



5 Family Lessons from the TV Show *THIS IS US*

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THE TV SHOW *THIS IS US* IS VERY popular right now, mostly because it resonates with people. We can all relate to this show in some way. We can use the Pearson family's triumphs and mistakes, and subsequent growth, as a guide to improve our own family relationships.

Here are 5 take-aways from **THIS IS US:**

1 A sense of belonging. Right from the start, siblings Kevin, Kate, and Randall are known as The Big Three—complete with their own ritual. They know their place in the family and are taught from childhood that family comes first. Kevin and Randall have their differences growing up—one is a jock, the other a bookworm—but the two remain close throughout their lives because their father constantly reinforces that family is an unbreakable bond. In other words, you may not always like your family, but...they're family and you love them.

2 Respect. The Pearson family demonstrates that it's okay to have conflict, but they learn to deal with it respectfully. Randall struggles with anxiety, Kate has weight issues, and Kevin has a substance abuse problem. The family realizes they cannot control each other, but they

do learn to support each other. For example when Kevin supports Kate in dealing with her weight by going to a weight-loss camp, she is finally able to take that risk. They want the best for each other, and they find ways to bring out the best in each other. When Kate encourages Kevin to trust his instincts and quit The Manny, he is finally able to move on, and his career blossoms.

3 Communication. Despite living miles apart, the family keeps in close

touch through frequent phone calls and visits. In addition, the Pearsons learn to express painful emotions. When Kevin goes to rehab, he finally voices his feeling of being left out. His family is able to listen and come together to support him.

5 Openness to change and growth. Life constantly changes, and the Pearsons learn to adapt to this change. When Toby has his bachelor

party, brothers Kevin and Randall accept Toby into the fold though they really have nothing in common except a love of Kate. When Randall fosters Deja, the Pearsons welcome her as well. In addition, each member



of the family is a distinct individual, and this individuality is encouraged. Kevin is an actor, and Kate works as a waitress or in retail, while Randall is a businessman. Very different lives, but each is accepted.

4 Dependability. Regardless of the current state of their relationship, the Pearsons can count on each other during rough times. Even when times are hard, such as the period after the fire, they make an effort to spend time together. Randall admits he had no interest

The Pearson family is not perfect, but they are an excellent example of how a family can grow and evolve in a healthy way. ■

Lisa Hopkins, N.C.C., L.C.P.C., C.A.D.C., P.C.G.C., enjoys working with individuals and families, and she is an avid fan of This Is Us.

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Q&A

Q How much screen-time should I allow for my child?

A Children are exposed to digital media from an early age. That can have both positive and negative effects on healthy development. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the following:

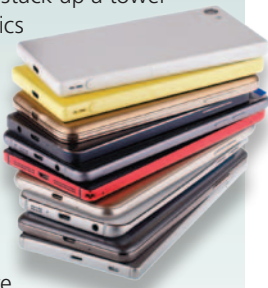
- **under 18 months** — avoid screen-based media except video chatting
- **18–24 months** — parents should choose high-quality programming and watch with their children
- **2–5 years old** — limit screen time to one hour per day of high-quality programming
- **6 & up** — establish consistent limits on the time spent using media, and the types of media

I would recommend focusing on not just screen-time limits but content and the context in which kids are using it. Setting up mealtime and bedtime tech-free rules helps to limit problems related to family bonding and sleep quality. Ask your whole family to participate in a phone-stack game to start this habit in a fun way: stack up a tower of electronics

on a side table, and those who reach for it first, do the dishes!

Don't let excessive electronics use displace free play time, physical activity and face-to-face social interaction. Ongoing discussion of online safety is also a must. ■

Anna Makender, M.D., is a board-certified psychiatrist.



The Power of Family Time

OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS, I have counseled thousands of kids and parents, and I have two kids of my own. I have seen close families and families that were falling apart. While my family has had its ups and downs, I am so thankful I can tell you that we were able to stay really close when my boys were at home and have remained a close family to this day.

While there are several factors that have influenced that, there is one that I believe occupies the top ranked spot. In fact, second place isn't even close.

The number one factor? A regular family time.

The word "regular" is important. It means that you do it in a scheduled, not haphazard, way. You prioritize it. This sends an unmistakable message to your

kids that your family (which includes them) is important and you are going to invest in it (and them).

There are two components of a good family time. They can take place in any order, but they should both be there. The *first* is a fun activity. That can include anything from having some ice cream together to playing a game or cards or even a fun outing (e.g., putt-putt golf). The goal is simply to have a fun time together as a family. This builds family cohesion, positive family memories, and sibling relationships. If you are thinking that your kids get along so poorly that they would sabotage a fun activity, then keep it short and manageable and focus on the second component below.

The *second* component is meaningful discussion. In one

of our very first family times, our meaningful discussion was simply making a list together of topics that we all wanted to talk about in future family times. Topics can include being respectful, solving problems, how to talk to each other, listening, sharing, Bible devotions (age appropriate), being flexible, how to make good choices, peer pressure, and the list goes on. There are many books on family times that you can read, with fun activities and object lessons. My book, *8 Simple Tools for Raising Great Kids* has lots of material that would be perfect for family times, and *Keep the Siblings/Lose the Rivalry* includes 15 family-time discussion guides in the appendix.

If you want a close family, having a regular family time will get you started in the right direction. ■

Todd Cartmell, Psy.D. is a child psychologist and author of *8 Simple Tools for Raising Great Kids*.

Building a Healthy Stepfamily

OUR CULTURE HAS CHANGED. We have gone from a time when most families consist of parents and their biological children to a nation where over fifty percent of families have been split by divorce. These new families are constituted in many ways. There are families with one parent and their children, and remarried couples with each partner's biological children. In many instances, single parents are living with a partner to whom they are not married. The US Bureau of Census reports that 1300 new stepfamilies are created in the US every day.

These new families are formed with little guidance on how to create a healthy stepfamily relationship. There has begun to emerge, however, a body of knowledge regarding what works to create a healthy stepfamily.

A few tips:

1) Expect merging families to take time; it can take 2-5 years

for all to get comfortable. Introduce children to new partners slowly, and have realistic expectations regarding their feelings about the new family.

2) Increase individual time between children and their biological parents. It is tempting to plan a lot of joint family time, which can be destined to fail, if children are feeling abandoned by their biological parent and do not initially want extra stepfamily time.

3) The biological parent of each child/children needs to take the lead in disciplining their children; the couple can develop the rules together behind the scenes.

4) Stepparents need to take a "monitoring" role, aiming to become friends over time with their stepchildren, rather than taking a more hierarchical parental role. Questions like "How was the soccer game?" instead of mandates like "Do

your homework" will result in better outcomes. This is especially important with older stepchildren. The younger the children when blended, the more parental the stepparent role can be.

5) While parents are often extremely excited to have found a new partner, children may intensely grieve the loss of the biological family unit. Though they may continue to see and interact with both parents, it certainly will not feel the same. Understanding and accepting the children's negative feelings is crucial.

Ultimately, building a healthy stepfamily can be rewarding if expectations are realistic. Though it may take time and effort, the outcome is certainly worth the time and energy invested. ■

Sharon Beck, D.N.P., P.M.H.N.P.-B.C., L.C.S.W., is a nurse practitioner and therapist who sees both adults and adolescents for medications.