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APPENDIX: GRANDKIDS NIGHTS EXPANDED

4. DIVERSE IDENTITY

Many potentially successful family events become disasters because of our inability to allow diversity.

Diversity is more easily accepted in our neighborhoods, schools or work centers than in our families. As our world becomes more accessible, and technology provides us information around the globe, we are faced with the necessity to find the path of accepting major changes in our expanding family structure.

We were on a trip and stopped in a small town restaurant for breakfast. The food was great and the conversation was interesting. One lady spoke of her husband she labeled “a fall down drunk” and another spoke of seeking a doctor who spoke “redneck”. Most of the cars were pickups, as local ranchers in boots and hats enjoyed their visit with neighbors and women caught up on all the gossip. We were the odd birds in that nest and enjoyed the unique environment, for a little while.

It is fun to peek into a foreign culture when we can move on to smile about it, or remember the aspects which we found appealing. It is far more difficult to accept differing vocabulary, dress, standards or ambitions within a family unit. As you find diversity in your expanding families, stop, listen and learn. Pretend you are set on “mute”- don’t talk before you find yourself saying the wrong thing. Talking too much or making candid comments is very dangerous. Avoid the temptation to add a little humor by contributing to the problem with fresh dialogue. These mistakes within a family often result in permanent consequences. Recognize the difference between diverse and undesirable. They are not the same. Diffuse negative conversation when you can, avoid gossiping about the problem or sharing information with people who “really should know”. Search for and find every opportunity to speak up with positives.

Friendships may change as you or your friends mature and find less and less in common. You may have little or no desire to attend school reunions or stay in touch with college roommates. Discovering how different you are today from years ago may lead to changing courses, making different choices or changing priorities in many ways. Families who want to remain close cannot accept this course. In family, you can’t watch differences and circumstances cause friction and despair. Giving up is not an option. In family, we must find solutions for our problems. Accepting diversity should be a vital trademark in a healthy family. Laughing about disagreements or peculiar personality traits is normal and usually expected. When you allow these remarks to grow into dialogue, it is time to diffuse. Take the high road and remember, it may be very, very high. Insert a positive, change the subject, or just quit talking. Do yourself and your family a favor, walk away.

Appreciate the opportunity to know and understand people from different backgrounds. Understand how language, race or background may separate us and look for ways to bring unity.

I lived in a very small mining town in Texas until the college years. Due to the history of mining in the area, my friends and neighbors included families from Italy, France, Germany,

Poland, and Mexico. Each home I entered was decorated by parents who brought their cultural standards from their native land, and most spoke their native language. Invitations to dinner were exciting as every family was so different in tastes and food preparation. I did not realize how fortunate this experience was until years later. Diversity is a wonderful gift, not a handicap and never to be discredited.

Lead the path to find unity through acceptance and love. The mature adult family member needs to set the bar here, and set it high. Model the road to acceptance for the family.

We face our diverse role as parents when our families mature. We realize that we are no longer responsible for what our child does or how they spend their days, yet we *feel* responsible. This realization is both pleasant and frightening and at times terrifying. Our birds are flying, and we do not know their destination. We rejoice as we watch them soar into space. We know they will face challenges we never knew.

With grandchildren, we meet again the feeling of caring without responsibility, of understanding the problem without the freedom to redirect. We felt this when our own children left the nest, and it becomes clearly defined when we are with grandchildren. We know they are a part of us, a result of our creation, yet we are not the parent. This diverse new role is easier in countless ways—we can go home at the end of the day or wave goodbye as they leave. It is also harder as we agonize over decisions made by parents which cause us concern. They changed the rules! They do not seem to remember the standards in our home when they were children. As we witness this, be very careful to assume the change was mutual, not a result of in-law influence. Differences in family expectations can be exciting, and often show mature, adult decisions. Look for the possibilities and if you must reminisce about how things used to be – do it in private after you have returned home.

As disappointments or hardships occur, we feel the pain for our own children and for the grandchildren. A double dose!

Many families live continents apart and frequent traveling may be prohibited by finances, health or other issues. Others face differences in race, nationality, languages, faith, or sexual orientation. Some are living alone after losing a spouse to divorce or illness or death. Some provide housing and stability for a divorced or dependent child and their children. Some work two jobs to support a newly extended family. Many feel as if they are playing hop scotch, trying to find a place to land in the lives of their extended families. Diversity prints a new page of definitions in our modern families. This spread sheet is missing references. The how to do's and why's are absent. We have to fill in the blanks.

Toss your personal pride out the window. Evaluate the challenges and recognize the major obstacles. Try to concentrate on the events which truly matter, and ignore the minor irritations. The volume of the TV, acceptable dress for a night out, or bedtime for the children may become major problems in a family if differing values are not recognized and accepted. Save your energy for the majors.

Many potentially successful family events become disasters because of our inability to allow diversity. Say goodbye with a smile if they leave too soon. Relax and enjoy the moment if they stay too late. Find food if they are hungry and freeze the dessert you planned if they decline.

Keep your focus. Re-define the family unit and hang on to precious relationships. It may not be what you hoped for, and not what you expected. Find value in what is and protect it.

You are not the queen or the king—nor a dictator ruling your empire. Allow your age to mellow your attitude and increase your acceptance. Lower your expectations to avoid disappointments and dwell not on the negatives.

Savor the small victories and keep the bigger picture in your mental frame. If the hair seems too long or is the color of the rainbow, compliment their shoes. If the earrings are inappropriate, or the jeans barely hang on their body, ask about their music or their friends. Avoid stumbling over minor obstacles and save your energies for the distance race. Diverse is not divorce, and it is not disgraceful. It is only different. When two individuals are different, who is to decide which is better, or does anyone need to make this decision? Accept, appreciate, acknowledge problems and announce victories. You and your family will benefit. Families must try harder, for the alternative to success is not acceptable.

Family life today is often complex and challenging. Some face extremely different situations, when parents abandon or leave children in their care, or face divorce, medical problems, financial issues, mental hardships or family problems, which can send your adult child back home with a child for you to co-parent. Statistics show the tremendous increase in multiple family dwellings because of this trend.

Many face these problems valiantly, feeling deeply the pain for their own children, intensified in feelings for their grandchild. They find their way by accepting the situation for what it is, and they make the best of it. They are forced to become a parent again, an older parent complete with all the complications of age. In the process, they lose the role of grandparent and form their own definition for guardians of young children.

All too often, the children involved come burdened with tremendous emotional scars. When they must assume responsibility for these damaged children or become legal guardians to abandoned grandchildren, the landscape of family changes. They know the storms of being a grandparent. They know them intimately.

If you find yourself in a similar situation, you are not alone. Concentrate on the children and their needs. Perhaps God planned for you to be present at this time and ready for this challenge. In the presence of adversity, lies opportunity.

Grandchildren need their grandparents.

