



What Is A Healthy Family Anyway?

A Guide for Parents In Recovery

by Linda K Sibley

The father looked sad as he sat in our Confident Kids parents' group. "I want to give my kids a great family to grow up in – something I never had," he said. "But, heck, I don't even know what a healthy family is. All I have to go on is what my family was like, and I wouldn't wish that on my dog, let alone my kids!" Heads all around the circle bobbed up and down. That parent had verbalized what many others were also feeling.

Parents in recovery have a double task ... figure out how to overcome their past experiences to make themselves healthy AND figure out how to make their homes healthier places for their own children.

Those of us who are parents in recovery have a double task. We must not only figure out how to overcome our past experiences to make ourselves healthy, but we must also figure out how to make our homes healthier places for our children. However, with no models from the past to draw on, we may not know where to start. Here are some suggestions that can help.

Start with your own recovery.

One hard-and-fast rule of parenting is that you can't take your kids any further than you have come yourself. Parents who do not know how to live in healthy ways cannot raise children to live in healthy ways. Therefore, the way to start is by setting aside your natural instinct to put your children's needs first, and concentrate on yourself.

Ask yourself questions like these:

- What did I need from my parents that I did not get?
- What unhealthy skills did I learn as a child that I must unlearn now? (Examples: poor communication, inability to feel and express your feelings, continually making poor choices for yourself.)
- What words did I hear in my home that I wish had never been said?
- What words did I need to hear that no one ever said to me?

As you answer these questions for yourself, you will gain valuable insight about what your children need from you.



Break the “Don’t...” Rules.

Most of us who are in recovery grew up in families that were governed by three powerful rules:

Don’t talk

Don’t trust

Don’t feel

As a result, we learned to carry family secrets, to not trust anyone to be there for us, and to hide our true feelings from others and from ourselves. To keep from passing these rules on to our children, we must be intentional about breaking these rules with our children. Let’s look at some new, healthy rules we can establish.

Healthy Rule #1: TALK.

The “Don’t talk” rule in families is communicated in many ways. Direct statements, such as “Never tell anyone what goes on in our family!” Or, “What happens in this family is nobody’s business but ours!” Or, “Your father is NOT drunk! I don’t ever want to hear you say that again!” teach children to carry family secrets and to ignore their own questions and feelings. Children’s powers of observation add to the problem when they see, for example, one parent covering up for another (mom calls dad’s boss to report he is “sick” when he is drunk or hung over) or acting as if everything is okay when it obviously is not. You can break the “Don’t talk” rule in your family by following these guidelines:

Tell your children the truth. In an effort to protect their children from the painful side of life, parents often make the mistake of not talking to them about difficult family issues. Unfortunately, not talking to children about what is real does not protect them. John Bradshaw has said that children always know ... they just don’t always know what they know. And when children know something is wrong but no one will talk to them about it, they fill in the blanks for themselves. Their version will include inaccurate and distorted details. In reality, it is much easier for children to deal with the real truth about painful family issues than with their made-up version of it. The toughest part of these conversations is separating the information that children need from our own emotional baggage. Children need information; they don’t need to carry all our anger, panic or fear. If we are not emotionally ready to talk with our children, it’s okay. We can look for someone wise to talk with them or to help us talk with them. Many parent in recovery turn to a trusted counselor, support group leader, family friend or pastor to mediate such conversations.

Reassure your children. Telling children the truth about family pain raises their anxiety levels, and they may begin to wonder: “Am I still loved? Who will take care of me? Are my parents going to be okay? What did I do to make this happen?” We cannot take away our children’s anxiety, but we can help them with it by reassuring them that they are loved, that nothing about the family’s circumstances is their fault, and that they will be taken care of. However, we need to guard against offering them false promises, such as: “I’m sure your dad will start doing better and will never use drugs again,” or “You mom and I will work things out, and we’ll all be a family again.” We can’t predict what like will be like in the future, but we can reassure our children that we are committed to working through the problems and that together we can all get through it.

Talk about the little things. If we want our children to talk to us about things that are important, we must let them talk to us about things that are not important. As parents in recovery, we may often find ourselves too short of patience and emotional energy to listen to our children’s everyday chatter. Many parents have found it helpful to set aside regular “listening” times with their children. They work hard at finding some time during the day or week for one-on-one time with each child. This may be a few minutes at bedtime, a lunch or dinner out, or a quiet game together. During listening times we can



train ourselves to listen and respond to our children without criticizing or giving advice. Responding with simple phrases such as, “Really?” “Uh-huh!” or “Then what happened?” can free our children to talk to us about anything that’s on their minds. Even if the conversations seem frivolous to us, we are creating an openness so that in the future our children will come to us with more important matters, because they know we will listen.

