

The Secrets of Happy Families: Improve Your Mornings, Tell Your Family History, Fight Smarter, Go Out and Play, And Much More

Bruce Feiler

Part One: Adapt All The Time

Chapter 1: The Agile Family Manifesto

That gap is invariably widest in the hour after the kids get up in the morning, and the hour before they go to bed - the twin war zones of modern family life.

David wrote in an influential 2009 white paper “Agile Practices for Families”

When Linda and I adopted the agile blueprint with our daughters, weekly family meetings quickly became the single most impactful idea we introduced into our lives since the birth of our children. They became the centerpiece around which we organized our family. And they transformed our relationships with our kids - and each other - in ways we could never have imagined.

And the meetings did all this while lasting under twenty minutes.

“The Best Thanksgiving We Ever Had”

Studies have shown that parental stress weakens children’s brains, depletes their immune systems, and increases their risk of obesity, mental illness, diabetes, allergies, even tooth decay.

And kids know it, too. In a survey of a thousand families, Ellen Galinsky, the head of the Families and Work Institute and the author of *Mind in the Making*, asked children, “If you were granted one wish about your parents, what would it be?” Most parents predicted their kids would say spending more time with them. They were wrong. The kids’ number one wish was that their parents were less tired and less stressed.

Welcome to Our Family Meeting

“You’re focusing on the wrong thing,” he said. “The purpose of the meeting is not to talk about each of you as individuals. It’s to focus on how you’re functioning as a family.”

- What worked well in our family this week?
- What went wrong in our family this week?
- What will we work on this coming week?

One takeaway I got from agile is that whenever I see friends with checklists - chores, schedules, allowance - I ask whether the adults or the kids are doing the checking off. Invariably it’s the adults. The science suggests there’s a better way. To achieve maximum benefits, have the children do the scoring. They’ll develop a much finer sense of self-awareness. Even if this approach doesn’t work on every occasion, it’s about teaching your kids an approach to problem solving they can carry with them the rest of their lives.

Eleanor agreed. “In the media, families just are,” she said. “But that’s misleading. You have your job; you work on that. You have your garden, your hobbies, you work on those. Your family requires just as much work, if not more. The most important thing agile taught me is that you have to make a commitment to always keep working to improve your family. That’s what no one believes until they start doing it themselves.

Chapter 2: The Right Way to Have Family Dinner

Who Needs Dinner?

A recent wave of research shows that children who eat dinner with their families are less likely to drink, smoke, do drugs, get pregnant, commit suicide, and develop eating disorders. Additional research found that children who enjoy family meals have larger vocabularies, better manners, healthier diets, and higher self-esteem. The most comprehensive survey done on this topic, a University of Michigan report that examined how American children spent their time between 1981 and 1997, discovered that the amount of time children spent eating meals at home was the single biggest predictor of better academic achievement and fewer behavioral problems.

Mealtime was more influential than time spent in school, studying, attending religious services, or playing sports.

- Can’t have dinner together every night? Aim for once a week.
- Aren’t home from work early enough? Gather everyone together at 8:00 PM for dessert, a bedtime snack,

- or just a chat about the day.
- Weekdays too busy? Aim for weekends.
- Don't have time to cook? Try Leftover Mondays, Chinese Takeout Tuesdays, or breakfast for dinner.

It's Not About the Dinner; It's About the Family

___Not long after, Marshall's wife, Sara, a psychologist who works with children who have learning disabilities, made an observation about her students. "The ones who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challenges." Her husband was intrigued and, along with colleague Robyn Fivush, he set out to test Sara's hypothesis. They developed a measure called the "Do You Know?" scale that asked children to answer twenty questions, including:

- Do you know where your grandparents grew up?
- Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school?
- Do you know where your parents met?
- Do you know of an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family?
- Do you know what went on when you were being born?

They then compared the children's results to a battery of psychological tests and reached some overwhelming conclusions. The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The "Do You Know?" scaled turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness. "We were blown away," Marshall said.

And then something unexpected happened. Two months later was September eleven. As Citizens Marshall and Robyn were horrified, like everyone else, but as psychologists they knew they had been given a rare opportunity: all of the families they had studied had experienced the same trauma at the same time. They went back and reassess the children. "Once again," Marshall said, "the ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress."

Why does knowing where your grandmother went to school help a child overcome something as minor as a skinned knee or as major as a terrorist attack? And how can family meals and other rituals play a role in children gaining this knowledge?

