

TOP TEN TIPS

for Building Strong Family Bonds

BY DR. JENNIFER DEGLER

- 1. The family that plays together stays together.** Shared laughter immediately eliminates distance between people, so take a shortcut to connection by having fun together. Play board games, cornhole, pickle ball, or hide and go seek outside or inside your house. Ride rollercoasters, bikes, or horses. Make crafts, cookies, or silly videos. The Fun List is endless. Be open to trying new activities or simply tag along to enjoy your family. Schedule one night a week for family fun so everyone can reserve this regular time.
- 2. Make the effort to show up.** Yes, it takes time, energy, and money to join extended family at significant events, like graduations, weddings, and funerals. Just do it. Decide you are the kind of family who shows up if at all possible. Rearrange your schedule, mark off time on your calendar, write the check. This practice costs you up front, but pays HUGE dividends in the long run. We all get exactly one opportunity to be there for someone's once in a lifetime event, and your presence powerfully says "you matter to me."
- 3. Eat at least one meal a day together.** Typically, this meal is dinner, but depending on your schedules, it could be breakfast or lunch. Research shows that regular family meals are associated with better academic performance, self-esteem, and resilience, as well as lower risk of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, depression, eating disorders, and obesity. Make it a meal time practice for each person to share the high and low points of the day without judgment or correction by anyone else. Ban screens (including your phone!) during meal times so everyone makes eye contact and feels heard and seen. We connect with what we look at, so look at your family, not a screen.
- 4. Celebrate one another's joys and mourn each other's losses, and never do the opposite.** This tip takes intentional training because our human nature is to resent the good things that happen to others and to secretly celebrate when bad things happen to someone we envy. When you sense your children are envying instead of celebrating, particularly with their siblings, kindly but firmly teach them to redirect their heart toward gratitude, not resentment. Be the first to get out the pom poms to celebrate successes and the tissues to cry over losses. For example, at birthday and graduation dinners, have each person share something they appreciate about the guest of honor.
- 5. Create an outdoor space to hang out with family.** Magic happens when we gather outside. We lose track of time and end up chatting longer and more openly as the daylight fades. We relax, laugh more easily, and don't stress about spills, breaking things, and kids being too loud or rowdy. This is why families who camp together consistently report high levels of family connectedness. If your family is new to camping, try going the first time with experienced campers who have the supplies and can show you how to make camping fun.

6. **Apologize and ask for forgiveness quickly.** You're going to make mistakes, say the wrong thing, forget to do what you said you would. Your family members will mess up too. Lead the way by taking responsibility for your own errors and apologize—even if you're the only one who will. Once you've apologized and made amends, forgive yourself and model for your family how to accept your own imperfections with grace, not lengthy self-condemnation. Strong families are made up of imperfect people who will own their mess ups, apologize, ask for forgiveness while also forgiving themselves, and then work toward not repeating the same mistake.
7. **Flex to embrace, not just tolerate, new family members.** Accepting and adapting to include a new in-law, step-parent, or sibling is a necessary and helpful process for families. Inquire about their traditions and include their preferences in your decision-making. Release any self-centered expectations of doing holidays or vacations exactly how you've always done them. Pray and ask God to help you truly love everyone in your family for who they are right now. We weaken our family bonds when we withhold love until people measure up to exactly what we want them to be.
8. **Create a deeper meaning and purpose for your family.** Living out a shared purpose bonds family together, so ask yourselves these questions: What does our family uniquely bring to the world? What do we want to be known for as a family? Which aspects of God does our family specifically reflect to the world (e.g., creativity, truth speaking, helpfulness, grace, etc.)? Who is God prompting our family to minister to currently? How can we be praying for each other right now? Jesus is writing your story, and He uses both the high and low points to weave a powerful, beautiful purpose for your family. Share about your family tree, so younger generations can appreciate and identify with what your family has overcome and achieved with God's help.
9. **Slow down the pace of life.** An accelerated pace weakens family bonds and rushes us past those little moments where connections are made. An overscheduled family, holiday, or vacation will feel like being in the space shuttle as it hurtles through our atmosphere, shuddering and shaking and stressing everyone as the pressure builds. Don't cram in one more activity in an effort to connect your family. Instead, leave white space on your calendar, on your vacations, at the holidays. Plan family vacations with several days of "let's just hang out" time. If you want your children to create strong bonds with their cousins that carry over into adulthood, then give them extended time to make memories together when they are young. People connect in the white spaces.
10. **Show physical affection and say "I love you."** Never underestimate the power of a hug to bridge distance. If your family aren't big huggers, try adding a hug when you first see someone or are saying goodbye. Even people who aren't "touchy feely" will usually cooperate with a hug then because it's more socially acceptable to express affection at hellos and goodbyes. And throw in an "I love you" for good measure. You never know who has been waiting a long time to hear those words from you. Own this tip for yourself without forcing your kids to hug relatives.