

At times, however, these small conflicts may turn into larger ones. The family environment can become stressful and unhappy. Each person needs to stop and think:

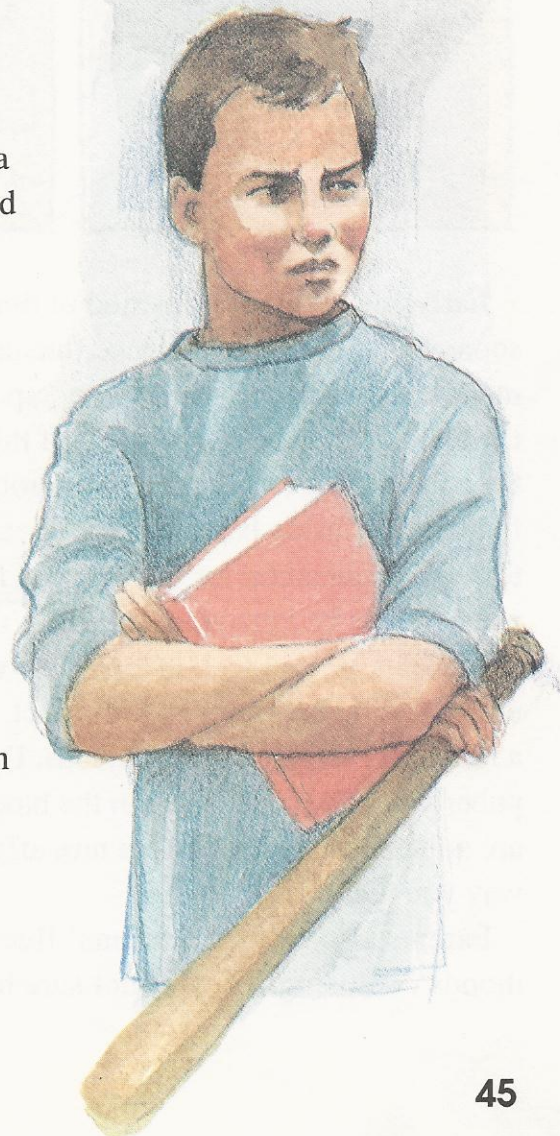


Each family member shares in the responsibility of creating a family environment that is peaceful, open, honest, tactful, and respectful.