"The answers have to do with a child's sense of being part of a larger family," Marshall said. Psychologists have found that every family has a unifying narrative, he explained, and those narratives take one of three shapes. First, there's the ascending family narrative that goes like this: "Son, when we came to this country, we had nothing. Our family worked. We opened a store. Your grandfather went to high school. Your father went to college. And now you..." Second is the descending narrative: "Sweetheart, we used to have it all. Then we lost everything..." "The most healthful narrative," Marshall continued, "is the third one. It's called the oscillating family narrative. 'Dear, let me tell you, we've had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who was once arrested. We had a house burned down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.'"

Marshall says that children who have the most balanced and self-confidence in their lives do so because of what he and Robyn call a strong "intergenerational self." They know they belong to something bigger than themselves. "one of the central people in this equation is the grandmother," he said. "She'll say, 'You're having trouble with math, kid? Let me tell you, your father had trouble with math.' 'You Don't want to practice piano? Boy, your Aunt Laura didn't want to practice piano, either.'"

"We call these the *bubbemeise*," he continued. "That's Yiddish for 'grandmother's fable.' Whatever problem the child is having, the grandmother has a story for it - even if it's made up!"

Marshall and Robyn Point out that dinner is an ideal time to give kids this family history. Everyone's together; it's a safe environment; it's easier for the children to hear about their families ups and downs while they're in a nurturing environment doing something reassuring. And nothing is more reassuring than eating.

But dinner does not cause the benefits, he stressed. What generates the sense of attachment and emotional toughness is the process of hearing all those old stories and seeing yourself in the larger flow of your family. In

other words, what we think of as family dinner is not really about the dinner. It's about the family.

Hunger Games

By this point, I had already had two surprising takeaways about family dinner. First, eating together every night is not as important as so many people say it is. Second, what you talk about matters even more than what you eat.

...a good family ritual should be fun, hokey, and memorable

Monday: Word of the Day

The first thing I did was devise a simple formula: 10-50-1.

10. Aim for ten minutes of quality talk per meal.

50. Let your kids speak at least half the time.

1. Teach your kids one new word every meal.

The good news, Galinsky says, is that you can help. No matter your income level, start by speaking more like yourself to your kids. If anything, you should go out of your way to use words that are unfamiliar to them.

- Throw out a word like *fruit*, *bird*, or *white*, and have everyone at the table come up with as many related words as possible. This simple game has been proven to boost creativity in children.
- Introduce a prefix (*a-*, *bi-*, *dis-*) or a suffix (*-er*, *-able*, *-ite*)
- Bring a newspaper, magazine, or catalog to the table and ask everyone to find a word they don't know. Googling at dinner is allowed!

Tuesday: Autobiography Night

Beginning around age five, children develop the tools to describe past events, but these skills must be practiced. The family table is the perfect theater. Ask your child to recall a memorable experience, either from that day or the past. Then follow up with what psychologists call "elaborative questions." *Who? What? When? Where? Why?* These open-ended questions build memory and identity.

As Marshall Duke discovered about children who know their history, the more kids remember about their own families, the more self-esteem and confidence they exhibit.

This game would work particularly well the night before a big test or game, as scientists have found recalling high points from their own lives boosts children's self-confidence.

Friday: Bad & Good

Every Friday night in my family, we play a dinnertime game I played growing up. It's called "Bad & Good," and the rules are simple. Everyone goes around and says what happened bad to them that day, then everyone goes around and says what happened good. The only mandates: you must have at least one bad and one good every day, and you're not allowed to knock anyone else's answer.

I was pleased to discover a growing body of research that reinforces the benefits of this type of exercise, which scholars call "tell about the day" activities. By watching others, including Mom and Dad, navigate ups and downs in real time, children develop empathy and solidarity with those around them.

When I met Fogle for coffee, she pointed out that when children push back against a parental tactic, you should let them win, just to increase their sense of control over their lives.

"Otherwise, I respectfully disagree with Ms. Fogle," he continued. "To me, the most important thing we can give our children, at dinnertime or anytime, is a sense of perspective. Children take their cues from us. When they're young and they hear a loud noise, they don't look where the noise came from, they look at us. If you're not upset, they're not upset.

When a child tells you something bad happened at school, sometimes the best thing to say is "Pass the ketchup." It's your way of saying, there's no reason to panic. You can handle this, just like I handled things like this. Then, once you've taken the panic out of the air, once you've put the ketchup on your french fries, then you can begin the conversation."