Healthy Rule #2: TRUST

The “Don’t Trust” rule in families develops as children’s needs are consistently ignored and their natural trust violated. When this happens, children conclude that no one will be there for them anyway, so if they don’t trust, they won’t be hurt! Of the three “Don’t...” rules, this one is the most difficult to break, especially if your children’s trust has been violated on numbers of occasions. But giving attention to the following guidelines will help.

Be there for your children. It has been said that one of the most important parts of life is just *showing up*. In building trust with children, that is absolutely true. Trusting relationships are established through attention to little things, over the long haul – things like sharing meals together, attending school functions, creating a stable schedule for co-parenting if you are divorced, and establishing and maintaining family traditions. Sounds easy enough, doesn’t it? But as parents in recovery we are often so emotionally drained from our own journey that these “little things” can feel overwhelming! Fortunately, we don’t have to be perfect to establish a trusting home. As our children see us consistently make an effort – especially when they see we are tired or stressed – they will know we are serious about being there for them over the long haul and that is what builds trust.

Keep your promises. Nothing teaches a child to NOT trust more than our broken promises. That’s why I strongly encourage parents to learn and religiously follow one simple rule: **Say what you will do – and do what you say.** In other words, *think before you speak and choose your words carefully!* Don’t say it unless you know for sure (or almost for sure) that you can follow through. And once you say you will do something, be committed to doing it, except under the most exceptional of circumstances. “I’m too tired,” or “We don’t have the money,” are NOT good reasons to break a promise. If we are really stressed and feel we will be too tired to go camping on the week end, we mustn’t promise our children that we will go! If money is short, we mustn’t promise them the \$100 pair of shoes they keep bugging us for. If we want to build trust, we must say ONLY what we will do ... and once we have said it, we must do everything in our power to make it happen.

Talk through the bumps in the road. Having said that, let me be quick to add this: *An essential lesson in trust children need to learn is that people can make mistakes or fail at times and still be trustworthy.* Trust is maintained when we consistently take the time to explain **why** we have to break a promise (on those rare occasions when we have to do so), admit our shortcomings, and apologize when we are wrong. Even if our children roll their eyes or seem to not be listening – the important thing is that we take the time and energy to talk to them. Trust is established *over time* as our children hear our words and begin to assimilate them.

Ask for help when YOU need it. Much of the failure in families happens when parents get so tired they simply cannot consistently be there for their children. But many of us who are in recovery have come to believe that **no one will be there for us** and so try to cope with everything on our own. We need to remember that one of the characteristics of healthy families is that they have a strong support system of extended (or surrogate) family, trusted friends, and community helpers. This network is an integral part of their family’s life, in both good times and bad!

If you and your children do not have such a network, you can begin to establish one by getting



involved in church, school and community activities where you can begin to develop relationships with other families and adults. Try volunteering for community projects, church outreach events or missions projects, or join a small group. Then, make the effort to build closer relationships by inviting people into your home. Include a wide variety of age groups in your network, and enjoy developing these new relationships!

Healthy Rule #3: FEEL

The “Don’t Feel” rule in families is particularly damaging. Quite naturally, we don’t like to feel painful, scary or threatening feelings and will do most anything we can to make them stop! Much of our unhealthy choices in life are the result of trying to avoid these difficult feelings. In families, children learn early that strong emotions can be scary and even dangerous. They learn this when they hear messages, such as: “You shouldn’t feel that way!” “Quite being such a crybaby!” or they are teased, shamed or punished for their feelings. They also learn to fear strong or painful feelings as they watch their parents deal with their feelings in unhealthy ways. They may observe, for example, that whenever Dad is mad, he gets drunk; or whenever Mom is upset, she screams at us.

Your own recovery process has probably produced many mixed and powerful feelings within your children. Unless they have a trustworthy environment in which to talk about those feelings, they will learn to deal with them by doing whatever they can think of to make them stop! You can make our family a place where feelings are embraced, talked about and expressed in healthy ways by following three important guidelines:

Empathize. Empathy is the ability to see an experience through another person’s eyes, and feel their feelings with them. It is not an easy skill to learn, especially for those of us who were raised with many negative messages about our feelings. A good place to begin is to journal your childhood memories – both good and bad. Try to connect with the feelings you experienced in each memory and how you learned to deal with those feelings. Journal the experiences in a child’s language. Getting in touch with these experiences and feelings will go a long way to help you empathize with your children when they have similar experiences.