Special Issues in Family Living

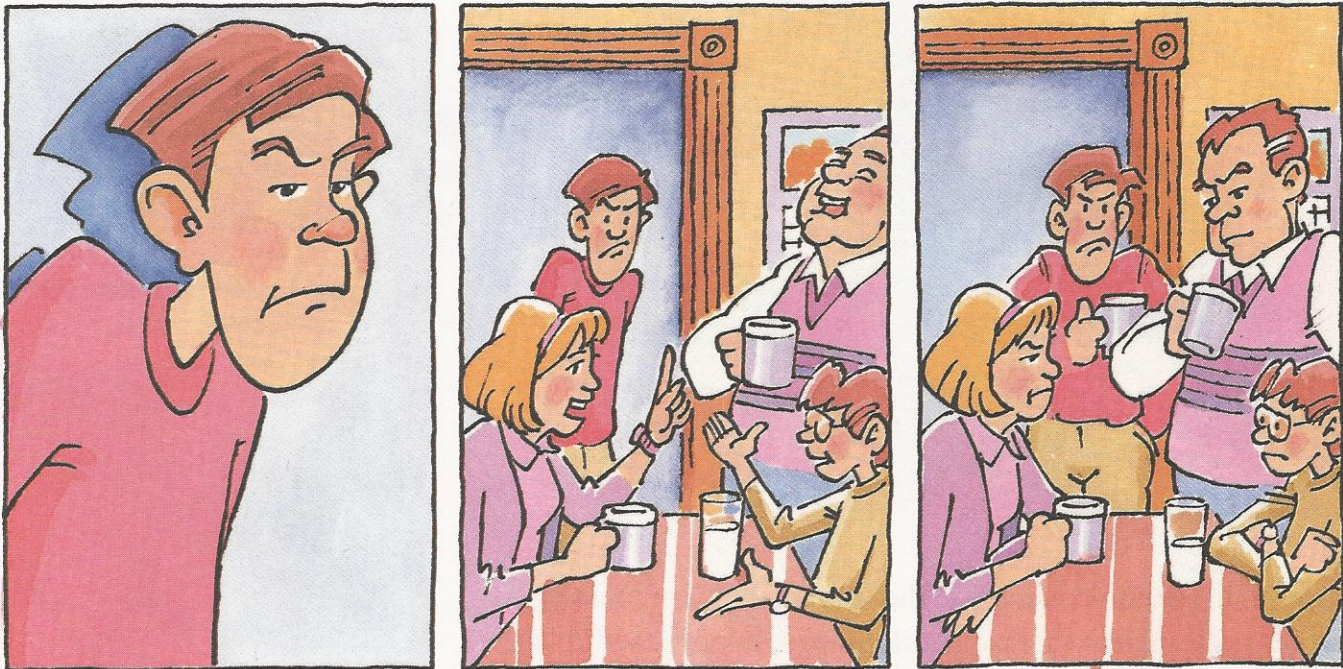
We have already discussed one issue in family living — communication. As children grow up, there are changes that occur in the family that raise new issues. An issue in family living is anything that is important to family members, and that has an effect on their relationship. An issue is not necessarily a problem, but it is often something that could turn into a problem.

The changes that occur in families as children grow up can be stressful for everyone. Both parents and children have to learn new ways of relating to each other. Some families find this very difficult and certain issues may develop into big problems. Understanding what is happening is helpful, but some stress is unavoidable.



Moods

Living in a family brings people into very close contact with each other. They cannot ignore each other, even if they want to. Family members are usually very aware of each other, and in particular of each other's moods. If one member of the family is sad, upset, or angry, it affects the other members.



Early adolescence is a period of time when some young people experience fluctuating moods. Their moods change very rapidly and the feelings may be quite strong. If this has been happening to you, you have probably found it confusing because there doesn't seem to be an explanation for the way you feel. You wake up in a bad mood and you don't know why. Later on, you feel on top of the world, and you still don't know why. In fact, there is a reason for these changing moods. During puberty the hormone levels in the bloodstream are quite unstable, and this in turn affects the way you feel.

Parents also find adolescents' fluctuating moods confusing. They're not sure how to

act. It's difficult to know how to relate to someone who was in a terrible mood in the morning but arrives home after school feeling great.

Moods become an issue in family living if they begin to have a negative effect on family relationships. In order to avoid this, it takes patience and understanding from parents and children. But the person with the biggest responsibility for solving the problem is the one with the bad mood. We are not responsible for feeling depressed or irritable, but we are responsible for managing and controlling these feelings. When moods control us, then we have no choices. We have to yell at people, or be rude to them, or refuse to talk to them.

But when we control our moods and manage our feelings, we have the freedom to:

- avoid getting into discussions that might lead to arguments until the mood passes
- go for a walk, pray, read a good book, watch an interesting television program
- listen to music, draw a picture, get involved in a favourite hobby
- ride a bike, shoot baskets, or go for a fast run
- explain the way we are feeling to our parents and other family members
- apologize when we hurt family members because of our moods.

