



# THREE SECRETS TO A Happier Family

EVERYBODY HATES CHANGE. While change is inevitable, no one likes it. We would much rather not change or have someone else change – such as our spouses, kids, or bosses. It is only when we see the benefit to change that we are motivated to do so.

**Secret No. 1: Realizing that change is a process.** Believe it or not, people change the same way -- at least that is what research has found -- and the Transtheoretical Model of Change actually describes it. The first stage of change – Precontemplation -- is thinking that we don't need to change. When we recognize that we might have a problem, but we're not quite ready to do anything, that's Contemplation. Then we plan to make the change. Think about if you have ever decided to lose weight. We prepare: We get rid of junk food, get new work out clothes, buy a Fitbit, etc. That is the Preparation stage. Finally, when we are ready, we take Action.

The Stages of Change make intuitive sense, but how they can be most helpful is when we are trying to help people change. Change often goes awry is when we try to get people to do something when they are not

ready. You will know that someone is not in the Action stage when you say, "You could do X," and the person responds by saying, "Yeah I could do X, but I (insert all the reasons the person is not ready here.)"

**Secret No. 2: Reality - expectations = happiness.** Tim Urban, on his "WaitbutWhy.com" web site, has used simple math to explain happiness. His contention is that Happiness is equal to Reality minus Expectations.

Basically, when reality is better than we expect we are happy and when reality is worse than we expect we are unhappy. So both our thoughts (expectations) and what we experience (reality) influence how we feel about our lives. For a long time I've wanted a book called, "Striving for Mediocrity: Secrets to a Happier Life." It would include chapters on Mediocre Parenting, Mediocre Housekeeping, even, Mediocre Sex.

Hear me out: I understand that we live in a culture in which we want to be the best, and that wanting to simply be "good enough" clashes with that. But being good enough is sufficient most of the time! For example, I had almost no knowledge of soccer, but I knew enough to coach my



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8-year-old son's team. I had fun hanging out with my son, and he and his friends had a blast playing blob-soccer – they all just ran after the ball!

We often put pressure on ourselves, our kids, and our partners to be the best, when sometimes all that is necessary is being mediocre. When get more than that, it's wonderful, and even more special because it's unexpected. Now that's happiness!

**Secret No. 3: Kids need a boss.** Most of my clinical work is with families who are struggling after a divorce or separation. Generally there is a significant amount of disagreement and conflict. Often, one parent suggests that the children should live with them because that's they are the parent the child prefers to live with. "Shouldn't we respect the wishes of the child?" the parent asks. My response is an emphatic and categorical "NO!"

There is a reason we don't let people under the age of 18 make decisions for themselves: They are not very good at it. I ask the parents, had they stayed together, whether they would let their 11-year-old daughter live with her best friend's family simply because she wanted to. The answer would always be "No," so why would we allow her to make that decision just because her parents decided they couldn't make it work and will be living separately?

Children need guidance — and sometimes they need more than that. I believe as parents it is our responsibility to provide the direction and do the best we can to not let children make huge mistakes that have long-term consequences. This is not to say we shouldn't give children opportunities to make choices and live with the consequences. We should. That is how they

learn to handle more serious situations in the future. As children, however, they need a boss. ■

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