

Happy Families

by

William A. Palmer, Jr.

Tolstoy was wrong, of course. In the opening sentence of his novel *Anna Karenina*, the Russian author asserted that “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” The reality is clearly more complex. Perhaps Tolstoy would have been closer to the mark if he had written that every family, whether happy or unhappy, is unique.

Despite mountains of evidence to the contrary, many people still subscribe to the notion that money can buy happiness. The corollary to such thinking is that every impoverished family is unhappy in its own way. Having just returned from a two-week mission trip to South Africa, my wife was struck by the happiness she encountered there. In a country still coping with the grim legacy of apartheid, where HIV and AIDS are epidemic and most citizens cannot dream of achieving the American standard of living, people were surprisingly happy. They embraced her team with heartfelt warmth and hospitality.

This is not to underestimate the unhappy effects of poverty, whether in Africa or at home. Poverty is not simply an economic issue. Sometimes it is the symptom of a broken family, substance abuse, emotional or mental illness, or educational neglect. Sometimes it is passed down from generation to generation, like some dread congenital disease. But before we blame the poor for bringing their problems upon themselves, it is important to recall that poverty also can be caused by plain bad luck: sickness that strikes without apparent reason, traumatic injuries suffered in accidents or wars, devastation wrought by natural disasters, or a rocky economy that has left millions jobless. Some families, like those my wife encountered in South Africa, manage to cope with economic poverty while

remaining rich in spirit. They are happy. When economic poverty and spiritual poverty intersect, however, the effects are dire. People are unhappy, and their children often suffer as a result.

At the Parent–Child Development Corporation (PCDC) we currently are accepting applications for the fall’s Bridges Head Start classes. This federally funded program is designed to enhance kindergarten readiness for poor children. Admittedly, our eligibility standards are crude; the primary guideline is family income. Yet a paycheck (or lack of one) reveals amazingly little about the quality of a family’s life. It is not necessarily a measure of happiness or unhappiness. It doesn’t tell us whether a child is being loved, encouraged, challenged, or nurtured at home in ways that will contribute to success not only in kindergarten but also in life.

Every one of our Head Start classrooms has three professionals assigned to it: a lead teacher, a teaching assistant, and a family advocate. The job of the family advocate is to serve as a kind of cheerleader for parents (and, frequently, the extended families) of the three- and four-year-old students in our program. It would be nice to think that our family advocates came equipped with magic wands to address all the problems that make people unhappy. Although this hope is unrealistic, the advocate may make a referral, share a suggestion, or simply offer a sympathetic ear to a parent who is struggling and, in so doing, catalyze change for the better. In collaboration with classroom teachers, the advocates strive to achieve that “Aha!” moment---unique for every family---that breaks cycles of poverty and defeatism, making greater happiness possible for parents and their children.

Every family, whether rich or poor, experiences happiness and unhappiness. As we honor our mission statement “to empower families to improve the quality of their lives” through education, advocacy, and support, we at PCDC are working to tip the balance in favor of happiness. It is a happiness not found in

money or possessions but in the richer rewards of effectively nurturing children and fostering safe, stable, and healthy families.

The author may be reached at (804) 843-2289 or wpalmer@pcdcva.org.