

chapter two

Keeping Family Ties from Pulling Strings

Sometimes you'll get so far away from your family you'll think you're outside its influence forever, then before you figure out what's happening, it will be right beside you, pulling the strings.

— Peter Collier

I (Leslie) will never forget the day my mom reported me missing. It started like any other day when I was in kindergarten, with one exception. As she helped me get dressed we rehearsed a plan, a “serious” plan I was to follow: Immediately after school I was to walk home, let myself into the backyard, and play there until she came home. Mom was almost always home for me when I returned from school, but on this day she and Dad both had unavoidable appointments, leaving me home alone for a few minutes that afternoon.

The day at school passed agonizingly slow as I rehearsed the plan in my mind. When the final bell rang, I hurried home, eager to please Mom by following her instructions. But just as I stepped onto the sidewalk in front of my house, Mrs. Magee, our next-door neighbor, came running. “Leslie,” she said, “your daddy just called and he wants you to come to my house until he gets home.” So I followed Mrs. Magee into her kitchen and played with some dolls while she baked cookies.

As the first batch of cookies was cooling, we heard a piercing siren and ran to the windows. There, next door in my own driveway, was

Mom, frantically waving a photo of me and sobbing as she talked to a police officer. Just then, my father's car came screeching into the driveway. Before I could run to my mother, Dad was explaining that I was safe, that he had made arrangements for me to wait with Mrs. Magee next door.

"Why on earth didn't you tell me?" my mother shouted at Dad. She scooped me up brusquely and carried me inside where she and my dad had the worst fight of my entire childhood. All I could do was stand helplessly by—knowing I was the cause. It was the single most horrifying moment of my first five years.

Who would think that such an early event would have such lasting repercussions? But it did. In fact, it still does. The first time I became consciously aware of how this early event impacted my life was during our second year of marriage. We were living in southern California, going to graduate school. On this occasion, I was to pick Les up at Los Angeles International Airport, something I had never done. And when I arrived at the pre-established spot, just under the United sign, Les was nowhere to be found. I panicked. *I must have misunderstood. He's going to be so upset with me. But he should have been more clear. I feel like such an idiot.* A shower of negative and anxious thoughts came over me. I'm generally an easy-going person who can roll with the punches, but I was losing it.

A few minutes later, Les showed up with a smile on his face like nothing had happened.

"Where've you been?" I demanded.

"Oh, I thought we were meeting on the lower level," he explained.

"Well, I'm never picking you up again!"

"What's wrong?" Les asked, wide-eyed and confused.

I couldn't answer because I didn't know. I just teared up as we circled out of the airport in silence.

This wasn't the first time this seemingly inexplicable anxiety had struck. But it was the first time I ever saw the connection to what happened when I was five years old. As we drove from the airport back

home to Pasadena that day, Les patiently and compassionately helped me unpack my feelings (after all, he was studying to be a psychologist!). We talked about other times we'd had minor miscommuni-

cations that led to painful misunderstandings. And we talked about "the first time" I'd ever experienced these intense feelings. That's when the light went on. For more than two decades, invisible strings had been tied to my feelings and played me like a puppet. The miscommunication I witnessed between Mom and Dad when I was five had left such a powerful imprint on me that any similar situation could trigger an onslaught of needless negative feelings. This phenomenon is what psychologists mean by "emotional baggage," and no matter how healthy our home, we all have it.

How could it be otherwise? No other relationship shapes who we are more than our family. Most of what we think, feel, say, and do is in response to the home we grew up in. On the conscious level, we either buy into or reject the lessons learned from our family. And on an unconscious level, through a kind of osmosis, we absorb ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Either way, we can't escape its influence. From the career we choose to the person we marry, from the politics we support to the values we live by, every conceivable aspect of our lives is influenced by family—whether we know it or not.

