

# The Center for Collaborative Family Therapy, PLLC

21 Memorial Highway, North Yarmouth, Maine 04097

*www.CenterforCollaborativeFamilyTherapy.com*

## The Happy Family Toolkit: Seven Tips for a More Harmonious Family

By Jennifer King, PhD, LMFT

*I often hear parents lament, "If only children came with an instruction manual!" I get it. I've been there. Parenting is certainly not for the faint of heart. The following guide provides some basic tips for achieving greater consistency, accountability, and connection in your family. I recommend starting with one tip at a time so all of you can get the hang of it and make it a family habit.*

### Tip #1. Show them how to disagree without arguing

Children can learn a lot from adults about how to handle disagreements without arguing.

Children who grow up around adults who argue every time they disagree are likely to experience stress and anxiety when in the presence of people who express a difference of opinion. As these children become adults, they are more likely to take things personally when people disagree with them and are more likely to become defensive or argumentative.

Children can be taught how to appreciate and respect differences of opinion without feeling threatened. They can learn this by watching how you handle disagreements.

Not sure how to disagree without arguing? Call the Center for Collaborative Family Therapy at (207) 489-9393 to make an appointment.

## Tip #2. Be clear about expectations

Instructions like “*Be good,*” “*Behave,*” and “*Make good choices*” are too vague for most children and thus, easy to ignore. Instead, try using language that describes exactly what you expect. If you can, be sure to include recent successes when you convey expectations (“*Remember how you did your homework yesterday without anyone asking you and you got to stay up an extra 20 minutes? Let’s see if we can make that happen again tonight.*”)

Prior to entering a challenging situation like shopping, dining in a restaurant, or attending a religious service, rehearse possible scenarios with your child so that expectations can be met. (“*We are not going to buy anything on this trip; we’re just looking, so if you ask me to buy anything, we will have to leave, okay?*”)

Your expectations of what is appropriate for your child need to be realistic for your child’s age and ability. Taking a tired four-year-old into a toy store to purchase a birthday gift for another child could prove challenging, so plan accordingly.

Having trouble keeping expectations clear and simple? At the Center for Collaborative Family Therapy, you can learn how to master this technique. Call the Center for Collaborative Family Therapy at (207) 489-9393 to make an appointment.

### Tip #3. Help children manage transitions

Children, especially young children, respond well to a predictable daily rhythm. Routines tied to food, physical activity, bodily functions, sleep, homework, and household tasks will help stabilize moods, teach how to transition between activities, and foster personal accountability.

In the absence of a routine, children are more likely to experience anxiety and may have trouble handling unexpected situations. This can lead to melt-downs.

Young children have an easier time making transitions between activities when given **countdown cues** and **transition prompts**. For example, you can help them to prepare for a transition by using a **countdown cue** like “Ten more minutes and then it’s time for us to go.” Keep in mind that these cues will only work if you follow through.

Children have an easier time with transitions if they know what activity comes next. You can do this by providing a **transition prompt** like, “What do we do after we brush teeth?” These prompts will help children to learn the routine so that they can carry them out independently.

Having trouble with routines, cues, and prompts? At the Center for Collaborative Family Therapy, you can learn how to master these techniques. Call (207) 489-9393 to make an appointment.

## Tip #4. Take a “One Chance Stance”

*“How many times do I have to ask you to turn that off?”* Does this sound familiar? Take heart: you’re not alone.

When we wait until things become unpleasant before following through on discipline, we undermine our own leadership and become part of the problem.

Don’t train your children to ignore you! Children whose parents don’t enforce the rules learn that rules can be broken. They also grow up not knowing who’s in charge, and this can cause feelings of anxiety.

Consider adopting the *One Chance Stance*. Start by providing **a *single courtesy notice*** to your child before enacting consequences. For example, you could say, *“If you don’t stop whining, we will have to leave the store. I am only going to say this once.”* Next, follow through with the consequence if your notice is disregarded.

Once children understand that you will follow through after your courtesy notice, you will only need to say things once.

It is never too late to practice the One Chance Stance. Start with a conversation about your new approach so that your children understand that you are looking for ways to get things done without having to resort to yelling or negotiating. Explain what you expect when you give them notice, then remind them the first few times that this is their “one courtesy notice” before consequences are enacted. Be sure to positively reinforce your successes at the end of the day. (“Thanks for listening in the store today. I really thought it was going to be a battle, but it wasn’t. I can’t wait to go shopping with you again!”)

Having trouble applying the One Chance Stance? At the Center for Collaborative Family Therapy, you can learn how to master this technique. Call (207) 489-9393 to make an appointment.

## Tip #5. Have everyone pitch in

While parents may disagree about whether children should have “chores” or whether children should be remunerated for helping out, most parents become resentful when their children don’t pitch in and help out. By the time children become teens, the problem becomes harder to address and this can create unpleasant power struggles and family stress.

When is the best time to get started? Between the ages of 3 and 6, children are developmentally eager to demonstrate what they can do and enjoy helping out.

Consider offering children a list of possible jobs and then having each child pick one or two from the list each week. Children will generally cooperate if they feel they have a say in selecting their job(s). They also enjoy having jobs rotate from week to week. Finally, children are more likely to cooperate with household tasks if ***all household members pitch in together.***

When children pitch in around the house, they get to experience the importance of teamwork and start to develop a work ethic. They also get to learn valuable skills, like how to do laundry or fold a fitted sheet. Working together as a family to take care of the household can also be an important bonding experience.

Having trouble getting your kids to pitch in? At the Center for Collaborative Family Therapy, you can learn how to master this technique. Call (207) 489-9393 to make an appointment.

## Tip #6. Bickering basics

Bickering often occur when children have to share coveted resources. Sibling rivalry is a healthy part of growing up, but it needn't include bickering or fighting. When children bicker, argue, or fight, it is often because they lack interpersonal skills. It can also be because they are looking to *engage an emotionally disengaged adult*.

Children whose parents only become engaged when children start to bicker, argue, or fight will sometimes let their disagreements intensify as a means of getting adults involved.

Parents can significantly reduce household bickering, arguing, and fighting by (1) being emotionally engaged with children, even if just to help children get started on an activity; (2) by teaching children how to share fairly with the use of an egg-timer for example; 3) by demonstrating that they can manage tension in their own adult relationships without resorting to bickering, arguing, or fighting (for more on this, see Tip #1).

Having trouble with bickering and fighting in your household? You are not alone. At the Center for Collaborative Family Therapy, you can learn how to be more fully engaged with your children as well as techniques for equitable sharing. Call (207) 489-9393 to make an appointment.

## Tip #7. Make Time for Family Meals

Children who partake in family meals are more likely to appreciate family values and cultural traditions; report feeling more connected to their parents and siblings; and develop important social skills and eating habits.

While family meals need not be home-made, preparing meals together does offer opportunities to teach children how to cook. Cooking together can also foster teamwork, reinforce cultural values, and pass down beloved family recipes.

When time is set aside for family meals, children learn that family togetherness is valued above and beyond other distractions. This contributes to a sense of belonging, acceptance, and security.

Avoid bribing children with dessert or forcing them to clean their plate. These parenting choices can unintentionally create unhealthy habits and produce a negative association with food.

Having trouble with meals in your household? You are not alone. At the Center for Collaborative Family Therapy, you can learn how to create a successful family meal tradition. Call (207) 489-9393 to make an appointment.