

Powerful Tips for Family Harmony

Family: The branches may grow in different directions, but the roots remain as one.

We may not always have it all together, but together we have it all.



Carlton Witte

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Going through life without conflict is impossible. For many, this conflict turns into arguments, fighting and discord resulting in miscommunication, hurt feelings, sadness, broken relationships, and on occasion, physical violence. The parties strive to get over on the other with an attitude that someone must “win” and someone must “lose.” But conflict does not always have to result in discord or have a “win-lose” philosophy. It is possible to create a situation where all win. When discussing a topic that has the potential for conflict, it is essential to share opinions and feelings. If you hold on to your position and don’t ever hear or understand the others opinions or feelings conflict will not be resolved, and in all probability, escalate it into something ugly. To keep this from happening, agree on before-hand, that whenever an issue comes up that has the potential for conflict, you will use a few rules. Family harmony is created by the ability of family members to live together in balance, with mutual respect and support. I provide suggestions for having to avoid family discord and promoting harmony. But first, let take a look at what NOT to do.

The key to family harmony: Effective Communication

Ineffective communication often ends up in disagreements escalating into hurt feelings, anger, loud arguments often including shouting and screaming, breaking things and even violence. When there is no resolution, the issue(s) causing the conflict remain, only to be raised again in the future. When you send a message to another do you want the other person to retaliate in anger or to shut you out in frustration? Or would you rather they hear you out and try to understand your feelings and views?

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- **Here are few things to avoid when having a sensitive conversation with another.**
- **Poor timing:** Frequently, when a person feels highly emotional about something they feel a need to resolve it right away. But the time to discuss it may not be the best time for the other party. If one or the other is tired, stressed, busy, drinking, or with other people, the chance for a successful outcome is significantly reduced.
- **Blaming:** The presumption of “I am right, and you are wrong” will often result in efforts to blame the other. This can take the form of accusing (“you failed to...”), exaggerating (“you always...”), or assuming evil intentions (“you cheated”). Note how often the word “you” appears in these examples. The use of the word “you” will, more often than not, be perceived as blaming and judgmental. Using the word “you” is like pointing a finger. People just don’t like it. So just don’t use it, unless of course, you are looking for pushback.
- **Too many issues:** When angry, it is common to use as much ammunition as possible. Bringing up any issue you can think of to support your position and “defeat” the other is the objective.
- **Anger** is the only emotion expressed. Other underlying emotions, such as fear, sadness, guilt, envy, disappointment, etc. are obscured by the anger.
- **Impossible demands:** Unfair fights often include obscure and vague demands, such as “don’t be so picky” or “be more considerate.” Such demands seldom work because changes in habits or personalities just do not change quickly.
- **Threats and ultimatums:** “If you do that again, I’ll leave”; “If you don’t stop that, I’ll smack you,” “I won’t love you anymore.”
- **Use of names or labels** such as selfish, foolish, stupid, liar, lazy, worthless, mean, bully, thief, drunk, etc. Use of such words is meant to hurt. And they usually do. Because they do hurt, expect the other person to defend themselves. Do not expect the conflict to end constructively.
- **Sarcasm** is usually couched in humor that covers some negative emotion such as anger or hurt. Unless the listener is extremely naïve, they will pick up sarcasm and either retaliate in anger or be pushed away.

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- **Dragging up the past:** Often when frustrated or angry we have a tendency to bring up issues from the past. Interestingly, they seldom even have any relevance to the current discussion. We do this because when we are in a high emotional state our temper rises, and the issues that are still unresolved will come up, if for nothing else, just to get them off our chest. The result is it confuses the issue at hand and opens old wounds rather than helping resolve the current dilemma.
- **Negative comparisons:** Comparing a person to another in an attempt to put that person down, sends the message that you think he/she is somehow inferior. No one likes to be put down, even if they may be guilty of something.

If someone else came at you with remarks similar to those above, how do you think you would feel and react?

Here is an example of a Mom who is setting up a situation that will create negative feelings. Mom sees her son with a shirt on that she feels is inappropriate to wear when getting ready to visit with relatives. Mom says to her son (in a loud voice): "Gary, I see you are wearing that silly shirt again. Go change it right away". What kind of reaction do you think Mom is going to get from her son? Even if Gary obeys, it probably will not be willingly.

