



ESL Podcast 686 – Roles Within a Family

GLOSSARY

to fit right in – to become part of a group, usually because one has many things in common with the other members; to be welcomed in a warm, friendly way into a group of people

* If you enjoy playing chess, you'll fit right in with the school's Chess Club.

matriarch – the female leader of a family or of a larger group of people; the older woman who controls a family or group

* Everyone gathers in the matriarch's house for important holidays.

black sheep – someone who is a failure and an embarrassment to relatives

* Everyone else in the family is a doctor, lawyer, scientist, or engineer, but poor Ricky has always been the black sheep, never having success in any of his work.

to let on – to let someone know something; to give some indication of what one is thinking or feeling

* Sakuhiro has been undergoing chemotherapy for weeks, but he never lets on that he's in pain.

prodigal son – a son who spends a lot of money and does things the family does not approve of, but later returns to the family and is welcomed with love

* Their family refers to the oldest child as the prodigal son, because he traveled internationally for several years and spent all of his inheritance, but then came back older and wiser.

rebellious – referring to someone who does not want to accept authority, follow the rules, or do what one is supposed to do or what one is told to do

* In-Young was very rebellious as a teenager and never did anything his parents wanted him to do.

eccentric – with very strange, unusual ideas and behaviors, very different from those of other people

* Professor Maser is a little eccentric, always wearing a top hat and a bowtie, and refusing to shake hands with anyone.

to steer clear of – to stay away from someone or something; to not interact with someone or something

* The doctor said that we should be able to avoid stomach problems by steering clear of spicy food.



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baby – the youngest child; the youngest sibling

* Now that their baby is about to graduate from high school, they're trying to prepare to live alone, without their children.

to come in – to be included in something; to be considered as a part of something

* You've talked a lot about how the decision will affect you, but where do your husband's feelings come in?

middle child – the second of three children in a family; a person who has one older sibling and one younger sibling

* As a middle child, Jean-Marie never felt he received enough attention from his parents.

scapegoat – a person who is blamed for problems or bad things that happen, especially when he or she did not really cause it

* Wayne was fired after profits fell, but it wasn't really his fault. The company used him as a scapegoat.

patriarch – the male leader of a family or of a larger group of people; the older man who controls a family or group

* When Grandpa Schmidt passes away, who will become the new family patriarch?

impressed – affected or influenced in a particular way by what one has seen, heard, or experienced, usually in a positive way

* Wow! I'm really impressed by how quickly you've learned the language!

lion's den – a scary, intimidating place where there is some danger, but one must go there anyway

* Participating in a panel interview often feels like entering the lion's den.

famous last words – a phrase used to express one's disbelief or disagreement with what another person has just said

* - This old bridge is safe. Nothing bad can happen if we use it.
- Famous last words!



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COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is Uncle Nick called the black sheep?
 - a) Because he always wears black clothing.
 - b) Because he's always sleepy.
 - c) Because he's an embarrassment to the family.
2. What does Larissa mean when she says, "I'll be sure to steer clear of Uncle Nick"?
 - a) She'll speak very loudly when talking to him.
 - b) She won't ask him about his past.
 - c) She'll try not to talk to him.

WHAT ELSE DOES IT MEAN?

to let on

The phrase "to let on," in this podcast, means to let someone know something, or to give an indication of one's thoughts or feelings: "Even though her marriage was falling apart, she never let on at work, so none of her co-workers knew what was happening until she filed for divorce." The phrase "to let (someone) down" means to disappoint someone, usually by not doing something: "He was supposed to meet us here at 3:00 to help us move, but he really let us down." The phrase "to let (someone) down gently" means to give someone bad news in the nicest way possible: "When you break up with her, please let her down gently." Finally, the phrase "to let (one's) hair down" means to relax and have fun: "After working really hard for the past two months, we're all ready to take some vacation and let our hair down."

baby

In this podcast, the word "baby" means the youngest child or the youngest sibling in a family: "Even though Egret is 56 years old, his mother still talks about 'her baby'." The word "baby" is also used as a term of affection for someone whom one loves: "Baby, do you want to see a movie tonight?" Some people use the word "baby" to refer to someone who is acting in a silly, childish way: "Don't be such a baby! The power went out, but there's nothing to be afraid of." Finally, the word "baby" can be used to describe vegetables that are eaten when they are much smaller than normal: "He always eats a couple baby carrots with his lunch." Or, "This baby asparagus is so tender and delicious!"



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CULTURE NOTE

The Ideal Family and the White Picket Fence

What's the "ideal" (best; what one wants to have) American family? In the past, many people would answer that question by talking about a "middle-class" (average, not rich or poor) house with a "white picket fence." This was symbolic of the ideal American family lifestyle, and although it isn't necessarily still the ideal today, the "symbolism" (what an image or picture means) is still strong.

