

How to Keep Healthy Family Relationships

There are simple, fun, and constructive steps you can take to strengthen the bonds between members of your family. Not only can familial relationships be sources of happiness and stability, they often provide us with lifelong friendships....

Having Fun with Your Family

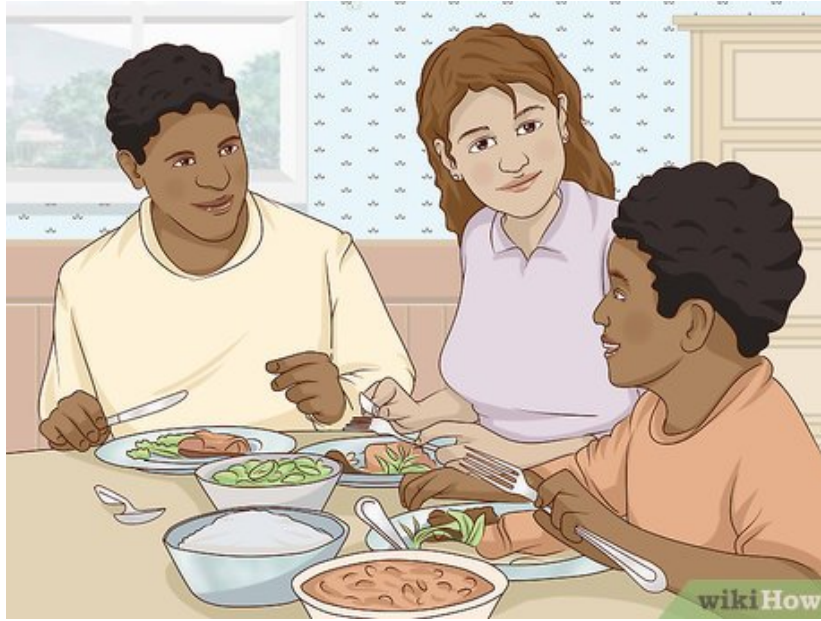


1.

Exchange daily stories. As soon as you get home, show that you're excited to reunite with them by immediately speaking with your family members about each other's day. Ask your family members how their days were, and share a story from your own day with them. Sharing the narratives of our daily lives allows us to be more in tune with our loved ones' lives.

1. Seek out younger family members as soon as you get home. Familial companionship means a great amount to children. They will be especially excited to see you (and will likely be the most interested in whatever story you have to tell).
2. Record stories that one of you find especially interesting or humorous. These recordings will have immense value later in your lives.
3. Consider telling a story together. StoryCorps is an organization that records conversations - usually between family members cooperatively reflecting on an experience they shared - and stores these recordings in the Library of Congress.^[2] There's even an app for that!

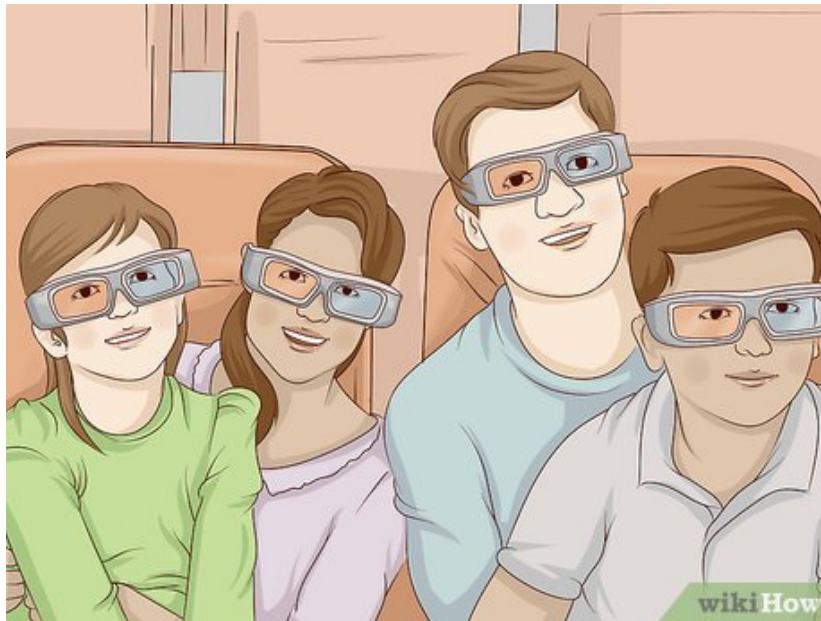
2.