Our family is like a classroom where we learn the skills and knowledge that will one day enable us to live outside it. Our families teach us to trust or distrust the people around us, to speak up or stay quiet in a social setting, to give or to take. They teach us what kinds of feelings are acceptable, appropriate, and tolerable. "It is in the family," says Theodor Lidz, "that patterns of emotional reactivity develop and interpersonal relationships are established that pattern and color all subsequent relationships."¹ Did you catch that? Our family sets the pattern for all other relationships.

Whoever said that death and taxes are the only inevitable things in life was overlooking an obvious third one: family.

—William J. Doherty

We therefore dedicate this chapter to understanding the lessons, both conscious and unconscious, you learned at home—and whether those lessons will prove useful in relating to others. By the way, once I understood the connection between my moments of anxiety and the incident of miscommunication when I was five, I was able to dismantle my irrational panic and keep it from wreaking havoc on my relationships. And when it comes to your family ties pulling your strings, you can do the same. So we begin by briefly exploring how your family teaches relationship lessons (both good and bad). We then focus on the “three Rs” your family taught you and how you can use them to your greatest advantage. We conclude this chapter with a special message to anyone whose parents have gotten divorced.

THE COMPELLING POWER OF YOUR ORIGINAL KIN

We all started off in some sort of family. Perhaps yours was the typical American family with 2.3 kids, a mom, and a dad. Perhaps you were raised by your older sister or your grandparents. Perhaps you haven't seen your father for twenty years. Perhaps your mother became both mom and dad to you. Or maybe yours was a blended family with step-brothers and sisters. Whatever your family portrait, typical or not, it's had a powerful imprint on you since day one. Literally. Learning begins in life's earliest moments and continues throughout childhood.

Consider a baby who wakes up at three in the morning. Her mother hears her crying down the hall and comes in to tenderly comfort and nurse her. For thirty minutes or more the mother holds the baby in her arms, rocks gently back and forth, and gazes affectionately into the infant's eyes. She tells the baby she's happy to see her, even in the middle of the night, and then hums a sweet lullaby. Content in her mother's love, the baby soon drifts back to sleep.

Now consider another newborn who also awoke crying in the wee hours. But this baby is met instead by a tense and tired mom. Earlier that evening she and her husband began a squabble during dinner that turned into a fight just before going to bed. The baby starts to tense up the

moment the mother pulls her from the crib. "Come on, kid, let's get it over with," she says in exasperation. As she nurses the baby, the mother stares stonily ahead and mulls over the cross words with her husband. The baby, sensing her tension, squirms, stiffens, and stops nursing. "You got me up for that?" the mother says sharply and abruptly puts the baby back in the crib and stalks out. The baby cries herself to sleep.

These two scenarios are presented in a clinical report as examples of the kinds of interactions that, if repeated over and over, instill very different approaches to life and relationships.² The first baby is learning that people can be trusted and counted on to help, and that she can be effective in getting help. The second baby is finding that no one really cares, that others can't be counted on, and that efforts to get help usually fail. Of course, most babies experience a mix of both kinds of interactions. But to the degree that one or the other is typical of how parents treat a child over the years, basic emotional lessons are imparted about how to interact with others.

We were recently invited to the home of a couple who had just installed a brand-new video game for their five-year-old son, Wesley. We sat in their living room after dinner so they could show us how it worked. What we saw next, however, revealed more about their family than it did about their new toy.

Wesley started to play while his parents, almost instantly, displayed overly eager attempts to "help" him. "Not so fast, honey. More to the right, to the right!" his mother shouted. Her urgings were intent and anxious. Wesley stared wide-eyed at the video screen, trying to follow her directives.

"You've got to line it up, son," the father chimed in. "It won't work unless you have it in line, and you've got to get ready to shoot." He started to grab the controls from Wesley but then suddenly jerked his own hands away and clasped them behind his back as if to say *I'm not going to interfere*.

The shadow cast by the family tree is truly an astonishingly long one.

— Maggie Scarf

Wesley's mom meanwhile rolled her eyes in frustration. "Now, you've got to move it to the left. You're not doing the stick right ... stop. Stop. Stop!"

