

Blueprint for Your Family's New Future

10 Keys to Happiness and Harmony



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Introduction

When asked what they value most in the world, the vast majority of people say the same thing — family. However, as many of us know all too well, families can often be like heaven or hell. They can lift us up or tear us apart. They can be our greatest refuge in difficult times or a source of unimaginable pain. Especially now. Changes in the world are happening at breakneck speed, leaving us overwhelmed, overworked, and out of gas.

Despite the many challenges that today's families face, research shows that families can successfully achieve the task of raising children who are able to live independently and establish stable and harmonious relationships. By burrowing through piles of professional literature and drawing on personal and professional experience over the past forty years, we've uncovered 10 Keys, or common factors, that can guide you toward building a happy loving family.

By understanding and improving your relationships with these keys, you'll be able to make a tangible difference in your family that can last a lifetime. You too can create a sense of closeness, provide support and encouragement through times of stress, and yet still allow for the uniqueness of each person.

The following process is designed to help you to:

- Learn the characteristics of healthy families and ways to bring out the best.
- Identify strengths and the areas for improvement for your family.
- Facilitate conversations between you, your partner, and your children about desired changes.
- Create a working set of goals to focus your efforts at improvement.
- Discover new resources for help with the most common problematic keys.



How's Your Family *Really* Doing?

First, we'll start with the Family Assessment, a self-administered 50-point questionnaire that will usually take you less than ten minutes to complete. Just like the blood test that gives your physician feedback about your physical health, this assessment can guide you toward understanding your family's strengths and areas for improvement. In the course of our practices, over a thousand families have taken this test and used this process to great advantage.

Begin by answering the 50 questions that follow. (You can download additional free copies at Strong-WilledChild.com.) If you have a partner or even a teen who wants to participate, make copies of the test and complete it independently of one another.

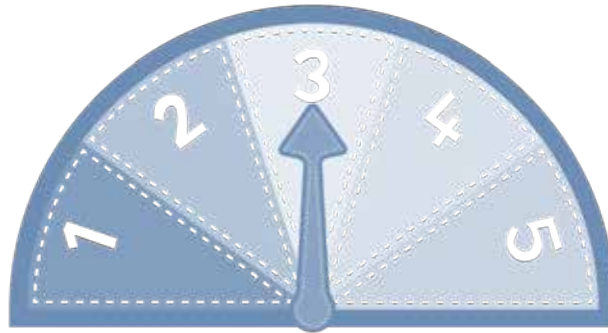
There are five questions that relate to each of the 10 Keys. Answer as honestly as you can. There are no right or wrong answers. Each item in the assessment describes a particular behavior or attitude that might or might not accurately describe your family. You are scoring each item based on your unique personal perspective.

Decide what you believe to be true about your family right now. For most people, the first step in any change process involves awareness. You will learn about elements of family functioning that you may not have thought about or put into words before.

FAMILY ASSESSMENT

This test contains fifty statements, each describing a particular family strength. How much improvement do you believe your family needs on each item?

Grade from 1–5 according to the following scale:



much need for improvement some need for improvement no need for improvement

1

2

3

4

5



Key #1: Talking and Listening

___ We talk things over and know what's going on with each other.

___ Individuals speak for themselves, not for others.

___ Each family member finds a balance between talking and listening.

___ We notice and discuss some of the nonverbal messages we send and receive.

___ We listen to one another's ideas or points of view.

___ Subtotal Key #1



Key #2: Expressing Feelings

- ___ Feelings are expressed in a balanced way—not too much or too little.
- ___ We comfort one another and are able to cry openly when sad.
- ___ Feelings of fear, frustration, and anger can be shared constructively.
- ___ As needed, we use calming methods such as centering and slow deep breaths.
- ___ We share more positive feelings (joy, tenderness, pleasure) than negative ones (fighting, criticizing, yelling, teasing).

___ Subtotal **Key #2**

Key #3: Adapting to Change

- ___ We recognize and encourage each other's unique strengths.
- ___ Mistakes are treated as helpful learning opportunities.
- ___ We adapt well to losses, changes, and transitions.
- ___ We have developed good habits of exercise, self-care, and regular sleep.
- ___ Each of us draws social support from friends, extended family, and social groups.

___ Subtotal **Key #3**



Key #4: Sharing Time Together

- ___ We like to spend time together.
- ___ There are established routines for bedtime, meals, and family time.
- ___ Family meals taken together occur more than once a week.
- ___ We have rituals that are special to our family and/or extended family.
- ___ Each family member spends some quality time with every other member.

