

EBOOK SERIES

Your Family Constitution

**INTRODUCTION TO YOUR
FAMILY CONSTITUTION**

www.yourfamilyconstitution.com



Scott Gale

INTRODUCTION TO YOUR FAMILY CONSTITUTION

"A family is a place where minds come in contact with one another. If these minds love one another, the home will be as beautiful as a flower garden. But if these minds get out of harmony with one another, it is like a storm that plays havoc with the garden."

—BUDDHA

BLACK SUNDAY

Mother's Day 2007, our celebration was in full-stride. My wife, two sons and I had just finished up a nice brunch with my parents and headed for the beach. The sun was shining. The sound of breaking waves soothed my soul as we walked on the sand. I felt good. These were the moments I had signed up for when I became a dad. Then my nine year-old son Jack started complaining.

It began with a whine about not going to the tide pools. Then he moaned about having to share a ball with his brother. Finally, he rolled his eyes in objection when I asked him not to go into the water past his knees to avoid getting his clothes wet. I could have overlooked or ignored any of these gripes independently, but the rapid succession with which they came, combined with the thick cloud of tension that already hung over us, had loosened my self-control. In an instant, I exploded.

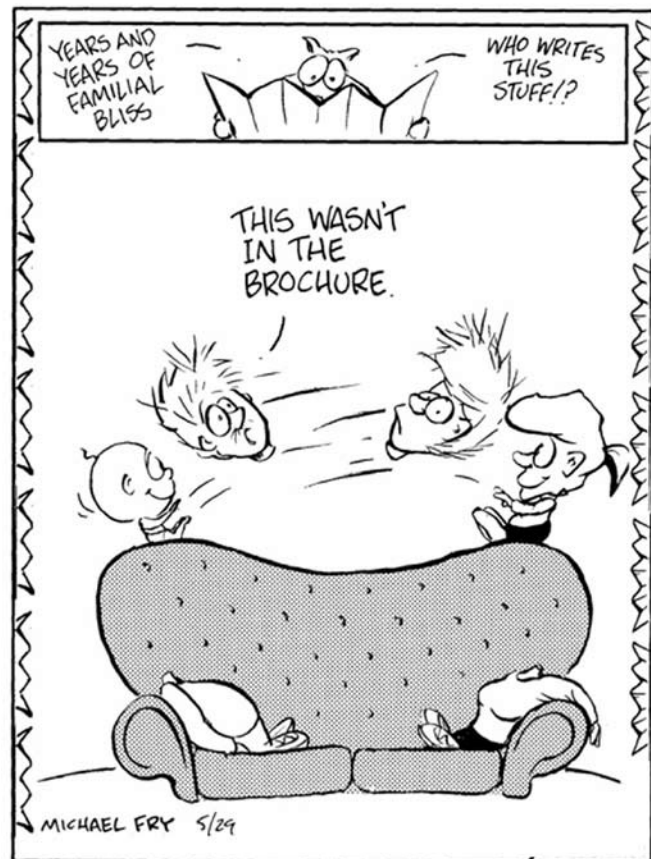
I first reacted by hollering at him to stop his antics. All I got in return was more complaining. I quickly moved on to a series of idle threats in a desperate attempt to end the charade. Other people on the beach were looking at me, wondering why I was shouting “You’re done with TV for a week!”, “You’re going to bed right after dinner!” and “You can spend the rest of the day in your bedroom!” I couldn’t stop. My actions were guided by a very angry autopilot.

My intimidation tactics failed. Jack countered my tyrannical rant with the all-too-familiar “stink-eye” and crossed arms. As the scene escalated, my wife Karen became engaged, visibly upset with both Jack and me. She clearly wanted to put an end to the spectacle. At first she tried to make peace, but promptly moved on to angry protest herself when she realized there was no accord in sight.

By that time, my bridge to reason had collapsed under a flood of emotion. I resorted to name-calling and absurd proclamations such as “Listen here you selfish jerk, we are leaving...now!” and “If you want a ride home, you better shower off and be ready to go by the time we are!” I mixed in a few expletives to punctuate my message. I was losing it.

