

# Family Legacy Institute

Tools For Families Building Godly Legacies

## Priorities That Strengthen Marriage

### I. Biblical Basis

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Mt. 6:33 ~ NIV).

Those who won't care for their own relatives, especially those living in the same household, have denied what we believe. Such people are worse than unbelievers (1 Tim. 5:8 ~ NLT).

The love of money is at the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows (1 Tim 6:10 ~ NLT).

As (a person) thinks within himself, so he is (Prov 23:7 ~ NASV).

### II. Introduction

The culture in which we live today is almost unrecognizable as compared with the culture of our great-grandparents. The majority of our great-grandparents were farmers. Electricity was still being integrated into their culture. Lucky families might have one car and one radio. The telephone was a newcomer. People didn't travel much. Many never left the county in which they were born. Families basically stayed in the same region. Kids knew their grandparents and cousins as "close family." All that changed between 1940-1950.

#### A. Rise Of Dual-Income Family Systems

The period of the late forties and the fifties saw two powerful forces dramatically re-shape the family identity and family system in Western Culture. The first dynamic involved women leaving the home and entering the workplace. During World War II, as men left their homes and jobs to fight on the battlefield, women filled the workplace void in great numbers. Rosie the Riveter became a common identity point as women stepped into jobs formerly held by men. After the war, large percentages of women didn't return to their homes. They kept their jobs as they raised their kids. Today most households

have dual incomes, which allows for a higher standard of living but which also leads to weaker family connections.

### **B. Explosion Of Consumer Goods**

The second reshaping force was an explosion of consumer goods production and sales. People began to realize that they could indeed have the house with white picket fence in the suburbs, a car (perhaps even two cars), a TV, and 2.3 children. The “American Dream” began to mean having a good investment portfolio and nice summer vacations. Twenty percent of the culture moved every year to some new geographical location as people chased career options. By the mid-1960s, two cars per family had become the norm. Most people had TVs and color TV was the new rage. Now everyone needed a “stereo” too. The concept of “need” became redefined as advertisers became more sophisticated in marketing their wares.

As the explosion of consumer goods ripped at the fabric of the family, kids began to express their frustration and hurt at their parents’ values. The Beatles wrote a hit song about a girl who left home ~ her parents had given her everything but themselves. Bob Dylan wrote, “The Times They Are A-Changing.” Fifteen years later Harry Chapin sang, “Cats in the Cradle,” but the genie was out of the bottle ~ moms and dads weren’t listening ~ family systems were now being openly sacrificed in favor of consumer goods.

### **C. Rise Of TV, Computers, Internet**

Today’s culture is filled with the most amazing “options.” TV and the internet provide access to an incredible field of entertainment and education. Everyone now knows that the average kid will spend more time watching TV, than any other single activity in their lives from birth through high school. The advent of the personal computer and the internet opened a universe of knowledge and international connections. TV, computers and the internet have also provided a ready source of moral degradation including sexual addiction and child abuse.

### **D. Rise Of Children’s “Performance” Options**

Athletics have never been as popular as they are today, with children beginning to compete in organized sports as early as age six. Families often spend several weekends during the sporting season in hotels as their first-grader’s team competes for a plastic trophy, and as coaches drive their little competitors to ever greater technical proficiency. The same dynamic is alive and well within music, dance, and other venues involving kids in “performance” or “competitive” situations. Today, if a child wishes to compete or perform in high school, they almost need to have been preparing in their chosen area during grade school and junior high school years. This dynamic has become a controlling force within family systems. Many families spend many weekends a year in a motel in some other town, as their child performs or competes with other children.

### **E. Demise Of The “Traditional” Family System**

The “traditional family” with dad working and mom solely engaged in the home used to reflect the majority of family systems in the culture. But twenty years ago in 1985, Betty Friedan wrote, “The traditional household is fast becoming a relic of the past. Fewer than 10% of families fit into the traditional ideal of working father, stay-at-home mother, and children (Friedan, B., 1985. *How to get the womens movement moving again*. New York Times, Nov. 3). Friedan was quite outdated when she made that observation. By 1985 some estimates had the “traditional family” at 4% of the general population.