___ **Subtotal Key #4**

Key #5: Who's the Boss?

- ___ Parenting of the children is not too soft but not too strict.
- ___ The parental figures in our family are on the same page and work together.
- ___ We use encouragement and praise far more often than negative words.
- ___ Punishment consists of consequences rather than spanking or yelling.
- ___ The children follow rules and respect the adults as the leaders of the family.

___ **Subtotal Key #5**



Key #6: Balancing Closeness and Distance

- ___ We find a balance between closeness and distance with each other.
- ___ We feel close and connected to other family members and to friends.
- ___ There is overall respect for each other's needs for independence.
- ___ Family members are usually available to one another for help and support.
- ___ We have "boundaries" that provide privacy between adults and children.

___ **Subtotal Key #6**

Key #7: Accepting Differences

- ___ Differences among family members are acknowledged and valued.
- ___ People don't "need to be right," allowing others to have their own perspective.
- ___ We acknowledge and accept differences in temperament and learning style.
- ___ Parents focus on the strengths of individual differences and teach tolerance.
- ___ As appropriate, we state preferences and requests rather than making demands.

___ **Subtotal Key #7**

Key #8: Seeing the Positive

- ___ We emphasize the positive aspects of situations rather than complaining.
- ___ We teach about social values and moral decision-making.
- ___ We treat others the way we would like to be treated.
- ___ We are capable of offering apologies and being forgiving.
- ___ We emphasize spiritual values, the bigger picture in life, and service to others.
- ___ **Subtotal Key #8**

Key #9: Effective Problem-solving

- ___ We negotiate and compromise rather than one person dominating decision-making.
- ___ We face problems early on rather than waiting until things get out of hand.
- ___ Parents are organized and provide leadership to make decisions and follow through.
- ___ Family members feel respected for their ideas even when they don't get their way.
- ___ Children are included in decision-making in a way that is age appropriate.
- ___ **Subtotal Key #9**

Key #10: Parenting Together

- ___ Parents provide a model of love, respect, and healthy boundaries.
- ___ Parents walk their talk rather than falling back on "Do as I say, not as I do."
- ___ Criticism and defensiveness happen only infrequently as forms of communication.
- ___ Parents work towards agreement and keep conflict away from the children.
- ___ Parents make their relationship a priority, cultivating friendship and intimacy.
- ___ **Subtotal Key #10**

ANALYZING YOUR ASSESSMENT

Now that you've completed the test, add up your scores for each of the individual Keys. The maximum score for each Key is 25 points.

A comparison of the point scores for each Key will clearly highlight your strengths and areas for growth. Where did you score high? Where did you score poorly?

Here's how to interpret your scores:

5-11 points = This is a problem Key that you'll want to improve on.

12-15 points = The topics covered in this Key probably need some attention.

16-25 points = This Key is a strength for your family.



SHARING YOUR RESULTS WITH OTHERS

Make sure to compare the scores that you give your family with those given by your partner or other family members. If there are big discrepancies, try to define what led you to differing conclusions. Even though you are in the same family, bear in mind that each individual's experience will be unique. Listen to other's perspectives and since there are no "right" answers, let it be okay to disagree. If you remain open and curious, you can learn a lot just by comparing notes. Improvements can already start to take place.



The Big Picture

Looking back again at your scores with the family assessment, if you had challenges with a number of different keys, you might decide to get a tune-up and read *How's Your Family Really Doing?: 10 Keys to a Happy Loving Family*. Each chapter describes a Key and can help you to:

- Learn from research about successful relationships
- Strengthen your skills with dozens of tips and tools
- Identify and overcome the effects of past influences

Who's The Boss?



One of the most common and important challenges facing families today relates to Key #5.

This key emphasizes the importance of an appropriate hierarchy in the family—parents being in charge of their kids by setting limits in caring ways. If you didn't score well on this key, the following processes can help you get started on a new blueprint toward greater happiness and harmony.

Some kids are just born with more challenging personalities and temperaments, but even they can adapt to creative and consistent parenting practices.

So what are you facing? What about your child? Place a check mark next to any adjectives that you or others might use to describe them.

- ___ Spirited
- ___ Strong-willed
- ___ Won't listen
- ___ Defiant
- ___ Spoiled
- ___ Entitled
- ___ Overly demanding
- ___ Difficult to handle
- ___ Out of control
- ___ Not respectful
- ___ Not grateful



Now place a check mark next to any of the challenges you have with your child. .