Wesley bites his bottom lip and hands the controls to his dad. At this point, Mom and Dad start bickering about how to work the game as Wesley's eyes well up with tears.

They fiddle with the game for a while until the father gives up and tosses the controls to his wife. "Here, you do it," he says. "Hey, where'd Wesley go?"

These are the moments where deep lessons are taught. Not intentionally, mind you. But taught just the same. And what did Wesley learn? Most likely, that he's incapable of doing things himself, that it's hard to please people, and that his feelings don't really matter. All that from a single incident with a video game? Not exactly. But if similar moments are repeated again and again over the course of his childhood (where Mom and Dad are routinely overbearing, raise their voices in exasperation, and lose their patience), a clear and enduring message is sent.

The point is that small exchanges between you and your family had emotional subtexts, and the messages, if left unexamined, will last a lifetime and shape every relationship you try to cultivate. For this reason, we turn next to helping you uncover the unconscious lessons you learned and the unspoken messages they reveal.

➡ Exercise 5: How Healthy Is Your Home?

Every family has a different emotional climate with differing patterns of relating. And while no family is perfect, some are more harmonious and well-functioning than others. This exercise in the *Relationships Workbook* will help you assess your own family functioning and thus determine areas of growth.

THE THREE R'S EVERY FAMILY TEACHES

It would be so convenient if the lessons our family taught were filed in an old family trunk locked away in the attic. We'd lift out a dog-eared journal containing the lesson plans and customized curriculum our parents knowingly and unknowingly used. We'd peruse our personal transcripts to discover the courses we'd unconsciously taken: "Feelings We Don't Talk About in This Family," "The Way We Avoid Arguments," "How We Express and Don't Express Intimacy," "Advanced Blame Shifting," and so on.

Unfortunately, discovering just what you learned from your family is not quite that easy. But it doesn't have to be terribly difficult either. Generally speaking, the lessons you learned from your family are the result of three Rs: (1) the rules they reinforced; (2) the roles they asked you to play; and (3) the relationships they modeled.

Family Rules

Each family has its own unique set of rules. And while family rules may be explicit, they are more often unspoken, operating outside the conscious awareness of every family member. No one may say, for example, "Never ask anyone for help," but the rule is unconsciously articulated and formed from picking up subtle and not-so-subtle attitudes. Hearing family stories about how brave Uncle John was to go it alone or how silly someone else was to have to depend on others, for example, can be a way of saying "you should do the same."

Family rules unconsciously guide individuals by describing what family members should do and how they should behave, even if they fly in the face of a person's real desires.

Julie, an intelligent, enthusiastic woman in the first year of an M.A. program, was dating Steve, who had his sights set on being an actor. Steve quit high school in his senior year to play a few bit parts in some local productions, but he was now struggling to make ends meet while working part-time as a waiter. Julie and Steve had been out about a dozen times, and the relationship was getting serious. Julie loved

Steve's wit and carefree spirit. With Christmas coming up, they were discussing their holiday plans when Julie found herself—without any forethought and almost against her will—blurting out, “I don't think we should keep seeing each other.” Out of nowhere, it seemed, she was calling it quits. She was as baffled as Steve, but stuck to her decision. Without explanation, her mysterious proclamation was the catalyst for a very sour breakup.

After the holidays, Julie came to my (Leslie's) office, heartbroken, depressed, and confused. She relayed her story and confessed, “I don't know why I did that. He was a great guy, and now he thinks I'm psycho.” The more we pressed for an explanation the more apparent it became that Julie really didn't want to break up with Steve, but for whatever reason, she felt compelled to do so. And this wasn't the first time she'd broken up with someone without a good reason. That's when we began exploring her family history.

As we talked, I asked an exploratory question: “Julie, who among your circle of family and friends is especially invested in your dating decisions?”

“It's funny you should ask that,” Julie said. “My father has never expressed interest in the guys I date, but I think he's the most invested. In fact, I'm scared to death he won't approve.”

