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Introduction

Since the early days of the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC), we have been consistently asked to catalog and provide “quick reference” materials that pastors and counselors could easily access for the variety of issues they face. This second volume on marriage and family issues—and all the volumes in this series—is our response to that legitimate call. Topics for the quick-reference guides are:

- Personal and emotional issues
- Marriage and family issues
- Issues in human sexuality
- Teenager issues
- Women’s issues
- Singles issues
- Money issues

We are delighted to deliver to you this volume, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Marriage and Family Counseling*, and trust that God will use it to bring His hope and life to millions of believers throughout America and the world to whom the continually growing membership in the AACC minister.

Everywhere we look in this new millennium, we find people who desperately need God’s touch, who cry out constantly for His gracious care. The mind-boggling advances in every professional and scientific field have stoked, along with a multibillion-dollar advertising blitz, the false expectation that we can “have it all, and have it all now.” This only reinforces the aching “hole in the soul” that so many suffer in the midst of our material abundance and intensifies the stress that we all live under in our 24/7 socio-cultural landscape. Does an authentic remedy really exist?

Since you are reading the introduction to this book, you have likely been called to counseling ministry, to a work of authentic caregiving. You have been called and are likely trained to some degree to deliver care and consolation to the many broken-down and brokenhearted souls living in your church and community. You will find this book and this entire series most helpful if you have been called to remind others that “the Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are
crushed” (Ps. 34:18 NLT). He has chosen you as a vessel for delivery of His special grace; you have both the privilege and the responsibility to deliver that care in the most excellent and ethical way possible.

There are a number of critical attributes that you need to exhibit toward others if you are called to intervene in someone’s most needy of times—if you are called to “bear one another’s burdens” in a way that will “fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). The first characteristic is something you have as a result of God’s Spirit working in you and transforming your heart and mind—something that this book cannot give you but can only enhance if you already have it. This is a spirit of authentic kindness—the kindness that draws others to you automatically because they sense that you really do care.

This also reveals a compassionate empathy that can deeply relate to others because you too have walked a path of suffering and pain and yet have not turned bitter or cynical. Instead, you have learned to trust God in everything—especially in those things of life that you would not choose to suffer. You have found God to be faithful to you and yours, and you know Him (which is distinct from merely knowing about Him) to be loving and wise and strong and kind. You have truly come to know that “God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us” (2 Cor. 1:3–4 NLT). And if you consistently deliver this comfort and care with integrity, you are a trustworthy servant in whom God delights and blesses in all that you do.

Added to the twin characteristics of authenticity and empathy are the twin requirements of knowledge and skill—something this book can help deliver to you more directly. The knowledge base of biblical and theological studies, combined with the behavioral and social sciences, is advancing far faster than anyone can keep up with in the twenty-first century. Therefore, we have culled from this burgeoning data the most critical and relevant facts and contextual clues that you should know for each of the forty topics that make up the content of this and all the books to follow. Finally, the eight-step outline we follow in every chapter will shape your thinking and mold your process so as to increase your skill as a counselor, in whatever role you do such work.

THE THREE LEGS OF HELPING MINISTRY

We have written these books to apply to every leg of our three-legged stool metaphor. We advance the idea that the helping ministry of the church is made up of pastors, who serve in a central case-managing role, as the client nearly always returns to the role of parishioner; of professional Christian counselors, who often serve many churches in a given geographic area; and of lay helpers, who have been trained and serve in the church in individual or group leadership roles.

People serving at all three levels must develop both the character and servant qualities that reflect the grace and truth of Christ Himself. God has also distributed His gifts liberally throughout the church to perform the various ministry tasks that are central to any healthy church operation. For no matter how skilled or intelligent...
or caring we are, unless we directly rely on the Spirit of God to work in us to do the ministry of God, our service will not bear kingdom fruit. He will bring to us the people He wants us to help, and we must learn to depend on Him to touch others in a supernatural way—so that people exclaim, “God showed up (and miracles happened) in that counseling session today!”

