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Family Privilege

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A resilience researcher and former youth in care describes the pains of family loss and provides a roadmap for restoring the powerful benefits that result from healthy families.

For much of my life until well into my adult years, I found the idea of families to be a mysterious, wondrous, and elusive thing. Spending my first eight years in an abusive home and then being shuttled through a long string of foster homes and other residential settings, I longed for but really did not understand what I imagined to be the magic of family. My lack of real experience in a loving family caused me to wonder about how families worked, or if most were places of pain as I had experienced.

On the rare occasions I visited with friends in their homes, this social unit was a mystery to me, and it felt foreign and out of place. When sent to live with the next in a line of social worker prescribed families, I was emotionally paralyzed. I had no idea what, if anything, they expected of me, or what I expected out of them. If my own family had failed me, why would I trust these phony replacements? Yet in spite of my ambivalence, I wanted a family and instinctively understood the importance of these bonds. I felt lost and discarded, believing that my own family had abandoned me.

Like the air we breathe, we take family for granted and do not recognize how important it is until its absence is felt.

The strong pull for family is almost primeval. The loss of family is profoundly sad and enduring as shown in decades of research on attachment and loss. Psychologist Rosalyn Folman (2009) recalls her own childhood growing up in an orphanage:

> *The desire to be part of a family always tugged at me, even though I never consciously thought about it. It was just there, deep down in that dark place, as were all my feelings, hopes and dreams, and sometimes I could not hold it back. (p. 150)*

Folman's words reflect a deep sense of pain, of loss, and of longing. Her sorrow rings true because that was once my journey as well. Now that my own wife and daughter have taught me the ropes, family is no longer foreign or fearful. But in some ways for me, and perhaps for others, family is still quite a mystery. How do families impact the well-being and development of children and young people? Moreover, if a child or adolescent lacks a stable family, is there any mechanism to compensate for this loss?

In seeking to understand family, important questions emerge. We know it is possible to articulate the tangible benefits of having a well-functioning family. Bill Buford (1955) notes that family is the essential presence—the thing that never leaves a person even if one has to leave it. An equally important quest is to explore the disadvantages of not having a well-functioning family, or any family at all.

In *Kids Who Outwit Adults* (Seita & Brendtro, 2005), the concept of family privilege was introduced to articulate the roles and dynamics that family plays in development of children and young people. The inspiration for family privilege was Peggy McIntosh (1990) who wrote of white privilege. Persons who have unearned advantages from either type of privilege are usually unaware of the profound assets they have gained. Few contemplate how many benefits, both hidden and seen, exist for those with solid family connections. While families have been around since the dawn of time, for most of human history they operated with backup mechanisms of intergenerational support. The phenomenon of a two-parent nuclear family—or in my case a struggling single mother—had no counterpoint in cultures where all shared in rearing the young.

Defining family seems straightforward enough to be easily understood by just about anyone. We presume that everyone knows what a family is and does. Yet like an onion, the more it is peeled back, the more layers are revealed, and the more potent family privilege really becomes. Like the air we breathe, we take family for granted and do not recognize how important it is until its absence is felt. This points to our obligation to cultivate family privilege, especially when no family is available.

Family Privilege

Family privilege is defined as *strengths and supports gained through primary caring relationships.* A generation ago, the typical family included two parents and a bevy of kids living under one roof.

Now, every variation of blended caregiving qualifies as family. But over the long arc of human history, a real family was a multigenerational tribal community who shared responsibility for nurturing the young. Whatever the configuration, in an increasingly fractured society, the challenge is to reclaim the spirit of family.

In our earlier resilience research (Seita, Mitchell, & Tobin, 1996), we focused on four dimensions called CCDO—Connections, Continuity, Dignity, and Opportunity. These are foundations of family privilege:

> **Connections** underscore the need to live in relationships. Urie Bronfenbrenner distilled this to its basics, namely that every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).
>
> **Continuity** highlights the developmental pathways that provide stability and permanence. Long-term relationships and cultural and spiritual roots give a sense of purpose and direction to life.
>
> **Dignity** is grounded in the value and worth of each individual who is entitled to be treated with respect. Children deprived of dignity become indignant or descend into worthlessness.
>
> **Opportunity** results as young people are able to achieve their potential, notably by meeting universal growth needs for belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002).