Chapter 3: Branding Your Family

The Power of a Family Mission Statement

Each scientist in attendance had already published a list of the qualities successful families share. For the first time, though, organizers closely reviewed two dozen of these lists to see if they could establish consensus. According to them, it was remarkably easy. The master list contained nine items:

- *Communication*. Family members talk to one another often, in a manner that's honest, clear, and open, even when they disagree.
- *Encouragement of individuals*. Strong families appreciate each member's uniqueness while cultivating a sense of belonging to the whole.
- *Commitment to the family*. Members of successful families make it clear to one another, and to the world, that their allegiance to their family is strong.
- *Religious/spiritual well-being*. Researchers concluded that a shared value system and moral code were common among highly functioning families. But they said these values were not contingent on membership in any denomination or frequent attendance at worship services
- *Social connectedness*. Successful families are not isolated; they are connected to the wider society, and they reach out to friends and neighbors in crisis.
- *Adaptability*. Strong families are structured yet flexible, and they adjust their structure in response to stress.
- *Appreciativeness*. People in strong families care deeply for one another, and they express their feelings often. Even if some members are not naturally expressive, they communicate their emotions by doing meaningful things for others.
- *Clear rules*. Members of successful families are aware of their responsibilities to the group.
- *Time together*. Members of strong families spend time together doing things they enjoy.

Covey, the father of nine and grandfather of fifty-two, was even more passionate about his family. In 1997, he repackaged his original ideas into a book called *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*. The habits were the same, but the messaging was slightly different.

- Habit 1. *Be proactive*. Become an agent of change in your family.
- Habit 2. *Begin with the end in mind*. Know the type of family you want to build.
- Habit 3. *Put first things first*. Make family a priority in a turbulent world.
- Habit 4. *Think "win-win."* Move from "me" to "we."
- Habit 5. *Seek first to understand... then to be understood*. Solve family problems through communication.
- Habit 6. *Synergize*. Build family unity while also celebrating differences.
- Habit 7. *Sharpen the saw*. Renew the family spirit through traditions.

"I believe words matter, even a few words"

The second value was Family: *We love, respect, and are loyal to one another, and build family Traditions*. "We know that one day our boys will grow up and may get pulled in different directions," David said. "So we set up very specific traditions we do every year - a big ski trip, a place we go every summer, a specific set of things we do every Christmas. We want to create grooves in their minds that attach them to our family."

What words best describe our family?

After reading that the KIPP charter schools, a network of college-preparatory public schools, started a pioneering program of "character reporter cards," I took all eight items on the list of qualities they evaluated for. And I took the entire list of 24 Character Strengths identified by Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology. I ended up with eighty items, which I typed up in no particular order.

Suddenly the air sucked out of the room. When the girls were six weeks old, we held a small gathering to introduce them to our friends. I gave a brief toast, which ended with the wish, "May your first word be *adventure* and your last word *love*." We spent years trying to make the first part come true. Every trip to the supermarket,

drugstore, or playground became, “Let’s go on an adventure!” Sure enough, *adventure* was one of the first words they mastered, their little lips curling charmingly around its syllables.

May Our First Word Be
ADVENTURE
And Our Last Word
LOVE

We live lives of passion
We dream undreamable dreams
We help others to fly
We love to learn
We don’t like dilemmas; we like solutions
We push through. We believe!
We know it’s okay to make mistakes
We bring people together
We are joy, rapture, yay!

A similar philosophy has recently been gaining currency in parenting circles. Alan Kazdin, a psychologist who heads the Yale University Parenting Center, has pioneered what he calls “parent management.” His core idea is that parents should spend more time identifying and rewarding good behavior instead of endlessly punishing bad behavior.

This sounds simple, but it’s not. Kazdin says parents need to specify the positive conduct they want to see more of. “You guys are doing so well playing together today!” “Great job, sticking with that math homework.” Even more important, parents need to create a home environment where children know exactly what’s expected of them.

Part 2: Talk. A lot.

Chapter 4: Fight Smart

Love is in the Eyes

___James Pennebaker, a psychologist at the University of Texas and the author of *The Secret Life of Pronouns*, says if a couple uses first-person pronouns - *I* or *we* - it’s a sign of a healthy relationship. *We* is a particularly good pronoun because the “we-ness” is a mark of high togetherness. The second-person singular - *you always say that or you never do this* - is a mark of unhappiness and poor problem-solving. The takeaway: One of the ways to stop fighting is to stop saying *you*.

Pizza vs. Pretzels

Either way, the biggest hurdle we face is not the other person and their emotions, Ury said, it’s ourselves and our emotions. He offered a simple way to prevent our emotions from getting in our way. It’s called “Go to the balcony.”

“When things are starting to go wrong in an encounter, imagine the negotiation taking place on a stage,” Ury said. “Then allow your mind to go to the balcony overlooking that stage. From there you can see the macro view. From there you can start to calm down. From there you can exert some self-control.”