### **F. Demise Of Church Influence**

Going to church on Sundays became optional, even for those professing faith. In previous generations a “regular attender” attended every Sunday morning, and prioritized their lives around being in church each week. They also usually attended at least one other weekly religious activity such Sunday evening service, prayer meeting, Bible study, etc. By the year 2000, a “regular attender” was someone attending church 2 – 3 times per month. Many other attractions had replaced church. Childhood athletics; summer golf or tennis; a cottage; yard work; winter outdoor activities ~ all now compete for Sunday morning time.

### **G. Redefinition Of The Meaning And Purpose Of Family**

In 1989 a university level textbook was published in which one writer observed, “Very few families can afford to have children unless both husband and wife have jobs,” (Thurow, 1987, in Carter/McGoldrick, “*The Changing Life Cycle*,” 1989, Simon & Schuster, N.Y.) Actually, people can afford to have children, but not if they wish to live in an expensive home in the suburbs, drive two expensive cars, wear designer clothes, and vacation in Europe. But the Carter/McGoldrick text book reflected the evolving value system of the culture.

Another textbook (Ahrons & Rogers, *Divorced Families*, 1987, W.W. Norton Co, N.Y.) speculated about the shift in social functioning, from the “traditional” family system toward what one might call the dual-income suburbanite family system. Ahrons and Rogers wrote,

“The movement to a more money-based economy had the effect of placing higher value on the wage-earning 'breadwinner' role of men, with a concomitant devaluation of the domestic labor of women and children. Women and children became dependents, rather than co-laborers.”

That word, “dependents,” can be perjorative *if* one assumes that the purpose of the family is to live an affluent lifestyle and have all the goodies. However, if the purpose of family is to belong to one another, support and encourage one another, and to guide children in

the ways of God, then both the role of the “breadwinner” and the identity of the family is different.

## H. Symptoms Of A Culture In Crisis

During this cultural evolutionary process, profound symptoms began to emerge. The divorce rate began to climb toward its current rate of 50%. Daycare for children began to replace mother at home. “Latchkey” kids became a new reality. Now that dad and mom had careers, although there was plenty of money, the depth and connection of family relationships was clearly eroding. Kids were paying the price for their parents’ absence. More serious problems began to emerge within the class room. Drug and alcohol abuse exploded like a hydrogen bomb across the culture. Teen pregnancy rates grew to the point that a third of all births came from young single moms. Suicide became the second leading cause of teen death.

## III. Introduction Of “Focus”

The purpose of this chapter is to explore a system of values aimed at helping families retain their purpose under God, and to provide a system of priorities to help them accomplish that task. This chapter is an exploration of how family priorities affect family functioning. Solid marriages and families are built upon functional value systems and priorities. There are always activities and interests that could compromise a family’s priorities ~ kids athletics ~ dad’s career ~ mom’s community activities ~ the list is endless. But healthy family systems have learned how to maintain their priorities in the face of myriad attractive alternatives. Healthy family systems exhibit what might be called healthy “**focus.**”

To begin the interactive process in this chapter, and to understand the application of the concept of healthy “**focus,**” pause for a moment and create a list. In order of their importance as you see them, list the top four priorities of your life right now. What’s important to you? Name the top four things, and if you are able, put them in order of their importance to you:

### Two Minute Personal Time

List your personal top four priorities, preferably in the order of their importance to you:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

The same exercise can be helpful as you ponder your family’s top four priorities. It might be a little more difficult, since the kids may prioritize their sports, music, or peer relationships as #1, while you as a parent may prioritize other things. Keep in mind that

you as a parent represent the “Executive Sub-System,” or as it was called in Chapter Two, the “Mom and Dad System.” You, as a parent, are responsible for the overall emotional tone, value system, and set of priorities of your family system. With this in mind, take a moment and list the top four priorities in your family system. You might ask, “What’s most important for my family and me?” and then list four items, preferably in the order of their importance.

**Two Minute Personal Time**

List your family’s top four priorities, preferably in the order of their importance to the family:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Finally, take two minutes and make a list of as many things as you can think of, that pull and tug at families, or at individual family members.

