

My Family Culture



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“One Improved Unit” is an original column appearing sporadically on Monday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OIU-only RSS feed available [here](#).

I read recently that, “If you change the culture, you change the people.” At first that seemed backwards. Don’t we need to change the people, before their culture is changed? But after more thought, I think that if we put the focus on the second word, *you*, then the rest follows. The only way that you can change a culture is by first changing yourself. Want to get rid of a culture of rudeness to strangers? Start being kind to strangers. Then you can start advocating that others do likewise. What about a culture of punishing children for undesirable behavior? Stop punishing your own children for undesirable behavior, and then advocate that others do likewise. What I would like to share with you is where my family culture is two years after we decided to make some major changes in how my wife and I are raising our children.

Punishments and Discipline

After reading Alfie Kohn’s *Unconditional Parenting*, I realized that my actions and behavior toward my children were inconsistent with my philosophical views about authority and violence. I would spank my son if he wet himself or otherwise merited a spanking. I would put him in time-out, or throw away his toys, or scream in his face, again, if I felt it was merited. I believed I was doing the proper thing. I always felt horrible about my actions, but I justified them as necessary for his development.

But I was wrong. After doing a bit more study, looking for peaceful “solutions” to his behavior, I realized that treating the outward symptoms was major folly. What I needed to do was figure out *why* my son was doing whatever it was he was doing that I considered “bad behavior.” I learned two things: 1) that most of his behavior wasn’t “bad,” but perfectly reasonable in light of his age, maturity, and the circumstances, and 2) that building a foundation of love, trust, respect, and connection preemptively served to prevent some of the undesirable behavior while at the same time teaching me to approach him impersonally and patiently, in order to better assess the cause of either his behavior or state of heightened emotions.

My son is now almost eight, and my daughter four. When either do something undesirable, so long as everyone is safe, I'll wait until I can find a moment to connect with them, and then figure out, usually Socratically, why he or she did what they did. If I think they need my counsel, I will ask them if I can offer it, and then do so. Since I've waited for a moment when we can connect, they've always accepted my counsel, and then my playful teasing and hugging to conclude things. My wife is learning to do likewise. It turns out that approaching our children this way has strengthened the mutual-love, -trust, and -respect that we share with our children. Our family relationships are stronger and more connected than ever.

This doesn't mean that our children don't sometimes get angry with each other, nor does it mean that Mom and Dad don't either, or towards one, the other, or both of our children. We are all human beings, after all, and we all have our list of peeves and panels of buttons that can be pushed to make negative emotions. It happens all the time, but it also happens that after the requisite cool down period, we come together to make things right.

Media, Food, and Sleep

We also decided two years ago to embrace the educational philosophy known as unschooling. I was far more excited for this than my wife was, but she has come along and is slowly learning to embrace it. Unschooling has caused us to rethink a number of things, like the use of media, eating, and sleeping arrangements.

Over the last two years, my children have had the green light to use as much media as they'd like. We don't set time limits on the computer, television (Netflix), or video games (because of their value as learning tools). They each enjoy their fair share, as do Mom and Dad. We've all learned the value of taking turns, and because Mom and Dad are sharing their devices with the kids, the kids are learning to share their devices with each other. Because the children know that they aren't limited in their use of media, and that Mom and Dad aren't going to arbitrarily take it away, they've felt assured leaving it when circumstances call for leaving the house. Of course, mobile devices are easily brought and played in the car. It turns out that they get a healthy dose of both inside media and outside play.

Our food and eating is likewise unlimited. Like Mom and Dad, our children are free to eat whatever is available in the house, and to eat as much or as little of it as they please. We don't make them finish their plates or eat when Mom and Dad are eating. We invite them, and are often graced with their presence. When they have food leftover on their plates, we either throw it away or eat it ourselves. Meal times have become very peaceful in our home.

This brings us to sleep. About six months ago we decided to make a family bed. Prior to

this, our children's bedtime routine was breaking down and getting them to sleep in their shared bedroom was becoming more difficult. One or the other wanted to sleep in our bed, and neither wanted to stay alone in their bedroom. This is all perfectly reasonable behavior when one considers our evolution as a species. Peter Gray, an evolutionary psychologist, has explained why co-sleeping is instinctual and natural. Considering also that co-sleeping is a part of many an unschooling household, we decided to expand our bed and allow our children in full time. Though they are not required to, they choose to go to bed when Mom and Dad go to bed. We expect as they get older, they won't be so nervous to stay upstairs alone at night, doing whatever it is they want to do, choosing for themselves when to go to bed.

Favors, Chores, and Interpersonal Relationships

My wife and I have decided that because it's our house, it's our responsibility. Since we no longer believe in coercing or manipulating our children, we don't require that they do any chores. Instead, when they make a mess, we offer to help them clean it up. Though Mom and Dad may do most of the work, our children do what they can. We try not to approach cleaning up as "a chore" to be lamented. It's still too early to tell, but they have become very good at cleaning up their own small messes and asking someone to help them clean up large ones. Mom and Dad also many times offer to help them with their messes. Likewise, we offer to help them to get something or take them somewhere, or whatever other favor we can do. In turn, they accept our request for a favor from them. We try not to make requests beyond their abilities, however.

If our kids demand something from us, as our smallest one is wont to do, we simply give her a puzzled look and say, "Excuse me? Do you expect me to help you if you don't ask me nicely?" She'll then ask nicely, with a playfully high-pitched voice, and we'll playfully respond. Her demanding is becoming less and less, and asking, more and more. There's no rudeness, just an understanding that she's yet to master the art of flattery and favor-asking, and the only way to learn is through kindness and playfulness. All of our other interpersonal relations are handled this way. We expect respect and give respect.

One more note, my wife and I do not consider ourselves to be our children's "boss." For that, we don't demand things from them, things like manners or apologies. We do our best to be polite, saying "please" and "thank you," and our children have learned to say these things for themselves. And on apologies, if they hurt us, we show them our pain, or if they hurt another, we explain to them why. They've learned to say "sorry" only when they've actually felt sorrow for their actions. I wouldn't want them to lie about how they feel, hence we won't demand that they apologize for anything they don't want to apologize for. Again, it turns out that they've learned to recognize when they've wronged somebody and desire, on their own accord, to make amends.

Final Thoughts

It's been quite an evolution from where we were to where we are. There's no more parental yelling, disrespect, or violence in our house. Our children get along beautifully, for the most part, with each other and with Mom and Dad. Our home is mostly peaceful. There are times when someone, young or old, makes a mistake and emotions can flare, but because we've built a strong foundation in love, trust, and respect, it's not too long before everyone is reconnected and happy. That foundation has served us well, and we believe will continue to serve us well as our children get older, and their problems more complicated. In my humble opinion, relationships built on love, trust, and respect, instead of violence, fear, and resentment, are much better equipped to deal with the adversities and challenges of life. Further, by changing ourselves, my wife and I have changed our family culture, thereby teaching our children the values of peaceful interaction and nonviolence toward others. As more and more families do likewise, the world is sure to become a more peaceful and prosperous place.