



# What makes a family **happy**

The 4 simple truths that bind families together through times both good and bad. By Jeannie Kim

Every mom wants to create and nurture a happy family. But if your own childhood wasn't so sunny, how do you know what that looks like? And even if you had a blissful upbringing, it's not always easy to define what, exactly, made your family life joyful. Was it the silly games you played on road trips, or the freedom you had to roam in and out of your neighbors' yards? Was it that you had good fortune never to experience a major tragedy, or was it that you had a close-knit clan that pulled together to support one another no matter what? Most of all, how can you make sure that the family you have now will be happy for the long haul?

The truth is, happy families have cranky kids, messy houses, and money struggles, just like everyone else. But underneath it all, they have a core of

contentment that sustains them through all of life's ups and downs. "Being happy as a family is something deeper than simply having fun together or feeling the immediate euphoria of a joyful event like opening presents on Christmas morning," explains REDBOOK Love Network expert Scott Haltzman, M.D., author of the new book *The Secrets of Happy Families*. "A happy family is a family that has a deep sense of meaning and purpose in their lives." When you have that, he adds, the lows feel more manageable, because you can put them into perspective—and the highs are more memorable. Here, your keys to building a family life that will make your guy, your kids, and *you* truly happy.

## Happy families... know who they are.

When your family agrees on its core values—and consistently lives by those standards—you'll build a stronger family identity and reduce conflict.

Certain values fall into place naturally; if you're married, you and your husband probably committed to each other in the first place because of values that both of you share. However, Haltzman insists on not simply letting your values evolve on their own, but rather deliberately shaping and naming your core principles. "Defining your values together cannot only reinforce a lot of the qualities that

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brought you together, but it can also help steer you in times when you feel conflicted," he says. Knowing that you prioritize new experiences, for example, you might decide to pull the kids out of school for a special family trip, while another family who values education over everything else would never consider scheduling a vacation during the school year.

Although the grown-ups in the house should drive the discussion, children can also play a part in framing your family's ideals. When Kerry Woodcock, 37, of Calgary, Alberta, and her husband discussed defining their values a few years ago, they asked their children (now ages 8, 7, and 3) about their favorite family moments, to gauge which mores were important to them. Their son's love of the family's nightly gratitude ritual (when everyone shares their best moments of the day) has helped them define gratitude as key value.

#### Happy families... lean on others.

As an Army wife, Hillari Bashioum, 42, of Lawton, OK, has spent her entire married life relying on other military families. "My family enjoys the support and guidance of other families who are going through all the things we have, like deployments and separation for assignments," says Bashioum, mother of four kids, ages 6 to 21. "And pulling together to help other families brings our family closer."

No family thrives in a bubble—your extended relatives, friends, neighbors, and other networks are crucial to your happiness. "Other families expose kids to new ideas and lifestyles and give them a broader view of their roles in their own family as well as in their community," Haltzman says.

"Spending time with our extended family is a big deal for us," says Gita Saini, 39, a mom of two, ages 5 and 8, in Orange County, CA, who has two sisters-in-law living close by. "The kids see our values, such as education and helping family, within our extended family, so those values are reinforced even more," she says.

If you don't have a built-in network, Haltzman suggests creating your own support system through volunteering, joining the PTA or a book club, participating in religious services, or simply reaching out to your neighbors. Alison Miller, 38, a mother of two in Chicago, has been getting together with eight other families in her neighborhood every Friday for the last seven years. The get-togethers started out as a playgroup for the moms and their first babies and evolved into a weekly dinner party that includes their husbands and 16 children. "We have formed an unlikely and remarkable commu-

nity," Miller says. "I know that I can always count on these women for anything I need."


#### Happy families... bounce back.

Truly happy families have the resiliency to face life's challenges and stay strong. "Going through difficult times can actually make you feel more connected as a family," Haltzman says. But what can you do to maximize your family's ability to absorb big blows? Emphasizing the positive has helped the Jackson family find happiness despite debilitating illness. Sue Jackson, 43, was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome in 2002—and her two sons, then 6 and 10, were diagnosed with the same disorder just a few years later. The Jacksons learned to adjust to their "new normal" and are now closer than ever. "Even during our worst times of illness, we remind our boys how fortunate we are to have each other," says Jackson, who lives in Wilmington, DE. "We try to find joy in everyday life by celebrating often, even small things."

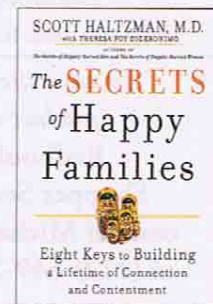
Strong routines and rituals also help families regain their equilibrium when calamity strikes. When Edie McRae and her family lost their home in New Orleans to Hurricane Katrina, they relocated to Houston. The McRaes had to build a new life for themselves and their two sons, then ages 2 and 3. "We enrolled our oldest in preschool right away; having new friends lessened his worry," says McRae, 33. "And we got back to our nightly story time and weekend movies as quickly as possible. I realized that the boys craved those things because it helped them feel like they were home."

#### Happy families... breathe.

Families do better when they have plenty of laid-back time together. Whether you're going for a walk, playing Rock Band, making cookies, or just hanging out, the best way to build happy family connections is simply to enjoy one another spontaneously. "You can spend your life defining your goals, setting your values, and putting all the right things into place," Haltzman says, "but you also have to take a step back and live a little."

Haltzman suggests setting aside time for unstructured fun. "I plan ahead for family time; otherwise it's too easy to get caught up in everything else," says Kat Henderson, 38, from Wilmington, NC. "It's not about *what* we do but just that we're together." That's why her schedule leaves plenty of room for lazy days at home. "And every evening after dinner, we go for a walk or play outside," Henderson says. "The dishes get done later." 

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