

Getting it Right: Five ways Bruce Feiler taught me how to be a better parent



Bruce Feiler at our interview at RootsTech 2016. He talked a whole bunch about the secret to happy families.

What is the [secret to happy families](#)? I interviewed [New York Times bestseller Bruce Feiler](#) and [his research](#) turned on some great light bulbs about parenting. It's a surprisingly simple answer: stories.

There are many days of my life where I don't feel like I know what I'm doing and I'm kind of waiting for someone to show up and clean up the messes I've made – literally and figuratively. Case in point: my refrigerator – can someone show up and clean that thing out? But, I digress. So while most days I feel like my life is organized chaos- parenting six kids, working from home, and volunteering on church and school committees – I sometimes get a small [tender mercy](#), a

clue that I might be getting one or two things right. One of these tender mercies hit about two years ago when I sat at the media dinner for [RootsTech](#) 2015. It was my first time attending the media night for the huge family history conference in Salt Lake City. The event is sponsored by [FamilySearch](#), the family history arm of the [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints](#).



Bruce Feiler,
Bestselling
New York
Times author

One of the classic and wonderful parts of the night focused on the importance of storytelling, backed up with data...this spoke to the journalist in me always loving stories yet seeking proof. Shipley Munson, the marketing guy for [FamilySearch](#) told us about a study (click [here](#) to read more about the study) done in the 1990s by a university researcher and then revisited in 2012 by Bruce Feiler about happiness and stability in children.

I want to break down what I learned that day and the next year when Feiler came to RootsTech and got to talk with him about the concept of family stories and happy kids. I had the great joy of interviewing him one-on-one about the “secret sauce” that holds families together. (Click [here](#) to read about that full interview.)

Five key secrets to happy families:

1. Family stories = happy, confident kids.



Rachel Trotter's 6 children

Feiler said children are happy, self-confident, and well-adjusted when they know where they came from, when they know their family stories. At that moment my veracious note taking at the dinner came to a halting stop. *WHAT? I DO THIS! WE DO THIS.* My husband and I love nothing more than sitting around the dinner table, on a road trip or during family time and talking about our family stories. *WHAT?* I got something right? Are my kids actually well-adjusted? I leaned back in my chair and started counting up moments when people say to me, "Wow you have great kids. What do you do?" I usually just smile and nod and say, "Well they are good kids in spite of me and their dad." Which is mostly true, maybe 90 percent. But that other 10 percent – it's the stories – the family stories. They know that their Grandpa Trotter stole the JB's Big Boy from the Provo JB's to impress a girl. They know that their Grandma and

Grandpa Jackson worked in a casino in Lake Tahoe and that's how they met. Grandma Jackson has told them all about it when she teaches them to play 21 at the age of 5...it's a great counting game, right? They know that Great Grandma and Grandpa Furniss were madly in love and the whole family wants to pattern our marriages after them.



2. Tell stories about the hard stuff

The really hard stuff. For many of us, when our kids are down in the dumps, we might have a tendency to focus only on the positive but Feiler suggested we be real with our kids. When our kids face challenges we should share the hard times our family members have endured and how they came out on top. Or maybe they didn't come out on top. Maybe they are still floundering. Both endings help our children to see the results of bad choices or just bad stuff happening to good people and how they got through it. Feiler called this an "oscillating narrative," and it's actually the most helpful kind of family storyline to foster resilience in children.

My husband is really good at telling all the stories. Our courtship was bumpy in some points, and our kids know it. They know the story where I didn't know if I would be marrying their dad because I wanted religion in my life and I wasn't sure if he did. I decided to turn it over to God and I was able to have both – the love of my life, and the love of my spiritual life – the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's a hard story with a good ending. My kids know all about that.

My fourth child loves World War II – he has a passion for learning about it. It seemed like a natural fit for him to really know his Great Grandpa Trotter, and even though he died

before he was even born, he knows the hard story of his World War II experience in as much detail as we know. Great Grandpa Trotter was a paratrooper in World War II and that he hid in a foxhole for weeks at a time. They know of the struggles he had because of it and they also know he overcame them and was one of the best people their dad and I ever knew. We loved him so much.


3. Find your family's secret sauce and use it.



What is the “crazy secret sauce?” TALKING! Put your phone down and talk. Some days when I am really tired and need to zone out I am TERRIBLE at this. Feiler told me he felt I had the secret sauce, but to use it a whole lot more. He suggested I be deliberate in my conversations about my ancestors. He told me to take my kids to family cemeteries and

talk about those family members. Check. We do that on Memorial Day every year. This past year I did it with a lot more purpose. I felt a large measure of emotion when I told my kids about my own Great Grandma Kap and her trip to America and then to Utah, her love story with my Great Grandpa and her feisty personality. That payoff came to me just a few days ago when my 5-year-old commented about her when we drove by the cemetery while running errands. “Remember when we went there and you told us about that old grandma of yours? I really liked that,” she said in her cutest 5-year-old voice.

4. Tell your beliefs through stories.

This makes so much sense. [We remember things so much better through a story](#)  and most of our deeply-seeded beliefs come from our life experiences, or stories. On a recent Sunday I was fixing my girls' hair for church. The morning was crazy, we were running late and I was frazzled. I decided to tell a story, a story I have told my older children countless times, but have failed to tell my little girls. It was a story of when a school bus dropped me off at the wrong stop when I was in kindergarten. My family had just moved and I was in unfamiliar surroundings. They were captivated by my scary tale. I told them as I started walking I got more and more frightened. "What do you think I did as I walked?" I asked them. Without hesitation they both exclaimed at once, "You prayed." Why yes, yes, I did. And you see what I did? I taught them something I believe in with such power, with one, simple story. It also distracted them long enough to finish their hair.

5. Don't just talk to your kids, talk to your parents and grandparents.

If you yourself don't know the cool stories, and if your parents and grandparents are still alive, *ask them!* Don't wait another day. Ask them, record it, write it down, and then turn around and tell your kids all about it. Or better yet, let your kids do the asking. One day I was talking with my kids about my dad. We were talking about how my dad is left-handed. My son then launched into this story about how my dad was a whiz on the baseball diamond because he used both arms

to bat and to pitch. How did he know this? He asked my dad what sports he played. Sounds like I should be giving my kids a little more credit, right? Letting them ask the questions yields great results.



I bet if you really think about it, you are doing a lot of these things as a parent and if you're not, they are easy to implement into life and the results are truly life-changing.

If you find Bruce Feiler's message inspiring, [get his book on Amazon \(click here\)](#). He is a New York Times bestseller for a reason! This article focuses on one of the key findings, but his engaging book contains the best research of our time about happy families and more than 200 ideas. It is must-reading for families making their way in modern times. [The Secrets of Happy Families: Improve Your Mornings, Tell Your Family History, Fight Smarter, Go Out and Play, and Much More](#)

In closing I'd also like to specifically challenge you to be intentional about hearing your family stories. An interview is a great place to start. If you record their voice and their stories, I promise you will always be glad you did. Not sure where to begin? [Get our free and super easy interviewing tutorial here](#). The most powerful way you can strengthen your family, might be one of the simplest.

<http://evalogue.life/mini-course/>

Hey y'all, get Bruce Feiler's books here!



Rachel J. Trotter is a writer at Evalogue.Life, where we tell personal and family stories that inspire, and help you tell yours. She has worked as a writer since her college days over 20 years ago. She loves telling people's stories. She lives in Ogden, Utah and is busy raising six children and loves working on family history alongside her husband, Mat.