Chapter 5: The Buck Starts Here

When enough friends started asking to use his system with their kids, Bill quit his job and launched FamZoo, a Web site that helps parents teach kids how to manage money.

The Bank of Mom and Dad

Although parents are talking directly to their kids about money, they are passing on their attitudes on the topic. Research shows that if kids see their parents feeling insecure about money, they internalize those fears. If kids see their parents being materialistic, they develop those same cravings. And if kids see their parents discussing financial matters responsibly and planning for the future, they follow those behaviors, too.

Question #2: Should the money be a handout or tied to chores around the house?

As Pink noted, “That’s why schoolchildren who are paid to solve problems typically choose easier problems and therefore learn less. The short-term prize crowds out the long-term learning.”

Daniel Kahneman, in *Thinking Fast and Slow*, shattered conventional wisdom on this topic. He found that people are more driven to avoid losses than to achieve gains. In other words, the fear of *not* reaching a goal is stronger than the desire to achieve it. Golfers, for example, are much more successful at putting for par than for a birdie, no matter the distance, because they fear losing a stroke more than they desire picking up one.

At the time I read this, Linda and I were shamefully resorting to bribing our daughters to eat more vegetables. For years, we’d been trying to get them to at least try more vegetables, and finally we broke down and offered them a few extra dollars if they added three new vegetables a month. Kahneman’s research persuaded us to change tacks. Instead of promising the payoff at the end, we gave it to them up front. “Here is five dollars. If you add three vegetables this month, you get to keep it. If you don’t, you have to give it back.” It worked! People I know have tried the same tactic with raking the leaves or curfew.

How much is that prom dress in the window?

“To me it is. In my mind, financial literacy is not, ‘Do you know how a stock works’? It’s about understanding the concept of constraints. I’ve done a lot of work advising startups over the years, and one reason they’re so innovative is they’re constrained.

Taking off the training wheels

1. *Show them the money.* Trott said most parents have an instinctive reluctance to be honest with their kids about money. “I tell my clients that forcing their kids to have financial literacy is one of the most important things they can do,” he said. He quoted statistics that say the more parents talk to their kids about debt, the less debt they rack up; the more they hear about savings, the more they sock away.

4. *Put them to work.* There’s a lot of vagueness in academic circles about children and money, but the research is clear that part time jobs are great for kids. The Youth Development Survey in St. Paul, Minnesota, followed a number of children from ninth grade through their midthirties to determine whether childhood should be the sanctuary of play and learning or if work can be a productive part of it. The study found that those who work don’t lose interest in school and don’t cut back on family, extracurricular activities, or volunteering. They even become better at time management.

So if you really want your daughters to understand money, have them open a lemonade stand.

Yours, Mine, and Ours

- All couples should have quarterly meetings to discuss financial matters; more if you’re having money troubles. (The same applies to extended families if they have shared financial interests.)
- Avoid talking about money at birthday parties, family dinners, or holidays; those occasions should be for fun.
- Have a third part of other neutral voice at the table; you’ll sit up straighter, ask more questions, and avoid bringing up grudges.

Chapter 6: Talk About the Marshmallows

Talk About the Marshmallows

When siblings between the ages of three and seven are together, they clash an average of three and a half times per hour, studies show, with those fights lasting a total of ten minutes out of every sixty.

- To reduce fights during mealtime, have siblings spend at least twenty minutes beforehand engaged in a joint activity that reaffirms their connection.
- To boost camaraderie, give siblings chores to do together to build trust and a sense of accomplishment.
- To increase confidence, spend ten minutes alone with each child every night doing something suited to that child - reading a book, reviewing ball scores, telling stories.

Turns out they may have been right. Kramer says children under eight are “generally unable” to manage conflicts with their siblings on their own. “The research that I and others have done,” she said, “has clearly shown

that for children who don't already have those skills in conflict management, it *is* critical for parents to step in and help." She recommends helping children by giving them a tool kit for resolving difficult situations.

So what should be in that tool kit? Heen and Richardson had some advice. The first thing they shared with me is a kid friendly version of the technique they've honed with adults. It has three steps.

"If you teach a child to think about the person they're in conflict with, it will serve them in good stead throughout their life."

"But to them, they really do matter," he continued. "On the surface it's about marshmallows, but it's really about 'Am I being treated fairly in the world?' And they carry these issues with them their whole lives until one day they're no longer fighting about marshmallows, they're fighting about taking care of you."

Chapter 7: Lessons from the Sex Mom

Who's Afraid of the Birds and the Bees?

_____In Europe, where research shows sex is more openly discussed within families, teenagers engage in intercourse an average of two years later, and the rate of teen pregnancy is eight times lower.

