

Grade 7, Theme Two

Family Letter

Dear Family,

It's time for the second theme of *Fully Alive*, our Family Life program. Because the partnership of home, church, and school is so important, this letter is written to let you know what we talk about in class, and to offer some ideas for your involvement. For more information, please go to www.acbo.on.ca.

About Theme Two

Theme Two of *Fully Alive* is called "Living in Relationship." God created us to live in relationship with others and to respond to each other with love. Living in relationship begins in the family, the setting in which people first learn about love. As children grow up, friendship becomes more and more important to them. In this theme we will be exploring both important relationships — family and friends.

In Theme Two we will:

- explore three aspects of relationships: intimacy, choice, and quality.
- discuss the importance of communication in our relationships with family members and friends.
- examine the experience of living in a family from the perspective of family structure, the birth order of children, and challenges that are part of being a family
- explore the relationship of friendship, including what we learn from it, the qualities of healthy relationships, and the challenges that are part of all relationships.

Working together at school and at home

- In class, we will be considering three guidelines for good communication: listening to each other, avoiding unnecessary conflict, and saying what we mean in a tactful and respectful way. Ask your child about these guidelines and how they could be used in your family.
- We will be examining family structure as one of the characteristics that makes each person's experience of growing up in a family unique. The family structures considered are extended families (one including relatives other than parents and their children); nuclear families (parents and children); single-parent families (most often a woman with one or more children); blended families (one that includes children from a previous marriage from one or both of the parents); and foster families (one in which a person or married couple provides care for one of more children whose own family is unable to look after them). You may want to discuss this topic with your child.

- We will be exploring some everyday family challenges, especially two that are related to the changes in children as they grow up. Being moody and wanting more privacy are normal occurrences during early adolescence. It takes patience from both young people and parents to handle this challenge. Ask your child about what he or she learned about dealing with moods and the need for more privacy.
- We will also be discussing some more serious challenges for families: unemployment, the experience of immigrant families, and the impact of divorce and remarriage. Please talk to your child about these challenges, especially if one of them has had an impact on your family.
- As most parents discover, friendship becomes very important during early adolescence. We will be learning about the qualities of healthy friendship relationships (respect, loyalty, personal interest), and the harm caused by exploitive friendships.
- Many young people have some difficulties with friendship during early adolescence. The most worrying of these are bullying and peer pressure. Try to find an opportunity to talk to your child about these issues, especially if you suspect that he or she is having some serious difficulties with friends.
- This year, each theme ends with a reflection on one of the virtues. For Theme Two the virtue is kindness. Ask your child to tell you about this virtue. At school we discussed kindness as the virtue that reveals an attitude of care and concern for others, both those we do not know and those whom we do, because we recognize that we are all people whom God created and loves.

Teacher: _____ Date _____

Theme Two Topics

Love one another as I have loved you.

John 15:12

This theme is about living in relationship with others, and is developed through six topics. The first two topics examine relationships from the perspective of intimacy, choice, quality, and communication. The next two topics focus on families, and consider family structure, birth order, daily challenges that are common to all families, and a number of serious challenges that some families face. Topics 5 and 6 turn to the topic of friendship. In Topic 5 the students explore what they learn from their friendships and the qualities of healthy relationships. Then, in the last topic, they examine some challenges of friendship, including those that are common at their stage of life, and some that are more serious.

Theme Two Virtue

The virtue of kindness is featured in the first topic of Theme Two. Kindness is the virtue that reveals an attitude of care and concern for others, because we recognize in them our common humanity. This recognition includes both those we know and those we do not know. This reflection on the virtue of kindness is from the student text.

The Virtue of Kindness

“. . . be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” Ephesians 4:32

Kindness is the virtue that reveals our care and concern for others. Kindness is really a way of saying to another person through our words and actions: “I see you. You are a person, as I am. I care about you.” Like all virtues, kindness is a habit, the habit of treating other people as people, not as things.

With people we don’t know, a kind act can be as small as a smile, holding the door open for someone, or apologizing when we accidentally bump into a person. Often, when people receive an unexpected gesture of kindness from a stranger, it surprises them, for example:

- “My car was stuck, and a nice young man came by and helped me.”
- “I forgot my wallet, and the person in line behind me paid for my coffee.”
- When I was in a city I didn’t know, and got lost. When I asked for ns, the person walked with me to make sure I didn’t get lost again.”