Eat together. Have at least one meal with all family members present once a week. Though simple, maintaining weekly meals can be a challenge with children of different ages and working parents. Eat as many meals together as possible.^[3] Know that family meals can be entirely casual.

1. Don't feel as though a family meal must be formal or special. Emphasize the fact that you're eating together, and that that's what matters. Alternate types of food at home or try a new spot if you're going out.
2. Have a back-up plan. Don't expect every family meal to go perfectly. When multiple people are involved, or you are depending on scenarios outside of your control, understand that time spent with family members may not go exactly as planned. Make light of unexpected hiccups in plans, and recall that the point of spending time together is the time together, not the plan.

3.



Have a weekly family night.^[4] Designate a separate night of the week to engage in something oriented around having fun together. Consider the following options, and switch from one activity to another

depending on your family's preferences:

1. Go bowling. Bowling a classic example of an activity that can appeal to all age groups. To keep older kids interested, keep track of high scores for each family member, and see if you all can beat your own personal record. Splitting into teams and scoring accordingly can increase feelings of cooperation and reduce competitiveness.
2. Go see a movie. Lots of cities have discount movie theaters, or theatres that offer cheaper tickets on certain nights of the week. Be aware that discounted days may be busier, however.
3. Stay in and play board games. Depending on ages and interests, there are literally thousands of games to choose from.
4. Go for a group hike. Sunlight, fresh air, and light exercise are not only healthy for your body, they're great for your mind and familial comradery too.

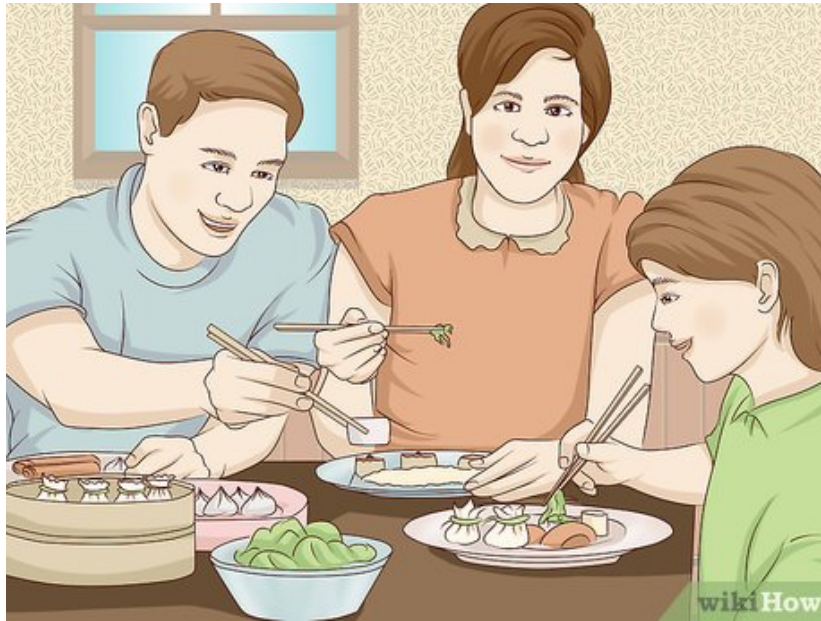


4.

Encourage organized activities. Children learn and grow from interacting with peers and positive adult role models. While it is important to make sure kids have family time at home, it is also important that they participate in organized activities outside of school. This will provide important socialization, constructive energy use, healthy physical activity, and something for children, parents, and siblings to talk about and bond over.^[5]

1. Attend children's events together as a family. The participant will feel your family's support, and everyone can talk about interesting or humorous moments afterwards.
2. Siblings in particular can bond over shared interests in organized activities. A brother or sister (or parent!) that has previously participated in similar organized activities can practice with a younger member of the family and speak with them about the challenges and enjoyment of those activities.
3. Limit unorganized extracurricular activities. One of the reasons it can be hard to find time together is that kids often end up with many opportunities outside of the home. Don't allow extracurricular activities to take priority to the happiness and wellbeing of your family.