Jack walked away, feigning refusal to leave with us. Karen stormed towards the car, clearly disgusted, in disbelief of what she had just witnessed. My younger son Max and I silently moved towards the showers to clean our feet. After washing off the sand, I took a brief moment to collect myself.

As Max and I walked to the car, I noticed Jack shadowing us from several paces behind, no doubt wanting to ensure we would not call his bluff and leave without him. He didn’t say a word. He didn’t have to. The hurt and anger on his face told the story.



Finally, we arrived at the car and all got in, including Jack. The tension at that moment was more intense than we had ever experienced together. Karen was frazzled, but decided to drive anyway. She pulled onto the main street and nearly collided with a passing vehicle. My blood pressure notched up to a record high. Once again, I lost it. I yelled at her and criticized her driving abilities.

What happened next is still subject to debate. Considering there was no video replay and no clear account, it's destined to be an unsolved mystery forever. Karen recalls that I asked her to pull over so I could get out of the car. I, however, remember leaving at her request. Regardless of the reason, she stopped the car and I got out. I closed the door and she drove off.

Perhaps I was delusional. Maybe I just underestimated the distance home or the blazing heat. Either way, I started the twelve-mile hike home up Laguna Canyon Road in my flip-flops. I had a cell phone and could have called for a ride. Or, I could have turned around and returned to the beach. Instead, I opted to punish myself with a really long walk.

Karen called me a short while later to see how I fared. The Sunday afternoon traffic towards Laguna Beach was now so horrendous that I couldn't ask her to return and pick me up. Besides, my foolish pride prohibited me from making such a bold request. She suggested a taxi, but I told her I was walking, perhaps vindictively trying to manufacture guilt for her driving off without me.

I walked and walked and walked, succeeding in my quest to punish myself. As if the walk hadn't been long enough, I encountered a park ranger who turned me back as I attempted to shortcut across a private trail towards my home. In the end, it took more than four hours to make the trek. It was worth every second.

THE DAWN OF REALITY

During my long journey home, I spent most of the time contemplating our family situation. Certain things rose to the surface and became clear. I realized that losing my patience with Jack was due to my inability to communicate effectively. I had been trying to shape his behavior through random directives and disciplinary actions. His habitual eye-rolls, verbal push-back and disrespect, which I'd interpreted as innate animosity towards me, had, in reality, been his coping mechanisms for dealing with my lack of clarity.

When I finally arrived home, it was clear we all hurt deeply from what had transpired. But on top of the hurt, there was anger. I felt at fault for the incident, but couldn't shake the resentment, nor could they. It took a day or so before we could begin to forgive and openly talk about the Mother's Day debacle. By that time, I'd already discovered we had underlying issues to settle if we wanted to ensure that we didn't repeat this kind of family meltdown.

I knew it deep inside my heart. Something *had* to change.

THE ROAD TO ROCK BOTTOM

In hindsight, I'm surprised that it took so long for the situation to come to a head. My family had few *clear* rules or *firm* behavioral standards. We had no *consistent* consequences and no *mutual* basis of understanding from which to discuss our challenges. These problems had been in front of me fighting, as Jack and Max inevitably had to dispute who was at fault for getting me mad.

In the wake of Black Sunday, my family problems felt deep and complicated. The solutions seemed elusive. I felt the need to understand our situation. Full comprehension represented the only viable way to mend my wounded family. I wanted to feel like a real dad again, not the angry guy I had become. When I finally took the time to look within, the things I discovered surprised me.

I realized that for 10 years, my wife Karen and I had been continuously juggling three bowling balls: our kids, our personal needs and our careers. It had been exhausting, painful and awkward at times, but too much had been at stake to let any of the balls hit the ground.

The balls grew heavier each year. The kids joined more teams and had more practices. Karen and I each took on more responsibility at work. Birthday parties abounded every weekend. In short, our world got crazier by the moment.

Our sheer determination had enabled us to keep the balls from crashing for a decade, but resolve alone could no longer ensure perseverance. Incremental stresses had slowly mounted to the point where an outward venting of emotion, like Black Sunday, seemed like the only way to purge frustration.

