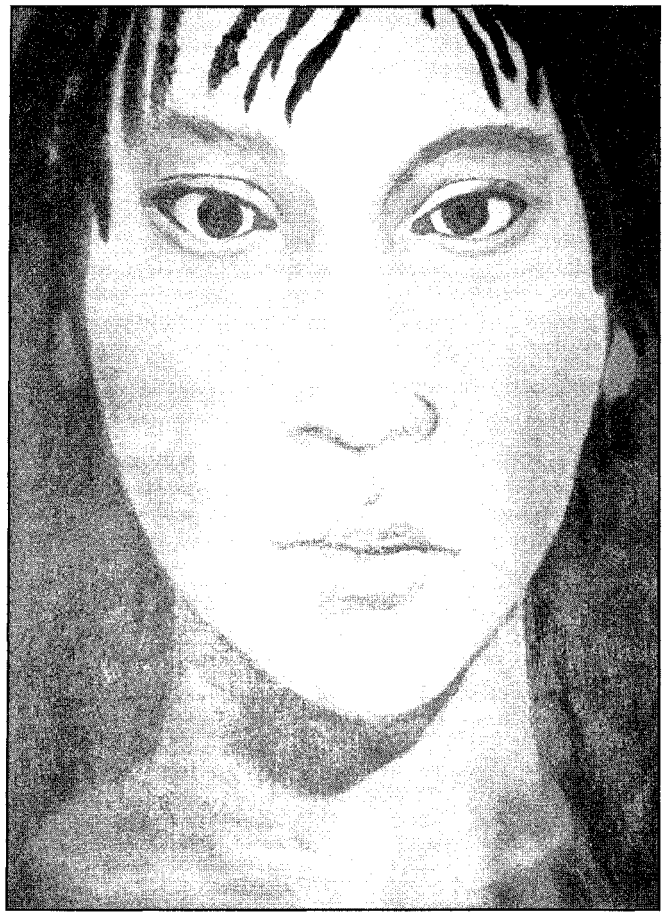
Growing Up Without Family Privilege

John R. Seita

A former youth at risk who is now an expert on youth development introduces the reader to the concept of Family Privilege. Individuals who grow up with this unearned advantage may fail to recognize the degree to which stable families set the stage for their success in life.



"Words Unsaid," Melissa T., Age 17,
Brandon Valley High School,
Brandon, SD. Used with permission.

"The first thing that happened to him was that he was abandoned by the people who were supposed to love him most."
— Will's therapist in *Good Will Hunting*

I too was abandoned. Many times. At age eight, I became the property of the Juvenile Court in Cleveland, Ohio. I was separated from my mother whose lifestyle included excessive drinking, promiscuity, and inner city squalor. Over the next four years, I repeatedly ran away from or was kicked out of a long string of foster homes and juvenile centers. For the most part, I grew up without the privilege of a family. The man I called father was prone to violence. He nearly beat my mother to death, and that marriage ended. I also had a half-brother Jimmy and a half-sister Maria, but the court took them away, too. I wish that I could remember Jimmy and Maria better, but I don't. I have no idea what ever happened to them.

Ours was the world of poverty, alcoholism, deprivation, decay, and madness of the inner city projects. We constantly moved, sometimes living in transient hotels. Often our utilities were disconnected and we went hungry. A report in my case file reads: "When the women's bureau investigated the home, there was no food; there were broken beer bottles strewn on the floor and the place was in a state of utter dishevelment. The mother had been leaving the children unsupervised most of the time. The children were all very undernourished."

On the worst day of my young life, my mother brought us three kids with her in a dirty cab to the court building in downtown Cleveland. She said she had to talk to a judge and told me I was the oldest and should watch over Jimmy and Maria. Some people whom I had never seen before took us from my mother to sit on a wooden bench outside of the courtroom. In a few minutes I heard my mother screaming, "No, no, no, no, no!" I ran to the room and looked inside to see who was hurting her. I saw her lying on the floor rolling around, crying, "I love my babies, please don't take my babies away!" I tried to rush to her aid, but the workers restrained me. I never lived with my family again.

Families on the Edge

Contemporary society is producing packs of kids detached from adults. Some roam wild as "mall orphans," while

others are banished from our schools and communities. Children who do not bond to a caring adult come to believe they are unwanted and unlovable (Bowlby, 1982). The result is anger and aggression, often mixed with shame and depression. They target their rage at adults, who failed to meet their need for love, and at themselves for not deserving that love. Defiant and distrustful, they are society's unclaimed kids. They are forever biting the hand that didn't feed them.

Troubled behavior results when children are deprived of the ingredients for positive development. In a healthy family, children receive emotional nurturance and guidance. In a healthy school, supportive teachers instill academic and social competence. As youth gain independence, their peers provide belonging and healthy values. The broader community also provides positive support and standards through churches, employment, and social organizations. These positive connections inoculate youth against a wide range of risks. But a lack of these positive connections produce what Lisbeth Schorr calls "rotten outcomes" (Schorr, 1989).

In the film *Good Will Hunting,* Will was an unparented youth who grew up in abusive foster homes. We aren't told what happened to Will's family or why he is an orphan and so alone. Maybe Will's parents were killed in an accident. Perhaps his mother was a young, single parent who gave him up for adoption, or his parents simply got divorced and neither wanted Will. Maybe he was taken from his home due to neglect or abuse. Whatever happened, Will is deeply wounded, and his feelings of rejection ooze out of his very being. Will has experienced the deepest of human loss: he is missing the basic kinds of privileges that are provided by stable families and environments.