Moods and Depression

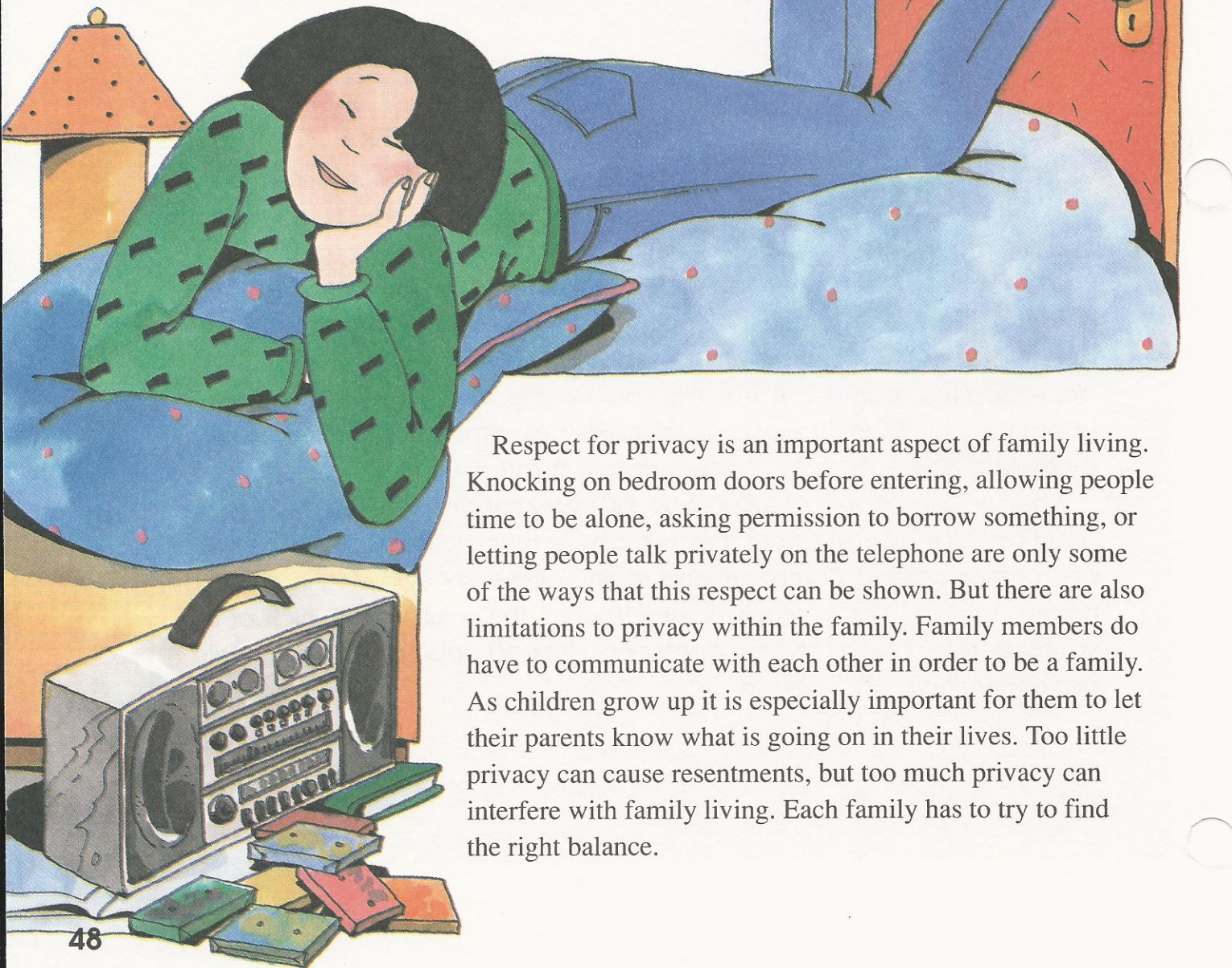
Usually unhappy moods come and go pretty quickly. But sometimes they don't. There might be a reason for a bad mood that lasts — trouble at home or a big argument with a close friend. Or sometimes young people don't know why they feel down, and they can't seem to get out of it. They might have trouble sleeping, lose their appetite, or find it very difficult to concentrate. When people are unhappy day after day, we use the word *depressed* to describe the way they are feeling. As doctors learn more about this condition, they are discovering that some depression may have a physical cause, and can be successfully treated with medication.

