

AZ Health: Be a Good Family, Not a Perfect Family

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How do we escape the vicious cycle of the never-ending chase for perfection? How do we raise our children with the self-esteem that grows inside of them rather than from our expectations of them? What does a “good” family look like? What are they made up of? The answer is this: Accountability, integrity and, above all, honesty. This is the recipe for a Spiritually Healthy Family System; a good family.

We often want to attach religion to the foundation of what makes a good family. Religion and spirituality are two very different things. Religion can absolutely be one of the pillars of a healthy family. Healthy families operate from a place of transparency and trust that, above all else, creates a safe environment for every member to thrive.

Let’s talk about some skills that parents can implement interactively with their children to begin the process of building an accountable, honest family unit with integrity. Sit with your children and simply ask them if they feel comfortable talking to you. Small children will answer playfully, teens will show you ambivalence, and teens will think you are strange but will eventually answer to get free from the conversation.

Next, ask your kid what they would change in you to feel safe in sharing. This willingness to take accountability for what they see as defects is one of the most important skills a parent can implement to build trust. Let them see you as a flawed human, not just Mom and Dad who talk at them. Secure this, and you will always be able to hold them accountable for missteps as you guide them to that healthy value system discussed earlier: Accountability, integrity and honesty.

Families with untreated addiction, alcoholism and mental health challenges keep a lot of secrets. Healthy families have age-appropriate conversations and do not live with family secrets. They do not cover up or enable one another. They do not align against one another. Sometimes a parent will place the ultimate burden on a child of keeping parents’ secret. This alignment is a time bomb for a kid to carry. Families encased in domestic violence will always expect the children to not only keep the abuse a secret, the parents will actually punish any whistleblower who tells the world they are not a perfect family. How can a family suffering like this turn the tide? We circle back to sitting with your kids, regardless of the age, and taking full accountability for the situation. Often the abuser is enabled by the opposite parent, adored at a grandiose and fabricated level, so this truth-telling can be a challenge at first.

Parents can build or re-build a family that thrives with the recipe of accountability, honesty and integrity. It all starts and ends with you as parents. --Mitzi MacKenzie, MSW, LCSW, Mackenzie Family Advocacy, Adolescent & Family Clinician

Ask Therapist Mitzi: Do you have a question for MacKenzie? Let her know at mmackenz@asu.edu.