- ___ They don't typically listen to me.
- ___ They have frequent emotional meltdowns.
- ___ They show verbal or physical aggression.

The Latest Trends

If these questions confirm that you need some help in this area, welcome to the club.

Millions of parents are struggling, like you, with kids who need to learn how to listen better and become more respectful. It's more and more common: Kids throwing temper tantrums in stores when they don't get an immediate treat, running around restaurants as if they were outdoor playgrounds, and ignoring their parents' simplest requests when they just don't feel like it.

Over the past fifty years, families of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds have become significantly more soft or permissive than in the past. In most families where kids are misbehaving, the hierarchy is upside down and kids are wielding more power than their parents. Moms and dads, at a loss in trying to keep the family ship afloat, often resort to yelling at their kids and repeating themselves.

The good news is that there's an effective Win-Win solution to help turn things around. So read on.... there's hope.

What's the Problem?

When kids have too much power, they not only drive their parents crazy but often get in trouble in school and have difficulty with peers. They become anxious about the impulses they can't control, and as a result they feel bad about themselves and guilty about the pain they are causing. When parents aren't setting enough limits, they are inadvertently depriving their children of fundamental lessons needed to survive in a world that won't always revolve around them.



So, why is this happening?

1. There are a variety of factors that help explain why you may have difficulty setting limits. Most parents who struggle in this way grew up in families where their own parents were too lax, so they are simply mimicking what was modeled for them. Many other parents have been over-compensating from the overly strict parenting that they experienced as kids. Consciously or unconsciously they've decided: "I'll never treat my kids the way I was brought up!"
2. Economic stresses and life circumstances can also make it difficult for parents to set limits. As moms and dads spend extra hours working outside the home, they have less time to be with their kids. The guilt stemming from this shortage of family time often prompts parents to be more lenient—an understandable but unhelpful means of compensating. They let their kids stay up too late at night, leading to sleep deprivation and even more irritability and conflict.
3. Some parents struggle with shifting and adapting their parenting style as their children grow older. For example, an important ingredient of early parenting is to bond with an infant—to provide what is called "secure attachment." At this age it is healthy and appropriate to attend to and try to meet all of an infant's needs, but as children grow older it's best if they're weaned from being the center of the universe. They need to be able to tolerate frustration and not be the center of attention. There's also a big difference between parental behaviors that are nurturing versus indulgent—doing things for kids that they can do for themselves.





4. Another roadblock to setting limits is to relax the rules for too long out of feeling sorry for a child. One mom realized in therapy that she became permissive with her eight-year-old son, Matthew, because of recent family traumas. His parents' divorce was immediately followed by the loss of their home in a wildfire. Matthew had lots of feelings about these losses and changes, but was also acting out as a way of testing boundaries. A dramatic reduction in his anxiety occurred only after his parents learned to set better limits.
5. Other parents fear that discipline will injure their child's self-esteem. In reality, letting children get away with too much can be as damaging to their feelings of self-worth as being too strict.
6. Permissiveness can also stem from a parent's fear of making waves. Some confess that they're "allergic" to and always try to avoid conflict. This can be due to many factors—temperament, upbringing, cultural backgrounds or even religious beliefs.
7. Finally, for some parents it's too important to be their child's best friend. They have all their emotional eggs in one basket. These parents benefit from finding more social support outside the family. We have a favorite adage about this dilemma:

If your child isn't upset with you at times, you probably aren't setting enough limits .

Why Kids Misbehave

Although gaining insight into the roadblocks we've described can be a good beginning, a second step is in understanding some of the many reasons why kids act out in the first place.

Place a check mark next to the following that you think may pertain to your child:

- ___ Testing to see what they can get away with
- ___ Not wanting to face frustration
- ___ Wanting their parents' attention
- ___ Showing their parents that they're upset
- ___ Retaliating for feeling like they've been mistreated
- ___ Expressing anger or upset about anything going on in their lives
- ___ Distracting their parents from their marital conflict
- ___ Sacrificing themselves by drawing attention to their behavior and away from a parent's own struggles with stress, anxiety, depression, conflict, etc.



Balancing Firmness with Love

The goal of effective parenting is pretty simple — to help children feel good about themselves and have love and respect for others. For kids to be happy and successful, they need to honor rules and limits and learn lessons in self-control and how to respect others. Parents need to dish out daily doses of love and warmth, say yes to their child's efforts, support their unique passions, and also ask them to make age-appropriate contributions to the family.