A "picket fence" is a type of fence made from many vertical "boards" (flat pieces of wood) that are separated by a small distance, connected with one horizontal piece of wood at the top and one horizontal piece of wood at the bottom. Each vertical piece points upward, ending with an arrow-like point. Picket fences are normally used in "residential" (housing) areas, sometimes around gardens or yards. Traditionally, they are painted white.

A middle-class house with a white picket fence is usually thought of as being in the "suburbs" (a residential area outside of the city, but not in a rural area). The ideal home with a white picket fence is large and painted white, and has a big yard with a green "well-manicured" (cut and well maintained) "lawn" (grassy area) where the kids can "run around" (play with a lot of movement). The old ideal American family also had two well-behaved kids, preferably one boy and one girl, and a dog.

Old television shows like Leave It to Beaver "portrayed" (showed) this ideal American family and home. More modern television shows are more likely to focus on "dysfunctional" (not working properly) American families.

Comprehension Questions Correct Answers: 1 – c; 2 – c



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COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 686: Roles Within a Family.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 686. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Our website is eslpod.com. Go there and download a Learning Guide today.

This episode is called "Roles Within a Family." It's a dialogue between Larissa and Vince talking about different vocabulary related to people in your family. Let's get started.

[start of dialogue]

Larissa: I'm really nervous about meeting your family.

Vince: You don't need to be. They'll love you and you'll fit right in.

Larissa: Okay, but I want to make sure I know everyone I'll be meeting. Your Grandmother Celine is the matriarch of the family and your Uncle Nick is the black sheep of the family, is that right?

Vince: That's right, but none of us let on that Uncle Nick is considered the prodigal son. He was really rebellious when he was young and left home when he was 17. He came back 15 years later, but nobody really knows what happened during that time. He's always been a little eccentric.

Larissa: I'll be sure to steer clear of Uncle Nick, in that case. Let's see, you told me that he is the oldest and your Aunt Sue is the baby of the family. Where does your Aunt Lily come in?

Vince: She's the middle child and is always the scapegoat for anything that goes wrong. At least that's what my grandfather has told me all these years.

Larissa: That's your Grandfather Albert, the patriarch of the family, right?

Vince: Yes, you've got it. I'm impressed you remembered so much about my family.



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Larissa: If I'm walking into the lion's den, then I want to be prepared.

Vince: Don't think of it that way. They're all going to love you.

Larissa: Famous last words!

[end of dialogue]

Our dialogue begins with Larissa saying to Vince, "I'm really nervous about meeting your family." Perhaps Larissa and Vince are boyfriend and girlfriend, and Larissa is meeting his family for the first time. Vince says, "You don't need to be," meaning you shouldn't be nervous, there's no reason to. "They'll love you and you'll fit right in." "To fit in," or "to fit right in," means to become part of a group, usually because you have something in common. You share something with other members, maybe an interest or you just have a similar personality to other people. That's what Vince is saying, that Larissa will fit right in with his family; they'll be comfortable with her.

Larissa says, "Okay, but I want to make sure I know everyone I'll be meeting." She wants to know who all the people are that she's going to meet. She says, "Your Grandmother Celine is the matriarch of the family." A "matriarch" (matriarch) is the female leader or head of a family, or perhaps a family that includes uncles and aunts and cousins and grandchildren, a large group of people who are related. The oldest woman in that set of relationships would be the matriarch. "Uncle Nick," she says, "is the black sheep of the family, is that right?" The expression "black sheep," like the animal sheep, refers to someone who is considered different than the rest of the family. We think about sheep as normally being white; well, the black sheep is the different one, the one who doesn't quite fit in, if you will, with the rest of the members, maybe because they have done something wrong, maybe they have been a failure. It's often used as a negative description of someone. Every family seems to have a black sheep; I know our family does. I won't say who that person is, however, maybe they're listening!

Vince says, "That's right, but none of us let on that Uncle Nick is considered the prodigal son." He says, "none of us let on." "To let on" means to let someone know that you know something or to let someone know what you're thinking or what you're feeling. "I didn't let on that I was very much attracted to the girl sitting next to me," I didn't indicate that in any way – and of course, I never would because I'm married! So, that's the phrasal verb "to let on." "Let" has a couple of different meanings, and you can find those in the Learning Guide for this episode. I should also mention that you will notice that we treat "none" here as a



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plural noun, not a singular noun. We say “none of us let on” rather than “none of us lets on.” There’s a debate about that in English usage; currently both forms seem to be acceptable. Traditionally, “none” was only considered singular, but the language changes and so we change along with it.

