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ARTICLE MEETINGS

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by Bruce Feiler

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At a moment when many families around the world are confined to home, climbing the walls, and are searching desperately for fresh techniques for managing their household chaos, one proven solution that my family, along with many others, uses comes from an unlikely source: agile development.

It's no secret that working parents face enormous pressures. Ellen Galinsky, of the Families and Work Institute, asked a thousand children, "If you were granted one wish about your parents, what would it be?" When she asked parents to predict what their children would say, the parents said: "Spending more time with us." They were wrong. The kids' number 1 wish: that their parents were less tired and less stressed.

So how can we reduce that stress and help families to become happier?

I spent the last 15 years trying to answer that question, meeting families, scholars, and experts ranging from a founder of the Harvard Negotiation Project to online game designers to Warren Buffett's bankers. I published my finding in the bestselling book *The Secrets of Happy Families* and have found myself doubling down on many of those ideas in this time of flux of stress. The single best solution I found may be the simplest of all: hold regular family meetings to discuss how you're managing your family.

Meet the First Agile Family

A few years ago, my research brought me to the Starr family home in Hidden Springs, Idaho. The Starrs are an ordinary American family with their share of ordinary American family issues. David is a software developer; Eleanor is a stay-at-home mom. At the time, their four children ranged in age from 10 to 15.

Like many parents, the Starrs were trapped in that endless tension between the sunny, smooth-running household they aspired to be living in and the exhausting, ear-splitting one they were actually living in. "I tried the whole 'love them and everything will work out' philosophy," Eleanor said. "but it wasn't working. 'For the love God,' I said, 'I can't take this anymore.'"

What the Starrs did next, though, was surprising. Instead of turning to their parents, their peers, or even a professional, they looked to David's workplace. Specifically, to a philosophy of business problem solving that David had studied and taught: agile development. The techniques worked so well for their family that David wrote a white paper about it, and the idea spread from there.

When my wife, Linda, and I adopted this blueprint into our home, weekly family meetings quickly became the single most impactful idea we introduced into our lives since the birth of our children.

The Three Questions

The idea of agile was invented in the 1980s in large measure through the leadership of Jeff Sutherland. A former fighter pilot in Vietnam, Sutherland was chief technologist at a financial firm in New England when he began noticing how dysfunctional software development was. Companies followed the "waterfall model," in which executives issued ambitious orders from above that then flowed down to harried programmers below. "Eighty-three percent of projects came in late, over budget, or failed entirely," Sutherland told me.

Sutherland designed a new system, in which ideas flowed not just down from the top but up from the bottom and groups were designed to react to changes in real time. The centerpiece is the weekly meeting that's built around shared decision making, open communication, and constant adaptability.

Such meetings are easy to replicate in families. In my home, we started when our twin daughters were five and chose Sunday afternoons. Everyone gathers around the breakfast table; we open with a short, ritualistic drum tapping on the table; then, following the agile model, we ask three questions.

1. What worked well in our family this week?
2. What didn't work well in our family this week?
3. What will we agree to work on this week?

From the very beginning, the most amazing things started coming out of our daughters' mouths. What worked well in our family this week? "Getting over our fears of riding a bike," "We've been doing much better making our beds." What went wrong? "Doing our math sheets," "Greeting visitors at the door."

Like most parents, we found our children to be something of a Bermuda Triangle: words and thoughts would go in, but few ever came out. Their emotional lives were invisible to us. The family meeting provided that rare window into their innermost thoughts.

The most satisfying moments came when we turned to the topic of what we would work on during the coming week. The girls loved this part of the process, particularly selecting their own rewards and punishments. Say hello to five people this week, get an extra 10 minutes of reading before bed. Kick someone, lose dessert for a month. Turns out they were little Stalins.

Naturally, there was a gap between the girls' off-the-charts maturity during these 20-minute sessions and their behavior the rest of the week, but that didn't seem to matter. It felt to us as if we were laying massive underground cables that wouldn't fully light up their world for many years to come. Ten years later, we still holding these family meetings every Sunday. Linda counts them as among her most-treasured moments as a mom.

So what did we learn?

1. Empower the children. Our instinct as parents is to issue orders to our children. We think we know best; it's easier; who has time to argue? And besides, we're usually right! There's a reason few systems have been more "waterfall" than the family. But as all parents quickly discover, telling your kids the same thing over and over is not necessarily the best tactic. The single biggest lesson we learned from our experience with agile practices is to reverse the waterfall as often as possible. Enlist the children whenever possible in their own upbringing.

Brain research backs up this conclusion. Scientists at the University of California and elsewhere found kids who plan their own time, set weekly goals, and evaluate their own work build up their prefrontal cortex and other parts of the brain that help them exert greater cognitive control over their lives. These so-called "executive skills" aid children with self-discipline, avoiding distraction, and weighing the pros and cons of their choices. By participating in their own rewards and punishment, children become more intrinsically motivated.

2. Parents aren't infallible. Another instinct we have as parents is to build ourselves up, to be Mr. or Ms. Fix-it. But abundant evidence suggests type of leadership is no longer the best model.

Researchers have found that the most effective business teams are not dominated by a charismatic leader. Rather, members of particularly effective teams spend as much time talking to one another as to the leader, meet face to face regularly, and everyone speaks in equal measure.

Sound familiar? “One thing that works in family meetings,” David Starr told me, “is the kids are allowed to say whatever they want, even about the grownups. If I’ve come back from a trip and am having trouble reentering the routine, or if mom hasn’t been nice that week, this is a safe venue to express their frustration.”

3. Build in flexibility. Another assumption parents often make is that we have to create a few overarching rules and stick to them indefinitely. This philosophy presumes we can anticipate every problem that will arise over many years. We can’t. A central tenet of the tech sector is if you’re doing the same thing today you were doing six months ago, you’re doing something wrong. Parents can learn a lot from that idea.

The agile family philosophy accepts and embraces the ever-changing nature of family life. It’s certainly not lax; think of all the public accountability. And it’s not anything goes. But it anticipates that even the best designed system will need to be re-engineered midstream.

As I was leaving the Starrs’ home, I asked Eleanor what’s the most important lesson I should learn from the first agile family.

“In the media, families just *are*,” she said. “But that’s misleading. You have your job; you work on that. You have your garden, your hobbies, you work on those. Your family requires just as much work. The most important thing agile taught me is that you have to make a commitment to always keep working to improve your family.”

What’s the secret to a happy family, in whatever situation you find yourself and whatever kind of stress you face?

Try.

Bruce Feiler is the author of six consecutive New York Times bestsellers, including *Council of Dads*, which inspired the NBC television series, and *The Secrets of Happy Families*. His latest book is *Life Is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age*.
