



Family Togetherness Sabbath
September 11th, 2021
Material and resources for the local church

Mission Statement

Our mission of evangelism is to provide resources, training, and networking opportunities that will instill hope and bring wholeness to families within the territory of the North American Division.



FAMILY MINISTRIES

Seventh-day Adventist Church
NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION

“Family Closeness Recipe” Suggested Order of Service

Intro:

Opening Prayer:

Opening hymn: #330, “Take My Life and Let it Be”

Call for the offering:

Children’s Story:

Scripture: Responsive Reading #826, “Family Life”

Sermon: “Family Closeness Recipe”

Closing hymn: #633, “When We All Get to Heaven”

Author of Sermon



Mira Djakov holds a Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy. After working in ministry for over ten years with her husband, she pursued further education and is presently working as a Mental Health Clinician. She maintains a successful private practice in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada where she offers couples and family counselling. She is also the Family Ministry Coordinator for BC SDA Conference. Mira is passionate about helping clients overcome the challenges to creating stronger and more meaningful relationships. She has presented internationally on topics of relationship, family, and mental health. Mira embraces the moments of happiness as well as growth in her role of a wife and mother. She enjoys music and nature.

FAMILY CLOSENESS RECIPE

Laughter

Mark Gungor, the pastor and author of the book “Laugh Your Way into a Better Marriage,” often gives timeless advice about the relationships. Here is the free marriage tip he posted on his Facebook page on July 1, 2021:

Don't ask your wife when dinner will be ready while she is mowing the lawn.

It is a good advice, isn't it, ladies?

Mark Gungor lives by Proverbs 17:22 (all the verses quoted in the sermon are from NKJV): “A merry heart does good, like medicine.” Hear what he says about laughter:

“Throughout our 40 years together, my wife and I have chosen to laugh at the craziness in our lives... And if your marriage is anything like ours, it has its fair share of stress... [Laughter] helps release the frustration that can build up over time.... Laughter is a choice... if you choose to reflect on the absurdity of your circumstances, if you gain the discipline of looking at the lighter side of life, you can smile in the face of adversity and joyfully eradicate tension” (Gungor, 2015)

Life is not easy. It's messy. It is beautiful and difficult at the same time. Our family relationships are equally messy. Our imperfections hurt our family members, and yet, it is in our imperfections that the beauty of family togetherness comes to light when we chose to laugh together rather than fight against each other. God's grace has a power to create this amazing bond between family member that knit us together for eternity even during those difficult moments.

Beside laughter, what other ingredients a good recipe for a unified family should include?

Prayer

In 1947, a young advertising executive and copywriter Al Scalpone wrote the now famous slogan, "The Family That Prays Together Stays Together" for the Christian radio series, Family Together. That same year, a Los Angeles outdoor advertising company offered to put the slogan on vacant billboards as a public service and since then this message has appeared on more than 100,000 billboards and is estimated that it has been seen more than 400 million times (See Wikipedia's article *The family that prays together stays together*, 2017).

How come this slogan took off so rapidly in our every growing secular world? Because it conveys the timeless sentiment and there is no more beautiful sight in the world than to see fathers and mothers raising children to live true Christian values and building a culture of love and unity in the home.

Megan Hill, in her book *Praying Together* (2016) lists the following benefits of daily family prayers:

- It demonstrates to children that prayer is vital.
- It trains children in theology, and godly reason...
- It affirms the ... identity of both parents and children as the children of [our] heavenly Father.
- It unites families in longsuffering and mutual love as they confess their sins together.
- It humbles both parents and children with the acknowledgement that they cannot meet their own needs.
- It comforts families in the midst of grief and trial.

- It orients families in the midst of blessing and joy.
- It disciplines both parents and children in the regular habit of prayer.
- It reinforces and proclaims the spiritual priorities of a Christian home.”

