

Family Literacy Project

OUR METHOD

Overview

The family is a powerful force in the human experience. From the beginning of history to our contemporary moment, families continue to inspire the full range of human identity. Whether engaging in dysfunction or disarray or in profound acts of love, selflessness, courage and compassion, families influence individuals and our society in powerful ways.

In spite of this reality, not enough citizens in our world understand the immense value, capacity, power, and influence of families—especially strong families—in the secular arenas of our lives. This is why there is such an urgent need for understanding the ways in which family and family influences are interwoven into all parts of the social, cultural, spiritual, and political fabric of our world.

However, despite these truths, a family perspective or family lens is not always utilized by local, community, or global organizations across areas of education, journalism, entertainment, public policy, law, humanitarian action, economic and government affairs. When it comes to addressing challenges or educating the next generation, a holistic, full family approach is not always utilized or developed to its full potential.

Why is this? And why does it matter?

Over the past several decades and the past few years in particular, we have witnessed the very tangible consequences of a lack of understanding about the critical role the family plays in maintaining strong, stable, flourishing communities and nations. More and more, society is neglecting viewing the world through a family-oriented lens. In other words, there is a growing lack of literacy about the family—what we call “family literacy.”

Whether we realize it or not, this lack of family literacy affects all our lives in very real ways. A lack of understanding about families and their immense power for good has many consequences. The ones we are most concerned with are the social consequences. Partial or superficial understandings about value of strong families hinder effective policy solutions and laws; instead of helping support, maintain, and strengthen families, they can unwittingly disrupt, fracture, or weaken them.

Yet perhaps the most compelling consequence is that *the role of the family becomes devalued in public life*. When there is a lack of literacy about the family’s indispensable role in creating and maintaining strong, stable societies, the result is that marriage and family become devalued. This, in turn, creates a devaluation of the family’s unique role in nurturing, protecting, and valuing the next generation. The brunt of this burden is being born by those who are the least able to bear it: *children*.

We have seen this play out in significant ways over the years through sweeping cultural and political change are flooding the earth. We have also seen it play out closer to home with our families, friends, communities, and places of worship, where the influence of entertainment, academia and social media are obscuring the critically important roles that healthy marriages and families play in public life.

However, with improved understanding about why marriage and family are so fundamental to society, the next generation can begin to view the world through a family lens. They will view *families as families*, instead of a group of separate individuals who are disconnected and independent from a family unit. We are confident that a complete paradigm shift toward a holistic, full-family approach to the world's complex problems will encourage a renaissance of successful marriages and family life in which all human life is valued and families flourish.

Our Goal

We believe that advancing a deeper understanding of families (what we call “family literacy”) provides the necessary tools to alleviate the negative consequences of family illiteracy and enhance our ability to generate powerful solutions and strength.

Our goal is to improve understanding about why families—especially strong families—are so critical to the wellbeing of individuals and society. We believe that improving and deepening public understanding about importance of strong families will provide much-needed **clarity**, **consistency**, and **effectiveness** for family policymakers, researchers, advocates, and educators as they teach about the indispensable role that family and family influences play in our world.

Skyline Research Institute (SRI) aims to educate leaders on family literacy by creating training, seminars, conferences, and educational resources to help individuals, universities, and organizations understand the complex roles that the family plays in human experience.

1. Family Literacy in Education

The **Family Literacy Project** will provide educational opportunities and resources to help individuals of all ages learn how to recognize, discern, understand, and analyze family influences in contemporary life through the intersecting sub-themes of marriage, gender, motherhood, and fatherhood. (*In development*)

2. Family Literacy in the Professions

The Family and Public Life Initiative will collaborate with professionals in public, private, and nonprofit sectors who share a commitment to the family and who wish to explore how a deeper understanding of the complex influences of families in human affairs can enhance their own work. We will offer resources, training, and support to professionals working in target areas of education, government/ministries of family, humanitarian affairs, media, communication, storytelling, non-profits, public policy, advocacy, and law. *(In development)*

We are equally committed to equipping educators and training the next generation with the skills and knowledge to make the most of their degrees and contribute to a broader understanding of families in the public sphere.

