

Families That Thrive

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

A Climate of Hospitality

“What does it take for a family to thrive? Is there one thing you’ve learned that stands out above all others?”

I was recently asked this question in a seminar. My first reaction was to point to the climate in our home. Nancy and I have been married for 32 years. We have two grown children—Jaime and David. We’ve had our fair share of successes and struggles. We have actively sought to grow as a family. We’ve tried to learn how to have solid, healthy relationships. The four of us are committed to a family that doesn’t merely survive, but thrives.

We’re all in agreement on one thing: We do our best together when the climate in our home is warm and sunny. This means that we each take responsibility for the atmosphere in our home. As much as possible, we want our home to be a place where people can feel welcome, relaxed, and comfortable with each other.

Fortunately, we’ve made a few simple discoveries, which any family can apply. We’ve discovered that tone of voice is important. We try to use tones of voice that are friendly, upbeat, supportive, and kind. A friendly tone of voice can quickly establish an atmosphere in which helpful communication can unfold. We try to use tones of voice that affirm each other. We aim for a respectful tone of voice that says, “You are a wonderful, dignified person.

The Blackwells have also learned that when our tones of voice are harsh or accusatory, everything breaks down. We feel hurt, and we immediately become alienated from each other. This is especially true for sarcasm. We try to avoid this at all costs. It’s interesting that the word sarcasm comes from the Greek word for flesh. Sarcasm consists of words that are designed to cut into someone else’s flesh. Sarcasm almost always hurts someone. We use it to cut another person down! We’ve learned the hard way that sarcasm doesn’t work for us. It sends us into a climate of hostility.

Instead of hostility, we want a climate of hospitality. We want a climate that is so friendly that every member of the family feels completely welcome and totally at home with each other.

We’ve also discovered that each of us is responsible for our own moods. If I’m in a bad mood, I try not to hold another member of our family responsible. We try to work through our own moods. We also work at letting others know when we’re in a bad mood and that we’re trying to work out of it.

There is no substitute for a sunny climate. We fully recognize that a warm, friendly climate isn’t everything. There are many more things that lead us to thrive in our

relationships. On the other hand, a warm, hospitable climate is a great beginning. We have found it essential!

Try this: Gather your family and ask, "What's the climate in our family like? What kind of climate do we need to thrive together? What would it take for us to get there?" I hope this helps!