Lesson #1: *It's never too early to start.* I have a confession. When I gave my daughters a bath or sat with them while they were being potty trained, I never named their genitals. I was too embarrassed, or afraid. "Wash your privates," I would say, or "Clean where the pee-pee comes from." Apparently I'm not alone. Research shows that half of all two-and-a-half-year-old girls know the correct name for boys' genitals, but not for their own. In our own culture, boys have penises; girls have "down there."

McFadden was outraged by this. "How can we give our daughters confidence in their bodies if they can't even name the parts of their body?" she said. "When my daughter had a diaper rash, I would say, 'Is your labia sore?' or 'Do you want some cream on your vulva?' I didn't say, 'Does your hee-ha hurt?'"

"We are so afraid of saying the wrong thing," she continued, "or that they'll ask us about our sexuality, [that] we don't tell them anything. To me this is about language: Nose. Lamp. Chair. Nipple. We don't change the names of people's ears, their scalp, their fingernails. Why change their genitalia?"

The American Academy of Pediatrics agrees. In a 2009 report, the group recommended speaking to children as young as eighteen months about sexuality. At that age, "It is important to teach your child the proper names for body parts. Making up names for body parts may give the idea that there is something bad about the proper name." When your kid eventually starts asking questions, the report recommended a careful response:

- Don't laugh or giggle, even if the question is cute. Your child shouldn't be made to feel ashamed for her curiosity.
- Be brief. Your four-year-old doesn't need to know the details of intercourse.
- See if your child wants or needs to know more. Follow up with, "Does that answer your question?"

Lesson #2: *It's easier to talk with a nine-year-old than a thirteen year old.* The stories about menstruation in *Your Daughter's Bedroom* are heartbreaking. Girls feeling horror, shame, guilt, disgust. Some women said their mothers insulted them when they first got their periods; others were sad their fathers withdrew and never hugged them again. McFadden's book contains memorable thoughts from such women.

McFadden said these responses told her that it's important to start talking about menstruation when girls are in their latency period, around seven or eight. "We do it backward," she said. "We wait until they're teenagers, when they withdraw from us, then we try to talk to them. If you start when they're younger, they're still sponges and happy to learn.

"I was incredibly excited," Brady said. "My mother had promised that I could get my ears pierced. She took me out to dinner with my great-aunt to this fancy restaurant. I got a cappuccino. I put about ten pounds of sugar in it, and it still tasted disgusting.

Kate Eggleston calls this a "period party," and she's had one for each of her daughters.

The Formula for Marital Happiness

But this standard advice just didn't work for many people, and so it came under attack in recent years. A group of psychologists led by David Schnarch, the author of *Passionate Marriage*, and Stephen Mitchell, the author of *Can Love Last?*, devised a new approach. Their radical idea was that intimacy is the last thing couples need. All that living together, sharing a bathroom, and learning about each other's lives all day gives couples a

surfeit of togetherness. What couples need is more separation. Too much familiarity quashes desire, the authors said, while sex thrives on mystery and adventure. If you want more sex in your marriage, you don't need more cuddling, you need more creativity and escapism.

Chapter 8: What's Love Got To Do With It

Love and Marriage

Dr. Chapman calls these different styles of expressing and receiving affection "the five love languages."

- *Words of affirmation.* Using compliments and expressions of appreciation, like "You are the best husband in the world" or "I admire your optimism."
- *Gifts.* Bringing flowers, leaving love notes, or buying tokens of affection.
- *Acts of service.* Doing something for your partner you know he or she would like you to do, like washing dishes, walking the dog, or changing a diaper.
- *Quality time.* Giving your partner your undivided attention by turning off the television, sharing a meal, or taking a walk.
- *Physical touch.* Holding hands, putting your arm around your partner, or tussling your partner's hair.

Take the Fight Out of the Night

In one way, Dr. Chapman's success is not a surprise. Religion has long been inextricably tied to family life in America. One truth that appears repeatedly in scientific studies is the persistent correlation between religiosity and happy families. Research on this is all but unanimous over the last fifty years. The more committed families are to a religious or spiritual tradition, the happier they are. Recent surveys have confirmed the correlation. A study from the University of Virginia in 2011 showed that mothers who attend religious services weekly are happier than those who do not. A study in 2008 showed that men who regularly attend religious services have happier marriages and are more likely to be involved with their children.

"Guys, I'm going to give you a sentence and encourage you to write it in your notebook," he said. "I guarantee it will change your life forever: *Honey, what you're saying makes a whole lot of sense.* You say that, you are no longer her enemy. You are her friend who understands her.