The Method

Adapted from Harvard's religious literacy model (See Diane Moore, "Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: Expanding the Boundaries of Religious Education"), the family literacy method is multi and inter-disciplinary and recognizes that far from being separate, families and family influences are interwoven throughout society, history, and culture. For example, social, historical, and cultural dimensions of the human experience cannot be accurately understood without understanding the family influences. This is the methodological framework related to the main components of family literacy: that the family is embedded in culture and that "culture" is inclusive of social, political, and economic influences.

Central Principles

Our family literacy framework has several dimensions, but there are some fundamental principles that animate our mission and inform all aspects of our work:

1. The family is a powerful force in the human experience
2. Few citizens in our world understand the immense depth and breadth of the power of the family
3. A lack of understanding about the important role of the family in society manifests itself through countless negative consequences
4. Improved family literacy provides tools needed to alleviate the negative consequences of illiteracy about the family

We believe that these foundations provide the best tools to understand the complex roles that the family plays in human experience and understanding them will help diminish the

negative consequences of widespread family illiteracy.

Definition of Family Literacy

For decades, the term “family literacy” has been used in education to describe the lifelong process of parents and children learning together in the home with the support of their schools and communities. Extending beyond the ability to read and write, “family literacy” has also involved the educational experience between parent and the child and uses programs to improve literacy skills.

Although the concept of “family literacy” is commonly used when discussing education *within* the family, this paper proposes expanding the definition of “family literacy” to include education *about* the family. The use of the term “family literacy” in this way has strong intuitive appeal; literacy is widely used across many fields, and includes media, cultural, health, digital, religious, financial, and computer literacy.

With this in mind, the following definition of “family literacy” has been expanded and reconceptualized by Skyline Research Institute to help students, educators, and lifelong learners gain a more holistic understanding of the family and its role in the human experience:

Family literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of the family and social/political/cultural life through a family lens. Specifically, a family-literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the family throughout history as it has been shaped by social, historical, and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to explore, discern, and view the world around them through a family lens.

Critical to this definition is understanding that family and family influences are *inextricably woven into all dimensions of the human experience*.

The overarching purpose of this expanded and reconceptualized definition of family literacy is to address the need for an improved understanding about family and family influences in public life in order to:

1. Strengthen public understanding about the critically important roles the family plays in local, national, and global contexts;

2. Improve clarity, consistency, and effectiveness when communicating and educating about the important roles that family and family influences play in society; and
3. Elevate the role of the family in public life by applying a family lens into all fields of education and professions.

This reframing of family literacy helps us know how to discern and articulate information related to the family. It also provides a new way to think about—and then apply—understanding and knowledge about role of the family in the world. The potential for educators and researchers is particularly significant because family literacy can be measured and quantified.

The Five Pillars

There are five pillars of our family literacy framework that flow from an understanding about the central role that the family plays in society:

1. Family influences are embedded in all dimensions of our culture and world.

Family and family influences are interwoven into all dimensions of human experience, as opposed to the assumption that the family functions in isolated, private contexts. These influences can almost always be found when one asks “the family question” of any given social or historical experience.

This understanding provides decision makers with countless opportunities to address societal problems through a holistic, family-focused lens. Understanding the ways in which the family and its influences are woven into the threads of all societies and within diverse ethnic groups contributes to the preservation of a culture of peace and promote dialogue. This principle of family literacy paves the way for cooperation across many different fields of study and encourages a greater appreciation for and understanding about the valuable roles that families play in our world.

2. Strong families are essential to individual and social well-being.

The family stands as the foundation of every human society, serving as its essential social unit. Sustainable, flourishing societies depend upon strong, stable families. Indeed, the strength of any nation lies within the walls of its homes because it is where the hearts and souls of future generations are nurtured. Families play a crucial role in shaping children's

welfare, fulfilling meaning and solidarity, and even influencing the economic, cultural, and political landscape of nations.

Across the globe, children are most likely to thrive socially, economically, emotionally, and educationally when they enjoy the shelter and stability of an intact family with a married mother and father. This formula provides a 'protective shield' over children, serving as a buffer against a myriad of negative outcomes.

Key to this principle of family literacy is understanding that as imperfect as they may be, strong, stable marriages and families play a vital role in determining the health and welfare of children, in providing tremendous potential for happiness, meaning, and belonging, and even in shaping the political, economic, and social destinies of nations.