This is such an amazing list that highlights the importance of prayer in building family togetherness as comfort, joy and many of parent’s values and beliefs are shared and passed down just by this simple act of family prayer. No wonder the research “of 7,700 married people found that 68 percent of highly connected couples said they prayed together regularly” (Feldhahn, 2014).

Forgiveness

The story of Melissa De Paiva Gibson, a missionary-drive nurse and pastoral wife from Texas, is an amazing example of the power of forgiveness. She was born in Michigan into Brazilian Adventist family. Her parents received the call to be missionary to Palau, an archipelago of over 500 islands, part of the Micronesia region in the western Pacific Ocean, which they graciously accepted. While there, Melissa and her family were viciously attacked only two days before Christmas. Her parents and brother were killed, and she was taken by the intruder who two days later throw her into a ravine out of fear to be discovered thinking she strangled her to death. However, Melissa survived. She was 10 years old at the time.

Her paternal grandparents from USA took her in and cared for until she grew up. Her paternal grandmother Ruth, soon after the incident and capture of the intruder, visited him in prison and delivered the following message to him: “Because of Jesus, I want you to know that we forgive you and we want to see you in heaven one day with our son, daughter-in-law, and grandson.” These words had a huge impact on the perpetrator and in the subsequent years, he began to change his life. Melissa’s grandparents prayed for Justin through the years and provided him with Christian literature. He read those books, and they helped change his life that led to his baptism about a decade after that fatal night.

Meanwhile, Melissa grew up, married, and worked as a nurse. Through the years, when invited, she would share about her experience always highlighting that God helped her to forgive: “Looking back I can see that my parents and brother accomplished much more I death then in life, and many blessings come out of what seem to be the end of everything. I learned to be a much stronger person, and my relationship with the Lord flourished.” (Paiva, 2012)

Melissa always planned to go back to Palau and in 2018, accompanied with her paternal grandparents and her husband, she embarked on that journey. In the honour of her return, the week of prayer meetings has been organized in the church her father pastored in the capital city Koror. While pastored shared sermons each night, she and her grandmother were giving the testimonies and answering questions.

One evening, one person asked, “How does one learn to forgive the way you have forgiven?” Ruth responded, “it is impossible from a human perspective. The goal is not to ‘try’ to forgive but to open one’s heart to the indwelling presence of God’s Spirit and allows Him to forgive through you.” (Hamel, 2019).

Another evening, Melissa was asked how can she reconcile God’s love and what has happened to her family. She acknowledged how difficult that question is and explained that “while we live in a world where sin and death reign, and there is an ongoing battle between the forces of good and evil, there are three possible answers to that question. First, God allows it in order to bring some greater good out of it for us. Second, He allows it to bring some greater good out of it for someone else. Third, things

happened for reason beyond our understanding. In our finiteness as human beings, we can't know why things like this happen, but we can trust that God has a plan for us, nonetheless" (Hamel, 2019).

At the end of her journey, Melissa and her family visited the prison. The intruder spoke first and expressed genuine repentance for his actions. Both grandparents spoke after that and encouraged him to continue his path with Christ. At the end, while the tears were streaming down her face, Melissa said: "Justin, we are all the same in God's sight. We are no better than you are. We are all in need of God's saving grace in our lives. I want to see you in heaven one day with my parents and my brother" (Hamel, 2019).

This amazing story illustrates what true Christian forgiveness can achieve. It can bring healing and peace. It can help people come together even under the horrific circumstances. It can bring salvation to everyone involved.

I don't know what your present situation is. What I do know, however, is that most of feel separated from God when we have unresolved forgiveness towards others. As love, forgiveness and salvation are closely connected in our Christian faith, my hope is that this story will inspire you today to deal with any resentment and bitterness that you might be nurturing in your heart and "If it is possible (and safe, if I might add), as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom 12:18), specially with your family members for the glory of God, for salvation of all involved, and for the sake of your tender family bond.