Continuing on here, Vince says that none of us let on that Uncle Nick is considered the prodigal son. Someone who is “prodigal” (prodigal) is someone who spends a lot of money and does things that the family doesn’t approve of. However, the expression “prodigal son,” or “prodigal daughter” would be possible, refers to a story from the Christian Bible, the story that Jesus tells about a man who leaves his family, goes to another place, spends all of his money, and then, when he’s poor, returns to his family, and his father forgives him and welcomes him back into the family. So, when Vince refers to his Uncle Nick as the “prodigal son,” he’s emphasizing probably more of the negative aspects of his uncle going and spending a lot of money, living a life the family didn’t approve of, but there’s also an idea that he has come back to the family. He says his Uncle Nick “was really rebellious when he was young.” “To be rebellious” means to not accept authority; someone who doesn’t follow the rules is someone who is rebellious. Vince says that when Uncle Nick was young he left home when he was just 17 years old. “He came back 15 years later, but nobody really knows what happened during that time. He’s always been a little eccentric.” “Eccentric” (eccentric) is someone who’s a little strange, a little unusual, someone who has very different ideas and possibly behaviors from other people around them.

Larissa says, “I’ll be sure to steer clear of Uncle Nick, in that case.” “To steer” (steer) is a verb that we use to indicate how you are directing a car or a bicycle. You can steer the car to the left or to the right or straight. In fact, we call the round wheel in a car a “steering wheel,” it comes from this verb “to steer.” “To steer clear” means I’m not going to go anywhere near that person or that situation. In this case, Larissa is going to steer clear of Uncle Nick; she’s going to stay away from Uncle Nick. Then she says, “Let’s see, you told me that Uncle Nick is the oldest and your Aunt Sue is the baby of the family.” Here, “baby” doesn’t refer to a small child under the age of one or two, it refers to the youngest person. I, for example, am the baby of my family; I am the youngest. And of course, everyone knows that the youngest is always treated badly – always discriminated against. The older brothers and sisters don’t like the baby of the family; the baby of the family doesn’t really get anything from his parents, and that, of course, was my experience growing up. So, always feel sorry for the baby of family! So, Vince’s Aunt Sue is the youngest or baby of the family. Then she asks, “Where does your Aunt Lily come in?” “To come in” here means to be included; really, it means what position or what place is Aunt Lily – is she the middle child, is she the third child, the fourth child, and so forth.



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Vince says, “She is the middle child and is always the scapegoat for anything that goes wrong.” The “middle child” would be the second of three children, or the third of five children. The term, more generally however, refers to someone who is not the oldest and not the youngest, someone in between or in the middle. Vince says that Aunt Lily is always the scapegoat for anything that goes wrong. A “scapegoat” (one word) is a person who is blamed for problems or bad things that happen, especially when that person is not actually responsible. That person didn’t do anything wrong, but people say that he or she did; they blame him or her. This dialogue was written by a middle child, who, of course, thinks that that’s the reason that she was a scapegoat. So, you have to understand a little bit about the writer here. Vince says, “At least that’s what my grandfather told me all these years,” meaning my entire life, for all of this time. His grandfather told him that the middle child was always the scapegoat, someone who is unfairly or unjustly blamed.

Larissa says, “That’s your Grandfather Albert, the patriarch of the family, right?” “Patriarch” is the male – the oldest male leader of a family, just like “matriarch” would be the oldest female member of the family. Vince says, “Yes, you’ve got it,” meaning yes, you understand, you are correct. He says, “I’m impressed you remembered so much about my family.” “To be impressed” means that you have a very positive evaluation of someone else, or you are very positively affected or influenced by what you have heard or experienced. Someone says, “Wow, I’m impressed how good your English is,” that means that they are congratulating you really, saying that your English is quite good and I think that that is a good accomplishment – a great accomplishment.

Vince is impressed that Larissa remembers all of this about his family. Larissa says, “If I’m walking into the lion’s den, then I want to be prepared.” The “lion’s (lion’s) den (den)” is the place where a lion sleeps or a lion lives. However, the term is used here to mean a dangerous place, but somewhere that you have to go to anyway. If you’re not careful, you could be injured or hurt by going into the lion’s den. Larissa says that, in effect, going to meet Vince’s family is a dangerous situation.

Vince says, “Don’t think of it that way. They’re all going to love you. Larissa says, “Famous last words!” The phrase “famous last words” is used to express your disagreement with what the other person just said, especially when you think that the opposite might happen and that if we just wait a little longer the opposite of that will happen, something bad will happen. For example, if you are nervous about going in someone else’s car because you think the car isn’t safe, and the driver of the car says, “Oh, don’t worry. We won’t have any problems,”



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you could say, “Famous last words!” meaning I think there will be a problem. Why are they your last words? Well, the idea is that you will be killed, the ultimate bad thing will happen to you and therefore what that person says will be their last word because suddenly something bad will happen.

Now let’s listen to the dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

[start of dialogue]

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Vince: Don’t think of it that way. They’re all going to love you.

Larissa: Famous last words!

[end of dialogue]



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I hope you're impressed by today's dialogue. That's because it's by our scriptwriter, the middle child, Dr. Lucy Tse.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us again here on ESL Podcast.

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