**Pastor or Church Staff**

*If you are a pastor or church staff member, virtually everyone sitting in your pews today has (or soon will be) touched by addiction, divorce, violence, depression, grief, confusion, loneliness, and a thousand other evidences of living as broken people in a fallen world. This guidebook will help you:*

- deliver effective counseling and short-term help to those who come to you with their issues
- teach others and construct sermons about the leading issues of the day with which people struggle
- provide essential resources and materials for staff and lay leaders in your church to advance their helping and teaching ministries

**Professional Clinician**

*If you are a professional clinician, licensed or certified in one of the six major clinical disciplines, you are likely already familiar with most of the topics in this book. This book will assist you best to:*

- review the definitions and assessment questions to use in your initial session with a new client
- understand and incorporate a biblical view of the client's problem
- shape your treatment plans with some of the best principles and resources available
- deliver information to your clients that best helps them get unstuck and move forward more resolutely with the right thinking and focused action of this treatment process

**Lay Helper or Minister**

*If you are a lay helper or minister, this book will guide you in planning and delivering the best care you can from beginning to end. We recommend that you read through the entire book, highlighting the material most useful to you in either individual or group formats. This guide will best help you to:*

- understand and accurately assess the person's problem
- guide your discussions and delivery of helpful suggestions without assuming too much control or yielding too little influence
• remind you of key principles and guide you in the process of moving from problem to resolution more effectively
• remind you of the limits of lay ministry and assist you in making constructive referrals to others more trained and able to help

USING THE QUICK-REFERENCE GUIDE TO MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELING

You will notice that we have divided each topic into an outlined format that follows the logic of the counseling process. The goal and purpose of each of the eight parts is as follows:

1. Portraits. Each topic begins with a number of little counseling vignettes that tell a common story about people struggling with the issue at hand. We have tried to deliver stories that you will most often encounter with the people you serve.

2. Definitions and Key Thoughts. This section begins with a clear definition of the issue in nontechnical language. Then we add a variety of ideas and data points to help you gain a fuller understanding of the issue and how it impacts the lives of and may harm the people who struggle with it.

3. Assessment Interview. This usually begins by suggesting a framework with which to approach assessment and is followed by a series of specific questions to ask to gain a more complete understanding of the client's problem. There may be a section of "rule-out questions" that will help you determine whether referral to a physician or other professional is needed.

4. Wise Counsel. This section usually presents one or more key ideas that should serve as an overarching guide to your intervention—wise counsel will help you frame your interventions in a better way. These key insights may be directed to the clinician or pastor but they are useful to all three types of helpers we have noted above and will give you an edge in understanding and working with the person(s) in front of you.

5. Action Steps. This section—along with wise counsel—will guide you in what to do in your counseling interventions. It allows you to construct a logical map that can guide you and your client from problem identification to resolution in a few measured steps—always client action steps (with specific instructions to counselors noted in italics). For without a good action plan, it is too easy to leave clients confused and drifting rather than moving in a determined fashion toward some concrete goals for change.

6. Biblical Insights. Here we provide relevant Bible passages and commentary to assist you in your counseling work from beginning to end. Embedding the entire process in a biblical framework and calling on the Lord's power to do many things we cannot do solely in our own strength are essential to doing authentic Christian counseling. You may choose to give your clients some of these verses as homework—ask them to meditate on them and/or memorize them—or you may want to use them as guides for the intervention process.
7. **Prayer Starter.** While not appropriate with every client, many Christians want—and even expect—prayer to be an integral part of your helping intervention. You should ask each client for his or her consent to prayer interventions. Every client can and should be prayed for, even if he or she does not join you and you must pray silently or in pre- or post-session reflection. Prayer is usually the most common spiritual intervention used in Christian counseling, and we prompt a few lines of good prayer that can serve, in whole or part, as effective introductions to taking counseling vertically, and inviting God directly into the relationship.

8. **Recommended Resources.** We list here some of the most well-known Christian resources and the best secular resources for further reading and study. By no means an exhaustive list, it will direct you to resources that will also reference additional works, allowing you to go as deep as you want in further study of an issue.

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**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The AACC is a ministry and professional organization of nearly fifty thousand members in the United States and around the world. We are dedicated to providing and delivering the finest resources available to pastors, professional counselors, and lay helpers in whatever role or setting such services are delivered. With our award-winning magazine, *Christian Counseling Today*, we also deliver a comprehensive range of education, training, ethical direction, consulting, books, and conference events to enhance the ministry of Christian counseling worldwide.

The AACC provides additional books, curricula, training, and conferences to equip you fully for the work of helping ministry in whatever form you do it. While some of these are noted in section 8 in every chapter of this book, some additional resources for your growth might also include:

*The Bible for Hope: Caring for People God’s Way* by Tim Clinton and many other leading contributors (Thomas Nelson, 2006).