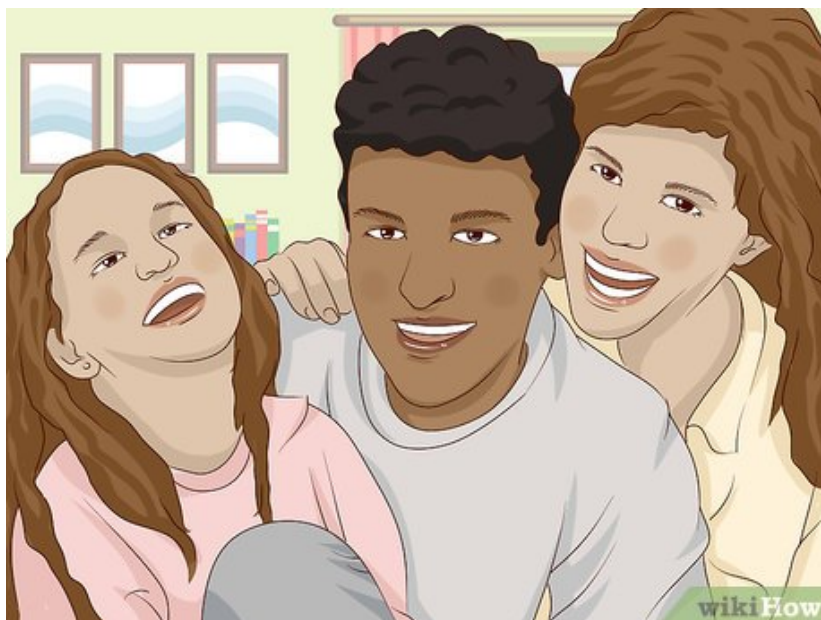
5.



Develop rituals. Build rituals around events or other reoccurring moments. It doesn't matter what they are, just that there is something that you all can look forward to enjoying together. For instance, go out for Chinese food on birthdays. Or, get donuts together once a month. Have everyone choose a different type and share them. Cast votes to determine the family's most popular confection!

1. Be flexible in the execution of your rituals.^[6] If you go the same pizza shop once a month, and they happen to be closed on a day you try to go, don't let it derail the evening, or the ritual. Try another pizza spot. Let your family rituals develop naturally!
2. Don't work too much! Work is a major reason that kids don't get enough time with their parents. This is especially true for fathers and teens. Too many hours at the office or out of town prevents your family's ability to develop and maintain healthy, fun rituals. Do not let your job overshadow your family.

6.



Laugh together. Laughter has an incredibly positive effect on our relationships with one another.^[7] Be comfortable laughing with one another. And don't hesitate to laugh at yourself! Next time you all find something humorous, remember it and reference it later. An inside joke can deeply strengthen the familial bond between you and your family members.



Read to one another. Read bedtime stories to very young children – and choose books that will amuse you both.^[8] As kids learn to read, sit with them in the evening and read a chapter from an age-appropriate novel. In the company of adults or older children, read sections of an interesting or funny piece aloud to nurture feelings of comfort and support.

Staying Calm and Sharing Affection with Family Members



Don't shout at one another. Maintain stability in the home by prioritizing calmness. Children sometimes need to be disciplined, but never lose control and allow anger to dictate your interactions with one another. [9]

1. One of the best ways to stay calm is simply pausing for a few moments and taking several deep, slow breaths. This not only provides a physiological defense against anger, is also gives you a chance to evaluate your response to the situation. Take a peek at the article *How To Control Your Temper* if you find yourself becoming agitated with regularity.
2. Don't try to work out disagreements with your spouse in front of your kids. If you do have an argument in front of your kids, explain that it was just a disagreement and that everything is alright. [10]



Maintain mindfulness. Take a few minutes every day to focus on your breath. Breathe deeply and evenly. Push away the thoughts and concerns that inevitably arise. Once your mind is calm, shift your focus to a positive aspect of a relationship with someone in your family. For instance: [11]

1. Reflect on what you are grateful for about your family, what you like about a certain family member, or the concept of patience.
2. Remind yourself that it is within your capacity to nurture the relationships you take part in.

3.



Nurture fondness, admiration, and affection. One way to maintain these feelings towards is to remind yourself of your family members' positive qualities. Short, genuine comments can go a long way in improving one another's moods and deepening bonds between family members.^[12]

1. Compliment each other. Don't just compliment your family members when it seems they're down. Convey the positive thoughts you have about each other as the thoughts arise.
2. Remind your spouse how attracted you are to them when they change their hairstyle or get a new jacket. Even better, mention your attraction out of nowhere.
3. Tell your family members you believe in them. If one of your family members is stressing about school or work, tell them you have faith in them. Tell them you're proud of them when they reach achievements they've been working towards.