Perhaps people are surprised by these actions because kindness is too rare in our world.

With people we know, kindness is shown in more intimate ways — being aware of and thoughtful about their needs, listening to those who are upset, asking what we can do to help, and apologizing when we have hurt a family member or friend.

Mother Teresa once said: “Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless.” One kindness leads to another and then to another. If we have experienced kindness, we are more likely to offer kindness to others.

Our world can sometimes be a very unkind place to live, filled with suspicions, misunderstandings, and lack of trust among people. It doesn't have to be that way. If each of us could look at each other and see our common humanity — I am a person, you are a person — and respond with kindness, we could change the world.

Topic 1 — Analyzing Relationships

People, like trees, grow best when they are near enough to share the essence of life, and far enough apart to let the sunshine help them grow.

Daniels

Summary

This topic examines human relationships, which are essential in our lives. God created us to live in relationship with others. The students discuss the difference between relationships that have a lasting influence and those that remain superficial, and the difference between relationships that are chosen and those that are not. Finally, they reflect on the quality of relationships and the desire everyone has to be appreciated and to belong.

Main Ideas

- We live in relationships with other people. Three important aspects of relationships are intimacy, choice, and quality
- We all struggle with selfishness and need to ask God to help us become more loving people.
- Supportive relationships free us to be ourselves and to be open and generous with others.

Family Participation

- **Intimacy and parents** — A question that parents rarely think about is: How intimate

am I with my children? When children are very young, the answer is, without a doubt, a lot. As children become more independent, however, and are deeply involved in their friendships, there often seem to be fewer and fewer opportunities for intimacy. When this is a concern for parents, they may want to try reinstating the ritual of a bedtime chat, or taking advantage of private time in the car or on a walk. Often a few simple questions such as “What’s the best thing that happened to you today?” “The worst?” “What was really interesting about your day?” “What was boring?” can lead into other areas that children want to talk about.

- **Relationships and choice** — In class, the students discussed the fact that some of their most important relationships are ones that they did not choose for themselves — relationships with family members, teachers, and classmates. When children complain about these people, it’s good to remind them how much these relationships can contribute to their development. Tolerance and openness to others is learned in the family — with a brother or sister who has irritating qualities, with a grandmother who always gives you the wrong thing for Christmas, or with an uncle who talks too much and tells boring jokes. People whose personalities, opinions, and interests are very different from our own provide us with a challenge to become more tolerant, to respond with patience and good humour, and to understand and respect different points of view. It’s good for children to realise that the more they practise being tolerant, the easier it will become.

- **Changing relationships** — Changing relationships within the family are stressful for everyone. As children enter adolescence, we expect more of them, and they in turn become more critical of us. It’s hard to give up the role of the perfect parent who knows everything, but this has to happen if children are to grow up and discover who they are as separate individuals. Hurt feelings on the part of parents are natural, but have to be kept in perspective.

- **Human selfishness** — As the students discussed in class, there are no perfect relationships. Our tendency to be selfish gets in the way — ignoring people’s feelings, worrying more about ourselves than others, or being unwilling to share ourselves with others. Selfishness can be overcome only through a relationship with God and with others. The virtue of kindness guides us to treat others with respect and generosity. When parents reflect kindness and concern for others in their relationships, it provides a young

people with a model of how we are meant to respond to each other.

Topic 2 — Relationships and Communication

Communication leads to community, that is, to understanding, intimacy and mutual valuing.

Rollo May

Summary

Relationships depend on communication. In this topic the students consider some guidelines for communicating with family members and with friends.

Main Ideas

- We cannot live in relationship with others without communication. Our ability to communicate with family members and friends is especially important.
- To communicate honestly and respectfully, we need to listen to each other; avoid creating unnecessary conflict; and say what we mean in a tactful and respectful way.
- Some friendship situations can lead to communication difficulties. Being honest, tactful, and trustworthy with friends can be helpful in avoiding and resolving these difficulties.

Family Participation

- This topic includes a number of examples of communication between family members and with friends. These examples illustrate the need for some basic guidelines for good communication. You will find them at the end of this theme.
- **Family communication** — Even with the best of intentions, it's easy for families to fall into bad habits in the way they communicate. The most common problems in family communication are: too much criticism, teasing and insults that are hurtful (especially among children), poor listening, and nagging. It's hard to change these habits, but it can be done if everyone agrees there is a problem and is motivated to change. It usually works best to attack one problem at a time.