**Two Minute Personal Time**

In two minutes, name as many things as you can, that pull and tug at families:

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**Ten Minute Small Group Discussion**

For ten minutes, share the lists you have created. Talk about why you prioritized items as you did. Talk about how your parents prioritized their families’ values.

If you have done these exercises, what you now have is a snapshot of your personal and family value or priority system ~ your **“Focus.”** Every culture from antiquity until today has had its specific issues to resolve. Many of these issues have had direct and specific impact upon family systems. Most have at least challenged family systems’ **“Focus.”** From this point forward in this lesson we’ll deal with the issue of establishing an intentional priority system, a **“Focus”** within your family.

**A. Gender Differences In “Focus”**

Decades ago there was a world renowned developmental psychologist named Jean Piaget. In one of his books, "The Moral Development of the Child," he discussed how males and females differ in the formation of their basic, core identity. Piaget found that males tend to gain their sense of identity from competition involving performance of tasks within structured systems which have rules. By contrast, he found that females tend to gain their sense of identity from relationships. This was a simple but profound observation. Much may be learned through further understanding of the consequences of Piaget's research.

Piaget's observations were used as a basis within research done by Splinter (1989). Splinter studied divorcing couples, focusing especially upon these divorcing couples' priority systems. One of the research questions was, "How do males differ from females in terms of their ongoing identity formation, as they progress through the struggles and pains of divorce?" Part of the findings in this research project confirmed that males who divorce tend to turn to their occupations for identity; females who divorce tend to turn to their children and friends for identity. That is to say, when a couple is divorcing, the man is more likely to pour his heart and soul into building his career ~ remember, males gain their identity through competing within structured systems. The research found also that divorcing men tend to become more involved in athletics, politics, and other sources of structure and competition.

By contrast, the research confirmed that divorcing females were more likely to pour their hearts and souls into their relationships with their kids. There was not a one-to-one correlation in these research findings, but the findings were "statistically significant."

### **B. Systemic Symptoms Of "Focus" Problems**

Now let's take this conversation a little farther. An extension of Piaget's observations may be seen within marriages which are at risk. These marriages frequently demonstrate a profile involving the husband over-involved with his occupation or career development, and the wife over-involved or enmeshed with the kids. This is to say, when one parent is consistently absent from the family system, it is not uncommon for the other parent to turn to the children for additional emotional support. And research has shown that these activities are often gender-biased, with more husbands becoming heavily involved with careers, and more wives becoming heavily involved with the kids.

Indeed, there's often a "teeter-totter" effect. As one parent moves away from the center, the other parent counterbalances by also moving away from the center. As this process continues, both parents become farther and farther away from each other. As they do so, it's very common for one or more of the children to step onto the "teeter-totter" to help "balance" the family system.

Let's apply this concept. When a husband is gone at work 50-70 hours a week, his wife is more prone to balance the system by becoming super-involved with the kids. When a mom does this, it can lead to the husband being gone even more, and so on. Ideally, both

parents are involved with the kids. Children need both parents' regular involvement with them. But as mom and dad move away from the center ~ that is, away from each other ~ and begin to balance and counter-balance each other, the kids feel the distance and usually react.

If both mom and dad have careers, the "teeter-totter" syndrome can be exacerbated, as time becomes a family system enemy. Kids need time from both mom and dad. When time's not there, kids feel the distance and usually react.

When one parent becomes enmeshed with the children, it can result in family system problems. For example, a child may begin to sense it is his/her job to take care of one parent's emotional issues ~ to keep dad from being angry so he'll come home more often, or to keep mom from depression or loneliness.

Another frequent family system problem when mothers and fathers are too far out on their respective sides of the "teeter-totter," is that one child may become a "surrogate parent," with too much authority, or inappropriate authority, over other the children. Remember, nature abhors a vacuum. If either mom or dad leaves a vacuum in the family system, one of the kids is likely to step into it and try to resolve the problems.

Yet another systemic "teeter-totter" related problem is that one child may become a "surrogate emotional spouse" for one of the parents. It happens when dad's gone all the time and mom turns to one of the kids for caring, nurturing, and emotional support. It happens when one of the parents begins giving negative "insider information" about the other parent, to one of the kids. In severe cases this dynamic is sometimes identified as "emotional incest."

