

The Habits of Happy Families

As I have surveyed and worked with thousands of families over the years, there are a small handful of habits that I see parents practice that make their families happy. And they are astonishingly powerful. In this article I will share those habits by describing the principle, discussing how it works in practice, and offering a provocation to get you thinking.

1. Assume Positive Intent

Principle: Your children are not actually trying to ruin your life. They're trying their best with limited skills and resources. Sometimes they can be clumsy. They only have their 'L' plates on.

In Practice: When your child does something upsetting, pause before reacting. Ask yourself, "What need is my child trying to meet?" Then, address the need rather than just the behaviour. "I can see you're frustrated. Let's figure this out together."

Provocation: We wouldn't assume your colleague intentionally sabotaged a project, yet we're quick to believe our children are orchestrating psychological warfare against us. Your child isn't a criminal mastermind plotting your demise. They're just hungry, tired, or struggling to communicate. The fastest way to turn a good kid bad is to treat them like they already are.

2. Laugh Together

Principle: Shared joy creates bonds that withstand life's challenges.

In Practice: Have family movie nights with comedies. Share funny stories. Play ridiculous games. Create inside jokes. Laugh at yourself when you make mistakes. Make silly faces, tell dad jokes, and celebrate the ridiculous moments of family life.

Provocation: Most families spend more time coordinating schedules than creating memories. The average household shares fewer than 20 minutes of laughter per week, yet we wonder why everyone feels disconnected. If your family hasn't had a proper belly laugh together in the last few days, your family culture is in critical condition.

3. Fix Things Fast

Principle: Conflict is inevitable; prolonged disconnection is optional.

In Practice: Be the first to apologise, especially if you're the parent. Name what went wrong. Take responsibility for your part. Ask what would help. End with physical connection. A hug, high five, or fist bump resets everyone's nervous system.

Provocation: Your silent treatment isn't "teaching them a lesson". Nor is yelling or threatening. It's teaching them that love is conditional. Every hour of unresolved tension between you and your child is rewiring their brain to expect conditional acceptance in future relationships. Your pride isn't worth the therapy bills they'll have later.

4. Stay Close

Principle: Children of all ages are biologically wired for connection with their parents.

In Practice: Create daily rituals of connection: bedtime stories, morning cuddles, after-school check-ins. Sit on their bed for five minutes at night. Drive them to school when possible. Find small ways to connect throughout the day that show you're thinking of them.

Provocation: Your child's push for independence is a façade. Behind it is a child desperately hoping you won't believe the act. While you're respecting their "independence" by backing off, they're interpreting your distance as abandonment. Your children need you more, not less—they just need you differently as they grow. They want your involvement in a supportive, not a controlling, way.

5. Listen Fully

Principle: Being heard creates security and builds trust.

In Practice: Put down your phone when your child speaks. Make eye contact. Ask follow-up questions. Reflect back what you hear. Don't immediately jump to solutions or lectures. Sometimes say, "Tell me more about that."

Provocation: If your screen time report shows more hours on social media than minutes of eye contact with your children, you're outsourcing the most important relationship they have right now to someone or something else. Your child will remember exactly zero of your "important" emails or Instagram reels, but they'll never forget the times you chose your phone over their story.

6. Create Meaningful Traditions

Principle: Family rituals create stability and identity in an unpredictable world.

In Practice: Establish weekly family nights, seasonal celebrations, birthday traditions, or Sunday dinners. They don't need to be elaborate—consistency matters more than complexity. Even simple traditions like Sunday morning pancakes create anchors of belonging.

Provocation: In a culture where kids construct identity through screens and peers, your family traditions are fighting for your children's sense of self. Without these shared experiences, your family becomes little more than roommates who occasionally share Wi-Fi. The traditions you neglect creating today are the memories your children won't have tomorrow.

7. Have the Hard Conversations

Principle: Children need parents who are brave enough to discuss difficult topics.

In Practice: Create an environment where no question is off-limits. Talk about bodies, relationships, disappointments, and fears in age-appropriate ways. Don't wait for the "perfect moment". Use everyday opportunities to address important topics briefly and naturally.

Provocation: Your discomfort with difficult conversations doesn't make them unnecessary. It makes them urgent. The conversations you avoid having with your children will be filled by Google, YouTube, or the kid on the bus with wildly inaccurate information. If you won't have these conversations, someone else—or something else—will, and you probably won't like their curriculum.



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