Nagging, for example, is poor communication for several reasons. It encourages people not to listen, can lead to conflict, and is an ineffective way to convey a message. One family solved this problem by identifying the situation that caused most of the nagging (no one was ready for the school bus on time), called a family meeting, and each

family member offered suggestions on how to change the situation (for example, each person is responsible for packing his or her lunch and school bag in the evening, a bathroom schedule to avoid last minute congestion, one reminder only from mother or father.)

After a serious disagreement or argument with a child, some parents find it helpful to write a letter once they have cooled off and had time to think. Children could be encouraged to do this also. This method of communication provides an opportunity to explain a decision (since reasons are often lost in the heat of an argument), to apologize if there has been an injustice or if harsh words were spoken, and to offer an invitation to talk about the situation in a calmer way.

- **Brothers and sisters** — Brothers and sisters can be very hard on each other, and the older they get, the more adept they become at teasing and insults. Families differ in their tolerance and approach on this issue, but without some ground rules the quality of family life can deteriorate under the pressure of constant bickering and retaliation. Respect for each family member is a value that underlies a happy home life, and when this value is ignored, it should be treated seriously. Children need to know that to make a brother or sister feel bad so that they can feel good is a lot more serious matter than forgetting to take out the garbage or leaving a bed unmade.

- **Civility** — In class, the students discussed civility (politeness) in communication and the relationship of civility to the virtue of kindness. You might ask your child about this discussion.

When children are young, most parents make an effort to teach them to be polite — to say “please,” “thank you,” “excuse me,” and “sorry.” Unfortunately, there are many examples in the media of communication that is anything but civil and is intended to make people laugh — put downs, vulgar gestures, and rudeness. When children and young people are frequently exposed to these models it does have an influence on them.

Topic 3 — Looking at Families

A family is a group of people who will risk being themselves in order to help one another discover the fullest possible expression of their own humanity.

Paul Connolly

Summary

In this topic, the students examine two aspects of living in a family that makes each person's experience of growing up unique: family structure and the birth order of children.

Main Ideas

- We all need families. It is in our families that we learn to live in relationship with others.
- Each family is unique. One aspect of family that affects our experience of growing up is the structure of the family — extended, nuclear, single-parent, blended, or foster families.
- Another aspect of family that affects our experience of growing up is our position in the family — first child, youngest child, middle child, or only child.

Family Participation

• **Family structure** — The number of children who are growing up in single-parent and blended families is increasing. Single-parents face the day-to-day challenges of raising children without a partner in whom to confide and with whom to share the joys and worries of family life. Every parent needs a support system, especially during children's adolescence, and single parents are no exception. This might be a close friend, a relative, or a support group for parents living in similar situations.

Many blended families find the first years of adjustment to be uneven and stressful. Again, a support system is essential. The relationship of children and step-parents requires sensitivity, tact, and patience; when the child is a young adolescent, the challenges can seem overwhelming. There are social service agencies offering counseling and support groups for this special area of family life.

• **Birth order** — You might ask your child what she or he learned about birth order in class. You could also share your own experiences of growing up in a family as the oldest, middle, youngest, or only child.

Topic 4 — Family Challenges

*In each family a story is playing itself out,
and each family story embodies its hope and despair.*

Auguste Napier

Summary

In this topic the students examine common challenges that all families face, and some significant challenges that demand a strong commitment from all family members to support each other.

Main Ideas

- All families have challenges in their lives; some are part of daily living as a family, and some are major challenges that demand a lot from families.
- All families experience stress and worry, and family members have to work together to meet this challenge with patience and concern for each other.
- All family members fail at times and are in need of forgiveness; all family members need God's help to sustain them.

Family Participation

- At the end of this theme, you will find three personal stories about families. The stories of Robin and Ned are true; Jim's story is fictional, but represents some of the common challenges of living in a blended family from the perspective of a child. Your child may enjoy discussing these stories with you.

Daily Living Family Challenges

The two daily living family challenges discussed in this grade are related to the changes families experience as children grow up — moods and growing children's desire for more privacy.

- **Moods** — During early adolescence many young people experience moods that change very rapidly. This is confusing and upsetting for them, since often there's no apparent reason for the way they feel. The same hormonal activity that causes the changes of puberty plays a part in this situation. During puberty, the hormone levels in the bloodstream are quite unstable, and this in turn has some effect on mood.

