

## FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

### Taking Stock: Goals Strengthen Relationships

*“The determining factor in whether wives feel satisfied with the sex, romance and passion in their marriage is, by 70 %, the quality of the couple’s friendship. For men, the determining factor is, by 70 %, the quality of the couple’s friendship. So men and women come from the same planet after all.”*

John Gottman,  
*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*

Each issue of KinderKronicle talks about ways to improve family relationships, and we often talk about the importance of goals. Why?

Because effective leadership relies on empathy and respect, and good family leadership adds in the additional key component of love. If your relationship with your partner and your children is weak, then family leadership suffers, then fails.

Dr. Thomas R. Lee, Ph.D., dean and executive director of Utah State University’s Department of Family and Human Development at the Brigham City Regional Campus, states that friendship is the key to keeping love alive in a marriage. When couples nurture their friendship with each other, they remember why they fell in love with each other in the first place, and are more likely to “feel the glow” in their marriage.<sup>1</sup> When you make and follow through on relationship goals to nurture your friendship, you will strengthen the bond between you and your spouse which, in turn, creates the necessary foundation for productive family leadership.

### Keeping Friendship Alive and Well in Marriage

**So, this month, we ask you to take stock of your relationship with your spouse.**

- What goal or goals have you set for improving and strengthening that relationship?
- How do you keep your relationship healthy, vibrant, and strong? For example, do you show appreciation for your spouse? Do you do kind things for your spouse, just because you want to? Do you give your spouse the benefit of the doubt when he does something that doesn’t make sense to you, or do you take the time to hold her hand and hug her before you leave?
- Do you take time for one another?

Dr. Lee recommends the following as good goals to help keep your friendship strong:

1. Create a specific time to talk to each other each day about what went on that day—if possible, hold hands while you do so.
2. Be appreciative—notice your spouse’s daily efforts or their “invisible” work, such as when he folds the laundry and puts it away or when she cleans up the kitchen.
  3. Leave a love note, give a hug, or do a task for your spouse— show your spouse kindness.<sup>2</sup>
  4. Have fun together. Dr. Lee recommends having each spouse make a list of fun activities, and then trading lists before taking turns picking off the lists. These are great ways to focus a weekly date night, and give you a plan to work from.
  5. Read together. Reading the monthly issues of KinderKronicle together is a must. This can spark conversation as you discuss how to implement the principles you read about.




## KINDERKRONICLE-CHANGING LIVES ONE FAMILY AT A TIME

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If you are married but temporarily living apart due to work or military service, what goals have you set to help you remain connected to one another? Do you take time for private conversations, or mail love letters to one another, to keep your relationship strong? John and Abigail Adams, from the United States' history, are legendary for their love letters. John was away a good part of their married life, but their letters helped them keep their relationship strong.

Even if you must be far apart, you can adapt Dr. Lee's suggestions to work with your long distance situation. For example, you can:

- Use modern technology to see each other as you talk about your respective days, to keep in touch with each other.
  - Bring humor into your interactions. Dr. Lee suggests sharing funny comics or jokes with each other. You could send a care package with items that reference in-jokes you have with each other.
  - Watch a movie at the same time and talk about it over the phone or the computer as you do so for your weekly date night.
- These types of activities can help you stay close, even when you are physically far away from each other. 


### Keeping Friendship Alive and Well If You Are Cohabiting

The same goals, activities, and ideas that are suggested for married couples apply to couples who are cohabiting as well. However, it is important to note that there are many studies that encourage couples to marry rather than cohabit, especially if there are children involved. For example, The National Marriage Project, out of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, published a report called "Should We Live Together?" In this report, the researchers assert that "children need and should have parents who are committed to staying together over the long term. Cohabiting parents break up at a much higher rate than married parents and the effects of the breakup can be devastating and often long-lasting."<sup>3</sup> Why is this?

