

## Now that 'parenting' has become a verb

### Same task, same effort, different solutions

1 September 2014



Back in the 1960s, a group of parents from Spain foresaw that parents in coming decades would need help with this role due to new threats arising at that time. They felt that the best way to do this would not be by organizing the usual sort of talks and speeches full of preconceived ideas and ideal solutions. Instead, based on the experience that some of them had working as professors in Business Schools, they designed the first Family Enrichment programs using the 'case method': a way to promote open discussion about real situations without imposing our own ideas or dismissing other people's.

The famous Harvard Business School professor Chris Christensen has described the case method as "the art of managing uncertainty" – a process in which an expert serves as "planner, host, moderator, devil's advocate, fellow-student, and judge," all in search of solutions to real-world problems and challenges. These experts are not teachers, but leaders, and, in this way, their role perfectly matches the meaning of the Latin verb 'educare': to lead forth. A good discussion leader does not seek just to cover material in the classroom, but instead to guide students towards the discovery of critical insights and the uncovering of broader

This picture was taken during a meeting of Family Enrichment leaders some years ago. Michele had just arrived from Sweden with his wife, Joanna, and his young son, and Evelyn, from Kenya, was surprised to see how blond the little boy was. She approached the family and started smiling as the child smiled too. It is a great image of how families from such different background come together through Family Enrichment courses, and demonstrates how much parents have to share and learn from each other.

*By Marina Robben, President of the International Federation for Family Development.*

*This article is part of 'Family Futures', the landmark publication commemorating the 20th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, produced by Tudor Rose.*



Participants in a course in Ivory Coast with their children.

lessons through thoughtful questioning, listening, and responding. That is why the leader must be well-prepared, both to cover the content associated with each class session, as well as to guide the participant-centred learning experience.

The role of this individual is to achieve the highest possible level of participation from the parents attending the session, helping them to define the problems presented in the case in order to maximize the learning experience. The moderators are not only leaders, but also parents who are experts at facilitating and guiding these debates in small groups. They are professionals from different sectors, trained in moderation and communication techniques. Each professional moderator has a broad knowledge of the contents of all programs. The courses are developed with a strong commitment to cooperation: parents educating parents, families educating families.

---

***"A good discussion leader does not seek just to cover material in the classroom, but instead to guide students towards the discovery of critical insights"***

---

Another key element of the case method is that the other participants act as co-creators of the learning process. They are responsible for preparing the case in advance, first individually, and then often in small study groups. Ideally, learning should continue after class as students reflect on the discussion and apply insights and lessons in the broader context of their academic, professional, and personal lives.

The case method in the context of family training is known as the 'family system', in recognition of its spe-

cific characteristics. In addition to the traditional three stages of the case method – individual analysis, discussion of the case in small groups, and general discussion – an intermediary stage is added: the discussion of the case by the couple. This means that the family system is made up of a total of four stages: individual analysis, discussion of the case by the couple, discussion of the case in small groups, and general discussion, led by an expert. The family system is more focused on the couple than on the subject, and is based on the following principles:

*Parents as primary educators of their children.* The specialization that so often occurs in contemporary life can lead parents to relinquish control of their children's education to others (teachers, educators, nannies, etc). However, it is the parents themselves who are in the best position to educate their children, as they are the ones who receive all the information about them from different sources. Family Enrichment courses highlight this reality and provide parents with the tools they need to develop their own philosophies and goals, both in terms of education and character. The methodology – discussion of case studies by the couple, in small groups, and in larger general sessions led by an expert moderator – dissuades parents from the temptation to develop a child's education system according to a single external perspective.

*Professionalization and anticipation.* Through individual study of the technical notes and discussion of the case studies in three phases, couples develop their ability to analyze the reality of a situation, to distinguish facts from prejudices and judgements, and to get to the root of a problem. The cases provide an opportunity to anticipate and learn how to deal with situations that will, sooner or later, arise in family life.

*Commitment.* The case method, by virtue of analyzing an external situation, ensures the involvement of both partners and allows them to rediscover the richness they each bring to their shared role as spouses and parents. This balance is critical in the family. On the one hand, for the children, whose temperaments are generally more aligned with one or other parent, and

for whom it is important to recognize both parents' contributions and roles. However, it is also essential for the couple, who learn to externalize their own ideas, put them together, and manage any differences of opinion effectively. To educate is to teach love, and strengthening the bond between spouses helps ensure a solid foundation on which children can grow.

