

**Institute for Family Studies**  
**Charlottesville, VA**  
**“Creating a Healthy Family Infrastructure”**  
**Richard and Linda Eyre**  
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<https://ifstudies.org/blog/creating-a-healthy-family-infrastructure>

**Editor’s note:** *We gave [Richard and Linda Eyre](#) a tough assignment—to summarize in 1200 words what they have learned about the challenges that parents are facing today and the best practices they have found for meeting them. For decades, the Eyres have advocated family priorities and life balance as guests on virtually all national TV talk shows and via their speaking in more than 50 countries throughout the world. They are the authors of a dozen prominent parenting books, including the New York Times#1 bestseller, [Teaching Your Children Values](#).*

In the following essay, we have attempted to summarize and simplify what we have learned over decades of observing, writing about, and speaking to families throughout the developed world.

Statistically, families appear to be in trouble with declining marriage and birth rates. Yet paradoxically, we feel that the best and most equal marriages in history and the most conscientious parenting are happening right now. Generally, the upward trends in the *quality* of marriages and parenting are taking place among highly-educated and middle-to-upper income demographic segments. But it should trouble us that the downward trends in the *quantity* of marriages, births, and intact families are taking place among the less educated, working-class segments. Even so, every family, regardless of income, education, or social class faces certain challenges that we have attempted to summarize here.

In our experience, the biggest challenges of most parents center around four issues: a lack of work-family balance, children’s screen time, kids’ entitlement attitudes (particularly for educated, upper-class parents), and kids’ behavioral issues.

- **Work-Family Balance:** When asked, most people say family is their top priority and that marriage and children (if they have them) are what matters most or, if they don’t have them yet, are what they want most. Yet their allocation of time and mental energy generally does not match with these stated priorities.
- **Screen Time and Social Media Use:** Virtually all parents in developed countries express concern about the effect of technology access on their children and are looking for ways to govern it and get it right.
- **Kids’ Entitlement Attitudes and Lack of Responsibility and Work Ethic:** Helicopter parents and snowplow parents who are trying to give their kids everything (except anything that is too hard) are producing children who think they deserve everything, without any waiting or any working.
- **Kids’ Behavioral Issues:** Many parents are concerned about their children acting out, often stemming from depression, anxiety and a lack of resilience, security, and identity. So many parents feel emotionally disconnected from their children, and at a loss for how to communicate with them—and how to give them the kind of emotional security that gets them through tough times.

### **A Four-Part Family Infrastructure**

We find that the most effective parental approach to these four challenges is not to react to them or to try to find specific solutions for each individual problem. Rather, it is most helpful to take a wider view and attempt to set up a home or family “infrastructure” that creates an atmosphere and a culture in which these issues cannot thrive.

Our children, and indeed ourselves, are sucked in by the many powerful cultures that pull us in all directions—the peer culture, the internet culture, the celebrity culture, the consumer culture—and our job as parents is to create a *family culture* that supersedes all

of these other cultures, and that influences our children more than any of the others or than all of them combined. Essentially, we want to create family cultures that *last*, so that our marriages and families will be resilient enough to endure the pressures of the outside world, and so that our children will be held by the gravity and security of our family institution. To that end, there are four things that have to be in place and intact for any institution to last and endure: 1) a set of governing laws or rules—some kind of a legal system; 2) a responsibility-sharing economy, or financial system; 3) rituals and traditions that bind and hold people together—a bonding system; and 4) reliable communication and supervision—a management system.

### **1. A Family Legal System**

Families that create a small number of very simple and clearly understood “family laws” or “family rules” (and who get children involved in the creation of those laws and in the agreement of what the consequence will be for breaking each of the laws) find that they have far less need for ad hoc discipline and punishment and that they eliminate many of the power struggles that otherwise happen with strong-willed kids.

So how do you set up such a system? Start with a discussion of why laws or rules are necessary (how they can make our home happier) and, through a series of family conferences, decide together on a small number of rules and consequences. As an example, we often suggest five one-word laws: Peace, Respect, Order, Asking, and Obedience, each with a well-defined consequence. And, again in discussion with the children, establish written and agreed-on rules and guidelines for screen time and smartphones.

### **2. A Family Economy**

Entitlement attitudes are partially caused by no-responsibility “allowances.” Families do better when kids have certain household tasks or “chores” and keep track of them with a big chart or pegboard, and when Saturday, instead of “allowance” day, becomes

“payday,” where kids get paid in direct proportion to the household responsibilities they fulfilled. To make the shift, get a big chest with a lock and dub it “the family bank” out of which kids are paid on payday, and in which they can leave part of their money to grow with interest.

### **3. Family Traditions and Rituals**

Traditions are the glue that holds families together. Have holiday traditions, birthday traditions, Sunday traditions, and back-to-school traditions. Kids draw security and identity from regular rituals. Create a tradition calendar or book that shows upcoming traditions that children can anticipate. Parents can try to honor old traditions from their own families and can create new ones that teach and embrace the values they want to teach to their children.

### **4. Family Communication Patterns**

Something as simple as a weekly family meeting can help with scheduling and logistics, as well as provide a regular time and place to continue to develop and work on the family legal system, family economy, and family traditions. Sunday often works best for the meeting in most families since it is the beginning of the week. Keep the meetings brief and have refreshments! Have an agenda and let children conduct the meeting to give them a sense of involvement.

For parents who wish to forge strong and happy families in today’s world, these four approaches can create an infrastructure and an atmosphere that overcomes and supersedes most of the common challenges parents face with their children—resulting in a strong family culture in which the various threats to families (listed earlier) cannot thrive. Each of these four approaches takes work and time and concentration. Each one is hard to establish and to maintain. But like the infrastructure of a city, once they are built and operating on a regular basis, they allow everything else to run more effectively and efficiently.