And while parents should be in charge, this doesn't mean that they deserve respect but their children don't. Respect should flow in both directions. Children who feel respected and understood for their feelings, in turn, listen better to their parents— not like little robots not phony people pleasers, but also not with a lot of defiance.

NEXT STEPS

Armed with this wealth of new information, it's time to consider some new directions:

Option #1: Free Hour-long Webinar

The 4 Essential Keys to Parenting Strong-Willed Kids: *Innovative Tools for Raising Happy, Respectful Children*

Visit Strong-WilledChild.com to view.

The 4 Essential Keys are:

#1: Knowing Their Nature

Strong-willed children are very special and unique, yet challenging in how reactive they can be. A combination of social, emotional, biological, and family systems factors needs to be assessed and integrated into an effective program for change.

#2: Handling Family Feelings

In order to turn things around, it's essential to reduce anger and deal with emotional upsets in healthy and constructive ways. I'll be sharing the latest brain research that has important implications for preventing and breaking negative cycles of interaction.

#3: Creating a Caring Climate

This key focuses on the creation of a positive atmosphere by using methods of modeling, praise and incentives, and by learning to pick your battles wisely. You'll understand the value of offering choices and actually becoming less "attached" to outcomes.

#4: Setting Effective Limits

Strong-willed children also respond best to structure, consistency, and age-appropriate consequences. You'll learn how to provide healthy limits with behaviors and feelings that help kids feel less anxious and better about themselves.

Option #2: 7 Module Online Course

Parenting Spirited Strong-Willed Kids: *The Win-Win Way to Bring Out the Best*

With this program, you can make the following shifts:

- From too much tension, to having more fun, positive and playful times
- From being indecisive and inconsistent, to having a simple and effective plan of action
- From having frequent upsets, to knowing how to resolve feelings in caring ways
- From falling into conflict, to using your child's strong-willed nature as an asset
- From being at odds with your partner, to being on the same page with common procedures
- From not realizing the effects of the past, to discovering and overcoming the negative influences from how you were parented

And, your strong-willed child can make the following shifts:

- From not listening, to learning how to do so
- From not taking responsibility, to becoming more helpful, happy and respectful
- From feeling overlooked and misunderstood, to feeling appreciated and valued
- From being upset and anxious, to developing a higher self-esteem and becoming more loving and capable

Visit Strong-WilledChild.com to learn more and register.

A Final Note

No child can be expected to do exactly what mom or dad says the very first time they say something. Children are still children. It's part of their nature to stretch limits, test, and experiment with the world around them. However, parents in healthy families know that they can enforce their requests, and when they really mean it, their child will comply.

This turnaround is not just crucial for your own sanity, but to give your child the social and emotional tools that they need to face life's inevitable stresses and frustrations. And as you take on your parental authority in a firm and loving manner, or take it back after having lost it, your kids can go back to being kids again—relieved to let you take charge.

Come visit Strong-WilledChild.com

Don MacMannis, Ph.D. Debra Manchester-MacMannis, MSW

Don and Debra are a team both at home and at the office. Husband and wife for thirty-six years, they have simultaneously served as directors of the Family Therapy Institute of Santa Barbara, a nonprofit organization. In this capacity they oversee the clinical work of fourteen therapists providing help to hundreds of clients each year. They are also coauthors of two highly acclaimed parenting books—*How's Your Family Really Doing?* and *Who's the Boss?*



Child psychologist "Dr. Mac" is a graduate of Dartmouth and the University of Virginia, and also specializes in creative projects for young children. He was music director and songwriter for the PBS hit, *Jay Jay the Jet Plane*, and has also written for *Mutt & Stuff* on Nick Jr. His *Happy Kids Songs* are an award-winning series of fifty songs and activities that build character, social and emotional skills.

Recently named "Best Family Therapist" in a poll taken by SBParent.com, he has been featured in national newspapers, magazines, radio programs, CNN, Time Magazine, Inside Edition, Time for Kids and more.

Debra received her undergraduate degree in psychology with distinction from Stanford University and her masters in social welfare from U.C. Berkeley with a specialty in family therapy. She was recently honored by the Mayor of Santa Barbara "for 30 years of inspiration, leadership, and training provided to thousands of clinicians, and the devotion exemplified in consistent visionary work for the community."

Dr. Mac

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