

Parenting

SUCCESSFUL FAMILIES



The little old lady was working in the garden when reporters started arriving at her small house in the country.

Her son had just become president of the USA. "What do you think of your son now, Mrs Eisenhower?" She stood straight, looked them in the eye and said, "Which one?" She had three sons. One was a leading lawyer, one was president of a large bank and the other had been a general and was now president of his country. She was equally proud of them all.



What is it about successful families?

1. THEY ENCOURAGE AND APPRECIATE

A music teacher once said, “As a composer, he is hopeless”—about Beethoven. A newspaper editor once fired a young man because he had “no good ideas”—it was Walt Disney. A 21-year-old worker in a store was kept away from customers because his boss said he “didn’t have enough sense”—that was F W Woolworth. Yet somehow, these famous people overcame the negativity because somebody else believed in them and encouraged them to believe in themselves. Your children will get enough knocks in the world. Make home a safe, positive place.

2. THEY PLAN TOGETHER

Some families do this formally, using a weekly family council. Everyone is able to speak freely about issues that concern them all: Goal-setting, priorities for the week, sharing chores, what people need, plans for days off and holidays. Everyone can contribute items to the agenda for discussion. As children get older, they can be given the job of keeping records and even chairing the meeting, which will be good experience in how to conduct themselves in school councils, board meetings, parliament . . . who knows? Family councils keep the family focused and positive.

3. THEY LOVE UNCONDITIONALLY

The more competitive life gets, the more children need a place where they get unconditional love, attention, time and have hero status even if they are not top of the class or captain of the team.

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4. THEY HAVE STRONG VALUES

What are the top 10 virtues you'd like to see in your children? Ours would be love, spirituality, kindness, fun, creativity, intelligence, responsibility, determination, consistent work, patience, honesty, wisdom, service. Oops, that's 13—maybe we should list mathematical ability!

The way to build values into your children is to practise them yourself—even in heavy traffic when you're tired and it's raining, even when the waiter just can't seem to get it right. If you think you're hiding your attitudes, you're not—your children pick them up and you're teaching them to hide their attitudes. This is frightening! But it's the greatest motivator to live well and try to follow your ideals.

5. THEY ACCEPT AND VALUE DIFFERENCES

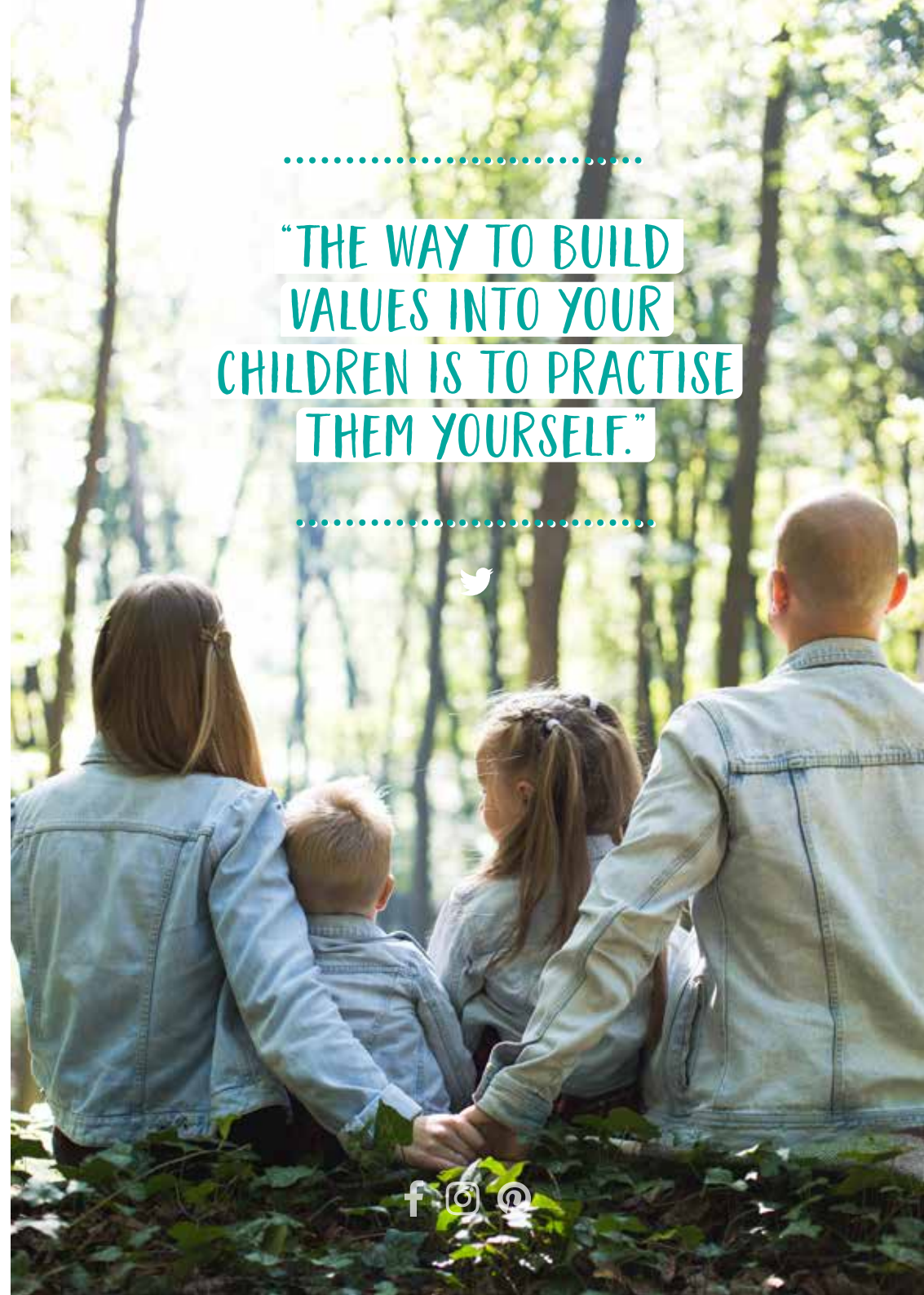
Dysfunctional families tend to view differences as a threat: *If you are different from me, you might be better and how would my self-esteem cope? So we'll all agree that our way is best and everyone else is stupid (and if you disagree, keep quiet or else).*