3 L's – Loving, Limiting and Listening

Ellen G. White talks about importance of parent-child bond on many occasions. The following paragraphs highlight some of her main points:

"Some parents do not understand their children and are not really acquainted with them. There is often a great distance between parents and children. If the parents would enter more fully into the feelings of their children and draw out what is in their hearts, it would have a beneficial influence upon them. The father and the mother should ... make themselves companions to their children. Parents should study the best and most successful manner of winning the love and confidence of their children, that they may lead them in the right path" (EGW, AH, 190).

"Young children love companionship and can seldom enjoy themselves alone. They yearn for sympathy and tenderness. That which they enjoy they think will please mother also, and it is natural for them to go to her with their little joys and sorrows. The mother should not wound their sensitive hearts by treating with indifference matters that, though trifling to her, are of great importance to them. Her sympathy and approval are precious. An approving glance, a word of encouragement or commendation, will be like sunshine in their hearts, often making the whole day happy" (EGW, AH, 190).

"No barrier of coldness and reserve should be allowed to arise between parents and children. Let parents become acquainted with their children, seeking to understand their tastes and dispositions, entering into their feelings, and drawing out what is in their hearts. Parents, let your children see that you love them and will do all in your power to make them happy. If you do so, your necessary restrictions will have far greater weight in their young minds. Rule your children with tenderness and compassion" (EGW, AH, 193).

The common theme in these quotes is the importance of connecting with our children on a deep emotional level in the way that fits our child personality. Even when they are talking about something

that seem trivial to us, we are invited to listen to our children and assure them of our approval. Most importantly, we are invited to be our children confident.

Dr. Ron Taffel (2009), a noted child and family therapist and author of Jewish origin talks about engaging our children through 3 L's: Loving, Limiting and Listening.

Dr. Taffel highlights that, although children often know they are loved, they unfortunately do not feel loved by their parents. One of the thing that is needed for the children to feel loved by their caregivers is for the parents to be authentic. Taffel states: "Those parents, teachers, coaches, and clergy whom [the children] described in loving ways were the ones who spoke with intensity and drama – not over the top, but with obvious authenticity that got their life-lessons and caring across."

We are reminded in Romans 12:9: "Let love be genuine." This is not referring only to our love to God. We should genuinely love our fellow human beings, and especially our children.

Parental lack of guidance is another thing our children experience as lack of caring. "Our children are yearning for us to effectively create [safety through limits] for them, even though they are often outraged about it when we do." The effective limit setting means creating consequences that are compassionate, creative, fit the crime, must happen immediately, consistent, and ought to teach something about character building (p.144). Taffel reminds parents that children's minds are like a room with four slippery bare walls, so you need to teach, teach, and teach again. Eventually, the lessons will stick, and the children will learn.

The third L that will help you create a strong bond with your children is Listening which he defines as an open, authentic communication where parents are able to hear what children has to say, when the child is ready and without parents overreacting no matter how difficult topic child brings up. He emphasises that communication that leads to the bonding with your child needs rituals. Boring is best! One child opens up to his mother every Tuesday afternoon when his mother vacuums the house. Another family of three children, noticed that one child opens up the most on their way to the church, the second on their way home from the church, and the third one opens up regularly to his mother while the father took afternoon nap. The author himself found that his children would open up the most while taking the bath, so he and his wife had a beach chair in their bathroom to place next to the tub. Even as the children grew, they continued to use that time for connecting with their children, who were now, off course, behind the shower curtains. Protecting these special times when our children open up to us is very important.

Kindness

Kindness, one of the Fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23, is identified as one of the social superpowers that can mend broken relationships, make businesses more profitable, make us feel happier, help us gain respect from others, even have better intimate life. Furthermore, "True kindness always strengthens and empowers, never weakens. It changes you, not just others. It melts hardness and makes gentleness immensely powerful. Kindness has a power to transform that is unparalleled in social science" (Feldhahn, 2016).