James Coan, a researcher from the University of Virginia's Psychology department, says that "Marriage is a signal that is intended to convey dependability and predictability" and that "asserting cohabitation is basically asserting that one is not 'locked in' to a commitment."<sup>4</sup> Without commitment, Coan points out, it is hard to maintain a healthy relationship, especially with the challenges parenthood brings.

When you choose to fully commit to your relationship, you set a pattern of commitment that will help you along your parenting journey, too. Remember that there are real differences in all relationships. Some are easier to adapt to than others, and some relationships do

have very difficult issues that threaten their survival. If you experience these types of issues in your relationship, it is important to seek counsel from someone you trust. Professional (licensed) marriage or family counselors can often help.

Regardless of the specific goals you adopt, the end result should lead toward increased kindness, friendship, and understanding toward each other. These foundational principles will strengthen your relationship and help you to lead your family toward a happy future. 

1. <http://stronger marriage.org/html/married/keep-the-glow-going-in-your-marriage>
2. Ibid
3. <http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/ShouldWeLiveTogether.pdf>
4. [http://www.science20.com/news\\_articles/living\\_together\\_healthy\\_being\\_married-129374](http://www.science20.com/news_articles/living_together_healthy_being_married-129374)



## SINGLE PARENT CORNER

## Parent Leadership when Dad and Mom are no Longer a Couple

Situations where parents are living apart give rise to intense challenges in how Dad and Mom lead their family. Former couples often have a difficult time working together, or wanting to be kind to each other. They may have different ideas on parenting, or have difficulty in being consistent across both households.. Thorny issues arise if, for example, the parents are of different religious faiths, or one has a strong faith and the other is agnostic, or one wants their daughter to play soccer and the other wants her to take dance lessons--the list of potential conflicts seems endless. For the child's well-being, and frankly yours, it is essential to set aside Dad-Mom differences as much as possible to provide a stable, loving environment for your child.

Bay Buchanan, a former United States Treasurer, was thrown into the world of single parenting when her husband walked out while she was pregnant with her 3rd child, a boy, and already had two boys, a four and two year old. Adding to this emotional roller coaster, her husband remarried and for a while attended the same church congregation. Bay raised her three sons to be responsible contributing-to-society adults. In her book, entitled *Bay and Her Boys*, she describes the "unexpected lessons I learned as a (Single) Mom." Even with the obvious and deep hurt that she experienced as a single mom, Bay wrote, "...the most important thing you can do for your kids, without question, is give them a real shot at a solid relationship with their dad." Then she wrote about how "to encourage this all-important relationship between their dad and them."

**Note:** We recognize that 8% of households with children are currently being led by single fathers. Though we are focusing primarily on addressing single mothers in this article, the recommendations apply to single fathers, as well.

One thing Bay emphasizes is to not only avoid bad-mouthing your child's other parent, but to focus on the positive. She acknowledges that this can be difficult, but that it is important. She points out that when you discuss your child's father in positive terms, "you send [your child] a powerfully important message: that it is okay for them to love him, that they have your consent, and that they can do so openly at home and in your presence."<sup>1</sup> This is important even if your ex is trying to alienate your children from you by speaking negatively of you. When you continue to be nurturing, loving, and accepting, over time your children will be able to recognize that.

Even if the father is completely out of the picture, it's good to have several positive things to share with your child as he grows older, to help your child process his feelings and understanding about the missing parent. When you frame your past interactions with your child's other parent in as positive a manner as possible, it helps build your child's self image as he grows. This doesn't mean you should

lie or make up positive things, but just to find the good where you can, understanding that some relationships make that easier than others.

**Note:** We understand that becoming a parent because of rape or a one-night stand presents their own set of issues that will require careful thought and perhaps professional counseling to work through. In these cases, it can be helpful to discuss ways to talk to your child about your experience with a professional counselor, as well.