*Competent Christian Counseling: Foundations and Practice of Compassionate Soul Care* by Tim Clinton, George Ohlschlager, and many leading contributors (WaterBrook Press, 2002).

*Caring for People God’s Way* (and *Marriage and Family Counseling* and *Healthy Sexuality*—upcoming books in the same series), by Tim Clinton, Arch Hart, and George Ohlschlager (Thomas Nelson, 2005).

Light University also provides various church and home-based training courses on:

- Caring for People God's Way
- Breaking Free
- Marriage Works
- Healthy Sexuality

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Introduction

Extraordinary Women
Caring for Kids God’s Way
Caring for Teens God’s Way

Please come online at either http://www.aacc.net, http://lightuniversity.com, or at http://ecounseling.com to consider other resources and services delivered by AACC for the growth and betterment of the church.
Disaffection—When Love Grows Cold

PORTRAITS

• When Elvis and Mary were newlyweds, they seemed to be in a constant state of bliss. But lately they seem different. Elvis is curt and confrontational with Mary. Mary is cold and condescending toward Elvis. They try to keep smiles on their faces in public, but you sense the anger that emanates from both of them. You approach them to ask if everything is okay.

• When Karen decided to take the job at the attorney’s office, Ryan flipped out. “Who’s going to take care of the house—it’s an old house and needs upkeep. And I need you to look after my parents during the week!”

Karen retorted, “I told you I was going to look for a job. This should be no surprise to you!”

• Last year, if Tom forgot to take out the garbage, Beth would have laughed about how absentminded her husband is. But for the last six months, things between them have not been good. There have been more disagreements and arguments than either of them thought possible. This morning when Beth noticed that Tom had forgotten to take out the garbage, she blew up.

DEFINITIONS AND KEY THOUGHTS

• Disaffection refers to the negative transformation of marital love and commitment—the process by which love grows cold and the desire to leave the marriage or hurt one’s spouse replaces former love.

• Often disaffection involves an unintentional severing of emotional ties of love and affection.

• All marriages go through times when love grows cold or lacks the depth it once had. When marriages get into trouble both partners hurt, and many times they can’t even pinpoint what went wrong.

• If people are willing to step back and review their marital story, they will usually find a pattern of thoughts and behaviors that led to the disaffection.

• Since harmful patterns are predictable, couples can work to stop them and save their marriage. More than just keeping their marriage afloat, they can reverse the process and breathe new life into their relationship.
3 ASSESSMENT INTERVIEW

The first step in the counseling process is identifying the patterns that led the couple to a place of disaffection.

Try asking the following questions:

1. How long have you felt disaffection in your relationship? Does it feel as though it is getting worse, better, or staying at about the same level?
2. What expectations do you have of your spouse that are not being fulfilled? Does your spouse know of these expectations?
3. What expectations do you think your spouse has of you? Are you fulfilling them? What would he [she] say about your response?
4. Have you and your spouse agreed on the expectations you have? If you and your spouse do not agree, are you willing to compromise and create a new set of expectations?
5. What stressors or distractions are tearing at your love for each other? Are you willing to devote time and energy to ending any harmful patterns that are in the relationship?
6. Do you believe the marriage can improve? If you woke up tomorrow and everything in your relationship were perfect, what would be different?
7. What are the best things about your spouse? What are the greatest strengths of the relationship? What attracted you to your spouse in the first place?
8. If there are children, what role do they play in your marriage?
9. Are there any things you need to forgive your spouse for? Are there some things your spouse needs to forgive you for?
10. If only one spouse is present: Would your spouse be willing to come in for counseling with you?

4 WISE COUNSEL

Disaffection in marriage is not a mystery, it is a common virus. Interestingly, the process begins with everyday life and pressures. Consider the following examples:

Stress

Some marriages have been battered by life stresses, such as financial troubles, losses, health problems, or overly demanding work schedules. Spouses must deal with stress by considering the demands in life and their ability to cope with those demands. If the demands exceed their ability to cope, the formula spells trouble.

Spouses need to take an inventory of what stresses have been tearing at their relationship since they married. From this list, they must develop a plan for better coping, and stress reduction. For instance, changing jobs to improve a marriage is often a good choice (stress reduction). Hiring an assistant to free up more personal time is also a good option (coping).
Sin and Selfishness

Sin is part of our nature. As Christians, we seek to be victorious over sin but often we fail. Somewhere in the marital story, one or both partners may begin to take advantage of the other. They hurt each other. As Paul wrote, “For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do” (Rom. 7:15). The same often goes for our marriages.