The family is a child's first and principal source of these strengths and supports. However, when primary caregivers cannot deliver family privilege, others in the broader community must step forward if the child is to grow and thrive.

Virtual Family Privilege

In every culture that has ever existed, there were always some parents who were too young, immature, troubled, or clueless to properly parent their offspring. But even in supposedly primitive hunter-gatherer cultures, there was an inbuilt solution with a network of *virtual* parents in the extended family or clan. This process of sharing child rearing and backing up inadequate or overly stressed parents is called *alloparenting* (Lamb & Hewlett, 2005). Too often we are stuck with *monoparenting*.

"All kids are our kids," said Peter Benson (1997) of the Search Institute. As long as any children are at risk, then all our children reside in *at-risk communities*. Ironically, those who most need virtual family privilege from the school and community are the first to be expelled, rejected, and relegated to sub-substandard services.

Beyond the immediate family, young people live in a network of ecosystems including school, peer group, workplace, teams, youth centers, places of worship, neighborhoods, and communities. These complement family privilege when they are welcoming, safe, fair, and enriching. Young people without stability at home need support from other healthy ecosystems. Our challenge is to create caring community, organizational, and school cultures that promote virtual family privilege.

Practicing Family Privilege

How do we put family privilege into practice? The Circle of Courage model highlights four growth needs: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Specific strategies are needed to build strengths in each of these areas.

Belonging: Building Trust

Belonging is the most basic biosocial need of humans. It begins with healthy parenting but can be provided by other relatives, or by adults and peers who are not biologically related. In Native American and First Nations cultures, children were reared in communities of belonging. Lakota anthropologist Ella Deloria (1998) described the core value of belonging as being related, somehow, to everyone we know. Treating others as kin forges powerful social bonds that draw all into relationships of respect.

The book *Growing Up in the Care of Strangers* (Brown & Seita, 2009) documents the gripping reflections of eleven professionals in our field who as youth were removed from their homes and placed in foster care, residential group care, or juvenile corrections. A common thread is the powerful, raw, and shameless desire to belong in a loving family. Even as adults, the confusion about family and the longing to belong remains. Social worker Claudette Braxton (2009) describes the impact of this experience of being torn from family which she and a sibling shared:

> *The fact that we both grew up in placement meant that we had little personal experience with family permanence, parental role models, or unconditional love that we could include in our own philosophy of family. (p. 136)*

Psychologist Rosalind Folman (2009) recalls how removal from her parents left her clueless about what a normal family provided to children:

> *To this day, I have no sense of family. I cannot even imagine it. I wish that I had even vague images of my mother or father hugging or kissing me or glimpses of mundane things such as sitting at the dinner table or riding in a car with them, but I do not. The sense of family, of loving parents, is so alien to my thinking that as an adult when I walked into my neighbor's apartment and she was hugging her seven-year-old son, I asked her, "Is he sick?" When she said "No," I asked, "Is he going away on a long trip?" She said, "No." She was as puzzled by my questions as I was by her behavior. I later asked my therapist to explain it to me. He said she was hugging him because he is her son and she loves him. I sat there shocked. I said, "Parents really do that?" I just could not believe it. (p. 145)*

The sense of loss of family is tangible, more real than real. Growing up without family has lifelong impact. But there are strategies to provide a sense of belonging through creating virtual family privilege. For example, schools and organizations like Big Brothers-Big Sisters enlist adults to serve as mentors for students at risk of failure. The goal is to ensure that no student is lost but has at least one advocate throughout the school year. Some schools have formed "connections committees" to reattach the most marginal students to the community bond.

