

## Improving Family Relationships

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

In my work with couples and families, I often see situations where people have been "beating their heads against the wall." This is because we all develop patterns of thought and behavior that cause us to repeat ourselves, despite the realization that it is getting us nowhere. Couples nag and criticize each other about the same old issues. Parents repeat themselves with their children, hoping maybe one day their children WILL finally put away their toys or do their homework or clean up their rooms. Teens often just turn off to their parents rather than participating in arguments that never get resolved.

Sometimes there are deep-seated issues than can only be addressed with ongoing therapy, but often it is possible to handle these impasses within the family. When you are locked into these sorts of battles, it's time to step back and work on forming an agreement. It's a problem-solving approach that involves compromise, but in a way where no one has to lose.

To take a common example, Denise and Scott are highly frustrated with their son, Chris, age 12. Chris has begun to neglect his homework, his room, and his younger brothers. Instead, he spends most of his time in his room either listening to music or on the computer. Both parents have tried asking, encouraging, complaining, and finally ordering Chris to comply with their requests. Nothing seems to make a difference. Chris becomes increasingly defiant and resentful.

Denise and Scott decide to re-group and try a different strategy, a more solution-based approach. They ask Chris when would be a good time

for them to talk with him. When they meet, both parents talk to Chris about what they appreciate about him and what they miss in their relationship with him. They ask Chris to tell them what he thinks they could do or say differently, promising no recriminations. They don't repeat their complaints. The objective is to promote understanding and good will, not to continue criticizing.

Depending on the level of distrust and resentment a child has developed, this process may need to be repeated several times before he is ready to cooperate. Then it is time to hammer out some agreements. When there is a "buy-in," there can be more progress. And when the agreement hits an inevitable snag, all parties can meet again to determine how they can get back on track. Working together toward an agreement can help diffuse emotionally-charged situations and promote closer relationships.



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist with offices in Orinda and Walnut Creek.



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