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From lying to fighting or forgetting to clean up, families tackle change

By [Lois M. Collins](#), Deseret News **National Edition**

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Truitt and Daniel Huntley of Fredericksburg, Va., with their son Jasper, 4. They're diligent about teaching him not to lie and not allowing him to get mouthy two issues families frequently try to change.

Family photo

Changing something about family action and interaction can be simple — but it's usually not. The habits we've nurtured and the grudges we've harbored are among the issues that block effective change.

This story is part of the [Deseret News National Edition](#), which focuses on the issues that resonate with American families.

FREDERICKSBURG, Va. — Jasper Huntley at age 4 is delightful, full of curiosity and laughter and can-do eagerness. Not long ago, though, Truin and Daniel Huntley had to tackle his burgeoning tendency to talk back. They'd just gotten a handle on that when they realized that he, like all children, was learning to lie. That required correction, too.

Art Markman's recent parenting challenge was his teenager's tendency to take his frustration out on family when his school workload got too big.

From sibling rivalry to doing chores, breaking curfew to parental bickering, family life is complicated. It can include battles of will, too little time and too much stress. Most families have things they'd like to change. Often, it's not a simple process. The habits we've nurtured and grudges we've harbored are among the issues that block effective change.

"It's normal for people to struggle with change, so the idea of change of any kind is hard for a family system to initiate and maintain," said Carl Grody of Grody Family Counseling in Worthington, Ohio. "However, the hardest change for families to embrace is that they're actually doing a lot of things well. Because of the problem in the family system, they don't notice those things."

Change often involves breaking habits or making new ones, said Markman, a professor at the University of Texas Austin. How parents "parent" is a combination of how their own parents ran things and how they reacted to it, said Markman, a cognitive scientist and author of "[Smart Change](#)."

"A massive number of habits are involved in these kinds of family dynamics," he said. "The thing about habits is we're blissfully unaware of where they come from. We associate the environment with the behavior so we can perform it quickly without thinking about it — not why it happens, what triggers it. That is the fundamental problem with changing behavior."

The principles of changing behavior are basically the same, whether it's not eating that extra ice cream to exercising or getting along better with your little sister, experts said.

Cooling off

Parents bring "anything and everything that brings some level of pain and discord" to love and relationship coach Kailen Rosenberg, author of "[Real Love Right Now](#)." She tackles change by helping individuals see what's causing problems "not from a place of judgment, but more from curiosity and compassion." That approach leads to understanding and empathy, the Minneapolis woman said. When a problem is not personalized, it's easier to see the origin and how to change it.

"It gets people unstuck," she said, adding people want change within families because they love their son, their spouse, their home and want happiness and prosperity. "That's a fabulous place to start: non-threatening."

Family members must buy into change, too, said Markman. The conversations that make it happen occur in calm moments. "Most people want to live a life in which interactions with others are pleasant. ... Families are fascinating, the people we would do literally anything for without keeping score. We do amazing things for kids without

sending a bill. But we would also say anything to our family because we know it is safe to do that. Kids and parents both say things they would never say to everyone else."

Using cooler moments, you can talk about whether you need outside help or how you can work together to make changes the family desires.

Ken Lindner, who wrote "[Your Killer Emotions](#)," said that it is necessary to pause if emotions are running high — especially toxic emotions like fear, anger, rage, hopelessness or despair. Acting on them offers a quick fix, not a solution. It's important to know what kind of results you want. If you always fight with your mom at family gatherings, keep reminding yourself that you're not going to do it. "Whatever might happen, know how you are going to respond."

That approach has benefitted smokers, dieters and others. Ahead of time, they tell themselves, " 'I am not going to smoke (or overeat or [whatever] ...) no matter what happens,' " he said.

He also suggests being motivated by the negative consequences if you don't get it right.

No brakes

With teens, you can add hormones to the volatile mix, and tension builds quickly, Markman said. People have a "stop" system and a "go" system, but teen brakes are defective. "Although a teenager at a certain age will realize he's probably not supposed to yell right now, he probably doesn't have the resources not to do that."