Parents also find these moods confusing. It's hard to know how to relate to someone who went off to school in a great mood, and returns home down in the dumps, yet insists nothing bad happened at school. In the classroom the students discussed several strategies for handling bad moods: 1) briefly explain how they are feeling, and apologize if they have been rude. 2) avoid getting into discussions that might lead to arguments. 3) go for a walk, play a computer game, listen to music, go to a movie, have a bike ride, or shoot

baskets.

Although young people have to accept responsibility for managing and controlling their feelings, parents can be helpful by being sensitive to moods and by trying to respond with tact. In particular, some children find persistent questions or comments about the way they are feeling difficult to handle and often react by becoming defensive.

Unhappy moods that last over a long period of time, combined with other symptoms like difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, and difficulty concentrating at school, are an indication that something is going wrong in the child's life. It could be an ongoing problem with classmates or a teacher, or it might be an indication that the child is worried or guilty about something that has happened. Persistent unhappy moods, however, can also be an indication of depression. Although depression is more common in older adolescents, it does affect a small number of young people in their early teens. It might be a response to a particular situation, for example, serious family stress, or it may have no specific reason. It's extremely important to ask for medical advice from your family doctor if you suspect that your child may be depressed, since there are effective treatments.

- **Privacy** — As children mature, they become more concerned with privacy. They resent younger brothers or sisters coming into their rooms or handling their possessions. Often, they like to keep bedroom doors shut, and are quick to accuse others of listening to their phone conversations. Young adolescents do need some privacy, and family rules like knocking on a closed door, or asking permission before borrowing personal possessions are important. At the same time, young people need to be reminded that family life involves give and take, spending time with each other, and letting family members know what is going on in their lives.

Significant Family Challenges

Three significant challenges are discussed in this topic: unemployment, recent immigration, and divorce.

- **Unemployment** — Financial difficulties are a major cause of family stress, and a constant worry for parents. It takes a huge effort from each member of the family, and particularly from parents, to avoid taking out their frustration and worries on each other. In class the students discussed how much family members need each other in difficult

times — to support and encourage each other, and to show their love for each other by being helpful and loving.

- **Recent immigration** — When families immigrate to Canada, they face a large number of challenges in their new country: finding a place to live and schools for children, getting jobs, learning a new language, and adapting to a new culture. In general, children adapt more quickly to new customs and behaviours than adults. This can lead to disagreements within families, sometimes minor, and sometimes very serious.

When immigrant families are experiencing problems, it is important that they seek help from local organizations that offer assistance and counseling. There are many sources of support for immigrant families in Canada.

- **Divorce** — In 2005, approximately 38% of Canadian couples were divorced at some point before they reached their 30th anniversary. Since this figure includes people who were previously divorced, a more reliable prediction for first marriages is 30%. In other words, of those who marry for the first time, 70% of them will likely still be married 30 years later.

About half of all divorces involve children who are dependent on their parents. Also, approximately 70% of divorced men and 58% of divorced women remarry. This means that a substantial number of children have major adjustments to make — the separation of their parents and then the experience of living with a step-parent, who may also have children. These are major challenges for both children and adults.

Children who experience the divorce of their parents continue to want and need the involvement of both parents in their lives. It helps greatly if parents refrain from making negative comments about each other and do not put their children in the position of taking sides. It is also important for parents to reassure children that they are not to blame for the separation, and to provide as stable and predictable home life as possible.

- At the end of this topic the students participated in a prayer service for families. You will find the main parts of this service in *Fully Alive Grade 7 Prayers*.

Topic 5 — Looking at Friendship

The impulse of love that leads us to the doorway of a friend is the voice of God within and we need not be afraid to follow it.

Summary

In this topic the students explore some of the influences of friendships on their development as persons, the qualities of healthy friendship relationships, and the issue of exploitation in friendship.

Main Ideas

- We learn a lot about ourselves and other people through our friendships. Friendship also provides us with opportunities to become more sensitive to human emotions and to become more independent.
- Healthy friendships are based on respect for each other, loyalty, and personal interest in each other.
- Unhealthy relationships often become exploitive. To exploit another person means to use that person for selfish reasons. Exploitation is the opposite of friendship.

Family Participation

• **Importance of friends** — A strong focus on friendship begins in late childhood or early adolescence and grows over the next several years. This concentration on friendship has two important implications: the lack of friends or the experience of being excluded from a group is usually very painful for students of this age; and the importance of having friends and being included often motivates exploitive situations.