Being honest, seeking forgiveness, and staying deeply invested in one’s spouse is the only remedy.

Satanic Assault

Since Adam and Eve, Satan has had the poison arrows of hell aimed at the intimate bond of marriage. He is the great confuser and ultimate liar. He magnifies people’s weaknesses and fears, using them as wedges in their marriage. Peter described Satan as “a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). And his desire is to take a big bite out of people’s marriages.

Couples need to stay focused on the Lord and pray for their marriage. They need not fear Satan but they do need to understand his tactics and influence. Becoming active members in a healthy and supportive church family is also a great way to remain strong spiritually.

Unrealistic Expectations

The gap between unrealized expectations and reality is filled with disappointment. If people’s expectations for marriage are unrealistic, they are setting themselves up for a fall. A few common unrealistic expectations include:

• “Marriage will complete me.” Some who grew up in unloving homes or some other painful environment may expect marriage to reverse all the negatives they’re carrying into it.

• “My spouse won’t hurt me.” As the first expectation sees marriage as the healing agent, this one sees marriage as the ultimate safe haven. The first experience of hurt, then, is devastating.

• “Life will be easy now.” This is the “happily ever after” expectation of fairy tales. Then every unhappy moment in a marriage brings disappointment and possibly fear.

• “Love will keep us together.” Every time spouses hurt one another, intentionally or unintentionally, love is perceived as increasingly less effective until, in the end, they can say that their relationship just wasn't meant to be.

These unrealistic expectations must be fought with realistic biblical ones. People need to understand that no one is perfect; no one person will ever fulfill all their needs. Only God can do that. No marriage is free from discord, and no spouse is completely unselfish.
Marriage brings together two people who have many human frailties and puts them in such close proximity that every detail of their life is known and every flaw exposed. Hopefully, in Christ, their frailties are strengthened into godly traits. But it takes a lot of humility, grace, and deep forgiveness for a marriage to survive. In other words, it is a lot of work.

**Childhood Scripts**

Many counselors believe that a majority of what drives us as adults happened to us in our early years. These “scripts” written for us long ago are faithfully followed and reinforced as we hold tightly to them. For instance, some people whose parents abandoned them may live as if they expect those they love to abandon them. Such scripts distort reality and drive people to act and react in what could be very destructive ways. These scripts also impact how people give and receive love. Unresolved physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, parental divorce, abandonment, gross failure, and emotional loss need to be dealt with before the Father so they don’t infect one’s marriage.

**Business and Time Pressures**

Relationships and intimacy take time, time to understand, enjoy, and respond to one another, time to satisfy the other’s needs and have one’s own needs satisfied. But with life being lived on the run, as it is today, there is little time—unless couples make the time. To stay close, couples need to schedule time regularly just to be together.

**5 ACTION STEPS**

As you have read, disaffection is a reasonable response to an unreasonable situation. Below are the steps to counter disaffection and restore the marital bond.

1. **Reframe Your Marital Story**

   The first step on the healing path is identifying the series of problems that brought you into the state of disaffection in the first place. This could be any combination of things. Perhaps the pattern includes some of the following:

   - working too many hours and not spending enough quality time together
   - not having a heart of acceptance and love
   - not putting your spouse's needs before your own
   - feeling unappreciated by your spouse
   - having expectations of your spouse that he [she] is unable or unwilling to meet
2. Respond (Don’t React) to Each Other as Christ Would

This step in healing means that you always have a heart of grace and charity—that you are gentle, supportive, and kind to your spouse. This does not mean you have to be a sacrificial lamb without any personal boundaries (see section on Boundaries in Marriage), however. The most supportive and loving spouses give a great deal but they also love themselves enough not to be manipulated, taken advantage of, or abused. Attend to these five tasks:

- Make a new and practical (behavioral) love commitment by investing real time in and attention to your spouse.
- Commit to building a new intimacy with him [her]—spiritual, sexual, emotional, and familial—and start dating once again.
- Reduce your criticism and negative interaction and increase your positive and emotionally invested communication.
- Extend an extra measure of grace, caring, and forgiveness in the near future. Praise your spouse for whatever he [she] is doing right.
- Maintain and respect your spouse’s zone of safety. When you fight, if you fight, back off early, apologize for any harmful words, and give him [her] space to retire and repair before you come back to the troubling issue.