Here are the ways kindness acts as a superpower (Feldhahn, 2016):

1. Kindness protects us. How, you might ask. When someone is intentionally trying to hurt us, they are aiming to hurt our feelings with their unkind words and actions. If we, however, decide

in advance to be kind to them regardless how they treat us, we take control of our feelings and, by doing that, take away the power to make us suffer from them.

2. Kindness disarms the attacker. Remember Abigail's conversation with David (1 Samuel 25). It was the power of her kindness that soften David's rage caused by Nabal's unreasonable action, that averted the bloodshed David planed by killing all the males belonging to Nabal's household. Kindness has a power not just to transform the attack of our enemies, but also to transform the attackers themselves.
3. Kindness gives us better understanding of others. People who have committed to being kind find that they are more attuned to others. Because they decided not to say anything negative, highlight the positives, and be generous they realized they are more able to put themselves in other person's shoes.
4. Kindness melts through the walls of defensiveness. Out of fear of being hurt by us, people often build the walls around their hearts to protect themselves. The kindness is the only way to melt those walls down. Through our continued kindness towards others, they eventually trust that we are not going to shred their hearts and they stop putting those bricks back up.
5. Kindness makes the invisible visible. When we are in contentious relationship with someone, their faults are often all we see. When we chose to shower them with kindness, to affirm the other person, we begin to see the positive characteristic this person has that were invisible to us before.
6. Kindness improves our lives. When we chose to be kind to others, we begin to receive the blessings both from God and people for it, and our life becomes more joyful and positive.

All these "powers" of kindness can do wonder for our family and strengthened the bond tenfold. What is even more important, the kindness can be a shield from the evil that can protect our families, and specifically, our children.

EGW invites parents: "children... must be treated with candor, Christian tenderness, and love. This will give you a strong influence over them, and they will feel that they can repose unlimited confidence in you. Throw around your children the charms of home and of your [company]... parents should have double care to bind [their children] to their hearts and let them see that they wish to make them happy. Brought up under the wise and loving guidance of a true home, children will have no desire to wander away in search of pleasure... Evil will not attract them. The spirit that prevails in the home will mold their characters; they will form habits and principles that will be a strong defense against temptation when they shall leave the home shelter and take their place in the world" (EGW, AH, 193). By nurturing the kindness in our homes, we build strong relationships with our partner and our children while at the same time protect our children for the eternity.

What does being kind practically looks like? Feldhahn (2016), in her 30-Day Kindness Challenge, proposes doing the following:

1. Say nothing negative, either to the person or about them to someone else. (If negative feedback is unavoidable, be constructive and encouraging without a negative tone.)
2. Every day, find one positive thing that you can sincerely praise or affirm about the person and tell them, and tell someone else.
3. Every day, do a small act of kindness or generosity for the person you want to reach out with your kindness.

I like the simplicity and yet the meaningfulness of this practical expression of kindness. Although these instructions are simple, they are often very hard to put in practice. We should never forget, however, that the ultimate source of kindness is our Heavenly Father.

Ephesians 4:32 invites us to “be kind to one another... forgiving one another ... as God in Christ forgave” us. When we chose to do that, when we chose to “love [our] enemies [and] do good... [our] reward will be great, and [we] will be sons of the Most High.” Luke then adds, “For He is kind to the unthankful and evil.” (Luke 6:35). Luke knows that being kind is hard for us, especially when we are invited to be kind to people who are not kind to us. So, Luke reminds us that God, Himself, is kind to the unkind. God understand how hard that can be and He will help us to put in practice a true kindness.

Regardless of what is a present situation in your family, with God’s grace you can reach out to your estranged family members and begin to build stronger connection and closeness. Especially when we have in mind the eternal impact of showing kindness within our family circle has on our partner and children, I’m sure we would all be inspired to practice kindness not just for 30 days, but for the rest of our lives.