Let's try re-structuring this message so that Gary will be more inclined to respond to Mom's wishes agreeably. When speaking with another try using these four key types of expression: what you see or **observe**, what you **think**, what you **feel**, and what you need or **want**, and **request**. To use this strategy, you must be sincere, with yourself and with the other person(s). It does not mean blaming, accusing or dumping on others. It means focus on yourself, not others. It means expressing your feelings and how you came to feel this way. It does not mean it is OK to be rude, aggressive or insensitive. How is this done? Let's look at an example.

"Gary, I **see** you are wearing your red sweatshirt (**Observation**)."

"You must really like that shirt. It is a good shirt to wear when playing. However, I don't think it is appropriate for a family gathering". (**Thought**)

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"I feel anxious that your aunts and uncles might think I don't provide you with nice clothes".

(Feeling)

I would be more comfortable if you wore another shirt. Would you mind changing"? **(Want)**

"Here are a few examples that do not use clear messages". (Observation, Thought, Feeling and Want/
Suggestion **(Request)**).

"You need to stop that loud noise right now"! (People do not like to be told what they "need" to do. Try to avoid that word.)

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"I can't believe you would do that". ("I can't believe" is a put down).

"If you don't stop that right now, I am going to scream". (A demand, followed by a shallow threat)

"I know what your problem is; you like to party too much". (An accusatory judgment of the other person...probably incorrect)

"Stop that right now, or you will not get a birthday party". (A demand followed by a consequence that has no connection to the misdeed, and probably will not even be enforced).

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If someone else came at you with remarks similar to those above, how do you think you would feel and react? Note that these examples have one or more of the following implied messages: demanding or ordering, accusative, blaming, judgmental, and threatening (sometimes shallow, as in the last example). It should be noted that these types of messages are often delivered in a tone of voice that helps to elicit even more defensiveness than the words alone. In other words, the tone of voice (yelling, scolding, nagging, belittling, whining, etc.) adds fuel to the fire. Body language can also send messages that result in defensiveness. Crossed arms, shaking fingers, waving of hands are but a few examples negative body languages.

Here are more examples of using the Observation, Thought, Feeling, Want/Suggestion/Request strategy.

“Kevin, you are making quite a bit of noise (**Observation**). Do you think this may be interfering with your big sister’s ability to concentrate on her homework (**Thought**)? How do you feel about that (**Feeling**)? I am sure she would appreciate it if you were quieter”. (**Suggestion**).

“Susan, I noticed that your school papers were left on the dining room table (**Observation**). When we clear the table for dinner, they may get misplaced (**Thought**). We don’t want that to happen (**Feeling**). How about if you put your papers in your folder, so you will know where they are later”? (**Suggestion**)?

“Danny, I had to close the front door after you left for school this morning (**Observation**). This sure does not help our electric bill, does it?” (**Thought**). Dad gets upset when we don’t help conserve electricity (**Feeling**). Dad would appreciate it if you would remember to shut the door when leaving the house (**Want/Request**).”

“Bob, you arrived home at 6 last night (**Observation**). . I expected you home at 5 PM for dinner. (**Expectation**). When you did not get home on time I worried (**Feeling**). Can we agree to call me when you are delayed? (**Request**)

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Family meetings: A key to family harmony is the ability to communicate with one another effectively. An excellent way to maintain family harmony is to establish procedures that prevent discord in the first place. When issues do arise, have a system in place to address and resolve them in a logical, non-confrontational manner. An excellent method to help promote family communication, promote harmony and balance, and avoid conflict is to have periodic family meetings. But for family meetings to work the family must use it. It cannot work if not used in a conscientious, routine manner. Get the family together and present the system. If all agree to use it, then agree to an established time to meet. NO excuses! Turn off the television, turn off cell phones.

Just do it!

RESOLVING FAMILY ISSUES (AND AVOIDING DISCORD)

All families have issues that must be addressed from time to time. When not addressed early, they can (and often do) escalate into discord, which causes disharmony. An effective way to avoid disharmony is to have family meetings. A family meeting can involve two or more family members, depending on the situation. Here is how to do it.

Rules: First, establish **ground rules**. All family members old enough to understand must agree to the rules. For example:

- Be honest.
- Take responsibility for your own actions and feelings.
- No blaming or finger-pointing.
- Give others the right to their own opinions. In other words, "agree to disagree."
- No complaining.
- Control emotions. If one feels themselves getting emotional or angry, leave the room until composure is regained.
- Encourage participation by all, but do not force.
- **Take turns speaking and listening.** When one is speaking give that person your undivided attention. Do that for them, and the more likely they will do the same for you.