Chasing Butterflies

1. *Put yourself first.* The cliché position is that good marriages are all about "we", but new research shows that successful relationships have a lot of "me" in them. Psychologists Arthur Aron and Gary Lewandowski studied how individuals use their relationships to better themselves. They learn new things from their partners, meet new people, try new experiences.

When couples are first falling in love, for example, each person uses a wider variety of words to describe themselves. The new relationship literally broadens their self-conception. Over time, each partner slowly adopts the traits of the other, growing individually as they grow together. As Dr. Lewandowski concluded, "People have a fundamental motivation to improve the self. If your partner is helping you become a better person, you become happier and more satisfied in the relationship."

2. *Rethink date night.* A common piece of advice for couples is to schedule regular one-on-one time. "Date night" is the default answer to most problems in modern marriages. And research backs this up. A study from the National Marriage Project in 2012 showed that couples who have weekly time to themselves are 3.5 times more likely to be happy, including sexually happy.

But not just any date will do. A growing body of research says that simply going to dinner and a movie has little impact on a relationship. If you want to improve your relationship, try something novel with your partner. Helen Fisher, of Rutgers, has observed that couples who participate in unusual or different activities, from taking an art class to driving to a new part of town to cooking a new recipe, flood their systems with the same chemicals as do couples just falling in love.

3. *Double-date.* One surprising way to score some of those novelty points is to go on a date with another couple. Richard Slatcher of Wayne State University did a fascinating study called "When Harry and Sally Met Dick and Jane." He divided sixty couples into two groups and had each couple spend time with another couple. One group was given highly revealing questions; the other, small talk. The results were dramatic. Couples who disclosed more about themselves felt closer to the other couples - and to each other. Slatcher said the experience of being

intimate with another couple was sufficiently novel to trigger the same chemical reaction as the exotic date night.

Chapter 9: The Care and Feeding of Grandparents

The Grandmother Effect

A meta-analysis of sixty-six studies completed in 1992 found that mothers who have more support from grandmothers have less stress and more well-adjusted children. The more involved the grandmothers are, the more involved dads are, too.

Why Grandparents are Happier

The study found a number of factors that contribute to this increased happiness. First, older people phase out people they're friendly with but not particularly close to (like the parents of their kids' friends) and concentrate on the people they actually care about, like family.

The second major reason older people are happier, she found, is that while younger adults experience more anxiety and disappointment over their career goals, finding a soul mate, and making money, older people have typically made peace with their accomplishments and failures. This lets them take more enjoyment out of life.

Chapter 10: The Right Stuff

I had invited a snoop - Snoopology

"We often assume people are trying to fool us and be something they're not," Gosling said. "The truth is, people want to be known. That's why places are so informative. I can learn more about you and your family by looking at your home than I can by talking to you.

A Happier Home

Larry Wentle

Privacy

____ Alexander helped define the idea that successful homes all have three types of spaces:

- *Individual*. Space that belongs to each person alone.
- *Shared*. Space that belongs to a subgroup, like parents or children.
- *Public*. Space that belongs to everyone.

Light

The lower the light, the more loving the conversation is likely to be.

A Big, Fat Mess

But the real culprit appears to have nothing to do with gender: it's self-aggrandizement. Daniel Kahneman found that both members of a couple overemphasize their role in cleaning the house. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* Kahneman cites a study in which spouses were asked to estimate how much time they spend keeping the place tidy, taking out the trash, or doing other chores. In every case, both men and women said their contribution was higher than it actually was. This information was so powerful, Kahneman said, that when couples learned about it, it often defused marital spats. Remember, he said, even though you may think you're doing more than your fair share, your partner is thinking the exact same thing.

Sit Unto Others as They Sit Unto You

"If you want to talk to your daughters about curfew," Augustin said, "I would want to have that conversation on cushioned chairs, because no one will be as doctrinaire, you'll be more open to the opinions of others, and you'll have a more conciliatory conversation, or at least less contentious."

Awesome Stuff

I was reminded of Randy Pausch's memorable line from his "last lecture." After showing photos of his childhood bedroom, which was covered in mathematical notations, he said, "If your kids want to paint their bedrooms, as a favor to me, let 'em do it." The next time a snoopologist comes to visit our home, he'll find that our daughters' bedroom is the color of mint chocolate chip ice cream. And he'll know exactly who chose it.

Part 3: Go Out And Play

Chapter 11: The Family Vacation Checklist

Introducing the Family Vacation Checklist

Armed with this advice I made a master list of our family's common travel mistakes. There were the things we often forget: sunscreen, cell phone chargers, stuffed animals. There were the things we forget to do: turn off the air-conditioning, shut the curtains, empty the trash. There were the things we assumed others were doing: pack snacks, print out directions, cancel the newspaper. Linda added her own favorites: set the DVR, make sure the kids go to the bathroom. The kids threw in a few of their own: bring enough books, charge the iPad!

