

Stephen and John Covey's

SECRETS OF MUCH HAPPIER FAMILYING



We would all like to have families that are loving, supportive, cooperative and fulfilling. In fact, you can have such a family—if you are willing to make the effort.

Happy families require commitment to each other and to universal principles that govern the results of our lives—principles such as integrity and responsibility.

Here are seven habits that can reinforce what many families are already doing *right*—and help provide anyone with the skills and courage to make the necessary changes.

HABIT 1: BE PROACTIVE

Members of effective families show each other kindness and consideration. They don't blame each other for problems or take out their anxieties on each other. They keep their promises to each other and apologize when they've said or done careless or hurtful things. They know that sometimes the best action is no action.

Example: A husband and wife have agreed to stop and count to 10 when a discussion threatens to turn into an argument. They resume such discussions only after tempers have cooled—and they each try to understand the other's point of view.

Proactive people recognize they can't change others, only themselves. This means that if one family member sees the need for a happier family life, that

person can act as a *transition leader* and change his/her own behavior.

HABIT 2: BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

To nurture the values that build a successful family, you need a shared vision of where you're going—together. A good way to start is by developing a clear description of your family's vision.

Create this description when your family is together, such as during dinner. Try asking, *What do each of you see as the purpose of our family?*

The first time you raise this question, you might get puzzled looks or nervous giggles. But if you keep asking—and listen to the answers—you'll find that a shared vision will start to evolve.

Example: The goals are to care for each other, offer mutual support and avoid tearing down each other...to develop a nurturing atmosphere in which love, order and faith can flourish.

HABIT 3: PUT FIRST THINGS FIRST

In order to put your vision into action, you need to set the right priorities.

Helpful: Have a weekly family planning meeting. Review the coming week's responsibilities and opportunities. Based

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on your family's mission statement, schedule important activities first—birthday celebrations, homework assignments, dentist appointments, concerts, parent-child "private time." Then fit less important demands around them.

HABIT 4: THINK WIN-WIN

The opposite of win-win thinking is self-centeredness. When conflict arises, don't put energy into trying to prove you're right. Instead, use *mutual benefit* as your guiding principle.

That doesn't mean your kids have to be happy with every decision you make. It means you need to take their desires into account—even when you can't always grant them—and you respect their rights to their own opinions.

HABIT 5: SEEK TO UNDERSTAND, THEN TO BE UNDERSTOOD

Practice the simple skill of *reflective listening*—repeating back what the other person seems to be thinking and feeling.

Example:

Parent: *What I hear you saying is that you're a little jealous.*

Child: *No, that's not it. I feel left out.*

Parent: *I get it...you feel left out.*

Allowing each person's point of view to be aired and accepted can do wonders for communication.

To keep discussions from deteriorating into arguments, follow this rule. Don't state your position until you've told the prior speaker what you hear him saying—to *his satisfaction*.

HABIT 6: SYNERGIZE

Some people deal with disagreements by insisting on their own ways and treating everyone else's needs as secondary.

Others try to compromise and may resent having given up too much.

There's a third, more effective approach we call *synergy*—using creative cooperation to come up with a better solution than the options any of you would have thought of on your own.

Example: Dad wants to take the family on a fishing trip. Mom wants everyone to spend the week at her mother's. Once this couple understands the needs behind their honest desires, they can move away from either/or solutions. They decide to rent a comfortable cabin by the lake and invite Grandma to stay there with them.

HABIT 7: SHARPEN THE SAW

We use the term *sharpen the saw* to refer to continuous self-renewal. This

expression comes from the story of a man who was trying to saw through a log but was not making much progress. As he became more and more exhausted, his companion finally asked him, *Why don't you sharpen the saw?* The man replied, *Because I don't have the time.*

Unless people make time for self-renewal, they won't have the energy or the tools to build effective families. Family members need to support each other in renewing themselves in the four major areas of life.

• **Physical.** Taking care of our bodies so that we are strong and healthy enough to function at our best.

• **Social/emotional.** Improving our capacity to love and be loved.

Examples: Agreeing to give each other 12 hugs a day...paying compliments...arranging one-on-one time between parents and kids and between spouses.

• **Intellectual/mental.** Improving our ability to think clearly...valuing life-long learning.

Examples: Agreeing to limit TV viewing...reading to children.

• **Spiritual.** Connecting to the world beyond the family...making a greater contribution to society.

No family is perfect...but developing these seven habits can help build a trusting, supportive environment that nourishes every aspect of our lives. ■