3. Find a Marriage Mentor

Believe it or not, the most stable and strong couples have also gone through dark periods. Hence, it is wise for a couple battling disaffection to learn and gather support from experienced couples who have been there—and who have successfully found their way back. Note: If a couple claims they have never gone through times of disaffection, they are either lying or blind to it. Either way, they are probably not good candidates as a mentoring couple.

4. Have a Pursuable Dream for Your Marriage

Having a dream for your marriage means you have specific goals and expectations that you both share and agree to. For example, your dream may include the answers to the following questions: Is life going to always happen in the suburbs or the city or the country? Who will work? How many children will there be? How much money will the family have? What will our sex life be like? A good premarital counseling program will address these issues and many more—though it is never too late to create a marital dream, and it may be useful for a couple to go back and see if the dream has changed in some ways.

5. Remember What God Has Done

God gives us a spouse so He can work through him or her to create in us an image more like that of Christ. As you work together on your marriage, don’t lose focus on your autonomous personal development. Your sanctification process, of
becoming more like Christ, is crucial, and the marital union should play a constructive, not a destructive, role in it.

6 BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

_The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”_  
*Genesis 3:12 NIV*

In Genesis we see the first dissention between man and woman, when Adam blamed Eve for his sin.  
The “blame game” started early in the Bible. And it is still prominent today. Healthy marriages and individuals accept responsibility for their behavior.

_If you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth, then do this, my son, to free yourself, since you have fallen into your neighbor’s hands: go and humble yourself; press your plea with your neighbor!_  
*_Proverbs 6:2–3 NIV*

Though this passage refers to conflict with a neighbor, the same applies to marriage and family.  
From time to time, we all say things we regret. Though it is best to never have said them, we can minimize the damage by humbling ourselves and asking for forgiveness.

_A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered._  
*Proverbs 17:27 NIV*

Using personal restraint and keeping an even temper are of vital importance in conflict.  
Husband and wife need not raise their voices or make snide remarks to have their arguments heard. As anyone with experience knows, such disrespect only makes conflict worse.

_When a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him._  
*Proverbs 16:7 NIV*

Have you ever heard anyone say, “I don’t like him but I do respect him”? Some people are so honorable in their actions that even their opponents need to give them credit for the way they handle themselves.  
In marriage, if husband and wife can be civil, and honor God in all they do, though they will have conflict (all marriages do), the disagreements need not be ugly or destructive.
PRAYER STARTER

Lord God, we know that all marriages go through times of struggle and disaffection. We confess that most of us have not looked on our marriage or our spouse as You do. Give this couple a new vision for their marriage and new hope for one another. We pray to You that this period of disaffection be brief, and that closeness and joy be restored to their relationship. In Your Son’s name we pray this . . .

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Relocation and Moving

PORTRAITS

• David just got a huge promotion—in California! “But we’ve always been an East Coast family,” his wife says. “That’s going to be a difficult move for us.”

• Becky is a junior in high school. She has a tightly knit group of friends and a firm place on the varsity lacrosse team. Now her parents want to move her to Missouri, where she has no friends and where she’s sure they haven’t even heard of lacrosse.

• The Smiths have done well, so well in fact they are moving into a bigger house. It is definitely needed with the third child on the way, but there are so many memories in this place. Will the kids think this is good news? How will the parents break it to them?

• Tina couldn’t stop crying. She was angry with herself for agreeing to the move and with her husband, Bill, for forcing them to move a thousand miles. She missed everyone—her church, the friends she had grown up with, and most of all her family. She didn’t want to be here and certainly didn’t want to make friends. The phone bill was huge but she didn’t care. She just wanted to go back home.

DEFINITIONS AND KEY THOUGHTS

• Moving can be a way to get a “fresh start.” It can be a chance for families to put a difficult past behind them and begin anew. However, even a small move or a strategic move can be a stressful experience for the whole family. Moving is seldom easy for adults, and it can be especially troubling for children.

• A move may reflect a social step forward. The family moves because Dad or Mom is moving up in his or her career. Or they move because financial success has allowed the purchase of a bigger house in a nicer neighborhood. The parent feels proud because he or she can finally provide a better quality of life for the family.

• To adults, the house they are leaving behind might seem like it was a temporary home. “We’ve only been here six years,” the parents say. But little Sally and Dan, who are six and nine, can hardly remember a time when they have not lived in the comfort of their current home. To children the house is perfect. It represents
Relocation and Moving

safety, comfort, and stability. It is a special place that cannot be replaced by another house with bigger bedrooms or a pool.