A frequent problem when the parents get too far apart on the "teeter-totter" involves triangulation of a child, or of the children, with one parent using one or more of the kids against the other parent. This tendency is not necessarily gender-biased. When triangulation occurs, either parent may be doing it.

A frequent indicator of family dysfunction is seen in how kids leave the family system. In a healthy system, kids are generally comfortable to leave, and are motivated to go out into the big world and make their own mark. But in a conflicted, emotionally struggling system, one of two symptoms is frequently seen.

The first symptom is that it becomes very difficult for the kid to actually leave the system or separate from the family. The kid may believe that if he/she leaves, something terrible is going to happen to mom and/or dad. The "teeter-totter" is going to bang down on one side. Mom and dad may get a divorce. Mom may cry all the time. Dad may start drinking again. Mom may seek a divorce. Whatever the source of the child's fear, it leads the child to remain at home, and possibly emotionally "enmeshed" with one or both parents.



The second symptom finds a child storming out the front door yelling, “I’ve had it with this crazy family ~ I’m never coming back!” And they don’t come back. When this happens it’s called a “cut-off.” The big problems with “cut-offs” is that the kids leaves the family system carrying, rather than leaving, the family pain. If issues are not resolved at home, the person leaving the family system will generally carry them into the next relationship, and the next, and the next.

Let’s draw all these examples into a single thought. If mom and dad get too far apart on the “teeter-totter,” and kids become drawn into the Executive Sub-system, then in order to either help or escape the needs of one or both parents, kids may jump onto the “teeter-totter” and try to balance it, or in frustration jump out of the system altogether. In keeping with the subject of this chapter, much of this “teeter-totter” is tied to the family system’s priorities, or their “Focus.” *That which is important to Mom and Dad, becomes played out in how the family functions.*

## IV. “Focsing” The Big Four

Earlier in the chapter we read about some of the myriad and powerful options that are available to everyone in this culture. We looked at how a family’s “Focus” can inadvertently degenerate into a family crisis. And we’ve looked at some thoughts regarding how gender and identity formation play a role in what we called the “teeter-totter” effect. In the next section we’re going to look at a system of family priorities that will take into account each of the previous thoughts presented in the chapter.

### A. Preliminary Prioritization

Before we do this, let’s pause for a moment and ponder how our parents would have prioritized four items.

| <b>Three Minutes Personal Time</b>  |        | <b>Box A</b> |        |
|---|--------|--------------|--------|
| <p>List in order of priority, how you perceived your mother’s and your father’s most important four items ~ their four top priorities in life. What “drove” them? What provided “Focus” for them? Were they the same thing, or were the four things different for each of them?</p> |        |              |        |
|   | Mother |              | Father |
| 1.  |        | 1.           |        |
| 2.  |        | 2.           |        |
| 3.  |        | 3.           |        |
| 4.  |        | 4.           |        |



**Three Minute Personal Time****Box B**

Now list in order of priority, how your mother and your father would have prioritized the following four variables within your childhood family system, if they'd have been asked to do so. The four variables are: **Career, Spouse, Faith, and Children**. Which would have been first for mom? For dad? Second? Third? Last?

Mother

Father

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

**Ten Minute Small Group Discussion**

Share with one another how your parents' prioritization of any of these items in Box A or Box B affected your childhood, your family system, and their marriage.

**B. Optimal Marriage/Family Priority System**

In masters thesis work, Splinter (1989) studied the impact of four marriage/family priorities, upon five marital qualities. The basic research question was, "How does shuffling around these four Priorities, affect five very basic Marital Qualities?" For example, how does making the children one's #1 priority, affect one's marital happiness?

The four priorities in this research were the ones outlined in **Box B** above: Children, Career, Spouse, Faith. Let's briefly review each of these priorities.

**1. Faith.** There's a world of difference between religion and faith. Religion is something people "do" on Sundays, or something people "believe" but which never really meshes with the realities of life. By contrast, faith is something that provides a guiding and leveling influence in all aspects of life. Faith, by definition within this book, involves a daily active walk with God.

