

Sorting out, strengthening the family ties that bind

A Chicago writer's book gives tips on fostering functional and satisfying family relationships

BEAVERTON — Susan Kuczmarski took three years to write a book that she expects some parents will spend only a minute and a half reading each day.

"It was written for the busy parent," Kuczmarski said about "The Family Bond: Inspiring Tips for Creating a Closer Family."

The book's short chapters, rarely more than a page and a half, describe practices and perspectives that have strengthened Kuczmarski's family through the years.

Kuczmarski, her husband and three sons live in Chicago, where she is executive vice president of Kuczmarski & Associates. She and her husband co-founded the consulting firm, which specializes in long-term planning and innovation. She has a doctorate and two master's degrees in education from Columbia University.

Kuczmarski will be at the Barnes & Noble at 18300 N.W. Evergreen Parkway in Beaverton at noon Sunday. For information, call 503-645-1678.

In her book, Kuczmarski, 49, compares the family to a quilt and a vegetable garden. She encourages "deep listening," "deep talking" and "spiritual hugs" and offers some specific ideas for strengthening the family bond.

Q: You talk about turning off the computer and the TV and doing nothing. Did that take some getting used to for your kids?

A: We found they really like it when the computer and TV are not around. If you're on vacation, it's very interesting: You engage in more reading and talking. It's a lot more bonding. This book is really not about parenting. It's about family-making.

Q: But that's when you're on vacation. Can you keep up the bonding when you get home?

A: In a sense, you're sort of searching for bond time. If you're cooking meals, for example, cook them together. If you're watching TV, during commercials talk about some issue that was raised in the show. If you're stuck in traffic going to the soccer game, don't stress out; sing your family's favorite song. If you're in the bathroom in the morning, share the bathroom. It can be an adventure, but there's a little bonding going on.

Q: If you could assign readers a few practices to keep their families strong, what would they be?

A: Play differently. Parents usually play by going to the health club, going to the golf course. With kids, the play gets

boxed and canned, and you're off to the soccer game and absorbed in that.

We need to get lost in our play. In the book, I use the example of mooing at cows. Get caught in your child's thoughts.

I'm a believer in taking a short amount of time each day, say 15 minutes, with each child and doing whatever they want to do. My 16-year-old will take that time and show me something on the computer. My 14-year-old loves to teach me how to dance the swing. With my 10-year-old, I would join him on the floor, and if he is building something with Legos, I would watch and do whatever he wants to.

Q: What's another concrete practice parents can take from this book?

A: Something that's sort of easy to do is use descriptive praise instead of what I call global praise. Global praise is "You did a great job on your assignment." Descriptive praise is "I know you read a very long time. It was difficult material. You had to answer some really hard questions. You really understand the material now."

Q: Which of the suggestions in your book do you think would be the most difficult for the average parent?

A: Viewing each member of the family as an equal because most parents probably weren't brought up that way. The traditional way is very different, very authoritarian.

Let's take the example of household chores. We had each person pick two chores they didn't mind doing. My 16-year-old picks doing the dishes every night and taking out the garbage. We worked this out as a group. In an authoritarian family, the parent would say, "John, you'll be doing the dinner dishes, and you'll be taking out the garbage."

There's a greater likelihood he'll be doing these on his own if he has helped work them out.

Another example is curfews. That's a real problem in families, having the teen be home at the agreed-upon time. If you get the teen involved in the process, there's a greater likelihood (he will comply) than if the authoritarian parent says "You have to be home at 11." We tried that.

Q: You tried the authoritarian way, and it didn't work?

A: The teens, especially, don't like the authoritarian way. There's a greater chance for rebellion.

— Jill Smith



KUCZMARSKI

Book for busy parents