When young people are depressed it's very important for them to tell an adult whom they trust about their feelings. In many cases, this person will be one of their parents. Sometimes just talking about unhappy feelings can be helpful. There are other times, however, when the adult may think that the young person should talk to a doctor or a trained counselor, and will help him or her find such a person.

Privacy

Family members like to spend time together, but they also enjoy having privacy. To some degree, this depends on personality. Some people need more privacy than others. But this need always has to be balanced with the need for family intimacy.

Young children don't consider privacy important. They usually prefer to be with other people and they enjoy talking about what is going on in their lives. As children mature and go through puberty, this begins to change. They discover that there are times when they want to be alone and do not want to talk to their family members about what is going on inside them. This is partly because their thoughts and feelings are more complicated, but it is also because they want to be more independent.



Respect for privacy is an important aspect of family living. Knocking on bedroom doors before entering, allowing people time to be alone, asking permission to borrow something, or letting people talk privately on the telephone are only some of the ways that this respect can be shown. But there are also limitations to privacy within the family. Family members do have to communicate with each other in order to be a family. As children grow up it is especially important for them to let their parents know what is going on in their lives. Too little privacy can cause resentments, but too much privacy can interfere with family living. Each family has to try to find the right balance.

Special Challenges to the Family

Every family experiences some stress. There are days when nothing seems to go right — parents are exhausted, children are unco-operative, and the refrigerator stops working.

But there are some situations that are far more stressful than tired parents, unco-operative children, and a warm refrigerator. Some families face difficult and unexpected changes in their lives. Among these special challenges are:

- **Serious Illness**

When a person develops a serious illness, it is natural for the family members to respond with many feelings: shock, fear, anger, guilt, sadness, and hopelessness. If a child is ill, he or she is likely to receive a lot of attention, and the other children in the family may feel jealous. If a parent is ill, it can be very frightening for the children because they depend on their parents in so many ways.

Serious illness often changes normal family routines, at least for a time. The children in the family may have to assume new responsibilities. Also, there may be financial difficulties, which only increase the stress for the family.



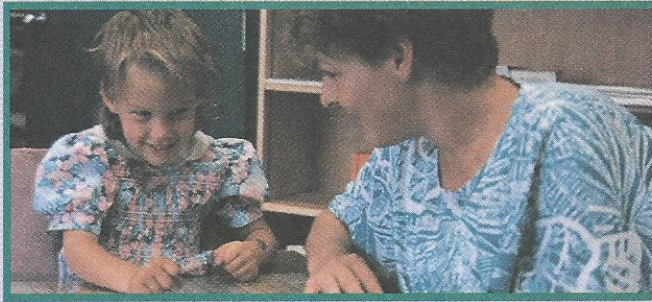
- **Unemployment**

For many families, even with both parents working, it is a struggle to meet their basic needs. When a parent loses a job, it creates serious stress for the family. There is worry about paying bills, little or no money available for recreation, and the terrible uncertainty of not knowing how long the situation will last. Children find it hard to understand why their parents cannot afford toys, movies, records, or sports equipment. The person who has become unemployed may feel that he or she is a failure.

For families with only one parent, unemployment is a particularly serious problem. Who is going to support the family? Older teen-agers can help, but if they want to remain in school, they have to limit the number of hours they work. Often the only alternative is financial support from the government. This support is one of the ways in which people demonstrate their concern for others. Money that has been collected from those who have jobs (through their taxes) is distributed by the government to help people in need.

- Children with Disabilities

When a child is born with a serious disability, parents are shocked. They may also feel sad, angry, and guilty. Usually they know very little about the particular problem, and so they wonder whether they will be able to cope. Often they receive conflicting advice from doctors, relatives, and friends.