As we explored her family background, it became apparent that an unspoken family rule was at the root of Julie's decision to break up with Steve. Her father was a disciplined, hard-driving physician who ruled with an iron fist. He was kind but reserved, and rarely intimate, vulnerable, or warm. A series of exercises revealed rule number one: “Never confront your father and always, always attempt to please him.” A close second was “No matter what else you do in life, get a good education.” These unspoken rules may seem obvious to you and me as outsiders looking in, but they were a flash of insight to Julie. All of a sudden she saw why she was drawn to Steve, but at the same time didn't want the relationship to progress too far. She was testing her boundaries with her father. As a young adult she felt compelled to please him but wanted

to be her own person too. Once Julie raised her awareness of the unspoken rules she was operating by—the rules her family unknowingly perpetuated and instilled in her—she was more able to make conscious, intentional decisions about her life and her relationships. In fact, last I heard, Julie explained her insight to Steve, and they were dating again.

What about you? What unspoken rules does your family live by? Here's a sampling of the ones we hear most often:

- Don't reveal your true feelings.
- Never hide your emotions.
- Always get your point across.
- Never raise your voice.
- Do everything you can to win an argument.
- Compromise whenever you can.
- Trust others only after they've earned it.
- Never call attention to yourself.
- Let others know your accomplishments.
- Put on a happy face.
- Always be genuine.

The list could go on and on, but what really matters is what is on *your* list. Take a moment to think about the unspoken rules your family lives by and how they continue to influence you. Exercise 6 in the workbook will guide you in this process.

◆ Exercise 6: Uncovering Unspoken Rules

This exercise in the *Relationships Workbook* will help you become aware of the rules you live by. Once they are uncovered, you can then consciously incorporate these rules into your life or choose to transcend them. Either way, your heightened awareness of how your family has shaped you will make your relationships healthier.

Family Roles

Jeff, a twenty-something college graduate came into my (Leslie's) office unannounced. He had been a student of mine a few years back, and I knew he could always be counted on for a little levity.

Long before birth, even before we are conceived, our parents have decided who we shall be.

—Jean-Paul Sartre

"Hey!" I said as he appeared at my door, "what's the joke of the day?"

"No jokes today, Doc."

Jeff was notably different as we had a bit of idle conver-

sation. Then tears began to well up in his eyes. He dropped his gaze, and we sat together silently for a few seconds. With a deep sigh, Jeff then revealed that his older brother—who was on a fast track in a very successful career—had been recently killed in a car accident. Suddenly, the happy-go-lucky Jeff, who had been content with his retail job at an outdoor equipment supplier, felt the mantle of "oldest and only son" falling on his shoulders. Now that Jeff's role in the family had changed, everything about his future looked different.

Birth order and sibling dynamics are significant factors in shaping one's role in the family. How we act has a lot to do with our family constellation: whether we are oldest or youngest, male or female, and so on. The point is that roles played out within the family, just like unspoken rules, often develop into lifelong patterns of behavior that influence every other relationship.³

Before his brother's death, Jeff's role in the family was as a fun-loving, carefree youngest child. But the death of his brother had redefined the boundaries of Jeff's role in the family and created an identity crisis. Suddenly, Jeff looked at all of life differently. His career, his putting off marriage, and his dreams were changing because his perceived role in his family had changed. He now felt much more responsible.

Have you given much thought to your role in the home you grew up in? What part did you play in your family's drama? Consider the following roles to help you more accurately pinpoint your part. Which

one comes closest to describing you in relationship to the rest of your family?

- Problem-solver: Always ready with a solution.
- Victim: Pulling compassion and sympathy from others.
- Rescuer: Diving into situations for somebody else's safety.
- Comedian: Ready with a joke for comic relief.
- Mediator: Serving as a bridge between others.
- Confronter: Facing reality and calling it as you see it.
- Healer: Administering healing to emotional wounds.
- Secret-keeper: Holding a confidence tight and safe.