Obviously, all families are different. Some people feel a bit of shame that they don't live in a "proper" family with two adults, 2.6 children and a white picket fence. Can they have family values too? Even the Bible—which promotes the highest family values—mentions many different types of families. The famous children of Israel were born to two wives (who were sisters!) and a couple of servants—a violently conflicted family that somehow produced greatness. The adored Queen Esther was an orphan adopted by her childless uncle and aunt. King David's family tree contained a foreigner on her second marriage (Ruth) and an ex-prostitute who had worked for the enemy army (Rahab). Even Jesus was born to an unusual family: Joseph was a widower, so Jesus had older stepbrothers to pick on Him. And everyone thought Jesus was conceived by unmarried parents and called him illegitimate even in his adulthood. While some family situations may be ideal, there is no shame in difference.

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6. THEY SHARE CHORES AND POWER

As children develop, they need more autonomy and power if they are to develop responsibility and accountability.

7. THEY MAKE TIME TO BE TOGETHER

They actually like each other! Their greatest priority is spending time together. They play together and help each other work.

A young Australian executive remembers meeting a Jewish entrepreneur who ran a huge tourism empire across the US from his palatial Manhattan office. Their meeting had run all day Friday and they were close to finalising a \$50 million-plus deal. The boardroom was full of lawyers, accountants and other suited experts, all concentrating hard when the doors burst open and a little old lady marched in shouting, "Isaac! What, you're blind? You didn't see the sun about to go down?"

The 40-something entrepreneur rolled his eyes and said, "Hello, Mother. Oh, is that the time? Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, we'll have to pick this up on Monday." And he got up and walked out to spend Shabbat with his extended family. The highly-paid experts looked at each other, shrugged and came back on Monday.

One reason Jewish culture has lasted for thousands of years (despite some horrible blows) is its emphasis on family. Children are taught to honour their father and mother. Parents value their children above their own lives, and pass on their values and beliefs with as much skill and enthusiasm as they can. The day of worship demands (not suggests) that they stop work for 24 hours each week and unwind with their family. Sounds brilliant for stressed workaholics who spend an average of 32 seconds per day with their children. (And a rest sends you back to work fresher anyway.)