To express your empathy, respond to your children’s outpouring of feelings with phrases such as, “That hurts, doesn’t it?” or “I’m so sorry.” or, “I remember feeling that way when I was your age – it’s hard, isn’t it?” And don’t forget positive statements, such as: “I’m so proud of you!” or “Good for you!” You can also express your empathy with non-verbal actions such as hugs, giving your full attention, and expressing your feelings non-verbally. (Sometimes our facial expressions and body posture communicate more than our words).

Validate. Empathy is telling our children we understand their feelings; validation is telling them their feelings are right and appropriate to the situation. For example, children need to be assured that it is right and appropriate to feel disappointed and angry when someone breaks a promise to them. They need to be told that it is right and appropriate to feel confused when they are told one thing one day and something different the next day. They need to be reassured that it is okay to be afraid in scary situations, and so on.

To validate your children’s feelings, use phrases such as: “I would feel angry, too, if someone treated me like that.” Or, “It’s okay to feel scared right now.” Hug your children and reassure them that things will be okay. And don’t forget to validate positive feelings, too: “You can feel very proud of the job you did!” or “I’m glad you are so excited about your birthday party! It’s going to be lots of fun!”

Teach healthy ways of expressing feelings. Help your children understand that although all their feelings are okay, the way they express them may not be okay. In our Confident Kids groups, we



use this rule: *It is okay to express your feelings in any way you choose EXCEPT you may not hurt yourself, others, or destroy property.* That means it's okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hit, say mean things, or throw something through the TV screen to express it.

There are many healthy ways to express feelings. Examples include doing something physical like running around the block; writing a letter or keeping a journal; drawing a picture of our feelings; having a good cry or pouring out our feelings to a safe person. Give your children lots of ideas, so they can choose what works best for them. You can also keep a "feelings box" handy, containing items like an old pair of gym shoes, paper and pens, drawing supplies, a box of tissues, and other things they can use to safely express their feelings.

Practice the Traits of a Healthy Family.

Once the foundation of talk, trust and feel is firmly in place, there are a number of other things you can do to strengthen your family relationships. A helpful tool I use to teach parents how to do this is the following list of traits of a healthy family:



A Healthy Family:*

- Communicates and listens
- Affirms and supports one another
- Teaches respect for others
- Develops a sense of trust
- Has a sense of play and humor
- Has a sense of shared responsibility
- Teaches right and wrong
- Abounds with rituals and traditions
- Has a balance of interaction among members
- Has a shared religious core
- Respects the privacy of others
- Values service to others
- Fosters family table time and conversation
- Admits to and seeks help for problems

**Taken from Traits of a Healthy Family, by Dolores Curran, © 1983*



You may find this description of a healthy family overwhelming if you were not raised in such a family. But don't be discouraged! The following activity gives you three simple steps for using this list as a guide in strengthening your family.

Activity: Family Growth Goals

The list of traits of a healthy family can be a helpful tool if you follow these steps:

1. Check off items you already do well. Remember that every family has some traits that work, so don't be modest. Find those things you do well – not perfectly, but well enough for you to feel okay about them. These things are your strengths, and knowing your strengths empowers you to deal with your weaknesses. Be sure to complete this step before moving on.

2. Choose ONE trait to work on. The key to success is to choose only ONE trait to work on at a time. Ignore the rest of the list while you work on making that one characteristic routinely part of your family's life. To begin with, choose one that you are confident you can achieve with a minimum of effort. A good first choice might be establishing a family meal time or creating a family play time. Keep working on it, even if it seems difficult at first. Don't worry about how much time it takes; move on ONLY when you feel ready to do so. Then, choose just one more trait to work on, and repeat the process.

3. Take note of your progress periodically. Remember that nothing worthwhile is built over night, and that includes healthy families! Our families become healthy slowly, as we make bite-size changes. However, when change is slow, it is easy to lose perspective. So whenever you feel discouraged, just take a little time to think back to what your family was like one, two or three years earlier. Journal the changes you see, and you will receive the encouragement you need to keep growing!

