

Family is IMPORTANT for a child's sense of wellbeing because they are the first line of defense against a big and scary world. Family is your child's first *classroom* where they learn security, faith, empathy, compassion, and who they are. Your child's sense of belonging, connection, purpose, and family, are what he will draw upon as he makes his way out into the world.^{1,2} And your family traditions are the anchors that will keep him tethered to his family for the rest of his life. First, let's get rid of a few lies about families.

Lie #1 – Families should be perfect.

Families are not perfect. You cannot *compare* your life with fictional characters. They're make believe, but you are living in a complicated real world. Sometimes conflicts just don't get resolved.

Lie #2 – My kid's actions make me look bad.

All kids have their own personalities. You can provide for your kids' *needs*, encourage them and nurture them, but you cannot ultimately determine their *success*. That's up to them. It's always good to examine how we *parent* to see if we can handle things better, but you cannot assume that your children's struggles or behavior mean that you're doing something *wrong*.

Lie #3 – No matter how bad it is, families should ALWAYS stick together.

Our children are our number one responsibility. There may be family members who are really toxic. They may shame you or your children or want to fight or control every situation. You are in control of who your children are around, including family. This may mean deciding to stay away from family members who cannot treat you and your children with love and respect.

What Children Need

You have a *family*. Your family needs a place to be accepted and understood -- to be able to just be themselves. You have the opportunity to give this to your family. So, how can you start creating this safe haven for your children?

Help your children belong and have a purpose. Belonging is about being a part of something bigger than yourself. We can help our children belong and have a purpose by:

- Providing a home where they can express their feelings, thoughts, and fears without judgment
- Allowing them to connect with healthy extended family members and friends
- Teaching them their role within the family
- Providing them with age-appropriate responsibilities and goals

Help your children know they are loved unconditionally and cared for. Love should never have to be earned or lost because of anything we do. Being loved unconditionally allows a child to express their feelings and be themselves. It also helps them to know they are cared for. We can help our children know they are loved unconditionally by:

- Loving them through their mistakes
- Focusing on their behavior when disciplining them

- Addressing heart issues respectfully. If your child lies or steals, then talk to them about how they feel when others do this to them and then provide them with appropriate consequences for the behavior.

Create togetherness. We can help our children understand that in this great, big world, we can count on each other. As a family, we work through problems and struggles together. We look out for each other. Nobody has to face a scary situation all alone. No matter how big the problem or struggle is, we work on it as a family and we celebrate each other's accomplishments. We can help our children understand togetherness by:

- Compassionately listening to their struggles and fears
- Expressing care and concern for what they are struggling with
- Working together to solve problems
- Celebrating accomplishments and the things they've overcome

Every family is different. They come in all shapes and sizes. Family IS who we do life with. As parents we create family for our children. Give them a place to belong and a purpose. Love them unconditionally. Teach them that with family, they are never alone. And provide them wonderful routines and traditions that they can hold on to for the rest of their lives. It just takes commitment, consistency, and imagination. And for your children, family will stand for a lifelong relationship, a shared history, and a place to go back to.

Resources include:

1. Payne, J., MB, BS, DFFP, DRCOG, FRCGP & Gronow, H., MB, ChB. Patient. Child Attachment Disorder. Found at <https://patient.info/health/child-attachment-disorder-leaflet>, accessed 1/29/2019.
2. Kliewer-Neumann JD, Zimmermann J, Bovenschen I, et al; Assessment of attachment disorder symptoms in foster children: comparing diagnostic assessment tools. *Child Adolesc Psychiatry Ment Health*. 2018 Aug 17;12:43. doi: 10.1186/s13034-018-0250-3. eCollection 2018.
3. Rubin, D. M., Downes, K. J., O'Reilly, A. L. R., Mekonnen, R., Luan, X., et al. Impact of Kinship Care on Behavioral Well-being for Children in Out-of-home Care. 2008. *Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine*, 162(6), 550–556.
4. Walsh, W. A. & Mattingly, M. J. Related Foster Parents Less Likely to Receive Support Services Compared with Nonrelative Foster Parents. 2014. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Carsey School of Public Policy. Found at <http://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1216&context=carsey>, accessed 1/29/2019.
5. KIDS COUNT Data Center. Child Population by Age Group [Data table]. 2017. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation. Found at <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/101-child-population-by-age-group#detailed/1/any/false/870,573,869,36,868,867,133,38,35,18/4693/419>, accessed 1/29/2019.