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Explain your point of view. But keep it brief and use the “Rules for Effective Messaging” presented below.

When you are the speaker:

Avoid the 10 negative strategies listed above.

Use the “Observation,” “Think,” “Feel,” “Want/Suggestion/Request” technique.

When you are the listener:

Give your full attention to the other person. Strive to understand their feelings, opinions, and needs.

Do not disagree, argue or correct anything the other has to say.

Try to listen more and talk less.

Once the speaker has finished his/her thought, the listener finishes by paraphrasing or summarizing what he/she heard the speaker said to help ensure a complete understanding as possible. Now the roles are reversed, and the “speaker” becomes the “listener.”

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Family meetings:

Set aside a time for family meetings. Emphasize that there are one or more issues the family must address and it is best done when all are involved. Preferably the meeting should be on the same day and time every week. Sunday evening is a good time, as weekly schedules and plans can be discussed and coordinated as well as any issues of concern. Special meetings can be called by any family member should they feel the need. If one person attempts to avoid the discussion, state something like, this is important to me, and it will not go away. I would really like to resolve it. Can we talk it out? How about tonight at 7?

Have an agenda. Make a list items to discuss. All family members can contribute...even the youngest ones. Cover old unresolved issues first, then go to new topics of concern.

Take turns facilitating the group. This means the leader starts the meeting and makes sure the rules are followed and ends the meeting at the agreed upon time. Meeting should not go beyond 60 minutes. The shorter, the better.

Constructive discussion strategies: Whether in a family meeting or on a one & one discussion there are effective ways to communicate that can maximize effective communication and minimize the chance of disharmony. Here are some strategies. .

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- **State the problem.** Clearly say what the issue is. If you can put it in the **Observation, Thought, Feeling** and **Want/ Suggestion/Request technique, do it!**
- **Stick to the issue.** Discuss only one issue at a time. More than one can obscure the current issue or tempt one or the other to bring up past issues.
- **Use “I” messages and express “feelings” as much as possible.** For example, rather than saying, “You made me so angry this afternoon,” say “I felt so angry this afternoon”.
- **Propose change.** “State what is needed or desired and be specific as possible.
- **Describe consequences:** Describe any emotional, practical, financial or health benefits.
- **Prevent escalation:** If the conversation begins to get emotional, try these preventive measures.
(1) Watch non-verbal behavior. Rising voice, pacing, finger or arm waving, clenched fists, head shaking, etc. (2) Stop talking and breathe deeply. Take a few minutes to calm down. (3) If necessary, take a “time out.” To do this agree, in advance, to signal, such as a T sign as is used during sports time out. No “last words.” As soon as a time out is called, stop talking immediately. Leave one another for a short break and return at the agreed upon time. Do not mind-altering substances during the time out. In fact, don’t use them at any time before or during the discussion.
- **Avoid using the word “you”** when you have a concern about what another does, doesn’t do, or is not doing. By so doing they may feel accused, resulting in them becoming defensive. A better strategy is to define your concerns by stating “I feel...,” or “It makes me feel...”.
- **Ask everyone’s opinion.**
- **Consider pros & cons of all options.**
- **Express feelings** by using words that express your feelings, such as I am hurt, pained, sorry, confused, or angry. Avoid the word “you.” “You” statements, often are perceived by the other as an attempt to place blame on the other person, resulting in their becoming defensive. In so doing they counter-attack and potential for an argument is the result.

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- **Timing:** When you have an issue that you feel needs discussion, set a time and place with the other person. Avoid pushing an issue that one or the other has energy on or that has the potential to become emotional. Addressing such a point at the wrong time will usually result in a disappointing outcome. Examples of poor timing are when one or the other is pre-occupied, stressed out, or emotionally strained. When the discussion does take place, turn off all distractions such as television and music. If children are in the household, have the discussion when they are not present. Emotional discussions are best-done face to face. Telephone or e-mail should only be used if absolutely necessary.
- **Focus on your own feelings and thoughts.** When you focus on the other, you are basically telling them that you have more authority about their thoughts and feelings and you are going to tell them how it is. This will almost always illicit defensiveness from the other person. Continual focus on the other is also a way for some to avoid accepting responsibility for one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions. This may take practice. Many of us have become so accustomed to focusing on others we forget to focus on ourselves. Ironically, it is when we begin to focus on ourselves that opens the door to the resolution of problems.
- **Use the "and" stance.** Using the word "and" helps to underscore the fact that there is more than one view on issues. "I believe in you, and I am sure you can do it, **and** I am fearful of a few things that may be challenging." Do not use the word "but." "But" tends to negate. "I believe in you, and am sure you can do it, **but** I am afraid some challenges will be too tough." Note that the first example sends the message that you have more than one feeling on an issue, whereas the second example negates the vote of confidence of the words "I believe in you."