4.



Be aware of rough periods in family life. Relationships between family members are inevitably effected by stress or tension in normal family life. Watch for signs that your relationships may need particular

attention from time to time. Consider these options:

1. Take a step back. Since many family members often inevitably spend a lot of time together, whether intentionally or by nature of proximity, it can sometimes be helpful to spend time apart. Everyone – not just the kids – should involve themselves in some sort of activity outside of the home with some regularity.
2. Talk to someone else. If there is something you cannot talk to a family member about that is bothering you, talk to someone else. The important thing is to express concerns constructively. A friend, counselor, therapist, or doctor can help you deal with uncertainties or concerns about your own life or something happening in your family. Don't allow personal conflicts or concerns to negatively affect the relationships you have with family members.
3. See a family counselor. If your family is having a significant amount of trouble maintaining healthy relationships and you or other members of your family are unhappy, consider getting help. Reassure yourself and your family members that there is nothing wrong with seeing a counselor, and that doing so will strengthen your relationships with one another.^[13]

Communicating with Your Family



State that you want to maintain strong relationships. Tell your family members that you value their love and support. Do not allow momentary feelings of anger, skepticism, or simple confusion to lead to more serious issues between family members.^[14]

1. Share what you appreciate about what you do for another. Thank each other for attending one another's events or obligations.
2. Thank each other when you're there for one another. This doesn't require a long or dramatic conversation, simply say thank you for the acts and behaviors you appreciate.



Insist on open and honest communication. Talk to one another frequently about how everyone is feeling. This is vital to positive relationships within your family. It is also easier than it seems once you do so regularly. Make sure you understand what your family members are feeling so that you're aware of any unmet needs or desires.^[15]

1. Be explicit. Use short, direct statements. It's always helpful to say positive things like, 'We can figure out a way to handle this that works for everyone' or even, 'We're in this together.'
2. Alternatively, be clear about what you need by saying things like, 'I'd feel more comfortable with _____,' or 'I don't like it when _____.'
3. Do not allow negative emotions to build. Never maintain silence simply to 'keep the peace.' This will lead to larger issues in the future.
4. If your family goes through a major life change, such as a new member in the family, a loss, or a significant move, be especially aware of the greater need for open communication in periods of transition.

3.



Express yourself! Contemplate your own needs, wants, and feelings. Share these thoughts with your family. You will feel better, and your family members will better understand you. Begin statements with phrases like 'I feel like...' and avoid accusatory language or complaints.^[16]

1. Avoid contentious statements or language that might escalate a conversation. In particular, avoid beginning statements with accusations.
2. Instead of, 'You always _____,' try 'I'm frustrated that this keeps happening,' and go on to explain why you are unhappy with the situation.

4.



Be an active listener. Put effort into improving your listening skills.^[17] Everyone needs the opportunity to express themselves, especially in the context of close relationships. Ensure you are allowing others to effectively communicate with you by doing the following during important conversations:

1. Maintain eye contact.
2. Don't interrupt.

3. Watch your body language. Ensure that you're conveying respect and genuine interest in what your family member has to say by sitting or standing attentively, and facing towards them.



Take advantage of teachable moments. There are many conversations between parents and children that can be challenging or feel awkward. Allow certain conversations to happen naturally, and don't hesitate to start a conversation when an opportunity to do so presents itself.

1. When a child or sibling becomes especially frustrated at a situation outside of their control, be there for them. Wait for them to calm down and then encourage them to talk about how they felt. Speaking with one another about how anger develops can help us learn how to control our emotions.
2. Talk about sexuality and bodily awareness with young children early and often. This actually encourages responsible sexual decisions later on (and does not encourage promiscuity).^[18] This can also diminish the need to have an intimidating, dramatic talk about sex someday.



Emphasize trust. Ensure your family members can trust you by following through on promises and staying true to your word. If you're communicating effectively, trust will be built into the relationships you have with one another. In the event that you need to rebuild trust, begin by stating that it is your intention to do so, and put extra effort into communicating openly, honestly, and as often as possible.^[19]

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