

The State of Your Family

“To put the world right in order, we must first put the nation in order. To put the nation in order, we must first put the family in order. To put the family in order, we must first cultivate our personal life; we must first set our hearts right.”—Confucius, Chinese philosopher

At the beginning of each year, the president of the United States gives a State of the Union address to Congress, outlining his hopes and plans for the year. Take some time to sit down and discuss the “state of your family” and see what hopes and dreams everyone has.

Try it...

For all parents

- Make this a democratic process and give everyone in the family a say. If your family isn't used to this, you might be surprised at what your kids have to say. Listen to them.
- Take stock of where your family is and where you'd like it to be. Encourage family members to be open and honest about what they see as your family's strengths and weaknesses.
- Think about two or three things you enjoy about your family and be ready to name them. As a parent, you may need to model this at first (if your kids aren't used to it). For tips on effective family meetings, visit [The Family Education Center](#).
- If discussions become difficult, make sure you keep them away from mealtimes. Stress can kill people's appetites, and stressful meals usually drive people away from wanting to eat together. Keep mealtimes calm and fun. Deal with the hard stuff at other times.
- Sometimes kids say their family is boring and doesn't do anything. If any of your kids have “big dreams” that cost “big bucks” (such as wanting your family to go on an overseas vacation), be honest about your family budget. Look at ways to save and creative ways to respond. For example, maybe you can't afford to fly to China, but your family could attend the Chinese New Year celebration in your city. Expanding your family's experience of other cultures is always a good activity to elevate the state of your family.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Create regular family times to play and be together. When you're together, ask your child: “What would make family time more fun?” Keep questions short and easy to answer.
- If you have a parenting partner, talk about the current state of your family and what your hopes and needs are. Parenting young children can be intense and time-consuming, so be clear about your needs. If you're a single parent, see if you can

team up with another single parent to form a mutual support system for each other.

- Focus more on the state of your family rather than the state of your home. With young children in the house, it's often difficult to maintain a well kept up home. Occasionally let the dishes sit in the sink to get down on the floor to play with your child.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Since children think concretely, you can make the "state of your family" day the same day as the "state of the union" address. Decorate your table with red, white, and blue ribbons. Talk about who the president is. Ask your kids: If you could be president of our family, what would you want to do?
- Your family will run much smoother if everyone pitches in with chores. Set aside time for clean-up where everyone picks up their things and puts them away. You also can have a family chore time once a week where family members work together to complete chores.
- Make time for family fun. With our busy lifestyles, it's easy for everyone to be going in different directions and for life to get overly scheduled. Inflate a balloon and see how many times family members can bat it without the balloon falling to the ground.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Set up a time for a family meeting and talk about what kids hope for in the year to come. Most kids tend to think only of vacations, but encourage them to think broader, such as: Are there any recreational activities you'd like to try? Is there a restaurant that you've heard of that's good?
- Encourage kids to invite a friend for family activities. They're more likely to participate if they have a friend with them.
- Together learn more about the State of the Union and its purpose by reading about it on [Wikipedia](#).
- Try to talk to your kids about the state of your family when they're in a good mood. If kids are feeling down or having a bad day, you'll only get negative feedback.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Make your home inviting to older teenagers. Keep snacks and beverages on hand that they enjoy. Say hello to your teen's friends when they come through the door. Even though you may not see your teenager a whole lot, they're more likely to bring their friends home with them if they view your house as a good place to be.
- Create enjoyable family time when you're more apt to all be together, such as during the holidays, visiting colleges, and so on.
- Talk about the state of your family when you're all together. Sometimes it's tempting to do this without your older teenagers because they often are busy and not home much. So be spontaneous and call the family together to talk when they are home.
- Consider watching the State of the Union with your older teenager. Ask what she thinks is impressive, impossible, or interesting. Ask your teenager what she would say about the state of your family for the coming year.