• **Friendship Lessons** — In class, the student discussed what they learn from the relationship of friendship. The three areas they examined are: emotional support, opportunities to interact with others, and opportunities for independence. Although friendships do not always go smoothly, they do provide a unique education in understanding self and others. The experience of friendship offers opportunities to:

- learn about other people's emotions, and respond to them
- practise problem solving, and learn how to avoid unnecessary arguments and how to resolve conflicts
- develop new insights into the complexities of people
- learn to make some independent decisions and to be responsible

This education also happens in families, but the unique aspect of the lessons learned from friendship is that the relationship is one of equals — a peer relationship.

• **Healthy Friendships** — Three essential characteristics of a healthy friendship are respect, loyalty, and personal interest. The students discussed these characteristics and explored some of reasons they are essential. A common difficulty in friendships of this age, especially among girls, is confusion between loyalty and possession. Loyalty to friends does not limit a person’s freedom to have friendships with others. This can be a hard lesson for some children to learn.

In class, the students learned that when relationships are not healthy, they can easily become exploitive — using other people for selfish reasons. For example, trying to get status by becoming friends with a popular person, or choosing friends who are followers in order to be the dominant person.

• **Looking at young adolescent friendships** — From an adult’s perspective, young adolescents’ friendships can appear fickle (because of changing alliances), possessive (they worry when a friend becomes close to someone else), or obsessive (they spend all day at school with friends and then come home and exchange messages and talk on the telephone.) There is no doubt that friendship is a major issue during adolescence, and these relationships are more intense, particularly among girls, than they were a few years earlier. The most helpful thing parents can do is to listen sympathetically when there are difficulties and to offer tactful advice. To a great extent, however, the complications young people face in learning how to be true friends are ones they have to sort out for themselves.

• At the end of this topic the students completed a sheet with a list of friendship qualities. They were asked to rank these qualities from the most important to the least important. You might ask about this activity. What did your child choose as the most important? The least important?

Topic 6 — Friendship Challenges

No person is your friend who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow.

Alice Walker

Summary

In this topic the students consider some friendship challenges that may cause stress but are not unusual at this stage of life. They also discuss more serious friendship challenges that can be difficult to handle.

Main Ideas

- All relationships involve some challenges. Friendship challenges can be difficult for young people to handle because friendship is so important in their lives.
- Some friendship challenges are part of growing up, and most people experience them. Changes within a friendship and within groups of friends are examples of expected challenges. More significant friendship challenges include moving to a new school during young adolescence, bullying, and peer pressure.
- Meeting the challenges of friendship means not giving up, learning from mistakes, and continuing to grow as a person and a friend.

Family Participation

Expected Friendship Challenges

- **Changing Relationships** — As children begin to mature and develop their interests, it is not surprising that these changes affect their friendships, both individual relationships and the group of friends with whom they spend time. Not all close childhood friendships survive as children grow up. This situation can be stressful when it results in hurt feelings on the part of one person and possibly guilty feelings for the other person. There is little parents can do about these situations, since children have to learn these lessons about friendship. Parents can, however, keep in mind how important friendship is to young adolescents and be sympathetic and tactful.
- **Balancing relationships** — Another expected friendship stress at this age is learning how to balance relationships with family and friends. Many young adolescents want to spend more time with friends, and less with family members. Many parents would comment that even when their children are home, they're messaging their friends or talking to them on the phone. In families that expect their children to spend a lot of time at home, this preoccupation with friends can lead to conflict. Parents need to remember that spending more time with friends is a normal part of growing up, and young people need to remember that both family and friendship relationships are important.

Significant Friendship Challenges

The students also explored several serious challenges that can be very hard to handle: a family move that results in having to go to a new school, bullying, and peer pressure.

- **Moving** — Young adolescents can find it quite stressful when their families move and they must go to a new school and leave their friends behind. Parents cannot change the situation, but they can make an effort to be supportive and understanding and to encourage their child to get involved in activities at the new school. Activities like team sports, interest clubs, or music groups provide opportunities to get to know people with similar interests.

- **Bullying** — There is an “Ask Sophia” feature with a question about bullying in this topic. You will find it at the end of Theme Two. You might ask your child what she or he thought about Sophia’s response.

