



A Happy Family Formula

New York (RNS) — A popular complaint today is that "outside forces" are making successful home life almost impossible and undermining everything good which the family is trying to do.

The American public is overwhelmed by negative pictures of family life: rising divorce, unhappy marriages, delinquency. From this they are led to believe that unhappy, disrupted family life is "normal" and that stable and successful families are the exception.

How accurate is this view?

Father Lucius F. Cervantes, S.J., a sociologist, says the common negative stereotype of American families is largely distorted and untrue.

While all modern families have problems and dissatisfactions, the majority of them have found healthy means of coping with undesirable social forces, he said. And families who adhere most closely to this "success formula" are those are the most stable and successful.

Father Cervantes is co-author of a book called *Successful American Families*, based on a classic study of successful American families conducted with Harvard University professor-emeritus Dr. Carl C. Zimmerman in the late 1950s. Father Cervantes is currently an adviser to his brother, Mayor Alfonzo Cervantes of St. Louis.

What is the "success formula" uncovered in the study?

In essence, the study revealed that the most successful families began with a marriage between two individuals who fundamentally believed that their marriage was to last "until death do us part." They worked to create a successful marriage. They tended to be optimistic about the future and of their ability to control their destiny to a great extent.

The parents of the most successful families were found to have clear-cut moral standards, generally based on religious values. They gathered a close circle of family friends who were very much like themselves in religion, interests, ideals, economic background. Thus they shielded themselves from the impact of forces contrary to their beliefs.

"It is so obvious," Father Cervantes said in a recent telephone interview. "All that we're saying is that you're conditioned by the people closest to you."

He said that the study took as the minimum requirement for a successful family the ability to

get the child through school without taint of juvenile delinquency. The most successful of these families had additional qualities — a stable, lasting marriage, happy home environment, success of the child as an adult.

Father Cervantes said that the study, supported by other evidence, revealed that about 85 per cent of American families have found the "success formula" to some extent — or at least aspired to what has been called the orthodox and traditional way of life.

The Cervantes-Zimmerman studies showed that the remaining 15 per cent of the families are those who go contrary to the "success formula," and are severely affected by the strains of modern life. The researchers found a high correlation between this group and delinquency and divorce, leading them to conclude that

about 15 per cent of the nation's families are largely responsible for most of the social problems.

Unsuccessful families were found to come most often from the very high or very low economic brackets, the low income group mainly because of poor physical surroundings and tendency toward broken marriages.

The rich who have unsuccessful families tended to be those who rejected orthodox absolute values, and followed "situation ethics." They tend to surround themselves with friends from a diversity of backgrounds and values. All of this apparently creates an environment of too much diversity, tension. Individuals growing up in such a milieu become unsure of values, confused, dissatisfied, and more likely to succumb to the pressures of the outer society.



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