Mastery: Cultivating Talent

In kinship cultures, children were reared by the village which guaranteed abundant opportunities for mastery. The young were taught to carefully observe and listen to elders and peers with more experience. Vygotzky (1978) considered the mentoring process as the foundation for competence: *the zone of proximal development* is the difference between what a person can achieve with skillful instruction versus what can be learned in isolation. In the quest for mastery, families provide modeling, practice, shared history of family lessons learned, wisdom, and pathways to competence. In short, a well-functioning family is a pathway for success.

In my own experience, I was not able to bathe in the fountain of family learning; still, many caring adults took on the role of mentor for mastery. Even though I felt inadequate, they were constantly on talent hunts to identify and nurture my untapped potentials. Mr. Wilson was an athletic instructor at my residential school who provided great encouragement. He had high expectations and constantly inspired me to strive for excellence on the basketball court. He never let me give up, no matter what the odds seemed to be. Failure was not an option.

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One afternoon, we were playing one-on-one on the outdoor basketball court. As usual, the game was intense and neither Mr. Wilson nor I was giving an inch. I was playing what he called "tenacious defense" by forcing him further and further from the basket. I hounded him to the edge of the court, far beyond shooting range. In my mind's eye, I had a vision of him falling out of bounds far from the basket. But just as he was about to fulfill my fantasy and land on the grass, he turned, spun in mid-air and launched the ball toward the basket. The high, arching shot seemed to float in the air for an eternity. I stood by in astonishment as it floated through the hoop as effortlessly as a feather on the wind. "See?" he said to me with a smile on his face and a glow in his eyes, "never give up." No doubt Mr. Wilson did not view this as mastery in action, but in the end, the persistence to see a meaningful task through to its completion leads to mastery. He was teaching me a lesson for life.

Independence: Fostering Responsibility

Competence is not enough without confidence and the power to control one's destiny. Albert Bandura (1995) calls this *self-efficacy,* which is the belief in one's own ability to complete tasks and reach goals. This sense of personal power is grounded in self-control rather than the use of power to dominate others. Authentic independence is always rooted in a secure sense of belonging. In contrast, the myth of individualism ignores the interdependence of all humans. Stated succinctly by child care pioneer Henry Maier (1982), healthy development involves being both attached and free.

Young people cannot develop responsible independence through obedience models of discipline. Moral development psychologist Martin Hoffman (2001) observes that there are three types of discipline used by families: power assertion, love withdrawal, and inductive reasoning.

Power assertion is part of the parental role, particularly with younger children who have not yet developed the values and capacities for self-regulation. But when force becomes the focus of discipline, it fuels powerlessness or rebellion. Such was my experience in many foster placements which were long on coercion and low on concern.

Love withdrawal has no legitimate role in child rearing or teaching as it violates the principle of dignity. Feeling unloved unleashes the destructive emotion of shame, eroding the sense of self-worth. This was my story of serial rejection as my angry and defiant pain-based behavior led foster parents and so-called "child care" professionals to give up on me.

Inductive reasoning entails using discipline problems as opportunities for learning and growth. Rather than reacting to pain-based behavior with pain-based punishment, adults treat misbehavior as a lag in learning. From the time I was removed from my mother at age eight, it took four years and fifteen placements until I finally found permanency in a relationship-based residential group care center. In that setting, the more problems I presented, the more opportunities for learning ensued. The most powerful consequences were conversations with caring staff and peers who helped me see how my behavior hurt myself and others.

As I gained in self-control and responsibility, I moved from the structured residential program to a group home where I attended public school in the community. I had brief glimpses of what a real family might be on occasions when I visited in homes of fellow students, one of whom was the son of the college coach. Most of my peers from the group home and public school were college bound, and so my own progress in academics and athletics led to a college scholarship. But in spite of this success, I had spent over half of my life without family privilege. My transition to independence following a decade in foster care was treacherous. Easing into college life and its responsibilities is difficult for many young adults, but my situation was especially so because I lost my most important connections.

Without a family, I expected no phone calls from home, because there was no home. There were no requests for "care packages," for who would prepare and send them? There was no one to bail me out when I was broke, and there was no one to help me navigate the confusing and Byzantine world of academia. I had no one to cheer me on, or if needed, to kick me in the rear as I faced the challenges of college.

