

Transcript of Interview

MARTIN: Managing the chaos of family life is just one of the topics that author Bruce Feiler tackles in his new book. It's called "The Secrets of Happy Families." Feiler himself is the father of twins, and when he went looking for parenting guidance, he says there weren't a lot of options.

BRUCE FEILER: Parents are in this straitjacket almost that the only ideas we can implement in our homes have to come from what I call from the family improvement industry - right - shrinks and self-help gurus and family experts. And to be honest, I found their ideas stale. Like, I kept hearing the same things over and over again.

MARTIN: So, to get some new ideas, Feiler looked in some unexpected places.

FEILER: I was having dinner. It was New Year's Eve, and I was with a group of friends. And I was sitting next to an executive at Silicon Valley. And I said tell me what's going on in your world that might be able to help my family. And she told me about this program that she was running at her company. And that program is called Agile. And it's an idea that things should not become top-down. They should be done in small groups and you should get constant feedback and change all the time and adapt. You know, our instinct as parents is to boss our kids around because it's easier and because we're usually right. But as any parent knows, if you tell the same kid to do the same thing over and over again, it doesn't work. And what, you know, what this system does is build in change, so you can react to what's going on in real time.

MARTIN: So, the cornerstone of this idea, this idea of agile family movement - and there is such a thing now - the cornerstone is this idea of the family meeting. How did this go down when you told your family that you were going to start having these?

FEILER: My wife was skeptical at first. But she also, as she says, was so desperate for ideas, she was willing to try. And then what happened was our girls - we started when they are five - they're almost eight now, so we had been doing for three years weekly - they really embraced it. And what was interesting about it was, first of all, the most amazing things started coming out of their mouths, right. So, what worked well this week? Getting over our fears of riding a bike or making our beds. What didn't go well? You know, our math sheets or greeting visitors at the door. You know, like a lot of parents, Rachel, we thought our children were like Bermuda triangles. You know, like ideas would go in but they would never come out. This meeting gave us kind of access to their innermost thoughts. You know, think about it, Rachel. We have our jobs. We work on those. We have our hobbies. We work on those. We have our bodies. We work on those. The family is so central to our lives. And the truth is very few of us actually work on that.

MARTIN: Another idea that you gleaned from someone who works in corporate America is the idea of drafting a family mission statement, which is really interesting. You would think, you know, that feels kind of corporate. How does this work for a family?

FEILER: I would say this is one of the top two or three things that I most enjoyed and that our family most benefited from. And it comes out of, again, of a core problem. Every parent I know struggles with this idea of how do I teach my kids values, right? How do I say even in the 24/7 world some things are timeless? And then I realized, you know, have I really told my children? I mean, I could sit down and ask my kids, you know, what's really important to your parents? But have I really made the trouble to tell them? So, we did the family equivalent of a corporate retreat; we had a pajama party, and we had this chart and we had this conversation, like, what's really important to us? What sayings that mom and dad use all the time do you most remember? And what is it that we most want to stand for? And it can't be what you want to stand for; it has to be actually, you know, honesty. Yeah, I get honesty is important but, come on, is that really a core value for us? You know, you can't just wag your finger. And we ended up with this list. And, you know, there's a lot of research that shows that if you identify what is your best possible self, you know, if you identify what it is that you aspire to,

you're going to do a better job of trying to achieve that. So, our family mission statement is may our first word be adventure and our last word love.

MARTIN: There are lots of provocative ideas in the book, one that many listeners out there may find liberating. You say rethink the family dinner and maybe give it up entirely. How come?

FEILER: I-yi-yi-yi-yi. It is like the big bogeyman in families today. Like, everybody has heard that family dinner is great for kids. But unfortunately it doesn't work in many of our lives. Well, guess what? Dig deeper into the research and it's very interesting. It turns out there's only 10 minutes of productive conversation in any family dinner - 10 minutes. The rest is taken up with: take your elbows off the table and pass the ketchup. I mean, maybe my favorite idea in the whole book came out of this process of looking into family dinner. Researchers at Emory gave children a do you know test. Do you know where your grandparents were born? Do you know where your parents went to high school? Do you know any member of your family who had an illness or something terrible that happened to them that they overcame? Children who scored highest on the do you know test had higher self-esteem and a greater sense of control over their lives. If you tell your own story to your children - that includes your positive moments and the negative moments and how you overcame them - you give your children the skill and the confidence they need to feel like they can overcome some hardship that they face.

MARTIN: And it's OK to have those conversations, perhaps, in 10-minute increments - at night, in the morning or whenever you can sneak them in?

FEILER: You could do it in the morning. You could do it at carpool. You can do it snuggling in bed at night. You don't need a grand plan. You need to take small steps. You need to accumulate small wins. In the end, to me, this is the greatest lesson of all.

MARTIN: Bruce Feiler. His new book is called "The Secrets of Happy Families." He talked to us from our New York bureau. Bruce, thanks so much.

FEILER: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

MARTIN: So, what are your tips for a happy family? What have you tried that worked or didn't work? Let us know on our Facebook page, NPR Weekend. Or you can tweet me: @RachelNPR.

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