickly. Life becomes a soap opera when it really doesn’t have to be most of the time.

Society teaches us that men and women are emotionally reactive in different ways. Women are accused of expressing their emotions too much; men are supposed to hide theirs. Men have learned to mask their emotions to some degree, but they can’t mask these feelings from themselves.

A friend Yun Lu from China came across an ancient Chinese saying about marriage that is useful in this regard.

Twixt you and me
There is too much emotion.
That’s the reason why
There’s such a commotion!

Take a lump of clay,
Wet it, pat it,
And make an image of me,
And an image of you.

Then smash them, crash them,
And add a little water.
Break them and remake them
Into an image of you,
And an image of me.

Then in my clay, there is a little of you.
And in your clay, there’s a little of me.
And nothing ever shall us sever;
Living, we’ll sleep in the same quilt,
And dead, we’ll be buried together.

This process of smashing and crashing and sloshing around that all relationships go through to varying degrees has been called, dryly, the process of marital adjustment. It takes most couples several years before the delicate blending of personalities occurs. The process tends to work its wonders quicker and more efficiently if we can control our emotions and not get carried away when emotions run high.

Cybernetics is the science dealing with the comparative study of human control systems, such as the brain and nervous system. Cybernetics also refers to complex electronic systems. In cybernetics there is a delicious phrase, the *uncontrollable cybernetic feedback loop*. It describes how electrical impulses can totally get out of hand, feeding back and forth on each other, unable to stop.

When the boy broke his tooth at age 7, he was clearly a victim of an uncontrollable cybernetic feedback loop among cousins running amuck in the backyard.

One doesn’t have to look far to see loopy behavior among adults, either. For example, one negative campaign feeds off another at election time. Meetings at the office occasionally get out of control as we feed off each other’s emotions, both negative and positive. People at any age can become unreasonable. Families also can feed off each other and the tone

in a family unit can quickly become either overwhelmingly positive or negative. The cybernetic feedback produces a multiplier effect.

In one family, an example of an *uncontrollable cybernetic feedback loop* would be the mother arriving home to find her teen not working on homework but rather watching TV. All of a sudden mom's good mood dissolves. Daughter's music is too loud, the house looks a mess, there are no ideas for supper and husband is wondering what the problem is! Can you think of examples of uncontrollable cybernetic feedback loops in your family?

As we strive to communicate effectively with each other in our families, the delicate balance lies in how we manage to keep the sparkle of positive emotion alive in our very intimate relationships with each other, while minimizing negative emotional interchanges that can easily get out of control.

How can individuals calm themselves down when they are getting overly emotional?

- Let others know you need a "time out." Return when you have calmed down; listen, talk and find a solution.
- Realize that negative thoughts feed on each other, but so do positive thoughts.
- Clear your head by counting backward from 10 or 20.
- Think of a calming or friendly scene.
- Don't look at the whole situation; rather, break it down into parts that don't appear so overwhelming.
- Both males and females need to learn to talk and express themselves.

How do we provide positive influences for our families?

- Monitor and limit "screens" that don't give positive ways to relate to human beings, including shows like soap operas, reality TV, movies, violent video games, web surfing and unhealthy Web sites.
- Call a family time out to point out the awareness of uncontrollable cybernetic feedback to everyone as it is happening. Use a code word that has family meaning. One family used the word "Charlie" because it represented an out-of-control dog they had.
- Think about a time when your family experienced an uncontrollable cybernetic feedback loop. How did it start? What happened? How could it be avoided next time? When emotions are calm, have fun role-playing that situation as a family so everyone can experience how it can be done differently.

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Family Life
Issued February 2008

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

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