What is bullying? Bullying is not an occasional disagreement among children involving name-calling or pushing and shoving. It is usually a repeated activity involving someone more powerful against someone who is weaker, and, most importantly, the intent is to harm the other person. There are several forms of bullying: verbal (e.g., insults, threats), relational (e.g., excluding people, spreading rumours), and physical (e.g., hitting, kicking). Both verbal and relational bullying can be carried out in person or through electronic media (e.g., instant messages, e-mails, postings on a social network) usually called *cyber-bullying*.

Why don’t people who are being bullied defend themselves? Most often, they don’t know what to do. They are both frightened and embarrassed. Some of them begin to feel that there must be something wrong with them. Why else would they be singled out? Sadly, the experience of being bullied weakens people’s ability to assert and defend themselves. Often, they may not even tell parents about what is happening because they believe that it will just make the situation worse if parents get involved.

Why don’t classmates or other students who are aware of the bullying do something? The reason could be fear of the person or people doing the bullying, not wanting to draw attention to themselves, or worrying about getting the reputation as a snitch.

What can parents do? If your child has been the target of bullying at school or has been involved in bullying other children, you need to talk to your child’s teacher or

the principal of the school about what is happening, and what you can do. If you are interested in learning more about bullying, there are many helpful resources, including books, articles, and websites.

It is important for parents to talk about bullying and discuss the difference between tattling on someone to get the person into trouble and telling a trusted adult about a serious problem a friend or classmate is having. The difference is obvious to adults, but not always to children. In class the students discussed the responsibility we all have to do what we can when someone is in trouble.

- **Peer Pressure** — During the early years of adolescence, many young people have a strong need to belong and to fit in. This need makes them vulnerable to the influence of their friends. Peer pressure is social pressure from a group of friends to adopt certain attitudes, style of dress, behaviour, or interests in order to be accepted. This pressure can be positive or negative.

Positive peer pressure: If members of a group of friends have similar attitudes about working hard at school, avoiding drugs, smoking, and alcohol, and treating other people respectfully, the pressure within the group is a positive and healthy one.

Negative peer pressure: When people hear about peer pressure, they usually think of negative influences — problems involving alcohol and drugs, skipping school, and early sexual activity. Many young people think they can resist these influences, but pressure from members of a peer group can be very powerful.

What can parents do? The influence of friends in children's lives is something that parents worry about, especially as adolescence begins. At this age, most peer pressure revolves around issues like clothing, hairstyles, preferred music, video games, popular television shows, or how late they stay up. Serious problems involving drugs, sex, and alcohol are more frequent during the high school years, but can occur in late grade school. A distinct change in a child's behaviour (difficulty concentrating, secretiveness, much lower marks at school) can have many reasons, but the possibility of drug or alcohol use should be considered.

The best advice experienced parents have to offer about the dangers of negative peer pressure is this: Know your children, know their friends, and keep in close touch with their daily lives. Young adolescents need careful monitoring. Problems arise

when parents do not know whom their children are with, or when children have too much freedom and spend a lot of time just “hanging around.”

- The students read a story about peer pressure, “The Fight Club,” which features Curtis. You will find this story at the end of this theme. You might ask your child about it. What did he or she think about it?

Theme Two Resources from the Student Text

Topic 2: These are some examples of communication problems experienced by family members and by friends.

Guideline 1: Listen to each other

Rachel: “Mom, Sarah’s having a party at her house on Friday night, and I’m invited. Can I go?”

Mom: “Rachel, didn’t you promise to clean your room yesterday? It’s still a terrible mess.”

Rachel: “Mom, you’re not listening. I’m telling you about Sarah’s party, and I really want to go!”

Mom: “And I really want you to clean your room.”

Who’s listening in this scene? No one. The two people have different concerns. Mom wants the room cleaned up, and Rachel wants to go to a party. What would this scene look like if both Rachel and her mother listened to each other?

* * *

Guideline 2: Don’t create unnecessary conflict

Gary: “Hey, stupid, it’s time for dinner. John! Are you deaf as well as stupid?”

John: “Stop calling me stupid, Gary! You’re the stupidest person I’ve ever met.

Gary: “Oh, yeah? Well, at least I’m not ugly.”

John: “You sure about that? Have you looked in the mirror?”

In this scene, Gary sent his brother an invitation to an argument, and John had a choice to accept this invitation or ignore it. The old saying, “It takes two to have an argument” is a good one. What would this scene look like if John had refused to respond to Gary’s insult?

* * *

Guideline 3: Say what you mean in a tactful and respectful way

Father: “George, you haven’t said a word. Is there some reason you look like a thundercloud?”

