

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
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Happy Family Life



When families are genuinely functioning as a happy and functional unit, where communication is open and honest, where family members spend real quality time together, children grow up well. They have a sense of right and wrong. They don't develop dysfunctional drug habits, they are responsible, and they pass this functionality to their own families when they become adults. Let us discuss some of the factors that lead us to a happy family life.

Put your family first. When you come home from work, tired as you may be, greet your children. Talk to them about their day and tell them about yours. Be honest and open with them and they will be with you. Find something interesting to share with them. Don't sit down and turn on the TV and ignore them. If they can't talk to their parents, they will learn to confide in friends – that is, with anyone who is interested in hearing about their lives.

Enjoy your relationship with your spouse and with your children. Your family is your blessing. Don't take them for granted. Show them that you care and are glad to see them. Your family is too precious to be treated as boring. If you let your family life become boring, spouses will seek affairs, and children will seek other company, and possibly get involved with drugs or other dysfunctional behavior. Keep up a positive relationship with your spouse; don't use a child's company as a substitute for the caring love of your spouse, and don't ever make your children take sides.

Sharing meals together is an essential part of family life. Our forebears always ate together. Together means socially, without TV, without being on the phone, without having music blasting, without having negative talk. Sitting together in silence or in prayer or meditation for a moment before eating, whether or not you are religious, is a way of appreciating the bounty that we have. We should always realize that as we are about to partake in our meal, there are hundreds of millions of people suffering from the pangs of hunger, and the pain of seeing their children go without nourishment.

Sharing fun times – recreation and play – on a daily basis with our children is something else we should do daily. Even reading a bedtime story to a younger child or a chapter from a novel to an older child is a way of strengthening our bonds.

We all have friends, but we must always put our family before our friends. If they understand that friendships are important but family comes first, then they will stick with their families, and not, in turn, put their friends before family. It works both ways.

Don't give up your parental responsibilities by involving your children in too many after-school activities when you can do similar or even healthier or more creative activities with your children. Being a soccer-mom type chauffeur is not the most creative way to use your spare time with your children. Children do need some time together with their peers, but very often it is overdone to the detriment of the family.

Every family needs some kind of regular event that becomes a ritual, be it weekly, monthly or yearly. Sundays may be a day of going to church together, or having a barbecue, or going on a picnic, or a day trip, or visiting a grandparent. Perhaps there is a special place the family can go to relax for a week or for several days every summer; holiday dinners can be done special ways with special foods and dishes that are unique to the family, or perhaps part of a county holiday, like the fair, or a national holiday. These events, repeated regularly, become essential family traditions that keep members close. Similarly, on a daily basis, little inside family jokes and nicknames and special family words emphasize the uniqueness of your little group.

Maintain a peaceful home environment. If you wish to keep your home under control you must first keep yourself under control; don't lose it; enforce rules with appropriate, non-abusive punishment. A calm environment, without blaring music and TV, is much more conducive to harmony than a noisy space.

Don't fight and argue with your spouse in front of your children. It sets a terrible example – and this is how they learn. It upsets them and can affect their behavior and mood. If they do witness this disharmony, apologize to them and let them understand that things are good again.

If you work too much and are always gone, your children will begin to feel worthless and insecure. Sometimes it is difficult to make a living and spend as much time as you like with your children; if this describes your situation, spend as much of your free time with your children. You only have a limited number of years with them at home, and this is the time to teach them well for their own future.

Encourage your children to get along with their brothers and sisters. Do not let rivalries occur by taking sides or showing favoritism. Having a sibling is a great fortune. Let them understand and learn that fact.

Allow for the changing nature of families over time. We all pass through various stages of life as time passes from infancy to childhood to adolescence, to young

adult, to middle age, to elderly, to the frail end stages of life. This means that you must remain flexible to change.

The best basis for a happy family is open lines of communication between all members of the family; everyone talks to everyone. Mom shouldn't be communication central, for there is a better system: let's all work to talk to each other openly, and listen openly. Communication is talking and listening, and not judging. Being judgmental shows there is no trust and thus ends the conversation. You can't fix a situation or deal with a family problem without talking to each other.

Website of the week: Here is a website with lots of links to family fun games. Although this site is hosted by the Latter-Day Saints, most games are not affiliated with any religion. I do not support any one group over any other. The games, however, are good.

http://lds.about.com/od/familyhomeeveninggames/Family_Home_Evening_Games.htm

Tip of the week: How can a mental health therapist help you? Unlike friends and family to whom you tell your troubles, therapists are professionally trained as listeners to help you find the underlying causes of your current problems. They teach you how to learn and use tools to improve your most intimate problems and relationships. They can guide you and help you do the work to improve your life, without the use of medications and drugs. It is clinically proven that most problems can be dealt with as well as or better with psychotherapy than with drugs.