

Little Miss Sunshine

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*Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton & Faris, 2006) is an independent film about a family forced to band together and drive their youngest member halfway across the country so that she can compete in a beauty pageant in California. Along the way, the dysfunctional Hoover family faces some extreme challenges that begin the process of breaking down the walls that each family member has constructed around themselves, save the adorable seven-year-old Olive who is still young enough to be blissfully naïve. Ironically, it is this naivety that causes the family to ultimately come together in a big way and seemingly heal their strained relationships.

Richard is an aspiring motivational speaker who is so narrow-minded and self-absorbed he does not see what he does to his family. Sheryl is an overly stressed, working mother who shoulders the burdens of the family's financial, emotional, and psychological needs. Edwin is the live-in grandfather who got kicked out of his nursing home because he was snorting heroin and continues to do so in the Hoover home. Frank is an unemployed literature professor who had recently attempted suicide because of a failed romantic entanglement. Having nowhere else to go, the hospital released Frank into the custody of his sister, Sheryl. Dwayne is Sheryl's son from her first marriage who, throughout the first part of the film, has taken a vow of silence and exhibits considerable antisocial behavior. Lastly, Olive is a sweet, curious girl who dreams of competing on the beauty pageant circuit (Dayton & Faris, 2006).

From the beginning, this movie has a disturbing amount of familial dysfunction. From the near-constant arguments between Richard and Sheryl to Richard's delusion of success and refusal to give up on his dying dream, it was almost painful to watch. Other examples of this dysfunction include Richard encouraging Dwayne's abhorrent behavior by saying that it shows discipline and that they should all aspire to this type of behavior (Dayton & Faris, 2006). On the

other hand, he discourages his daughter's desirable behavior by inadvertently calling her a loser, encourages Frank to lie to her about his suicide, and bullies the entire family into accepting and maintaining the social norms of what he, Richard, deems appropriate behavior (Dayton & Faris, 2006). He even tells Olive that she should not eat ice cream if she wants to win the pageant because it will make her fat and fat people are not beautiful people (Dayton & Faris, 2006).

Throughout the movie, it seems that Richard is indeed the primary catalyst for everyone else's dysfunction. He allows his father's heroin habit to continue, which ultimately kills him. He neglects his family, only caring about what he wants to achieve in life, and forces Sheryl to shoulder the entire burden of financially supporting and emotionally caring for the household. This burden causes Sheryl to have to take shortcuts in and around the household and neglect the children, leaving Edwin in charge of raising Olive. Examples of this are her getting a fried chicken bucket for dinner every night and no one being aware of the contents of Olive's dance routine for the pageant until she performs it (Dayton & Faris, 2006).

Fortunately, there were some shining moments as well, such as sitting down as a family to eat dinner and joining together to support Olive in her dream (Dayton & Faris, 2006). However, these moments are few and far between early in the film. Nevertheless, the more time the family spends on the road, the more they begin to support each other. The first time we see them work as a family is when they have to get the bus rolling so that Richard can put it in gear to drive (Dayton & Faris, 2006). They seem to build on this exercise, supporting each other when Edwin dies and ultimately breaking the social norms of the Little Miss Sunshine pageant and getting on stage to support Olive (Dayton & Faris, 2006).

There are also a couple of great relationship examples in the film, particularly the relationship between Edwin and Olive and the one between Frank and Dwayne. In both

relationships, the pair seem to understand and accept the other person without judgment and support them without care of consequence. For example, the night before Edwin dies, he and Olive discuss the difference between being a winner and giving up before even trying (Dayton & Faris, 2006). Frank takes a less direct but still accepting when he and Dwayne discuss Proust on the boardwalk overlooking the ocean (Dayton & Faris, 2006). In both cases, the older men are very open and supportive of their younger counterparts.

There is much work that needs to be done in order for this family to become fully functional and healthy. Richard and Sheryl need couples counseling to work on their relationship. Dr. Gottman says that the emotional climate of the house in which a child is raised is incredibly important in its development (KCTS9, 2009), and the environment caused by the couple's constant arguing is not healthy for the family. They need to learn how to communicate with each other, as all of Dr. Gottman's Four Horsemen (The Gottman Institute, 2014) are evident in their communications. The couple should probably attend some parenting classes as well so that they can learn how to communicate and connect with the children, especially since their primary caregiver (Edwin) is now gone. Richard may need some individual counseling to work through his delusions of grandeur and other narcissistic tendencies (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2017). The entire family should probably attend some sessions as well, to work through some of the system issues that exist (Gladding, 2019), such as Dwayne's anger toward everyone. All in all, dysfunctional as they may be, the work this family completed toward harmony during this 800-mile journey is a massive step in the right direction. Hopefully, they can keep it up.

## References

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