George: “It’s my business how I feel! Why doesn’t everyone just leave me alone?”

Father: “If you’re going to act like that, I’ll be glad to.”

George: “Good. That’s what I want. To be left alone.”

In this scene, George’s father knows his son is in a bad mood, but his question sounds more like a criticism than an effort to communicate. George doesn’t want to talk about how he feels, but he responds in a way that annoys and hurts his father. What would this scene look like if George and his dad made an effort to recognize each other’s feelings and to communicate more respectfully?

* * *

Friendship Communication: A changing situation

Carla: “You totally ignored me at lunch. We always used to sit together, and now you’re sitting with Kate and Robin.”

Tracey: “Listen, Carla. I’m still your friend, but I’m just busy with other people. You need to find some other friends to hang out with.”

Carla: “Why are you so mean? Why can’t I hang out with Kate and Robin, too?”

Tracey: “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but it wouldn’t work out.”

In this scene, Carla is putting pressure on Tracey, and Tracey is trying to respect her feelings. But it’s a difficult conversation for both girls. What do you think this scene would look like if Carla hadn’t tried to make Tracey feel guilty?

* * *

Friendship Communication: Moods and relationships

Bill: “Why didn’t you come to practice this morning? The coach asked me where you were, and I said I didn’t know.”

Peter: “Didn’t feel like it. Soccer’s boring.”

Bill: “No way! What’s going on with you? Are you mad at me or something?”

Peter: “No, it’s nothing. Just lay off me.”

In this scene Peter is obviously feeling down, and his friend Bill doesn’t know what to do. What would this scene look like if Peter were a little more honest about how he was feeling?

* * *

Friendship Communication: Private conversations

Megan: “I can’t believe you did that! It was private, and you went and blabbed. How many people did you tell?”

Jill: “Come on, it’s not that big a deal. I wouldn’t have said anything if I’d

known you'd get so upset.

Megan: "Didn't I tell you not to tell anyone? How can I be friends with someone I can't trust?"

Jill: "Aren't you being a little dramatic? Okay, have it your way. We're not friends. Happy?"

In this scene, Megan is expressing her feelings quite clearly. What she believed was private communication has been passed on to others. What would this scene look like if Jill accepted responsibility for being disloyal to Megan?

* * *

Topic 4: These are personal stories about challenges in families. Jim is an imaginary character, but both Robin and Ned are real people who wrote about their families.

Robin

I have been very blessed in my life to have parents who loved and encouraged me, and had high expectations about what I would do and be. Every project was encouraged – pictures I drew were mounted on walls, poems I wrote were framed – and every interest I had was nurtured. When I took up the cello, my father suddenly acquired an astonishing collection of albums by famous cellists; when I decided I wanted to sew my own clothes, my mother taught me how to read a pattern and use a sewing machine. When I showed an aptitude for something or a special interest, my parents would encourage me to pursue it further.

That said, my parents are not perfect and when I lived at home we often fought. When I was younger I thought they were unfair, overbearing, and demanding. I did not want them to be as involved in my life as they were. I wanted more space, fewer rules, lower expectations. When I was a teenager I fought so much with my parents that I eventually moved out of home when I was 18.

I see now that the questions my parents asked, the expectations they had, and the rules they set made me feel special and interesting. They made me feel that the world would be a better place if I found out what I was meant to do and did it. They never said, "That's not good enough," but they would say, "You can do better."

Everybody should have somebody to tell them to find what they love and do it.

* * *

Jim's Story

Jim Bernard's life is complicated. His parents divorced when he was 8, and he was their only child. Two years later his mother remarried, and she and Jim's stepfather now have a 1-year-old daughter. His father also remarried, and his new wife has two children of her own.

During the week, Jim lives with his mother, stepfather, and their baby girl. On weekends, he's usually with his father, stepmother, and her children. The things he finds difficult are not unusual for someone in his situation:

- Jim's mother and stepfather are busy with their new daughter, and he feels left out.
- At his father's home, Jim shares a room with his stepbrother, which gives him very little privacy.
- His stepmother tries to be nice to him, but her attention is mainly on her own children.
- Jim's stepfather is more intrusive than his own father. He 's always asking Jim about homework and friends, and calls him "son," which Jim hates.
- What Jim wants most of all is to spend some time alone with each of his parents, but this never seems to happen.