Beyond Twenty Questions

Good games, they said, have four things in common:

1. *A clear goal.* Players know what they're trying to achieve.
2. *Rules.* Limitations that force creativity and strategic thinking.
3. *Feedback.* Points, levels, scores, or something that lets players know how close they are to the goal and gives them the motivation to keep playing.
4. *Voluntary participation.* Only if players choose to play will the game be fun.

These benefits are even greater with games like FarmVille and CityVille, which oblige players to cooperate. In 2009, researchers from eight universities in the United States and Asia studied the effects of games that require "helpful behavior." In three different studies, they looked at children under thirteen, teenagers, and college students. All three studies concluded that the more time young people spend helping others in games, the more time they spent helping friends and family members in real life. The project's coauthors called this the "upward spiral" of gaming. Families that play together stay together.

Over the Mountains and Through the Woods

I'm Thinking of a Time When

They recommended a homemade version of Twenty Questions. "Kids have all this memory of things they've done with you," one designer said. "Throw out a statement, 'I'm thinking of a time when we went to a place... all you can ask is yes or no questions. Go!'" Suddenly the kids become actors in their own game. "What's mom thinking about? 'Where did we go?'"

Another advantage of this game is that the kids are on the same side. "With the young kids especially, if one kid keeps score against another, it ends up being a disaster," one designer added. "So it's a joint scoring system. They work together for a while, then they compete. By mixing it up, they get along better." The winner chooses the next place.

Not Leaving on a Jet Plane

Mission Impossible

Many of the Zynga designers play a similar game with their kids, but they were much better at it. First, they mix up items more creatively: I need two luggage tags from United Airlines, then three stirrers from Starbucks, and I need you to find out what time the next flight for Amsterdam leaves. Next they generously sprinkle in rewards: If you introduce yourself to five people and bring me three business cards, I'll take you to get frozen yogurt. Finally they escalate: How many baby steps does it take to get to Gate 16? Now how many dinosaur steps? If you can cut that number in half, I'll give you three bonus points.

"For many children, leveling up is their main goal when playing a game, one designer said. "It taps into a basic human need to achieve. The guys in karate figured this out ages ago. The only reason there's a black belt is it's mysteriously better than a white belt.

Chapter 12: Shut Up And Cheer!

Viewed from a different angle, these fields showed the most destructive tendencies of modern parents - the relentless pressure they put on children to work too hard, succeed too mightily, and specialize too quickly. These two fields combine to make kids' athletics one of the most fraught arenas for modern families.

Follow the Money

A 2005 study by the U.S. government found that athletes are more likely than nonathletes to attend college

and graduate. A survey of senior executives in Fortune 500 companies found that 95 percent had played high school sports, compared with half who were in student government and less than that in the National Honor Society.

Showdown on Field #6B

I was amazed by the difference. Though it was mostly moms, there seemed to be more testosterone here than at my local gym. “Go for the goal!” “Attack.” “Get in there, fight!” And the Fury was winning this game! What stood out most was that the parents were all talking about individual achievement: Does my child need better equipment? Should I get her more lessons? Is she shooting enough? The coach, meanwhile, who did not have a child on the Fury but was a former college standout hired to coach the squad, was more focused on the team.

The most important thing for children under twelve is to enjoy the game. Nothing more.

You’re The Kind Of Person Who...

Before the Game

“It’s hard for a child to be driven when he’s been driven all the time by his parents.”

During the Game

No verbs. “Our advice is to cheer, but don’t give directions,” Thompson said. “You can say ‘good pass,’ but you can’t say ‘pass it to her.’ You can say ‘nice shot,’ but you can’t say ‘shoot.’”

After the Game

No PGA. Thompson said the number one thing that parents should avoid after games is the deconstructing of mistakes. Your job is not to play jock radio host and comp on every missed kick, whiffed catch, or dropped ball. Thompson’s way of expressing this is “No PGA. No postgame analysis.”

You’re the type of person who... Ask your child for three things they remember about the game, then tell them three things you remember. If your kid mentions something negative, respond with what Thompson calls a *You’re the kind of person who* statement.

“Sure, you didn’t get a hit, but I want you to know, one of the reasons I like you is you’re the kind of person who doesn’t give up easily or keeps practicing until you get it right.”

Chapter 13: Give War a Chance

“People wonder why guys in the military have such a strong bond,” McCarthy told me earlier. “It’s because they suffer together, and they do things as a group they could never do as individuals.”