Our love for each other had kept my family intact, but daily pressures had severely eroded our mutual respect and understanding. We urgently needed to change course to avoid irreparable damage. My family had trav-

eled to Rock Bottom with me in the driver's seat. I had no choice but to make a u-turn and try to find the road out.

Rock Bottom was a state of mind for me. I struggled to find satisfaction during my day-to-day interactions with my kids. My pessimism overshadowed my family's many blessings. My negative emotional responses aggravated existing tensions. I dragged the people I loved most down with me. Fear, frustration and anxiety became the staples of family life.

The truth is that I didn't even know we were headed towards Rock Bottom until we had arrived. Throughout this book, I'll share with you the signs and symptoms I recognized in hindsight. If you think you might be on the hidden highway to your own Rock Bottom, hopefully my experiences can help your family reverse course before you get there.

THE NATURE OF OUR DYSFUNCTION

There were multiple layers to the dysfunction which landed my family at Rock Bottom. On the surface there were the abrasive situations (e.g. baseball, Rusty, arguing) that routinely provoked conflict. These *visible* irritants received the blame for our problems, but they were not the root causes.

Beneath the surface lurked my family's *core* issues, ingrained problems that were both hard to identify and painful to accept. I had to understand these deep-rooted challenges if I were to have any hope of addressing our troubles. I needed to examine my family's darkest layers of dysfunction.



Core Issue #1: Lack of Time

What do you get when you cross two working professionals, two active kids and a dog? Chaos! To get off Rock Bottom, I knew I needed to create more time for my kids, my marriage and myself. I desperately wanted to keep up with the necessities of daily life, but could only afford to focus on the hottest fires. As the years went by and the kids got

more involved in activities, the fabric of our family gradually stretched thinner and thinner until it started to tear.

The stress of our constant struggle to keep up took its toll. Communication between Karen and I grew evermore difficult. We were drowning in our own schedules. By Black Sunday, Karen and I were simply too stymied and fatigued to keep the balls in the air any longer.

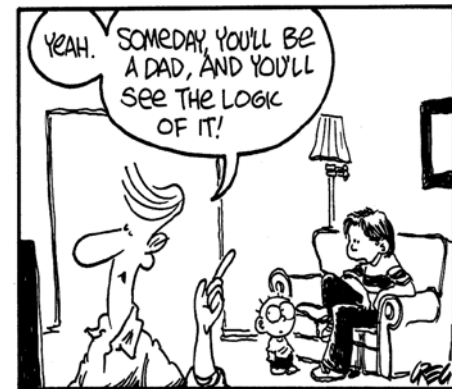
Core Issue #2: Lack of Clarity

My parental expectations had never been clear, not even to myself. In the absence of clarity, I resorted to “thematic parenting.” I used haphazard mandates to encourage nondescript guidelines. I gave Jack and Max varying instructions to reinforce recurrent behavioral “themes.” I suppose I figured my kids could read between my thematic lines and interpret my underlying messages. I was wrong. Confusion ensued.

For instance, I often attempted to get Jack and Max to play outside. My intentions were good. I wanted to encourage my kids to be active. Most Saturdays, I would tell Jack and Max to turn the TV off after breakfast. Sometimes, I would deliver the message after lunch. On weekends when I was worn down or focused on something else, I might let them watch all day.

Jack and Max couldn’t possibly manage their weekend schedules around my whims. My ever-changing mandates never established concrete expectations of when or how much television they could watch. A positive and reliable routine might have helped my boys develop healthy habits. Erratic themed instructions never had a chance.

The kids grew frustrated. They used my mixed messages against me. They argued precedents such as “You let us watch all day last Saturday” to justify more television. I was frustrated by my lack of clarity too. Unfortunately, that was the price I had to pay for substituting “themes” for a clear set of rules.





Core Issue #3: Lack of Consistency

Even for the few rules that were clear (i.e. homework before television), Karen and I had no uniform method to enforce them. We simply did not have the physical, mental or emotional capacity to consistently uphold discipline in the midst of our hectic lives. Our reaction to any given circumstance depended on our current mood, energy level and mental fortitude.