Once the shock has passed, families with disabled children still face special challenges. It may be hard to find the right kind of education for their child. The child may require a great deal of attention, which can mean less time for the other children in the family. Parents of children with serious disabilities also worry about the future. Will the child be able to function as an independent adult? If not, who will provide the care?



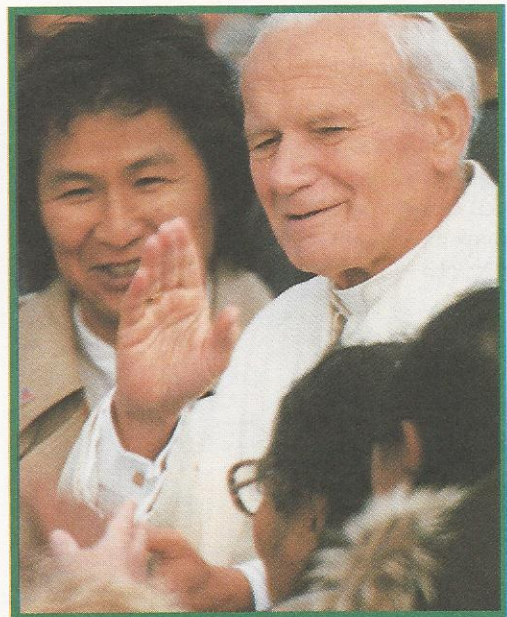
Many families meet these special challenges with courage, with hope, and with faith. Family members make a special effort to share their feelings, to be patient with each other, to pray as a family, and to keep a sense of perspective. They are greatly helped by the presence of supportive relatives and friends. The Christian community has an important responsibility to become more aware of special challenges to families, and to respond generously and compassionately.

Family life can be, and for many people is, a joyful experience. Parents find a deep fulfillment as they raise their children, but their role is also a demanding and difficult one. All families have some difficulties. The perfect family doesn't exist, except in our imaginations or on television. Families are never as loving, as patient, and as unselfish as they could be. There are small, daily failures — angry words, a refusal to listen, misunderstandings, unintended injustices. This is why forgiveness is so important among family members.

But there are also times when a family may experience larger failures — lack of acceptance, unwillingness to forgive, a breakdown of the relationship among family members, an emotional environment in which it is difficult for people to grow. No one begins a marriage and family wanting such things to happen. When Pope John Paul II came to Canada in 1984, he spoke to the young people in Montreal about the pain and sadness of family difficulties. This is part of what he said:

"Too many of you suffer because of the breakdown of family life, because of separation and divorce; and you have been wounded to the point of sometimes doubting whether a faithful and lasting love is possible.

It is not ours to judge those who have been hurt by the upheaval affecting morals and society. But I say to you: do not doubt; you can build a home on the rock of fidelity, because you can count totally on the fidelity of God, who is love."



Children and young people who have been hurt in their families need to know that they do not have to grow up bitter and angry, repeating the difficulties of the past. There are signs of God's love in each life, and the discovery of these signs leads to compassion, forgiveness, and hope.

EXPERIENCE

Introduce the lesson by reading the opening paragraphs of Special Issues in Family Living (page 45) with the students. Identify the two issues in family living (moods and privacy) that the students will be exploring in this lesson.

Ask some of the students to role-play these situations:

- You are having a conversation on the telephone, and your brother picks up another telephone in the house to make a call. He hangs up when he realizes that you are on the phone. You accuse him of listening to your private conversations.
- You notice your sister's diary lying open on top of her bed; you decide to read it, and she comes in and catches you. She asks to have a lock put on her door.
- You wake up in a bad mood in the morning, and while you're having breakfast, your father asks you to clean the garage when you come home from school. You ignore his request.
- You come home from school feeling down; your mother asks you a lot of questions about what's going on at school, how all your friends are doing, and what you would like to do to celebrate your birthday next week. You tell her that things are going badly at school, and you don't want to celebrate your birthday.

Encourage the students to respond after each scene. How could this affect family relationships? Is there another way of handling this situation?

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