“And that sense of camaraderies is lost on too many people,”

Get Yourselves a Log

McCarthy’s words echoed the more memorable lessons I had learned. In families, some of our greatest demons arise when the needs of the group conflict with those of the individual. We need more sleep, but we have to get the kids up and out the door. Someone wants to pull the plug on Grandma; others do not. In that moment, you can flee. You can fight. You can pout. But you only truly succeed when you break through the conflict and work out a system with the others on your team.

“Ultimately, the greatest experiences I’ve had have all come with other people.”

The Olympics of Sticky Buns

Play

The military has studied the impact of different types of activities on bonding. Solo games (bowling, golf) have the least impact. Relay races are next, because they have both individual and team components. The most effective are full-blown games (volleyball, touch football, ultimate Frisbee) in which everyone depends on one another.

“Start by asking what it means to be a Feiler,” Smith advise. “Then pick an activity based on what you like. ‘Okay, we’re lifelong learners; we’re going to try something new.’ ‘We’re risk takers, so we’re going to go hang gliding.’ ‘We’re really outdoorsy, so we never stay inside. I don’t care if a hurricane is coming, we’re still going surfing.’”

Conclusion

Everyone wants to be in a happy family.

Conflict is the norm.

“But I think what’s most modern about them is they admit their children don’t poop rainbows 24/7,” she continued. “There seems to have been this period for the last decade or so in which everything children did was perfect all the time, and they just needed to be told they were fantastic, gorgeous, and lovable, and they would turn out perfect. And we’re all finding out that’s not true. Claire and Phil love each other, and they love their kids, but they can also admit when their kids are obnoxious pains in the ass. I think Americans are hungry for that.” The currency of that emotion is conversation - lots of real, frank talk. “There’s a lot of direct communication in our show,” said Christopher Lloyd, the cocreator. “There’s a lot of talk about problems and feelings, more than in most families, which might be why people gravitate to it. Viewers wish their family communicated a lot more directly, the way our guys do.

That is perhaps the biggest lesson for all of us in real families. Conflict happens every day. Mishaps occur. But the microgesture of reconciliation - the hug, the pat on the back, the little object laid out on the bed, or the note tucked into the bag - goes a long way.

Just don’t expect the other person to be all that different a few days later.

2. Talk. A lot.

___Simply put, if you want a happier family, spend time crafting, refining, and retelling the story of your family’s positive moments and your ability to bound back from the difficult ones. If you tell it, they will come.

Choose Happiness

For busy families, this idea of gradual victories is both comfortine and energizing. You don’t need a wholesale makeover. You just need to get started. I heard this idea repeatedly in my travels: The surest way to have a poorly functioning family is to be content with the status quo. The easiest route to unhappiness is to do nothing.

The opposite of that dictum also holds: The easiest path to happiness is to do something. As the Dalai Lama said, “Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from your own actions.” Tackle the challenge that’s been nagging your family, tweak the routine that’s not working any longer, have the difficult conversation, pull out the game from the back of the closet.

The Happy Families Toolkit

Everything you need to improve your mornings, tell your family history, fight smarter, go out and play, and much more...

For more tips, watch Bruce’s TED Talk on Happy Families at

http://www.ted.com/talks/bruce_feiler_agile_programming_for_your_family.html

Improve Your Family’s Daily Routine

___Weekly family meetings quickly became the single most impactful idea

The Family Meeting

Create Your Family Brand

Design Your Family Mission Statement

Ask four questions to help define your core values:

- What words best describe our family?
- What is most important to our family?
- What are our strengths as a family?
- What saying best capture our family?

Narrate Your Family’s Wisdom

We Are Family

The “Do You Know” Scale

- Do you know how your parents met?
- Do you know where your mother grew up?
- Do you know where your father grew up?
- Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up?
- Do you know where some of your grandparents met?
- Do you know where your parents were married?
- Do you know what went on when you were being born?
- Do you know the source of your name?
- Do you know some things about what happened when your brothers or sisters were being born?
- Do you know which person in your family you look most like?
- Do you know which person in the family you act most like?
- Do you know some of the illnesses and injuries that your parents experienced when they were younger?
- Do you know some of the lessons that your parents learned from good or bad experiences?
- Do you know some things that happened to your mom or dad when they were in school?
- Do you know the national background of your family (such as English, German, Russian, etc.)?
- Do you know some of the jobs that your parents had when they were young?
- Do you know some awards that your parents received when they were young?
- Do you know the names of the schools that your mom went to?
- Do you know the names of the schools that your dad went to?
- Do you know about a relative whose face “froze” in a grumpy position because he or she did not smile enough?