While you may never have a large number of positive things to say about your baby's other parent, it is important to find some and keep those at the forefront from the very beginning of your baby's life. The truth is, your baby did get half of his genetic background from the father, and children often internalize negative comments about their parents as reflecting on them.<sup>2</sup>

Shaping your interactions with your child's other parent into more positive experiences now, when possible, can ease the process later on, when it really begins to become important to your child's emotional welfare. And, as research continues to show, when fathers are involved in their children's lives, they are more likely to thrive and make good choices as they grow older. This is one of the reasons that Bay Buchanan recommends letting your kids see their other parent as often as possible.

Regardless of your feelings toward your child's other parent, it is important to work to treat him with kindness. This provides a good example for your children as it models healthy behavior.

What concrete goals can you create to foster a civil relationship with your child's other parent?

From Bay Buchanan's perspective, here are some goals to help foster civility:

- Keep your child's other parent "in the loop" with your child's experiences, likes, and dislikes.
- Work to be positive and let your child freely love both of you.
- Think of a positive experience to share with your child as he grows to help him connect with his dad.
- Look for ways to create positive interactions between you and your child's other parent so it is easier to lead your children together. 

**Note:** When positive contact with the father isn't possible, it can be helpful to find a consistent, positive male role model, such as another male relative, a teacher, or a mentor from the community, to provide some of the benefits a father gives. This idea will be discussed further in Month 15, when we discuss community safety nets.

1. Buchanan, Angela Marie. *Bay and Her Boys: Unexpected Lessons I Learned as a (Single) Mom*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Lifelong, 2012. Print.

2. Engber, Andrea and Leah Klungness, *The Complete Single Mother* Third Edition, Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media, 2006.

## HAPPINESS CORNER

*"A happy person is not a person in a certain set of circumstances, but rather a person with a certain set of attitudes."* ~ Hugh Downs, television host and author

**Parenting is not for cowards.** Society doesn't provide much support, and it takes a lot of time, effort, and patience—with yourself, your spouse, and your child. Add in work and life stresses, and it can be hard to see how to be happy sometimes. But there are ways to be happy, regardless of your circumstances and your situation in life.

The famous Serenity Prayer, written by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, starts out as follows:

***"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."***


One important way to be happy is to focus on what you can affect, rather than what you can't. What you can't change or control:

- You can't change the past—you can only learn from it.
- You don't have control over the future—just what you do now to create the future you would like.
- You can't change or control how other people act or think—you can only show them how you feel and think through words and example.

### What you can change or control:

- Your perspective on events or your situation—instead of immediately assuming a negative reason for something, you can deliberately look for a more positive spin.
- Your present—you can change or control events, to a point, that are happening right now. For example, if you are in an argument, you can take a deep breath and step back from the situation, or if you are locked in a battle of wills with your 15-month-old, you can reevaluate what you are trying to accomplish and perhaps try a new tactic to achieve that goal.
- Your attitude—when you have confidence in where you are going and what you are doing, you have better control over your attitude, because you are more focused and have a goal to work toward. Having parenting goals and a parenting plan can help you to be happy because you won't feel adrift in the world of parenting—you know where you want to go, what you want to achieve, and you've already outlined some steps to take to get there. Like Maria Von Trapp sings in the movie *Sound of Music*,

*I Have Confidence,  
...with each step I am more certain  
Everything will turn out fine  
I have confidence the world can all be mine...  
I have confidence in confidence alone  
Besides which, you see, I have confidence in me!*

When you deliberately look for the positive and actively search for creative solutions to problems in the present, you are more likely to find happiness and positivity in your daily life. This happiness will help you to feel better individually, and it will help you parent more positively, too. And that's a win-win situation for everyone in your family. 



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MONTH 16;**  
LOOK FOR THESE  
EXCITING FEATURES  
AND ARTICLES

- **PARENT LEADERSHIP:**  
Ideas for Using Four Family Safety Nets
- **FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS:**  
Putting Family First

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