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THE SECRET OF FUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

Researcher and author Maggie Scarf gives advice to families facing today's pressures.

When Maggie Scarf's first, rather weighty book on women and depression became a best-seller, it took everyone by surprise. But Scarf, a journalist and not a psychologist by training, has since won critical acclaim in the form of an award from the respected American Psychological Association.

Next week, when her latest book, (September 1995) Intimate Worlds: Life inside the Family (RANDOM HOUSE \$ 25), is published she will be better prepared. A hefty 100,000 copies are being printed; the publicity blitz includes an appearance this Wednesday on ABC's "Primetime Live" and Thursday on NBC's "Today" show, then a whirlwind 10 city book tour.

In Intimate Worlds, Scarf may well hit a nerve again. The book examines the components of healthy and unhealthy families. Scarf uses what is known in the psychology world as the Beavers scale (a model developed by psychologist W. Robert Beavers) to divide families into five categories from Level 1 to 5, respectively; healthy or optimal, midrange, borderline and severely disturbed or dysfunctional. Basing her opinions on existing theories and her own observations from eight years of interviews with two-parent families, she believes most families fall somewhere in the middle scale.

The book comes at a time when the forces of nature and politics are converging on the subject of family: family ethics, single-parent families, same-sex parents, the impact of the media on families, tax rates for middle-class families - all seem to be issues at the forefront of the national psyche.

Ironically, Scarf is the first to downplay some of what she calls "the hype" about families in crisis.

"In the media now, everybody's interested in how dysfunctional and terrible and wretched life is," says Scarf, 63, who lives with her husband of 42 years in New Haven, Conn. "But they are presenting a somewhat distorted picture. When you go out there, there are also plenty of families that are loving, caring and are doing for their kids what needs to be done."

Early reviews bode well for the book. *Publishers Weekly* calls it an "enlightening report" and a valuable "resource for families trying to improve communication, to deal with anger, frustration and ambivalence."

Excerpts from a recent interview:

Q: What are the key ingredients to the happy, Level 1, family?

The sense that you're allowed to be you and you won't terrify the rest of the family. You can be different, you can kind of question the rules, the rules are more flexible. [This family] needs leaders - the parents have to be a coalition. And you need consistency. [But] the rules can't be written in cement.

Q: What are the common ingredients among unhealthy families?

Often there's just a tremendous lack of humor, a deadly seriousness. You do see more pleasure in each other's company as you ascend the scale. [Also] the rules are never the same

from day to day. There's no clear notion of which behaviors will be rewarded to whose in charge of doing the rewarding. You couldn't run a business the way some families are run.

Q: Can you define a “midrange” family?

It's a well-functioning family, but it's not up there with a sense of joy. It's a family that is pervaded by rules. It's always “you should” and “you ought” - for example; “You ought to keep the house perfectly spotless”; “a good husband spends all his free time with the family.” The system works well except for one thing: It hasn't taken into account that we're all quirky. You might not want to keep your house spotless; your husband might want to spend time with his friends going fishing.

Q: But aren't you creating other problems when you do your own thing?

No. When you get up to the “adequates” and the “optimals,” what you're saying is that “I do this because I want to. I am who I am.” I'm definitely not the kind of person who believes you should “grow” by abandoning your commitments. What I mean is that your own wishes and feelings should be as important to you as others' are.

Q: Do you think there are more healthy families than there seem to be?

Yes. Studies show the “dysfunctional” are like the “optimals” - they're out on one end of the bell curve. If you listened to the media, you would think there is no bell curve, that kids are rotten through and through. This is not a culture that loves children.

Q: What do you mean?

There are more children living in poverty in this culture than in any other industrialized nation. We've got so many working mothers and no decent child-care system. We don't put our money into children. It's almost scandalous.

Q: What about teenagers? Even in your happiest family in the book, the teenagers had negative things to say.

That's just part of adolescence. Teens are making a painful separation from that first intimate world. [Parents] have to set limits.

Q: What strategies have worked in your family?

Just the awareness that if you've come from a difficult background, that you don't play the same drama out. I, as a child of divorce, always was aware that when my oldest daughter reached the age that I was when my parents divorced, I'd have to be mindful that this would be a difficult time for me, when I might be feeling least in control.

Q: If there's a single message to convey from your book, what would it be?

That each of us comes into the world with two basic human needs. One is the need to love, to connect. The other is the need to be the human being one is. A good family helps a person develop both these areas. The family system respects you for who you are and, better yet, enjoys you for who you are.

BY: Carol Clurman in USA WEEKEND: Sept. 29 - Oct. 1, 1995

This is a condensed version of a family diagnostic scale that was adapted for this article by Professor Robert B. Hampson of Southern Methodist University in Dallas. It is important to bear in mind that the results will provide only a rough estimate of family health and competence.