

SECURE THE FUTURE BY ANCHORING THE PRESENT: CHILDHOOD ANCHORS

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When I was 12 years old, I made up a list of things my mother did that I would not do when I had children. I would not be old fashioned; I would be a “really cool” parent. I would not be strict; but I would let my kids have the freedom to decide important issues – like when to have a boyfriend and when to wear spike-heeled shoes. After all, my mother didn’t understand how badly I needed these freedoms to be an alpha girl in junior high.

As soon as I started raising my own four children, I put that list in the round file. My mother knew exactly what she was doing. She had the good sense to protect me from my own adolescent judgment and I would do the same with my own kids. Why? No matter what the circumstance, parents have a compelling desire to protect and shelter their offspring. We will do whatever we can to assure our children that they are anchored in the safe harbor of a family who loves them and who will shield them from harm.

How do we even begin to provide this level of emotional security? Without question, our frame of reference is informed by our own childhood experiences.

What gets remembered most? There’s no predicting which specific parenting practices or childhood incidents will have a stand out impact. Each child’s specific personality intersects with experience in a unique way. But, we need to start somewhere and deliberately organize our family’s life in ways that will strengthen our ties to each other. Anchoring the family is a concept that is as important for parents as it is for children.

How do we do this, when we’re often not sure of the direction we’re headed ourselves? We can start with the little things; daily routines that seem insignificant but add up to lifetime habits and self-discipline. Then, we can branch out to family rituals and traditions that create the stories we and our children will recall as part of a good life spent together. Finally, we can take on the more complicated task of showing your children how our family is part of a larger world.



1. Start by establishing predictability and consistency in your family routine.

Routines are not just about managing day-to-day living. Daily experiences accumulate to form lifetime habits of organization and self-discipline, approaches to problem solving, and styles of social interaction. Our family’s routine becomes “the way we do things.” As emphasized in child-rearing books, children especially need to know what to expect day after day.



Routines inspire your child's trust. Children need to feel that you, their parent, can handle all the new information and experiences coming their way. Routines help children master several skills such as following directions, remembering what to do, or completing tasks. Self-confidence is also increased. You will see your children learn to predict sequences, estimate time, and as they get older, help move the schedule along.

Routines will also help you get some time to take care of yourself. Like the televised *Super Nanny*, write down a daily schedule that you can manage. Bedtime is the capstone of the schedule; especially important for two reasons. First, you get some much deserved time for yourself before you crash. Second, adequate rest makes for happy kids who can get with the program the next day.

Don't overcrowd the daily schedule with too many activities, transit times, and wait times that you can't control. Otherwise, it will be harder to maintain consistency. Punctuate the blur with at least one daily ritual that you can sustain. If you have a bedtime ritual, allow enough time to do it every night. If there's a weekly treat, then make sure you've got it planned for each week. What seems like a minor deviation to an adult is a major disappointment to a child.

Don't confuse spontaneity with chaos, which can be quite overrated. If you like the idea of starting the day without a plan, then invest some time teaching your children to entertain themselves. Set aside a hang-loose day, so everyone knows the deal. Or, save the open-ended time for a vacation; a time-honored approach to anchoring one's children to a family tradition.

2. Secure your anchors by doing things that define a good life together.



A family is composed of semi-independent parts that are doing their best to exist as one unit. It becomes one, however, only if you work at doing things together on a *regular* basis where all of you *have a good time*. What's the point of creating a family, if you can't have some fun with them?

You can start by creating a small ritual. For example, Saturday morning breakfasts with made-to-order pancakes. Move up to a weekly or monthly plan where you do something special together; a short trip, weekly

bike rides, attending cultural events, going to local attractions, or tending a garden. As long as it is something you do regularly and calls for full family participation so it can be enjoyed by everyone. Consider sports where all the children are involved as participants and supporters of their siblings.



Definitely plan an annual family vacation to a place all of you can enjoy. It's not the cost of the vacation that's important; it's what you can do together and talk about later that matters. Outdoor vacations are often very successful. They usually aren't expensive; you can be removed from all the distractions and commerciality of daily life; and your family will find that there's really nothing more awesome than the natural environment.

One rule of thumb is that while other people can join any of the family traditions, family members cannot beg off and go elsewhere. If it's a family tradition, the family *has* to be there.

Holidays, of course, create family traditions, and many Holidays are grounded in religious, spiritual and social values that define the highest plane of a family's purpose. That gets me to a very important point.

3. Fortify your anchors with religious, spiritual or moral values.

Whether or not you are grounded in a religious tradition, a strong moral code is what keeps a civil society from teetering over the edge. Maria Shriver, First Lady of California, often recounts how her parents took the entire family out of the house and into the world to serve the poor and children with special needs. This was their family tradition and it is core to her behavior and beliefs to this day.



Some of you can establish traditions through participation in your religious institutions. Others can get involved in community service efforts. Through family participation in your religious organizations and community programs, you can actually reduce the risks that threaten to compromise the anchors you have worked so hard to establish for yourselves.

What goes on in families has a direct effect on the larger society. And you can show your children how even they can make a difference in another person's life. In recent months, the 2008 Presidential primaries have created so much excitement that parents are taking their children to the polls to show them how and why people vote. This ritual is a primer for sustaining a democracy. Certainly, if you do your job as a parent, you have a right to expect that your children will be productive and happy members of society as adults. But, by showing your children how your family can actually make a difference to others, your anchors are "paying it forward." You've turned your strengths into benefits for the next person who will pay it forward to someone else.



We spend time developing anchors for largely personal reasons, whether it's the immediacy of managing everyone's time or an inter-generational obligation to uphold a family legacy. The only requirements are that anchors should be positive, purposeful and unifying.

Many families probably take anchoring for granted. But, the bottom line is that the distance between your child having a regular bedtime and ending up as a productive, loving and happy adult is probably shorter and more direct than we would ever have imagined.

Remember that we are creating memories our children will use to design their futures. That last thing we want to happen is for the experience of childhood to leave them adrift, without an anchor.

