

Family Rules: The Power of "We..."

by James B. Stenson

The word "We..." is a powerful force in family life. It's what anchors children's loyalty to their parents and brothers and sisters--and forges a lifelong bond to their parents' convictions of right and wrong. It empowers children's inner voice of conscience for life.

Family loyalty saves many teens and young adults from disaster. Well raised young people will shun drugs and drunkenness and reckless driving, not only because these are wrong, but because, if caught, the teens would disgrace their family. Fear of causing their family shame can steel the will of young people, lead them to shrug off peer pressures, say "no" to selfish impulses, and live rightly.

How does this loyalty come about? Through the power of "We...."

Every healthy family lives by a set of rules in the home, some high standards for attitudes and conduct directed toward the welfare of others. When children live by these standards every day for years, they gradually--with fits and starts along the way--internalize powers of judgment, ethical responsibility, gutsy perseverance, and consideration for others. Active family rules form the framework for their growth in character.

Why does a healthy family have rules? For one reason: because it has a *job* to do, a *service mission* to carry out. A consumerist family, by contrast, has no job at all--for consumption is a static pastime, not an achievement--and so it has no reason to lay down standards for performance.

If we look at the parental job from a professional point of view--that is, the way things work in any serious business enterprise--here's what we see....

Every serious enterprise--whether a business, a non-profit service, a society and its government, or a family--has three basic elements that distinguish it from a loose and pointless or amateurish operation, :

- First, a *mission*. This is some long-term goal of service, a task carried out for the betterment of others.
- Secondly, a *responsible chain of command*. In any group, some people assume the burden of responsibility and consequently hold the authority to lead; they teach and direct others to carry out the institution's mission and deliver its service. In this way, responsible leaders direct those who work with them, not just under them--for, as we've seen before, a real leader has joiners, not followers.
- Third, a *set of performance standards*. These are clear directional rules by which those in charge show others what's expected of them, the ways they most effectively contribute to the overall mission. In business this includes a job description and some sort of protocol that sets standards for acceptable performance--office rules, by-laws, contractual obligations, and the like.

Here's the point. Because every healthy family is a serious service enterprise, it displays all three elements outlined here: mission, leadership, and performance standards.

On the other hand, since the consumerist family is going nowhere--has no real directed mission--then the parents are weak leaders (lead where?) and the family's rules, if any, act only as *ad hoc* bandages to keep hassles and damage to a minimum.

Obviously a father and mother take on a serious mission in family life. Since they assume this huge responsibility, Dad and Mom have the right and duty to lead. All children need leadership, and if both parents do not lead them to do right, then someone else may lead them to do wrong.

In my many conversations with great parents and their children, I used to probe from time to time to learn what rules each healthy family lived by.

Here is what I noticed....

- All the rules, directly or implicitly, began with the word "We...," not "You..."

For instance, the rule for chores was not "*You kids* must clean your room," but rather "*We* all pitch in to keep this house in decent shape." Not "*You* must call if you're late," but instead "*We* call if we're going to be late." It wasn't "*You* have to put toys away," but "*We* all return things where they belong."

In other words, *the parents lived by the rules themselves, the same ones they imposed on their children*. The parents lived at home like responsible, considerate adults, and they insisted their kids do the same. Like any other real leaders, Dad and Mom demanded as much of themselves as of their children. They practiced what they preached and led the way by their personal example. Consequently, every day, their children witnessed the parents' convictions alive in ongoing action. (And so, later as teenagers, they could never justly accuse their parents of hypocrisy.)

- Abiding by these rules led the children--or forced them--to practice each of the virtues. Repeatedly, every day, Dad and Mom encouraged their children to live rightly: to take responsibility, manage their own affairs, work conscientiously, discern right from wrong, respect their parents' authority, and consider the needs and rights of others. Right living permeated the whole spirit of the family--and seeped its way inside the kids little by little, day by day. An old maxim says, "As the day goes, so goes one's life." Whatever the children practice every day--for good or for ill--will be the way they live later.

- In a sense, the dynamic by which children learned the virtues through these rules seemed to follow the wise adage: What children *hear*, they mostly forget. What they *see*, they mostly remember. What they *do*, they understand and internalize.

- All the rules seemed to fall into five distinct but interconnected categories:
 - We respect the rights and sensibilities of others.
 - We all contribute to making our home a clean, orderly, civilized place to live.
 - We give people information they need to carry out their responsibilities.
 - We use electronic media only to promote family welfare, never to work against it.
 - We love and honor our Creator above all things; we thank Him for His blessings and ask His help for our needs and those of others.

For whatever use they may be to you, I list these rules for you here. Once again let me stress, what I lay out below is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. That is, I am describing what I've seen work in one great family after another. I do not presume to dogmatize about details here, or insist that every family should adopt these standards wholesale. I couldn't rightly do that even if I wanted to.

Let me stress, too, that practically no family lives by each and every one of these rules. I have simply listed all of them here for your thoughtful judgment.

It's up to you to weigh each one and judge what's best for you and your children. It's your family, and therefore your call.

Here they are....

1.) We respect the rights and sensibilities of others.

- We say to everyone, when appropriate: *please, thank you, excuse me, I'm sorry, I give my word of honor.*
- We do not insult people with words or affront them with rudeness.