*Friendship and definition of common standards.* The contrasting views of different couples during small group discussions and general sessions help couples to maintain objectivity and constantly review their own values. The cooperative climate surrounding the courses encourages couples to explore their desires, goals, and concerns, thus providing the basis for long-lasting friendships between couples. The mainstream climate is not always family-friendly, and the relationships formed naturally during Family Enrichment programs provide a welcome – and nourishing – change of pace.

---

***"The cooperative climate surrounding the courses encourages couples to explore their desires, goals, and concerns, thus providing the basis for long-lasting friendships between them"***

---

*Fun and simplicity.* Courses are developed according to the age of the children and/or the length of the marriage. The specific problems of a particular period of personality development of the children or the evolution of a marriage are discussed among those experiencing them firsthand, favouring a simple and informal exchange of stories and lessons learned. The atmosphere, rather than being strictly academic, is more like a gathering of friends interested in improving and helping each other with care and affection, whilst maintaining a strong level of professionalism.

The courses focused on children cover the main academic frameworks and the basic habits that children acquire at each stage of their development. The Marital Love course concentrates on the most important aspects of a marriage, and the Grandparents course deals with issues relevant to that role in the family. The fact that these programs deal precisely with the main issues facing parents in their everyday lives is what has made the initiative so successful and has meant that, fifty years on, Family Enrichment programs have spread to 65 countries and benefit thousands of parents on the five continents every year.

Since 1978, these activities have been coordinated by the International Federation for Family Development, the reference point for all Family Enrichment centres around the world. The main activities of these centres

## IFFD in ten points

1. We are a Federation of non-governmental, non-denominational, non-profit, independent and private Family Enrichment centers.
2. We work in 65 countries on the 5 continents.
3. Our mission is to help families around the world; we do not discriminate by race, color, religion, gender, or country of origin.
4. We firmly believe that raising children is an unavoidable task for parents and deserves support from society.
5. In order to put this task into practice, it is not enough to simply want to do it; parents also need to learn how to do it and for that it is important for both parents to be involved in the programs so that each one makes their own contribution at an individual, parental and family level.
6. Our programs use the 'case method', which promotes dialogue about real situations without imposing our own ideas or dismissing other people's.
7. The moderators are not teachers, but parents who are experts at facilitating and guiding these debates in small groups.
8. The courses are aimed at groups of parents with children who are the same age, and are focused on acquiring appropriate skills for that stage of development.
9. We organize regional and worldwide congresses, which reinforce our identity and help us to share knowledge and best practices.
10. For the academic and research tasks, IFFD has created The Family Watch, a think tank committed to carrying out research on family issues and finding solutions to the problems families face today.

are educational courses and programs. However, most of them also carry out other activities, such as forums, congresses and conferences, focusing on topics relevant to families. These, and other leisure and cultural activities, are intended to promote collaboration with the media and other institutions. All the work carried out by the centres is aimed at supporting families and promoting intergenerational solidarity.

IFFD holds general consultative status with ECOSOC, a position only granted to 4% of Civil Society organizations working in the United Nations. By awarding this status, the ECOSOC accredits organizations which it considers to be technically capable of dealing with



*The first course in a Chinese language was held in Shenzhen some months ago.*

status, the ECOSOC accredits organizations which it considers to be technically capable of dealing with matters within their area of competence, advising the Council, and participating actively in the actions it carries out.

As part of the preparations and celebrations for the 20th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, IFFD has taken part in different Expert Group Meetings. In this preparatory process, IFFD has also organized Awareness Raising Meetings in different cities on three continents.

IFFD has also regularly organized International Congresses since 1976, which has resulted in a remarkable increase in activities related to the family in a large number of cities and countries across the five continents. The Congresses are also designed to allow new skills to be learnt in order to promote and carry out educational and Family Development programs. They also take part in innovative European Union projects,

such as the large-scale 'FamiliesAndSocieties' integration project, involving 25 research partners. For these academic and research tasks, IFFD created, back in 2007, The Family Watch: a think tank committed to carrying out research on family issues and finding solutions to the problems they face. The Institute uses inter-disciplinary research to analyze the social context families find themselves in today. Its main activities include publishing research papers, exchanging information and services, integrating initiatives, promoting teaching activities and research projects, content production, and organizing events aimed at the promotion, creation and presentation of awards related with the promotion of the family.

Fifty years after they were first conceived, Family Enrichment programs, and the activities surrounding them, are continuing to grow and spread across the four corners of the globe, demonstrating that parenting is, and always will be, one of the most important tasks we face in our society.