Research by credible sources such as Barna and Gallop has clearly demonstrated the quantitative difference between religion and faith. Religious people have just as many divorces as non-religious people. Religious people are sometimes even more prone to having affairs than non-religious people. But people with an active faith in Christ demonstrate radically different research profiles.

For example, Meier and Meier (1981) state, "Only one out of forty marriages of those who regularly attend church ends in divorce. And only one out of four hundred marriages

ends in divorce when the couple reads the Bible and prays together." There's nothing magical about attending church, but in church one hears the truth of God's plan, and that affects marriages. When one takes that truth and implements it within a marriage, it has a powerful effect. And when takes that truth into one's life, personally, and prays with their spouse regularly, it pretty much knocks out divorce.

Marital problems become easier to manage as people implement biblical relational skills such as forgiveness, patience, kindness, humility, gentleness, and so forth. Old dysfunctional family system patters are overcome and corrected as people learn to listen to the indwelling voice of God in their lives. That's faith.

Scripture instructs us to, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt. 6:33 ~ NIV). Establishing one's Faith in Christ as the basis for their family system is somewhat like pulling a chain ~ pull the first link, and the rest follow.

**2. Spouse.** In this priority we're talking about one's husband or wife. Remember, in the Executive Sub-System there's room for just two ~ one husband, one wife.

**3. Children.** Scripture teaches, "Those who won't care for their own relatives, especially those living in the same household, have denied what we believe. Such people are worse than unbelievers" (1 Tim. 5:8 ~ NLT). To "care for" a child is far more than to put food on the table and a roof over his/her head. The spiritual responsibility of child-rearing is both an enormous challenge and a fantastic privilege.

Incidentally, caring for the kids" in an intact marriage is one thing. It gets a whole lot more complicated within remarriage. The most frequent reason given for second divorce has to do with the complexities of step-parenting.

**4. Career.** This priority deals with who brings home the money, and how much time/energy/effort does it take. Scripture says, "The love of money is at the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows" (1 Tim 6:10 ~ NLT). But careers aren't only about money. Sometimes they're about power. As an adult ponders the purpose of their career, things sometimes become more clear. Scripture also says, "As (a person) thinks within himself, so he is" (Prov 23:7 ~ NASV).

Splinter's research found that those marriages with highest "Marital Quality" scores, were the ones who had prioritized these four variables in the order they are listed above: 1) Faith, 2) Spouse, 3) Kids, and 4) Occupation. Research also found that as marriages begin to move toward divorce, a combination of re-ordering these Priorities, generally based upon gender bias outlined above, comes to play. As marriages weaken, Faith often fades into mere religion, husbands turn more of their time and energy toward their Careers, and wives turn more of their time and energy toward the Children.

### Ten Minute Small Group Discussion

Discuss the potential impact of the following items, upon maintaining the family  
**“Focus.”**

Grandparents or other significant extended family  
 Adult hobbies (e.g., golf, tennis, running, gardening, hunting, etc.)  
 Children’s athletics  
 Ongoing educational development  
 Social life  
 Involvement with church  
 Club membership

### C. Impact of These Four Priorities Upon Qualities of Marital Enjoyment

In his research Splinter identified five qualities of marital enjoyment. These “Marital Quality” factors were: 1) Happiness, 2) Intimacy, 3) Stability, 4) Morality, and 5) Dependability. Let’s briefly expand on these five items.

**1. Happiness.** Did each person in the marriage say they were happy with each other? With their marriage? Did they enjoy coming home to one another? Did they enjoy each other's friendship and company?