Maybe a label that is not on this list better describes your role. Whatever the case, you may find it helpful to identify other family member's parts. This will help you more clearly define your role. So review the list again and try to determine what role each member of your family played. By identifying your role in the family, you will become more empowered to fulfill it if you choose, or carve out a healthier pattern if need be.

Family Relationships

Perhaps the most powerful method our family has of teaching relationship lessons is by example. "Monkey see, monkey do," as the saying goes. There's really no way around it. We learn how to feel, how to think, and how to act by observing others in our home. And we learn the relationship skills that will either help or hinder the relationships we have as adults.⁴ Consider the following.

Ron's mother had a stroke when he was twelve. Her energy was nearly depleted, and she was unable even to dress herself. Ron watched his father support her emotionally and in countless physical ways.

Bethany, fifteen, and Bret, ten, live in a family where both parents find it very difficult to express their emotions. There is virtually no touching between parents and children apart from a brief good-night kiss.

Anthony was raised in a demonstrative family where everyone had the right to be angry, shout, and point a finger. No one really listened or tried to make sense of the outbursts; it was just his family's way of "letting off steam."

Do you think Ron, Bethany, Bret, and Anthony will adopt their family's patterns of behavior? You can almost count on it. Everyone of us grew up in a home where ways of relating were modeled. We absorbed ways of expressing affection and anger, of talking and listening, of burying conflict or resolving it. In short, we absorbed ways of interacting.

The family is our refuge and springboard; nourished on it, we can advance to new horizons. In every conceivable manner, the family is link to our past, bridge to our future.

— Alex Haley

I (Les) was blessed to grow up in a loving home with lots of care and affirmation. I got along well with my two older brothers, and we always knew Mom and Dad loved each other. But in all my growing up years, I rarely saw Mom

and Dad express much affection in public. At home, they might kiss, hug, or hold hands from time to time, but not all that often and certainly not in public.

I never thought about this much until one day when Leslie and I were in college and dating. We were standing in line for dinner at the campus dining hall and she kissed me. Not a quick peck on the cheek. She planted a big smack right on the lips—with people all around! I couldn't believe it. I felt my face turn red and I was mortified, but I didn't say anything at the time. I just laughed nervously and suddenly became concerned about why the food line wasn't moving faster.

Well, you can probably guess what our conversation that night over dinner was about. Kissing in public didn't fit my repertoire of modeled behavior. It wasn't in my family's lesson plans. And as a result, it's taken Leslie and me a while to negotiate the issue. Believe it or not, after more than a dozen years of marriage, I'm still not that crazy about kissing in public. All because Mom and Dad didn't model this

when I was growing up? Probably. “We are, in truth,” wrote English statesman Lord Chesterfield, “more than half what we are by imitation.”

What did you learn about relationships from the models you had at home? What did you learn about expressing affection or resolving conflict? Exercise 7 will help you see just how important your parents’ style of interaction is to your own.

◆ Exercise 7: Lessons Learned from Mom and Dad

A sixteenth century proverb says, “Example is better than precept.” No matter how healthy your home, you learned by example and absorbed deficient as well as helpful ways of interacting. This exercise in the *Relationships Workbook* will cause you to take a second look at what you might be taking for granted.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The goal of this chapter is to heighten your awareness of just how powerfully your family has shaped your relational readiness through the three Rs: the rules they reinforced, the roles they asked you to play, and the relationships they modeled. There is a school of thought that says “awareness is curative.” And while that may be true in many cases, just being aware of your family’s relationship lessons is not always enough to help you transcend them. A pursuit like this runs the risk of two potentially negative side effects, and it’s only fair that we point them out.

The first potential side effect is that you would take your new awareness only halfway. That is, that you would recognize the imprint your family legacy has left on your life and then leave it at that. We fear that you might take a helpless stance and allow your background to direct your future, thinking there is nothing you can do about it. Like the old joke about the farmer who sees a man on a horse swiftly galloping by and calls out, “Hey, where are you going?” The rider turns around and shouts back, “Don’t ask me, ask my horse.”