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- **Explore the facts.** Often, something that happens is the result of one or more things that each has done or failed to do. Take the time to be a detective and thoroughly and honestly find out what is really giving rise to the issue. For example, a mom is upset at her teenage daughter for leaving dirty glasses and dishes around the house after use. What mom may not realize is that she has helped to contribute to her daughter's bad habit of not picking up after herself by previously picking up after her daughter. In other words, she has enabled the practice even though it bothers her. For years she has continued to do it rather than addressing the issue promptly. Once you have a good idea of what may have caused the issue, rather than emotionally reacting, explore ways of possible resolution and/or compromise and how the issue can be avoided in the future.
- **Get the other's viewpoint.** To argue about who is right and who is wrong will do little to resolve a conflict. It is important to realize that you do not know the other person's thoughts, feeling, and opinions. If we do not understand the other person's viewpoint or story, we tend to try and persuade the other to our way of thinking. This will usually result in resistance since people do not like to be forced, told or persuaded. This will end up in an argument and arguments push others away rather than pull them together. What is more effective is influencing the other to consider options and make a choice on their own. When self-choices are made the likelihood of following through is significantly increased. Sometimes understanding the other person's story will not solve the problem but it will promote discussion and avoid an argument. To help find the other's viewpoint, try these strategies.
- **Ask questions** to increase understanding.
- **Appreciate differences** in values, habits, thoughts, feelings. We are all different. Trying to get others to our way of thinking may merely be an exercise in futility with resulting in disharmony. Avoid value judgments.
- **Do not assume you know the other person's "intent."** Just because we perceive something as so, does not mean another perceives or thinks the same way. Many arguments can be avoided by merely trying to understand the other person's viewpoint. This does not mean that we must agree. What should be sought is "understanding," not necessarily "agreement."

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Disagreements are inevitable: People will always have different opinions, values, and feelings, tastes, preferences, fears, and needs. Thus, it is unavoidable that family members will not always agree on everything. There is no avoiding it. Agree to disagree, but do not be disagreeable!

Two final suggestions:

Forgive! Often it is difficult to forgive another when you are angry. I recently saw a billboard that just said: "Forgive! Now!". What is behind these two-words? **Because when you do not forgive, you get to keep your negative feelings.** Doing so creates negativity in yourself- and all the undesirable side effects that go with it. Holding on to negative emotions also contribute to dis-harmony with family and friends. In fact, it can be stated that unwillingness to forgive has created more interpersonal discord than any other factor. Distinguish between "forgiving" and "forgetting." When you forgive you free yourself of a burden. "Forgetting" would be ideal, but if the hurt is so great, you can remember. But learn from the issue and move on.

Although the guidance provided herein can apply to anyone, more often than not it is family members who we find ourselves having emotional issues as these are the person(s) we are most likely to have hurt or been hurt by. I recently heard a sermon by a local pastor who has been speaking on Jesus' parables (stories). At this sermon, he spoke on forgiveness. Pastor Josh explained that when we feel that an injustice has been inflicted on us, we feel hurt. To try and make the hurt go away we are tempted to inflict hurt on the other. When we do so, what happens? Discord! Does it make the hurt go away? No! In fact, it often makes things worse. What can we do then? Forgive! "What, forgive the person who has hurt us?" "Yes," says Pastor Josh. Doing so may not make the pain go away, but it will not make it worse. Retaliation, on the other hand, will make it worse. "Do not try and make the other forgive you," warns Pastor Josh, "rather forgive yourself and forgive the other. If you just cannot forgive, at least have pity." Be patient. Time heals. Try hard not re-play the issue(s) in your mind over and over. When you find yourself doing this (and you will), re-focus on more pleasant memories. Think of what you have rather than what you do not have. Be patient! Time heals.

Remember to laugh! Humor is one of the Lords greatest gifts. Laugh at yourself and WITH others, but not AT them.

The TIP's provided in this e-book are from the book *"Student Success with Less Stress: What Students Must Do, How Parents Can Help"*. The book is available in paperback and e-book formats and can be purchased on Amazon and other retailers.