Family Privilege

Family Privilege is defined as the benefits, mostly invisible, that come from membership in a stable family. Most people cannot even imagine what life might be like without Family Privilege. Only as we recognize the power of Family Privilege can we begin to grasp how its absence hinders development. Bill Buford (1955) notes that family is the essential presence—the thing that never leaves you even if you have to leave it.

Family Privilege is an invisible package of assets and pathways that provides us with a sense of belonging, safety, unconditional love, and spiritual values. With Family Privilege, children observe parents or older siblings to see the effort it takes to be successful in life. Family Privilege provides the chance to hope and to dream.

Parents who provide consistent affection and discipline foster the development of Family Privilege. A variety of stressors, however, can interfere with normal parenting and the growth of family privilege. These stressors include hurried lifestyle, work pressure, poverty, divorce, illness, disability, criminality, substance abuse, and physical abuse. Adults who are extremely stressed or who lack parenting skills cannot form the secure bonds necessary for their children to develop social skills, self-control, and conscience.

Economist Theodore Schultz (1974) coined the term "human capital" and rooted it squarely in the family. Like financial resources, human capital accumulates over generations and is passed from parents to children. Human capital includes the social and educational skills that allow young people to follow rules, solve problems, and communicate at a high level.

Family Privilege is a form of human capital that compounds its benefits over time. However, large numbers of youth today operate without the support of stable parents, an extended family, or even minimal traces of Family Privilege. Even in traditional families, Family Privilege is not a given. It must be intentional, not simply hit or miss or hope and pray. Those of us with Family Privilege take it for granted. Like oxygen, we would never notice its absence unless we were suffocating.

Loss of Privilege

The idea of Family Privilege hearkens to Peggy McIntosh (1997) who coined the concept of "White Privilege" which is strongly influencing multicultural understanding. McIntosh suggests that prejudice is more than active discrimination; it is also an undeserved status coming from unearned privilege. Powerful benefits come with membership in a dominant group. For example, men do not worry about the possibility of rape when traveling in a new environment, but this is an ever-present concern of women. In this nation founded by European Americans, few whites feel they risk rejection each time they enter a typical classroom, but such stresses are common to those of other cultures. McIntosh provides the following example of how white privilege affects her life:

> *I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.* (McIntosh, 1997)

Other examples of white privilege abound: If I am white, I can, if I wish, spend most of my time in the company of people of my race. I can be fairly sure that my children will not come home from school devastated by racial harassment. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers will tolerate them without concern about their race. When I see police, I am usually certain that they are here to protect me.

McIntosh suggests that we cannot understand the barriers faced by "minorities" unless we first understand the benefits of whiteness. Likewise, in order to understand the barriers faced by those without Family Privilege, we must first recognize the benefits of those with Family Privilege. Here are a few examples of what it might be like to grow up without Family Privilege:

- As a small child, when I call out at night, I cannot be sure anyone will hear me. The people who come and go through my house frighten me. I never know if tomorrow I will live in this same home. I can never be sure if there will be anything to eat.
- When I start school, my parents don't attend conferences with the teacher, and I would be embarrassed if they did. If I am sick, they can't find my mother. There is no one to help me with my homework or even to wake me on time.
- As an adolescent, I can't bring friends home without being embarrassed. When I get in trouble, no one speaks for me. It wouldn't matter because people in authority like principals, police, and judges don't listen to or respect my parents.
- As a young adult, no one helps me plan for college and career. If life gets hard, I can't ask for a loan or move back home. I don't know my relatives or my genetic heritage, and I have no family medical history. I can never be sure that I am unconditionally loved.

Family Privilege is best secured in the family. When that is not possible, or even the best plan, then Family Privilege becomes a community issue. Peter Benson (1997) notes that "all kids are our kids." As long as there are any children at risk, then all our children reside in *at-risk communities.* Ironically, those children who most need Family Privilege from the school and the community are those who are the first to be expelled, rejected, or relegated to substandard services.

Those who thoughtfully examine their own Family Privilege may come to some disquieting conclusions. Perhaps their accomplishments are as much a product of unearned privileges and circumstances as of individual effort and capacity. Even goals and dreams may be the result of Family Privilege.

As a society, we place high expectations on young people for achievement and prosocial behavior. However, establishing standards without understanding privilege and handicap is like expecting all youths to run a 100-meter dash in twelve seconds. One runner must jump over hurdles, a second runs uphill, a third attempts to run the race on crutches. Meanwhile, three other runners in the same race have a smooth, dry, and obstacle-free track and come out ahead of the rest. Many applaud the three winners and look down on the others as losers. Only as we recognize their individual obstacles can we remove those barriers or help the runner overcome them. When youth lack Family Privilege, then schools, churches, and neighborhoods need to help fill this gap. Often that is not the case.

John R. Seita, *EdD, is an assistant professor at Michigan State University, East Lansing, where he teaches in the area of social work and youth development. After he was removed from his family at age 8, John experienced 15 failed placements in foster care and youth facilities. Fighting those who tried to help him, John did not begin building stable relationships with adults until well into adolescence. This article is drawn from his new book,* Kids Who Outwit Adults, *which is co-authored with a former mentor, Larry Brendtro. Published by Sopris West, the book will be available this fall. For information, contact the publisher or Reclaiming Youth Library at www.reclaiming.com, or call 1.888.647.2532. John Seita can be contacted at the Reclaiming Children and Youth Editorial Office: 1.605.647.2532.*

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