While the "sink or swim" approach to independence eventually worked for me, in the short term, the pain, loss of belonging, and confusion was almost unbearable. We know enough about the science of youth development to not rely on chance. Instead, all young people need supports on the challenging pathway to independence. Given the lack of a traditional family for many youth who are at risk, constructing family privilege becomes a priority.

Generosity: Finding a Purpose

While caring for others is at the core of all ethical systems, this value was largely neglected in Western approaches to education and psychology. In contrast, most indigenous cultures are more rooted in spiritual than materialistic values; children are reared to be generous and treat all others with respect. Now modern research has begun to validate the importance of generosity. Notable is the title of brain scientist Bruce Perry's book *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential—and Endangered* (Perry & Szalavitz, 2011). Without concern for others, human existence has little meaning; it is in helping others that we create our own proof of worthiness.

Without experiencing love for oneself, there would appear to be little reason to care for others. Yet, it is no accident that a large number of persons who themselves had painful childhoods are committing themselves to careers in service to children with similar backgrounds. In my experience, those who heal from a love-deprived life have been blessed by the unconditional acceptance of another caring human being. Such it was with me when I first encountered Mr. Leffert, a young group worker who refused to be driven away by my insolence and adult-avoidant behavior.

He stood observing from afar my solo pursuit of basketball perfection on a hot and breezeless summer day. The cement basketball court was lonely and barren, a metaphor for much of my life. I wondered why he was watching me and what he wanted. His name was Mr. Leffert but

that was all I knew. So I pretended to ignore him and finished my practice. I walked away from the courts with not even a polite nod toward my spectator—it was my coping strategy to keep my distance from all adults.

A couple days later, he showed up again, this time carrying a bag of something. As usual, I focused on basketball and on being aloof. Upon finishing my workout, I once again started to walk away without acknowledging his presence. "John," he called, "do you have a minute?" "No," I replied feeling both wary and belligerent. "Here, I have something that might improve your game. They're ankle weights and chest weights. They might help you jump higher and become quicker." I cautiously inched toward him, like a hungry stray dog might toward a stranger with scraps of food—but then pulled back. Suspicious as ever, I snapped, "Why would I want these and what do you want from me?" "I've seen you working hard," he replied, "and I don't want anything except for you to have a chance to be as good a basketball player as you seem to want to be. Besides," he went on, "they're not new, I got them at a garage sale, but they are barely used, and I think they'll help you."

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I was suddenly speechless, and my heart was pounding. No one had ever given me much of anything. "So," I replied sarcastically, "you're giving me someone else's used junk?" I accused. He didn't look hurt. "They're yours, John, if you want them—I'll just leave them here on the side of the court." He walked away, and so did I, without his weights. But I thought about them for the next few hours and retrieved them after dark. It turns out that my goals were bigger than my anger. I decided to use his weights.

I later became both all-conference and all-state in basketball. I think Mr. Leffert's weights and his generosity both played a role in my basketball success and eventually in life. His thoughtful act and selfless generosity made a deep and long-lasting impact upon me—this happened forty years ago. It took me a while, but that single act of generosity set the tone for a profound understanding of the power of giving which drew me into the helping profession.

Beyond Understanding to Practice

Those lacking family privilege are those most in need of it. All of us have the potential to impact the lives of these young people, often in what seem to be small ways. We help them take tentative steps toward trust. We search to discover and develop their talents and strengths. We provide coaching rather than criticism on their sometimes halting journey toward responsibility. And we model generosity so that they can pay it forward and find purpose in caring for others. Family privilege might be defined as putting the Circle of Courage into action.

My own journey from neglect, abuse, and homelessness to being a husband, father, and professional is largely a case of "luck and pluck." In other words, I was lucky to find myself in a series of serendipitous developmental opportunities. Moreover, my strong-willed and stubborn nature presented both problems and pathways to success. Using terms from resilience science, I benefited from both external and internal protective factors. It is clear what children need to grow and thrive is more than "luck and pluck." As members of the human community, it is our responsibility to ensure that all young people experience the rich benefits of family privilege.

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