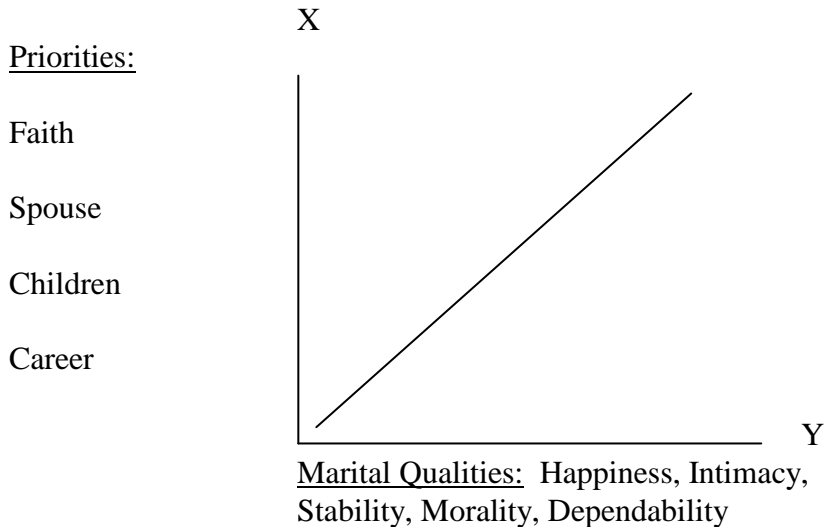
**2. Intimacy.** Were both partners willing and comfortable sharing their “deep stuff” with each other? Were they willing to be vulnerable or did they feel like they needed to be “on guard” with their emotions? Could they share their most closely guarded personal secrets with one another?

**3. Stability.** Was the marriage basically stable, or was it an emotional roller-coaster? Were there frequent fights, or was the marriage pretty much at peace and steady? Was each partner pretty much the same person when they were apart from their spouse, as they were when they were together? Did both live by relatively the same marital and personal guidelines?

**4. Morality.** Were both partners comfortable that the other partner was 100% true to them, both sexually and emotionally? Were they faithful to their marital vows? Did each consistently speak truth to the other? Did either hide things from one another? Could each trust the other when their spouse was not watching?

**5. Dependability.** Were both partners able to depend on each other when they needed each other? Were both “rock solid” for each other, or was one a little flaky? When one was either emotionally down or revved up, was the other one “there” for them?

The four “Priorities” listed in “B” above were measured against these five “Marital Qualities” (in “C” above). Again, the research question was, “How does shuffling around the four **Priorities**, affect the five **Marital Qualities**?”



The results were very interesting. There was a consistent pattern. Those marriages which maintained their “Priorities” with faith first, then spouse, then kids, then career, reported the highest “Marital Quality” scores.

By contrast, marriages which were “at risk,” or divorced, almost invariably ranked either Career or Children, above Spouse. And you can guess which gender ranked which priority above Spouse.

### Ten Minute Group Discussion

Discuss the following two questions:

1. What does it mean to "value" one's family more highly than to "value" one's Career? How does this valuing play itself out in terms of time management, allocation of family resources, and cost and location of house.
2. Does having a spouse and family mean that one morally can not be wealthy, or morally can not aggressively develop a career path? If not, what does it mean?

## V. Closing Thoughts On Focus

Living in a culture with our current options and values, it is extremely important for mom and dad to establish their family “**Focus**.” When a hockey or soccer coach wants to take a child away from home and church every weekend during the season, how is a family to handle it ~ what’s right or wrong ~ what’s important? When a person’s boss insists on

regular 70-hour work-weeks, how is a person to handle it ~ what's important ~ to whom? When a husband feels that his wife is giving her best shots to the kids, and reserving little time, energy or interest for him, what needs to happen ~ how may they discuss the issue using family system terminology? When one's kids spend every evening and half of Saturday watching TV, or playing on the internet, how should a parent respond ~ what's important ~ to whom ~ who's in charge ~ what values are important?

Having a family **“Focus”** with the system of Priorities presented in this chapter helps keep the Executive Sub-System working together. Thereafter, both marriage and parenting become easier tasks to manage. The extremely difficult challenges of step-parenting cannot be over-emphasized. In these situations both parents are encouraged even more to maintain the integrity of the Executive Sub-System, and to have a clear **“Focus.”**

## **VI. References**

Meier & Meier (1981). Family Foundations, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, pp. 7-8.

Splinter, J. (1989). Functional Priorities Within Marriage: Moral Values, Spouse, Children, and Occupation. Masters thesis, Lindenwood College, St. Charles, MO.