- Often moving is unpleasant and involves some major losses for children, especially if they have friends or a social network they need to leave behind.
- Generally speaking, the older a child is the more difficult a move will be on him or her. Preteens and teenagers build extremely important support networks with friends (some studies contend the influence of these social relationships outweighs that of the parents at this particular developmental juncture). These relationships are so important some parents allow their high-school-aged children to remain in the school they are attending and not move with the family.
- For school-aged kids, their biggest concern is usually whether they will make new friends in the new neighborhood. This is especially heightened if they are changing school districts.
- Though parents will need support and assurance, as well as physical help moving, it is even more imperative that kids and adolescents receive help coping with the changes that will occur.

3 ASSESSMENT INTERVIEW

Is the family you are counseling prepared for the move? The following questions will help you assess their progress, preparations, and stress-reduction coping strategies.

1. Are you definitely moving? Who will be moving? Do you know the exact house you will be moving to?
2. Do you have a plan for packing and moving? Do you need to sell your house? If there are children, have they been informed about the move?
3. What will be the best thing about moving? What will be the hardest thing about moving?
4. Will the children need to change schools? Will the children lose contact with their friends? Will the family lose contact with friends or family?
5. Does this move represent a fresh start? Is this move due to a financial or career success or is it because things haven’t worked out where you are?

Is the family you are counseling struggling with adjusting after a recent move? The following questions will help you assess their attitudes and coping strategies.

1. How long ago did you move? What was the reason for your relocation?
2. What has been the most difficult aspect of adjusting? How have your kids (if any) handled it?
3. How has it been trying to make new friends? Have you been able to get connected with a good church?
4. How has the move affected your family relationships? How have you handled the stress?

A divorced parent is more likely to relocate than an intact family. Within four years after divorce, 75 percent of custodial mothers will move at least once and more than half of them will move again.1

Even the most well-adjusted child, even a child who was looking forward to relocating, can find himself or herself quickly overwhelmed and can have trouble adjusting when the move becomes imminent and/or trouble adapting to a new place after the move. Moreover, some youngsters are not able or willing to talk about their stress or duress. Therefore, it is wise for parents to keep an eye open for common warning signs that a child is struggling. These could include:

- a drop in grades
- acting out
- clinging to parents
- crying or emotionality
- difficulty making new friends
- increased or decreased appetite
- irritability
- nightmares or night terrors
- other changes in behavior or personality
- outbursts of anger
- reluctance to leave the house
- sleeping too little or too much
- social withdrawal

**ACTION STEPS**

There are many things families can do to ease the moving process for children involved. The following action steps form a strategy parents can implement before, during, and after the move.

**Before the Move**

1. **Inform the Children as Soon as Possible**
   - Get the kids accustomed early to the idea of moving. If you think a move is in the near future, it is wise to introduce the possibility to your kids in hypothetical terms. You should not say to the children: “We might be moving soon”—which will cause undue anxiety before it is even definite whether a move will happen. Broach the topic in another way. For instance, you could say, “Wouldn’t it be nice if we had a bigger backyard?” or “Wouldn’t it be neat to live closer to the beach?” This will help the kids to begin thinking about how other places might have some advantages over their current location or home. (Parents need not worry about the kids becoming disenchanted with their current place. Kids are generally quite attached to their current home regardless of its disadvantages.)
Relocation and Moving

• When it is certain a move will occur, it is time to tell the whole family. The move should be introduced as a great and exciting blessing, never as something that is going to be negative or sad. Tell only the facts, not what is still uncertain.
• Kids can take in only so much information at one time, especially when it is an emotional topic. Therefore, give the basics: where, when, why it’s great—and then make yourself available for questions. When the kids are ready, they will ask lots of questions.

2. Involve the Kids in the Plans
• If possible, let the kids participate in some of the moving plans. Give the kids choices, but not too many. And they should not be involved in the major decisions, such as which house to buy. The children could want house A, while you might decide to purchase house B. This is not a good way for them to be involved.

