

Happiness: A Family Trust

When I think about responsibilities within the household, I immediately think of chores. Who is in charge of emptying the trash this week? Who is in charge of doing lunch dishes or cleaning the downstairs bathroom?

Many of those responsibilities depend on the age of the child. Some chores can easily be done by a preschooler; others require the skills of a high school student.

But there is one area of the household that Charlotte Mason said every member should be in charge of:

“Let the young people feel that the happiness of home is a trust which every member of it has in charge” (Vol. 5, p. 206).

Did you notice that word she used, trust? That word is taking on new significance for me this fall. We are walking through the process of setting up a special-needs trust for our youngest daughter, who has autism and developmental delays. We will contribute funds into the trust with an eye toward providing an atmosphere in which she can continue to grow, even when we’re not around.

Part of that process is appointing someone to be in charge of the trust. The person who oversees the trust will need to pay close attention to our daughter’s well being. He will need to be observant and aware of changes in her environment and comfort level and to proactively come up with ways to meet her changing needs.

That’s how Charlotte wanted each family member to view the happiness of the home: as a trust.

It’s easy to sit back and think only of yourself—What would make me happy in this situation?—and pour time and energy into your personal happiness fund. But a trust requires focusing on others, not yourself. The happiness of the home is a trust that all should contribute toward and all should be in charge of.

So what does that look like? Charlotte gave three very practical places to start—suggestions that will help you both contribute to the happiness trust fund of your home and encourage your children to be in charge of it along with you.

1. Use a friendly look and a friendly tone of voice.

Smile at your children more. Be aware of your voice; try to modulate it to the volume and tone that you use with your friends. I’m not saying to become a grinning fool; I’m saying do your best to be pleasant as much as possible. You can be kind yet firm when necessary. Set the example and look for every opportunity for your children to practice a friendly look and a friendly tone with each other.

2. Offer interest and help in others' pursuits.

It's important to foster an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual support, especially within a family. Encourage each person to look around for opportunities to be helpful. You may need to assign tasks in order to get this habit started: "Suzy, you and Tom may help me carry in the grocery bags. Joey, you open the door for us and make sure the dog doesn't get out, please. Lizzie, you carefully unload the bags and set the items on the counter; that will be a big help!" Soon you will be able to gather them around and let them brainstorm their own tasks: "Take a careful look around this room, everyone. What can you each do to help clean it up?"

3. Give service and pity in difficulty and trouble.

Another way to add to the happiness of your family is to sympathize and help each other through difficult times. This attitude can be modeled and encouraged in lots of ways. Institute a rule that no one is allowed to ridicule another's troubles. When you notice that one child is having a rough day, gather the others together to come up with ways you and they might encourage him. Pray for each other by name, setting the example of rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep.

Your family trust of happiness doesn't require huge annual deposits. The small, everyday contributions are what add up to a happy home.

"What is it that makes the happiness of every day—great treats, great successes, great delights? No, but constant friendly looks and tones in those about us, their interest and help in our pursuits, their service and pity when we are in difficulty and trouble. No home can be happy if a single member of it allow himself in ugly tempers and bad behaviour. By degrees, great sensitiveness to the moral atmosphere of the home will be acquired; the happiness of a single day will come to be regarded as a costly vase which any clumsy touch may overthrow. Now, the attention is taken off self and its claims, and fixed upon brother and sister, father and mother, servants and neighbours; so slight a thing as a friendly look can add to the happiness of every one of these" (Vol. 5, pp. 206, 207).

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