- We do not tattletale or gossip about people or otherwise negatively criticize people behind their backs. (Though if someone we know is getting involved with drugs, then for their sake we report it to whoever can help them in time.)
- We keep our family's affairs within the family. No "airing dirty laundry in public."
- We make no disparaging remarks of a racist, sexist, ethnic, or religious nature, not even as a joke. We have no place in our home for humor that hurts.
- We do not use profanity or vulgar language.
- We never ridicule or belittle anyone who tries.
- We do not interrupt; we wait our turn to speak. We do not distract people when they're speaking with someone, either in person or on the phone. If there's an urgent situation and we must interrupt, then we first say, "Excuse me, please...."
- We respect people's right to presumption of innocence. Before forming a negative judgment, we listen first to their side of things.
- We never lie to each other. Unless we have rock-solid evidence to the contrary, we presume other family members tell the truth.
- We do not argue back when we are corrected.
- We do not make promises unless we commit ourselves to carry them out. If we can't keep a promise for reasons beyond our control, then we make a sincere apology.
- We respect each other's property and right to privacy. We knock before entering a closed room; we ask permission before borrowing something.
- We do not bicker or quarrel during meals.
- If we must get up from the table at meals, we first say, "Excuse me, please...."
- We greet adult friends of our family with good manners, a warm greeting, a friendly handshake and look in the eye. We give our guests the best of what we have. (But children do not talk with adult strangers without parents' OK.)
- We show special respect to older people. We offer to give them a seat, hold doors for them, let them go first in line.
- We celebrate each other's accomplishments. But win or lose, we appreciate each other's earnest best efforts.
- We practice good telephone manners and thus bring honor to our family. We keep use of the telephone under reasonable control:
 - No calls during dinner or homework or after 10:00 p.m.
 - No outgoing calls after 9:30 p.m. (except for emergencies)
 - Calls generally limited to 15 minutes.

2.) We all contribute to making our home a clean, orderly, civilized place to live.

- We do not enter the house with wet or muddy footwear; if we track in a mess, we clean it up right away.
- We do not bring "outdoor" activities indoors: no ball-playing, running and chasing, missile throwing, rough wrestling, or excessive shouting. Males in the family wear no hats or caps indoors.
- We open and close doors quietly; if we accidentally slam a door, we say, "Excuse me, please...."
- We do not shout messages to people in other rooms. We walk to wherever someone is and then deliver the message in a normal voice.
- We do not consume food outside of designated eating areas: kitchen, dining room, play or t.v. room.
- We do not overindulge in food or drink. No unauthorized snacks between meals, especially right before meals.
- We try to eat all the food set before us.
- We put clothes where they belong when not in use: clean clothes in closet or drawers, dirty clothes in laundry.
- When we're finished with them, we put toys, sports gear, and tools back where they belong.
- If we've used a plate or drinking glass, we rinse or wash it and put it where it belongs.
- If we've borrowed something, we return it. If we've lost a borrowed item, we apologize and try our best to either replace it or pay for it.
- We do our house chores promptly and to the best of our ability; we start our homework at a set time and stick with it until it's done right.
- We do not return a car home with less than a quarter-tank of gas.
- We can all make suggestions about many affairs in family life, but parents make decisions in serious matters. And they decide what's serious.
- We do not aim for "results" as such, but rather for *personal best effort*.

3.) We give people information they need to carry out their responsibilities.

- When we're going out, we always inform: where we are going, with whom, and when we plan to return.
- We get prior permission, with at least one day's notice, for important and potentially disruptive activities: sleepovers, camping trips, long distance trips, and the like.
- We come straight home from school, work, social events--except with prior consultation.

- We return from social events at a reasonable hour, one previously agreed upon.
- If we're going to be late, we call.
- We take phone messages intelligently: caller's name and phone number, summary of message (if any), time and date of call, name or initials of person who took the call.
- In general, we work to avoid unpleasant surprises and unnecessary worry in the family. (We have enough as it is.)

4.) *We use electronic media and games only to promote family welfare, never to work against it.*

- We have one television in the house, so as to monitor it and keep it from fragmenting the family.
- We use t.v. and video-gadgets sparingly and discerningly. Most of our recreation will be non-electronic: reading, games, hobbies, sports, or conversation.
- We permit nothing in our home that offends our moral principles and treats other human beings as things: no pornography (treating women as objects), no racist or sexist or ethnic disparagement, no gratuitous violence, no coarse language, no glamorous depictions of disrespect and rudeness.
- We will usually--not always, but much of the time--watch t.v. and movies together: sports, high quality shows and films, news and documentaries. That's it.
- We do not watch t.v. on school nights, unless we watch together or with prior consultation, as noted above.
- If we bicker over t.v. or games, we get one warning to stop; if quarreling persists, the activity is terminated.
- We keep noise level within reason so as not to distract or bother others.

5.) *We love and honor our Creator above all things; we thank Him for His blessings and ask His help for our needs and those of others.*

- We thank the Lord by worshipping Him together as a family.
- We strive to live by His commandments of right and wrong.
- We respect the conscience and rights of others who worship Him differently.
- We pray before meals and bedtime. We pray for the needs of our family and country and those of anyone suffering in sorrow. We serve the Lord by serving others.
- We live in the confidence that God watches over us with His loving fatherly protection. Parents treat their children the way God treats all of us--with affectionate and protective love, attention to needs, clear standards of right and wrong, compassionate understanding, and a ready willingness to forgive.
- We know that God commands all of us to honor father and mother. The finest way we do this is to adopt our parents' values, live by them all our lives, and pass them on to our own children whole and intact.

There you have them, the rules most commonly found in great families.

To live by them perfectly every day is, of course, an impossible ideal. For both parents and children, some backsliding and flawed performance is absolutely normal. All the same, these rules are fixed in place as what we try to live by, a "resting place" for our conscience--like the keys on a piano or computer keyboard to which our fingers always return. The people in a great family never attain perfection, but they never stop trying. To keep trying, no matter what, is the essence of greatness.

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