3. Everyone is shaped by—and inextricably linked to—their family

Family relationships connect and bind generations together and provide meaning and belonging in life. They are also the primary relationships and first bonds that form a powerful connection between generations through the combined lineage of a father and a mother.

Among the many relationships we have in the human experience, the most important and significant are our family relationships. It is within the family that individual identity emerges and develops, and where intergenerational spiritual, cultural, and social bonds are created and shared. This becomes even more evident when married couples become parents, because this forms “a linear bridge” between family generations. In this sense, each family creates its own community with its own unique set of personalities, values, practices, stories, and family identity which, in turn, influence individual identity.

Understanding one's family heritage and stories gives meaning, shapes identity, and connects individuals between generations. Research shows that when people anchor themselves in family history, stories, traditions, and experiences, they develop a sense of belonging which not only centers an individual but provides them with understanding and the potential to meet life's challenges with resilience throughout their entire life. This is particularly significant for children and youth because knowing about and keeping alive the stories of their family's past help them better understand themselves and strengthens their emotional well-being.

4. Families are a force multiplier with unique capacity, resources, strength, and resilience.

Remarkable strength and fortitude can be found within a family. Despite the world's many differing and varying cultures, families bear striking similarities in the ways they turn to one another for strength. Many studies have found that despite enduring adversity, hardship, and even trauma, families have the ability to rally together and draw upon each other for strength, and often emerge with increased love, purpose, and resilience needed to face the future. Thus, strong families provide a 'protective shield' around children, giving them unique sources of strength and support, and buffering them against negative outcomes.

Because children and youth do not function in isolation, there is growing concern over the tendency of policymakers to focus primarily on children and youth apart from their parents instead of holistically encompassing the entire family ecosystem. As a result, many solutions to complex problems insufficiently comprehend or acknowledge the resources, strength, and resilience found within families. However, when solutions to complex societal challenges build upon a family's unique sources of strength, understanding, identity, and resilience, they can overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges—together.

5. The religions of the world share many common understandings about marriage and the family

Believing that the family is more than a social construct means we have a lot in common. In fact, for billions of us, religion and family are the very center of our lives. Faith traditions shape family and community life. Whether it be different religious traditions in Africa, Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, the Pacific, the Arab world, and the Americas, most of the world's great faiths share common understandings related to marriage and the importance of healthy family life. Family and family influences can be found in all the main religions, schools of thought and philosophies throughout time and place.

Despite differing theological beliefs, we can agree in fundamental ways about the nature and importance of the family. There is a striking consistency across disparate faiths in the perspective that 1) the human family derives from deity; 2) marriage and family life are divinely appointed; 3) parents and children have deep and lasting commitments to each other; 4) sexuality is a gift to be exercised within divinely established limits; and 5) the family is the central unit of society and the most important source of joy and fulfillment in life.

These shared convictions, properly understood, can help bring all people of the earth together. Indeed, gaining insight into the beliefs of different faith traditions regarding marriage and family can aid in overcoming differences with patience, bridging gaps of understanding between faith traditions, and discover ways in which we have more

similarities than differences.

Guiding Questions

1. What are the consequences of growing illiteracy the importance of marriage and family in our world?
2. What happens when we better understand the important roles that mothers and fathers play in creating healthy families and strong, resilient children?
3. What happens when we begin to see the world through a family lens? How might improved family literacy about the family help solve complex societal problems?
4. What does family literacy look like in action? What would it look in your profession, community, or nation?
5. How will improved understanding about the family as the fundamental unit of society make the world a better place?

Summary and Conclusion

The challenges families are facing in the 21st century is immense and requires fresh thinking and creative collaboration across all sectors of society. Deeper understanding of the power of families is an untapped resource with remarkable generative power. Thus, improving public understanding about the value of families in our world will require the collective wisdom, collaboration, and resources of engaged and responsive individuals who are passionate about fortifying families.

Improving public understanding about the value of families in our world will require the collective wisdom, collaboration, and resources of engaged and responsive people who are passionate about fortifying families. We invite you to join us as we seek to advance public understanding about families in service of a world where no one is left behind and where families flourish.