For example, Jack and Max knew they could postpone their bedtime each night by testing mine and Karen’s parental resolve. They would usually open up with a sheepish request to “stay up five minutes longer” or to “finish the show.” When feeling more determined, they might declare injustice or recite the many reasons why we should allow them to stay up. Regardless of their approach, Jack and Max failed to hit the sack, as requested.

Karen and I had a nightly choice to make: concession or combat. Neither option felt right. It boiled down to a question of resolve. Sometimes Karen would take

one approach and I would take the other. I felt like we couldn’t win. At the time, we were painfully unaware of our third option— structure.

Core Issue #4: Lack of Commitment to Improvement

With so many “important” things to get done, my family focused on near-term survival. We never stepped back to reflect. We never tried to evaluate or understand how we functioned as a team. We didn’t recognize the positive impacts such an effort might have.

The kids got older. We all got busier. The problems grew more complicated. The luster of our interrelationships began to fade. We *needed* a force to intervene, but we were painfully oblivious to this fact.

Looking back, my family expended far too much time and effort on battle. We could have re-channeled our energy. We could have taken our eyes off of the “bowling balls” for a moment and focused our efforts on improving our long-term family dynamic.

Unfortunately, my family was caught in a rut. We had become accustomed to confrontation and emotional bruising. Our frenzied pace veiled the urgent need for change. It took the Black Sunday meltdown to enlighten me. Better late than never.

RAY OF HOPE

I have always subscribed to the old adage “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” The aftermath of Black Sunday mentally and emotionally prepared me to address my family’s problems. Under unexpected circumstances, I found the right opportunity to unite with my preparation.

I created my own luck and pieced together a tool capable of picking my family up and putting us back together. I called it the “Family Constitution.” Over time, it became the catalyst for clarity, consistency and commitment in my family. These “3-C’s” became the glue that re-attached us. The Family Constitution would finally enable my family to have the critical structure that we’d lacked for so long.

I knew the journey from Rock Bottom would be demanding, even with our Family Constitution to smooth out the bumps. But for the first time in a while, I held onto sincere hope.

My vision eventually proved to have substance beyond my initial expectations. My family realized immediate forward progress and we have continued to improve steadily ever since. The issues weren’t nearly as complicated as I had originally thought.

The key was taking the time to examine my family’s problems. I investigated our issues from the roots up, first trying to understand myself and my family at a very basic level, then looking at the challenges that plagued us. Once I had diagnosed our ailments and remedied them with structure, the healing commenced and the emotional barriers began to come down.

WHAT'S AHEAD?

My family's set of problems and solutions is unique to us. The exercise of simply reading our rules may spark a few ideas, perhaps even provide solutions to a few common issues. However, as was the case for me during my search for "quick fix" answers, hasty attempts to apply someone else's structure to your own family will inevitably prove to be fruitless.

In the book, I guide you through the process of creating your own Family Constitution. During the journey, I share many personal stories of my successes and failures as a parent. Some are funny, some sad and others just plain weird. Nonetheless, each represents a lesson learned, from which I grew as a dad and a person.

I hope my experiences convince you of the fact that you are not alone in your parental challenges. More importantly, I hope that you can utilize the lessons from my trials and tribulations to make your own family stronger.

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Inside *Your Family Constitution*™ you'll learn...

- The four most overlooked signs that your household is becoming “out of control”...and a step-by-step process for correcting problems and appreciating family time.
- How to determine which important traits you most want to pass on to your children...and how to effectively transfer those qualities in a fun and meaningful way.
- How to assess your emotional availability to your family...and how to make adjustments to ensure you have the time for what matters. An in-depth look at the 3C's (clarity, consistency and commitment) that every family needs to run smoothly.
- Inside tips on how to understand what motivates your kids...and how to use this information to find “win-win” solutions that really work.
- Ten fun and healthy activities that your family members can enjoy together...that don't need to be plugged in.
- The keys to anticipating “big kid” and teenage issues...and a method to solve challenges before they become topics of concern.
- Common symptoms of entitlement in today's youth culture...and how to teach your child the difference between “learn” and “deserve” before it's too late.

Thank you again for taking interest in *Your Family Constitution*.

Sincerely,



Your Family Constitution

“Enjoy Parenting to the Fullest and Raise Great Kids”