Parents need to keep track of what happens in interactions gone awry, but step away. "Spend two weeks at least paying attention to what is the behavior that needs to be changed," Markman said. Once you recognize the patterns, you can develop a plan for handling it, instead of reacting instantly.

He did that with his son, a diligent student who takes things out on his family when his schoolwork gets overwhelming. The great student disappears and frustration grows and overflows. He snaps at people and they snap back.

During a calm moment, father and son devised a plan. "When you are at the point you get frustrated and will snap at us every time we talk, walk downstairs and tell me." Sure enough, the teen stormed down and barked, "Now." The rest of the family backed off, he learned it was safe to say he was going to be a jerk and much of the turmoil dissipated.

Quiet moments can create change magic. The same is true for quiet places. "When you're in an intense situation, it's a bad time to work on relationships," Markman said. It's important to "give people permission to find a spot to cool off or do calming activities."

Getting help

Markman also recommends finding good advisers. "We live in a society that prizes individual achievement and we like to believe we're self-sufficient and can solve our own problems." But it can be hard to diagnose the source of a difficult dynamic. Getting help from someone who may notice patterns you're missing can help. "If you have a friend

who can do that, wonderful. It is not admitting defeat to go to clergy or a therapist and talk about it," he said.

Change was forced on Dennis Poncher. Right after his wife died, his teenage daughter said she was pregnant. Then his son was arrested for drugs. His family needed change, but he hit a wall. Family members criticized him for poor parenting skills and his friends couldn't relate because they believed their own kids were perfect.

Eventually, he founded **Because I Love You (BILY)**, a parent peer-mentoring group now in 11 states and Canada. Based in Los Angeles, it helps parents acquire and share parenting skills through a peer mentoring network. The children that bring parents in range from birth to 58, he said. There's no time when you stop being a parent or quit needing to make changes for the sake of family. The most popular age for seeking help, though, is when kids are teens. "We deal with almost everything, from kids who won't make a bed to a kid who robbed a bank."

Being kind to yourself

Research shows it's important to be kind to yourself when inevitable setbacks occur as you try to change behavior. People who react to failure with self-compassion are the ones with the best chance of changing their behavior, he said. Failure can be a learning experience or you can let it defeat efforts.

Huntley directs First Things First of Greater Richmond, Va. She said people need to be someone special and to belong. "If you have a mom who lives only for her children, when they leave, she becomes a fallen person. She needs to develop her own identity and then work to belong with others. People need room to be close and room to be apart."

Everyone must be able to speak. "Coach people to say what they need but not with emotion. ... Speak clearly." Listen carefully, then reflect back what was said. Acknowledge feelings.

Being a compassionate listener inevitably leads to change. "It can melt a frozen heart," said Lindner.

Finding time

Huntley commutes three hours a day, working in Richmond and living in Fredericksburg. She and Daniel use part of that commute to plan and discuss issues by phone. Friday night belongs to Jasper. They order pizza and talk about the week — what he did well and what could go better. They watch a movie or read a Bible story. "That's when my son gets our undivided attention and is not competing with anything. Some issues must be addressed as they come up, but it's nice to know Friday's coming," said Huntley.

Time together is ideal for helping kids figure out how they're special. Affirming them can lead to positive change, she said.

One crucial thing is making sure the "order in the family is correct, that parents are in charge and kids aren't running them," she said. "Spouses should set rules together and broken rules need realistic consequences. "You can't say, 'if you don't go potty, I am

never reading you a bedtime story again.’ You can say, ‘if you don’t go potty, you have to go to bed 10 minutes earlier.’ ”

Poncher's BILY requires parents to post rules. Hotels have them and houses should too, he said. “No smoking, loud music, whatever. The rules are for the way you want your house run, the way you want everybody in the house to be,” he said. Consequences for broken rules must be clear.

Rules might include a curfew, going to school each day and maintaining grades. It means doing homework daily and completing chores, as well as being respectful. “It’s going back to basics,” said Poncher.

Markman created a Smart Change [journal](#) that’s rooted in the science of behavior to help people make changes. It can be downloaded at smarthinkingbook.com.