Meaningful traditions and routines

The meaningful traditions and routines have been shown to be a significant protective factor for people all around the world during the past year and half as we have been dealing with challenges and limitations brought by COVID-19 (Gadermann, 2021). Long before, however, there were two family traditions that have been proven to have significant positive impact on families.

A. Family Dinner

First one is regular family dinners. A research study by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at the Columbia University (CASA) found that strong family ties are associated with a reduced likelihood that a teen will use substances. Family togetherness is also associated with higher grades and higher self-esteem in children. Eating family dinners at least five times a week drastically lowers a teen’s chance to get depressed, consider suicide, and develop an eating disorder. They are also more likely to delay sex. These teens also report that their parents are proud of them. (Klain, 2011).

Compared to teens who have fewer than three family dinners per week, teens who have five to seven family dinners per week are almost one and a half times as likely to attend religious services at least four times a month with their families. Compared to teens who have infrequent family dinners (fewer than three per week), teens who have frequent family dinners are (1) one and a half times more likely to say their parents know a great deal or a fair amount about what is really going on in their lives (92 percent vs. 60 percent); and (5) five times less likely to say their parents know very little or nothing at all about what’s really going on in their lives (8 percent vs. 40 percent). (Lane, 2012).

Teens having frequent family dinners are more likely to report having excellent relationships with their family members. Compared to teens having infrequent family dinners, teens having frequent family dinners are:

- One-and-a-half times likelier to report having an excellent relationship with their mother;
- More than twice as likely to report having an excellent relationship with their father; and
- Almost twice as likely to report having an excellent relationship with their sibling(s).

Compared to teens who have frequent family dinners, teens who have infrequent family dinners are almost two-and-a-half times likelier to report that their parents do not regularly make time to check in with them (Lane, 2012)

Family dinners might be easy routine to bring family members together daily and create time to connect. However, if your schedule cannot be rearranged to include family dinners, engage in other kinds of activities with your children so that you are a reliable, involved, and interested presence in their lives.

EGW invites parents to “give some of your leisure hours to your children; associate with them in their work, and in their sports, and win their confidence. Cultivate their friendship. Let parents devote the evenings to their families. Lay off care and perplexity with the labors of the day. (EGW, AH, 192). The magic that happens over family dinners is not the food on the table, but the communication and conversations around it. Creating opportunities to connect is what is important.

B. Attending Worship Service

As we already saw, families that create meaningful routines, such as regular family dinners, reap many benefits, including having their teenagers attending the worship service with them regularly. Now, the regular worship attendance has many spiritual benefits, but did you know that it can also protect your marriage?

The common belief that divorce rate of the couple in the church is same as the one who don't attend the church, namely about 50%, is wrong. “In fact, every study that has been done has found that those who act on their faith by attending worship services, praying with their spouse and so on are happier and closer in their marriage and have a significantly lower divorce rate... among those who attend church weekly, the divorce rate drops by 27 percent from those who do not” (Feldhahn, 2014).

And as with family dinners, just attending the church is not enough to protect your marriage. So, what is the secret of family unity? Hear these wise words: “The secret of true unity in the ... family is not diplomacy, not management, not a superhuman effort to overcome difficulties—though there will be much of this to do—but union with Christ. Picture a large circle, from the edge of which are many lines all running to the center. The nearer these lines approach the center, the nearer they are to one another” (EGW, AH, 179).

The true secret to family connectedness is our connectedness to Christ. Attending the church services regularly, praising God, serving others, participating in the worship with the talents God has given us, is what brings us closer to our Heavenly Father, while at the same time, is bringing us closer to each other.

My prayer is that you will feel the call to strengthen your family relationships through laughter, love, setting the limits, listening, prayer, practicing forgiveness and kindness, having meaningful connection times during the family dinners, or the times that work best for your family. Above all, my prayer is that you will feel inspired to strengthen your bond with Christ through regular worship both in church and privately which will have an eternal effect on you and your loved ones.

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