"THEIR GREATEST PRIORITY
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8. THEY BELIEVE EVERYONE IS NEEDED AND VITAL TO THE TEAM

Jim, a very talented executive, arrived on the boat from Greece when he was one year old and watched his parents start with nothing. He was helping them in their fish-and-chips shop before he started school. He said, “Some people would see this as terrible child labour or something, but it taught me customer relations, marketing, management, finance, you name it. And Dad worked with minimum stress—he’d be singing at 7 am when he started heating up the oil and whistling when he swept the floor at 9 pm. He always had something to teach me—he listened to intelligent radio and if he had a minute’s break he’d be reading the paper—before he sold it.” When other children were goofing around and doing drugs, Jim was needed. They didn’t overdo it—they gave him time to study, and to have fun and relax—but he was needed and valuable.

Parents who work outside the home can’t always do this, but chores can be one way to make your child feel needed and boost their skills. Some parents buy pets mainly so that their child would be needed and responsible. (Be very careful before you do, though, as pets are a big responsibility).

9. THEY SHARE SPIRITUAL VALUES AND BELIEFS

Many new parents get interested in faith, hope and love. When you hold a newborn baby, it seems ridiculous to suggest that there is no meaning in life, no right or wrong, no big Parent up there planning for us and wishing us well. And as children start thinking for themselves, they ask huge cosmic questions: “Daddy, is Grandpa in heaven now?” “Where do people come from?” “When the sky flashes, is God taking my picture?” Even parents who found formal religion irrelevant, restrictive or hypocritical, now start wondering.

Real spirituality affects your attitudes. Your attitude to yourself: genetic junk or a child of God? Your attitude to others: competitors or God’s other children? Imperfect just like you and deserving of understanding? New parents tend to check out a local church or two, just for curiosity.

And there are other ways to teach spirituality to your children:

- **Time in nature.** Seeing how huge and well-designed the universe is and feeling how small you are.
- **Sponsoring a child** in a poor country. A great way to teach your own children how lucky they are and how good giving feels.
- **Prayer at bedtime every night.** Anyone can simply talk to God about their worries, ask for a safe and happy sleep, and thank Him for the good things, their friends and family. Children will need some guidance at first about what to say, but then they’ll get on a roll and want to chat on about everything. You’ll hear some classics. Try not to burst out laughing. (Prayer is a fantastic stress relief for parents too.)



10. THEY CONNECT OUTSIDE THEMSELVES

We live near an extended Mediterranean family. It's a large house owned by a sweet old couple in their 70s. Also living there are one son, his wife and their children. There's also another son and his new wife. And their other six children drop in regularly with some of their 63 grandchildren. I'm not suggesting that lifestyle would work for everyone, but they are never lonely. If someone has a shaky time, they derive practical and emotional support from the rest. The old couple will not go to an aged care institution unless they need special medical care. The young mums can continue working because they have free child care from someone they trust. They all save huge money on rental and eventually build big houses themselves.

If they need plumbing, concreting, accounting, legal advice, pizza, panel beating or medical care, they can call a relative—and pay them nothing as long as they are willing to help them with their own skill. Everybody wins. It's a joy to watch. I'm not suggesting you must copy that, but they have things Western culture has lost. Their children are mostly secure, responsible, high-achieving children. They belong. They are needed. The adults have adult company rather than being stuck home alone with children all the time.

We need to be connected to a tribe. One child with a single mum said as an adult how much he appreciated men from his church who took him camping, helped his mother renovate the house, and generally kept a fatherly eye on the family, and also their wives who didn't feel threatened and stayed close to his mother.

In cities, many people live far from their family network and form their own "tribe" from work, sport, club or religious community contacts. They mind each other's children for a sanity break. They swap their skills and pass on their contacts.

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Belonging to a social club or church or some kind of network is very handy. It offers:

- mentoring by specialists
- a feeling of connectedness
- practise in relating to a wide range of people
- knowing who else is influencing your child
- someone to keep an eye on children in those years when they think their parents know nothing
- a chance to give back and be appreciated, thus raising your self-esteem

11. THEY VALUE GRANDPARENTS

Grandparents who are healthy and live nearby can be an amazing help to parents and children, and can enjoy helping thoroughly.

- They usually have more time to spend than parents do (and more than they did as parents).
- They can pass on the best family traditions (and a few funny stories) and give children a sense of “roots” and belonging.
- They can babysit and help with chores, giving new parents a break.
- They can listen and they’ve learned that listening is often much more effective than talking.
- They can keep their houses child-friendly (no poisons or breakables down low), and a supply of stories and toys.

What do grandparents get out of it?