3. Help the Children Handle Their Emotions
• As much as possible, shelter your kids from the complications and the stresses of moving. If you tell a child how great the move is going to be, but then you are stressed out or otherwise upset about the moving process, this is confusing to the child.
• There are several things parents can do to help kids become acquainted with the idea of moving. First, create curiosity about the new city or neighborhood where you will be living. For example, parents can show the kids the new house (perhaps just drive by if it’s being built or is occupied), fun places in the new community, or the child’s new school.
• If possible, help the kids make new friends before the move, by meeting new children during trips to the new place or by finding them pen pals.

During the Move

1. Let Kids Help Pack
• Kids, especially younger kids, love to pack. Therefore, you can instill in your kids a sense of ownership in the moving process by involving them in the task. You can always use the extra help, and kids will become excited through the process of boxing their things up, with the knowledge that they will soon be able to unpack and reorganize them.

2. Maintain Close Communication
• Families become so busy during the process of moving sometimes family members forget to talk to each other. This is especially traumatic for children because the first thing they are experiencing during the move—a time of insecurity for them—is that their parents are not as accessible as they used to be.
• Instead of the moving process being a period when you are with your kids less, it needs to be the exact opposite. Spend more time with your children during
this time. In some cases, it may need to be constant, to provide them reassurance that everything is going to be okay.

3. Say Good-bye

• While it is not necessary to overdramatize the process of saying farewell, you should not ignore the need to say good-bye.
• Saying good-bye is an important task for everyone in the family. Encourage your kids to exchange their contact information (address and email) with their friends at school and in the neighborhood. You will want to do the same with the friends you are leaving.
• It may also be a good idea to throw a farewell celebration of some sort.

4. Help Kids Feel Secure

• Allow kids to keep with them a small number of things (in a small box or a carry-on suitcase) on moving day.
• Assign children a special task on moving day (preparing snacks, taking care of pets, games), so they have a responsibility over which they have control. For many children, this will help lower their anxiety and will give them a sense that they are helping out.

After the Move

1. Keep Old Routines

• When families arrive in a new place, life can feel quite chaotic for a while. Immediately try to reinstate some of the old routines. For example, make dinner and eat together. Watch television in the evening (if that’s what you are used to doing), read to the kids and tuck them in at night. Don’t have someone else watch over your kids at night—if possible, try to be there for and with them each night and when they wake up in the morning.

2. Regroup

• After arriving in the new place, it is important to spend some time together and regroup. Check up on one another to make sure everyone is adapting well to the move.

3. Get Involved

• After everyone is unpacked, rested, and situated, it may be time to begin getting involved in the community. Meet the neighbors, the mail person, and other people you will often see. Take young children to their new schools again before they start classes to continue to help them get acquainted with the new environment.
4. Grieve Any Losses

- Someone once said that life is a series of losses. When a family relocation occurs, families gain much, and they lose much. There may indeed be some things every person in the family has lost and needs to grieve—whether it is the closeness of certain friends or a special place out in the backyard that the kids used to spend hours a day exploring.
- Stay in touch with old friends. Invite them to visit.

5. Celebrate Any Gains

- Usually moving involves attaining some major (and minor) benefits that may be merely accepted without much notice. For a time after moving and as an aid to adjust to the stressors that do exist, it does a family good to celebrate.
- Have a party or go out and have a good time together.
- Have each member of the family name one good new thing that has happened to him or her since the move, and have the whole family celebrate.

6. BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle.

Exodus 13:18 NIV

The Exodus story is one of the greatest relocation stories of all time. God took the Israelites out of slavery, and they began a forty-year journey to a promised land.

The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water... and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

Genesis 7:18; 8:4 NIV

Sometimes we move by choice; sometimes we have little choice. Noah is an example of a person who had little choice.

After a long time floating in the ark, Noah found himself and his family landing on the top of a mountain.

Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them,
“Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.” And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Matthew 13:54–58 NIV

Jesus found that to accomplish his mission, he could not stay in his hometown. In fact he found that his place of origin was the least effective place for his ministry.

God’s callings are always God’s enablings!

PRAYER STARTER

For the Family Who Is Moving

We never know where life is going to take us—where You will lead us, Lord. Be with this family as they relocate to a new area. Help with the details, the financial matters, and the logistics of the move. And protect them emotionally and spiritually. In Christ’s name we pray . . .

For the Family Who Has Already Moved

Lord, we thank You that You are the author and controller of our lives. As this family is struggling to adjust to a new home and a new area, give them wisdom in building new friendships. Guide them to a solid church. Give them good times as a family in the midst of unpacking. God, we trust that You will provide everything this family needs. Teach them to rely on You and each other . . .

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