Jim is a quiet person by nature, and he finds it difficult to talk about his feelings. When his parents first separated, he hoped and prayed that they would get back together. He can see now that it isn't going to happen. He's told his friend Curtis a little bit about how he feels, but it's hard for Curtis to understand Jim's situation.

* * *

Ned's Story

My name is Ned, my wife is Stephanie, and my sons are Tony and Alex. Tony is fifteen years old and likes to swim at the beach, listen to music, and eat pizza and cheeseburgers. He gets bothered by his twelve-year-old brother, Alex, and likes to get away from him almost as much as he likes being with him. Tony goes to school and has a best friend, Matthew, and rides the school bus to get there. He likes to go the grocery store and munch on a bagel while we shop. He hates haircuts and spends too long in the shower. Sound pretty normal? Tony also has cerebral palsy and is severely mentally impaired. He can crawl around the house, but uses a wheelchair at school and out in public. He will never read a book, see a movie, or drive a car; he will never walk on his own, make a phone call, or have a girlfriend.

But Tony is one of the happiest people I know, and he's taught all of us a lot about being a family. Stephanie and I have learned to shape our careers around his needs, and his brother has had to learn not be embarrassed when Tony starts shouting or singing loudly (and not very well) in public. Because he is who he is, we've all learned that those things are less important than being with Tony and sharing his joy — being a family. As Tony's Dad, I consider myself very fortunate. Without him, I never would have learned so much about patience, determination, loyalty, and persistence. Sometimes I can tell people look on us with pity, but I know how lucky I am.

* * *

Topic 6: This is an Ask Sophia feature with a question about bullying and a story about Curtis and peer pressure, "The Fight Club."

Ask Sophia

I am a 30-year-old woman with a problem. My elementary school is having a Grade 8 class reunion this spring, and I don't know if I should go. I would like to know what you think.

My Grade 8 year was the worst year in my entire life. I was targeted by a small group of girls who harassed me, spread terrible rumours about me, and made sure that almost everyone in the class would have nothing to do with me. I have never understood why this happened. It never happened again, but the memory of that unbearable year is still with me.

If I go to this reunion, I'll probably see them, and I'm not sure what I'll do. Burst into tears? Attack them? Stand up on a table and tell everyone just what they did to me? But in some strange way, I want to go and face them. *Ami*

Dear Ami,

I can see you have some scars, but maybe it's time to leave Grade 8 behind. I can't answer your question about going to the reunion. It might help you resolve some of your feelings, but it could also make things worse. You may find that the people involved don't even remember what they did, or, if they do remember, deny it or refuse to talk about it.

An alternative to going to the reunion could be to write a letter to them, describing exactly how painful your memories are. You may decide to send the letter, or you may find that the process of writing the letter itself is enough, and that you have no need to send it. One way or another, let go of the unhappy Grade 8 person you once were, and banish the girls who caused you such heartache from your life. It is over. *Sophia*

The Fight Club

Curtis and Jim hang around with a larger group of boys. Some of these boys have started something they call "the fight club." It began with staged fights with no real risk. People took turns being the fighters, and the other members of the group took photos. These photos were circulated among the group, and forwarded to several other classmates.

So far, Curtis and Jim had only watched the fights and taken some pictures. After a few days, it became obvious that the fights were less staged, and people were getting hurt. But Jim decided to give it a try anyway. He ended up with a black eye, something he had a hard time explaining to his mother and stepfather. Brandon, the boy Jim fought, was a lot stronger than Jim.

"How come you hit Jim so hard?" Curtis asked Brandon.

"What's it to you?" Brandon said. "At least he has the guts to fight."

"It's got nothing to do with guts," Curtis said. "I just don't feel like it."

“Everyone’s saying you’re chicken!” Brandon replied.

“Who says that?” Curtis asked.

“The guys, the fight club. You’re the only one who hasn’t had a fight. If you want to be part of the club, you gotta do it. After school, today, okay?”

•••

Curtis did fight, but in the end he wished he hadn’t. Someone from the group posted all of the fight photos on a social networking website. The school principal became aware of what was going on, and called the parents of the students who were involved.

The conversation Curtis had with his parents was not a happy one. He expected there would be consequences, which there were, but what really upset him was how disappointed in him they seemed to be. What bothered his parents most was not the fight, although they didn’t approve of it, but his failure to follow his instincts and refuse to be pressured into fighting. It bothered Curtis, too.

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