- Being kept young and in touch with the fast-changing world.
- Pride in seeing their offspring grow and do well.
- Love and belonging.
- Lots of hugs and physical affection.
- Fun and a lot of laughs.
- Interest and wonder again. Overcoming the blasé blahs by looking afresh at the world through little eyes. (“Do fish kiss,

Nanna?” “How do your flowers get there, Pop?”)

- The feeling of being useful.
- The joy of giving and teaching.
- Passing on their values and what’s important.
- Even when they are sick, they know that little angels will visit them and love them.

12. THEY DON'T DEMAND PERFECTION

But they keep aiming for nothing less.

13. THEY HAVE GOOD MEN

This may sound sexist, but everyone already knows how vital mothers are to families. Not everyone knows how needed good men are—often not even good men themselves. Some men were not well fathered themselves or maybe they interpret “gender equality” to mean women can do everything they themselves can do, so they’re not needed. So here are a few words in praise of good father figures:

- Boys need fathers to give them masculinity lessons. This doesn’t mean killing deer, fighting others or hugging trees. Just sensible male living, like:
 1. How to understand yourself and look after your body.
 2. How to relate to other men.
 3. How to treat and understand women and girls (guess what: They’re different and that’s very good!).
 4. How to enjoy work.
 5. How to stand up for your beliefs and rights, and for other people’s.
- If boys lack father figures, they’ll be attracted to the (bad) parenting they receive from gangs, ultraviolent media heroes and so on.

- Girls need fathers to be their first friend from the opposite sex.
- Boys need rough-and-tumble play. Their rumbling dad models self-control and how to calm down. His greater power is comforting because it makes them feel protected, and it also makes them more likely to obey him.
- Boys are damaged by man-hating attitudes of the “all men are bad” type. If all men are, then they can act like that, they’ll theorise it’s unavoidable.



- Fathering provides more emotional rewards for men than work does.
- When researchers ask children what they want from fathers, they rarely say “a bigger house”. The overwhelming majority say, “More time to play with us”, and “Not being tired or grumpy when we’re together”.

Some dads don’t live with their children, usually not by choice, but due to divorce or separation. Yet they’re still needed. Here are some tips for dads in that situation:

- Don’t divorce your children or get slack about seeing them.
- You are still their dad. Make them feel secure, that your love will never change.
- Don’t let them see any conflict or sadness between you and their mother. It really hurts them to see two people they love hurting each other. If you can’t say anything positive about their mother, keep quiet. Even if you know your ex is criticising you, you will win points long-term by never criticising them. Don’t force them to take sides. Little hearts will silently tear.
- Don’t turn them into messengers: “What is your mother’s new boyfriend like?”
- Keep in touch, especially for birthdays or speech nights. But don’t just turn up for the “glory moments” when it’s easy—phone them the night before exams, turn up when they’re sick or their bike has a flat, and other times they need support.
- Don’t use them like a counsellor or adult friend, or express your sadness or anger around them. They have enough burdens of their own and may need you to listen. Don’t hide that you are struggling with emotions (because they’ll know anyway), but show them you are winning. This will give them hope.
- Let them share your life.
- Be reliable! If you say you’ll be there, be there—on time.

Many men are thrust into the position of being a stepdad. What advice is there for them?

- Take it slowly.
- Be friendly but play hard-to-get—they'll appreciate you more. Give them space.
- Don't punish them at first, even if their mother asks. Come up with a list of rules by asking them for input.
- Let them have some time alone with their mum. They may still be struggling with having you taking her attention.
- Be secure in yourself. Know who you are whether or not they like you, rather than being dependent on their approval.
- Do positive father things. Have fun with them. Help them. Listen to them.
- Encourage them to see their father if they want. He's not your competition.

And here's a thank-you to all the fill-in fathers out there. The male teachers who can spot a father-hungry boy and gladly give him some unofficial fathering and male bonding. The scout and youth group leaders who are good enough bush psychologists to give a young boy the emotional lift he needs, and the compliment of extra time and attention. The sporting coaches who may never be on TV, but try to be a good influence in the life of each child, particularly the virtually fatherless ones, and give them positive male attention and modelling. The grandfathers and uncles who try to help children through the hard yards of family breakdown even when they thought they quit fathering children 20 years ago. And above all, the dads who are determined to do their level best and enjoy parenting. Your children may not yet be able to express what you're doing for them, but they will.

Questions

- What good families do you know? What can you learn from them?
- Watch a TV family and compile lists of their strengths and weaknesses. You might like to do this as an activity with your children.



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