

WHAT A PEACEFUL FAMILY LOOKS LIKE

Hint: Not an Instagram photo, because real peace, like life, is messy.

by KATE ROPE

IN THE EARLY-MORNING HOURS LAST OCTOBER, ANITA Bullock-Morley was driving back from barre class when her view was obstructed by a hill and overgrown bushes. She did not see a woman crossing the street until it was too late, and she hit the pedestrian. Thankfully, the woman had only minor injuries, but the experience was traumatic for Bullock-Morley. Arriving home a few hours later, the Atlanta mom of two let all of her emotions out and sobbed with her husband and kids.

Then something amazing happened. Her 6-year-old daughter, Adele, began singing a song Bullock-Morley had taught her: “I take a deep breath. I tell myself it’s all right. I am peace.”

In the chaos and fear of that morning, a family song brought a sense of calm and a way forward. And it gives us a glimpse into what a peaceful family can look like. It is not one in which there is no

noise or big feelings or conflict or even scary moments. “A peaceful family is one that loves each other and listens to each other and can work through hard things together,” says Katie Hurley, a psychotherapist and the author of *The Happy Kid Handbook*.

So how do you get there? Chances are, you’re already on the path, but see if the following tenets are part of your family DNA.

● **PEACEFUL FAMILIES MAKE ROOM FOR ALL EMOTIONS.**

Human beings are evolutionarily programmed to have strong emotions like fear and anger, says Carla Naumburg, Ph.D., a parenting coach and the author of *How to Stop Losing Your Sh*t With Your Kids*. Being afraid prepared our ancestors to fight. These so-called difficult emotions still play a role in our well-being today (you feel tense before



a presentation, get an adrenaline surge, and nail it). “If we don’t find a way to actively acknowledge and feel them,” says Dr. Naumburg, “they will find their way out in less helpful ways, like snapping at each other.”

Studies show that children who learn to express difficult emotions develop emotional intelligence. Research by John Gottman, Ph.D., professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Washington, revealed that children of parents who “emotion coach”—by valuing negative emotions and not getting impatient when kids express them—are healthier, get along better with peers, and do better in school than kids who have parents who dismiss or quash negative emotions.

The problem is that many of us are uncomfortable with big emotions, says Hurley. “It’s important for kids to learn how to name emotions and understand they are just something that happens, and we can work through them.”

Tantrums can be teaching moments. They are often so embarrassing or overwhelming for us, so our instinct is to shut them down, says Hurley. “But that makes kids feel more out of control and they internalize the idea that having strong emotions is a terrible thing.”

And if you try to distract a child with a screen, she loses out on the opportunity to experience and recover from her strong emotions.

“The single best thing that you can do when your child is having a tantrum is to take a deep breath, stay calm, and empathize with them using phrases like ‘You feel sad right now. You wanted that ice-cream cone, and I said no,’” says Hurley. That’s how kids learn to make sense of what their emotions are and how to move through them. That same approach can be applied using more sophisticated language as kids grow.

Of course, tantrums are not the sole province of the very young. “As adults, we get mad at any number of things—traffic, a prescription not being ready on time—and we yell,” says Hurley. And then we are role-modeling that reaction for our kids.

So another step in creating a harmonious home is “taking responsibility of our own emotions so that we are not taking them out on other people,” says Laura Markham, Ph.D., a parenting coach and the author of *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids*.

Dr. Markham uses a technique called “stop, drop, and breathe”: Stop what you’re doing, drop your agenda, take a deep breath. “This simple process sends your neurology a message that it’s not an emergency, we can handle this,” she explains.

Bullock-Morley and her family of four have a ritual they call “three things.” When one of them is scared or stressed, they practice looking for three things they can touch, three things they can see, and three things they can hear to bring them back into the present moment.

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● **THEY DISAGREE (RESPECTFULLY).**

We all have disagreements, and learning to work through them is an essential life skill. When Dr. Naumburg runs into a family that insists that they never argue, she has *So Many Questions*. “It makes me wonder: Are you guys expressing yourselves? Are you encouraging everyone in your family to stand up for themselves and what they need?” Conflict will happen. The peace comes from

how you handle it.

One idea: “Create a safe space to discuss and resolve conflict,” recommends Bruce Feiler, the author of *The Secrets of Happy Families*. “It could be a weekly family meeting, a car ride, a walk.” Having an established time and place to work through conflict takes the pressure off intense moments when emotions are already running high.

● **THEY EMBRACE ROUTINES (BUT AREN’T RIGID).**

It’s hard for anyone to regulate her emotions when she’s tired, hungry, or overwhelmed. So one of the easiest ways to introduce some calm is to make sure everyone (yes, even you, parents!) is getting the nutrition and sleep they need to function properly. “So many kids are sleep-deprived,” says Hurley. “Preschoolers need 12 to 14 hours a night, and elemen-



tary kids need 10 to 12.” As for parents? Most experts recommend 7 to 8 hours nightly.

With that kind of routine will come a level of predictability that keeps kids (and you) grounded when the schedule inevitably is thrown out of whack. “When kids know what their day is going to look like and what the routine will be, it reduces stress and anxiety,” says Hurley. This is especially true for young kids—and the reason that pre-K and kindergarten teachers post the schedule at the front of the classroom.

● **THEY RESPECT THEIR DIFFERENCES.**

In the happiest families, kids are encouraged to be who they are. Hurley often sees families who run into trouble when every kid is expected to play the same sport or musical instrument. Yes, it may be convenient, but when kids don’t get to explore who they really are, they aren’t able to thrive, says Hurley.

This not only lets kids flourish in their own unique way but also helps them grow up with a stronger self-identity, adds Hurley: “Part of being a peaceful person in general is knowing who you are—your individual strengths and your own limits.”

It’s key for parents to listen to what their kids are truly interested in and help them pursue it. This also means letting your child quit an activity he really hates. “All kids will follow their own path eventually,” says Hurley, but if you help them do it at a younger age, you will cut a lot of conflict off at the pass.

● **THEY AREN’T AFRAID TO GET SILLY.**

“Playfulness and laughter are some of the easiest, most powerful paths to connection,” says Dr. Markham. Laughter releases the bonding hormone oxytocin, lowers levels of stress hormones like cortisol, and increases the levels of feel-good neurochemicals like serotonin. “That’s why playing together is one of the fastest ways to heal minor relationship stress, help people drop grudges, and bring your family into sync,” says Dr. Markham.

Some families have inside jokes or nicknames that help them feel bonded. Maybe you give your car a goofy name or you crank up music and dance around the living room. Whatever your preferred play mode, you’re showing your kids a way to relax, have fun, and let off some steam. ✨