

FAMILY POST

How to live up to your New Year's resolutions

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The goal shebang

New Year's resolutions have a better chance of succeeding if they involve the whole family, writes Elaine Yau

The close of a year is typically the cue to review the ups and downs of the past 12 months, rearrange priorities and make some New Year's resolutions in the hope of doing better.

Although shedding some flab or improving time management top many to-do lists, parents often make a few resolutions that are specific to their family roles. Whether it's a vow to spend more time with our children, or to keep a lid on our tempers, we all want a happier life for our families.

Counsellors say making resolutions as a family can help us persevere with the plan, and strengthen relationships along the way. Tik Chi-yuen, chairman of the Hong Kong Institute of Family Education, reckons New Year's Eve is a good time for parents and kids to discuss how to relate better as a family in the coming year.

"Each person should have the chance to have some input," Tik says. "A family can write up a 'contract' in words, with pictures by the kids, and post it up. You are more likely to persevere and succeed if you are holding one another accountable and going at it as a whole family."

Instead of making big changes or setting ambitious goals, Tik suggests taking little steps forward. "Setting unattainable goals will only dampen everybody's spirits when no one can pull them off. Parents should also avoid setting targets for their children to achieve. Some may want their children to get more than 90 per cent in tests.

"Such academic goals will put off the kids. The resolutions should be about steps that can be taken to bring the family closer together. Once there's family harmony and the child is happy, he will study of his own accord," Tik says.

There are many small things that can be done, like making a short chat a part of the family's daily routine. "A resolution can be as simple as giving mum a peck on the cheek before going to school every day. A child may promise to take out the rubbish to reduce his mother's burden or a parent can pledge to go home for dinner a number of times a week. Little gestures can work wonders," Tik says.

We talked to a few families to find out

Yan Kam-wah and wife Lai Hoi-yan with baby daughter Tsz-wan and twin sons Ching-wai (left) and Tsz-yu (right).

Right: Lam Moi-yee (centre), Hoi-tung (left) and Ching-tung. Photos: Jonathan Wong, Elaine Yau





Eva Martinez with her children Adriana and Marco (above); Wan Yun and wife Tang Kam-yuk often read the Bible with their children King-kwok (left), King-chi and King-yi

what they are planning for the year ahead.

AS THEIR twin sons will start secondary school in September, Yan Kam-wah and his wife, Lai Hoi-yan, reckon it's time they learned to be independent. The couple has made most of the decisions for them in the past, so they hope the boys will take charge of their own lives.

"We want to expose them to different activities and interest classes, and ask them to pick which ones they want to pursue," says Lai, a driver. "We enrolled them in calligraphy and piano classes, but they didn't like it. They felt that calligraphy was too sedentary and piano was too girly."

The couple sometimes becomes infuriated because the boys drag out their school assignments. "If they are willing to do it, they can finish it quickly. But at times, it takes them four hours to complete four pieces of homework," Yan says.

"We need to improve their self-discipline as secondary school will involve more homework. They get distracted easily. When grandma is watching television at home, they find it hard to concentrate. We will take them to the neighbourhood centre to do homework in future."

In the new year, Yan says they plan to introduce a carrot-and-stick system to encourage the twins to develop better study habits.

"They love pocket money. So they can earn a star for doing something well, like scoring a high mark for dictation. Four stars can earn them some pocket money. Conversely bad behaviour, like being late for school or failing to hand in homework, means money will be deducted from their

piggybank. We are going to check every night to see whether there are any misdemeanours. They can use their savings to buy robots, their favourite toys," he says.

FOR SPANISH resident Eva Martinez, New Year's Eve is a good time to help her three children figure out their goals for the year and how to work towards them. "Their resolutions are more short term. My son Marco, who just turned six, wants to be able to read higher-level Chinese books in 2013. He also wants to play soccer every day next year. I will help him get his wish."

"My daughter, Adriana, who is four, says she wants to do everything much better so she can go to the [primary] school she wants. We will help her understand that if she does

We sometimes get into heated arguments. I hope to better control my temper next year

LAM MOI-YEE

not get in, it's not because she is not good enough. It's just because such matters are out of her control. We want our little hard-working girl to know we are really proud of her."

Her youngest son, Christian, is too little to make wishes. But he's trying hard to learn how to ride a bike, his mother adds, and she hopes he will succeed soon.

Martinez and her husband, a banker, have pledged to spend more quality time with their children in the New Year. "Our major resolution for 2013 is to help our kids achieve a balanced life. We will work harder to ensure that school and homework are balanced with play every day, as time to play is extremely important for children."

"My husband and I are always talking about how we can do better as parents. We think that the key is continuous communication. No matter how tired or busy we are, we need to talk to them, and listen to them. They will guide us by expressing their fears, happiness, concerns and dreams."

HOUSEWIFE Lam Moi-yee worries that her 11-year-old eldest

daughter, Au Hoi-tung, is turning into a handful as she approaches her teens. "Hoi-tung changed a lot after advancing to Primary Six. She has become a little monster, losing her temper over minor things, and we sometimes get into heated arguments," she says. "I hope to better control my temper next year. I want to spend more time talking to her, and finding out about what upsets her as a teenager."

Her daughter is dyslexic and has difficulty spelling and recognising words. When Hoi-tung entered primary school, Lam quit her job as a beautician so that she could spend more time helping her with reading and comprehension. But since she isn't a professional, Lam wants to find a training centre which helps dyslexic children. She also plans to familiarise herself with social media and the internet to bridge the gap with her daughters, Hoi-tung and Ching-tung, 10, who are both computer savvy. Lam and her husband, a taxi driver, have discussed how they can spend more time with their daughters.

"He only gets two days off every month at the moment. But we agreed that he should try to take days off for family occasions and special festivals. We don't often get a chance to go out together as a family now, but we do go together on errands like grocery shopping."

WELFARE WORKER Wan Yun and his wife, Tang Kam-yuk, a teacher, are staunch Christians and adopt a regular routine with their three children to nurture a sense of discipline and order.

"We have a family meeting every night before bedtime for up to one hour," Tang says. "We read the Bible and pray. We also share experiences: we talk about our work that day and the children speak about their school day. We want the children to be thankful for the day."

But while these meetings help the family keep up with what's going on each other's lives, Tang says he and his wife want to set aside more time for individual chats with each child next year. "Our daughter, who's nine, might not want her elder brother to be privy to her conversation with me. Each child should have his personal space and get a chance to tell us what's on their mind as they grow up and face various issues. A 15-minute chat will go a long way towards helping me understand them better."

Another goal is to help their

children, King-kwok, King-chi and King-yi, learn to be more respectful of each other, Tang adds.

"Sometimes, when I am helping my daughter with her schoolwork, our youngest son will try to butt in. He should learn not to do that, as it's disrespectful to his older sister."

EXECUTIVE OFFICER Tsui Mei-ling's family had a frenetic year grooming her six-year-old daughter Chan Yu-yan for primary school. So 2013 is time for a breather.

"We didn't do much relaxing over the past year, as we all set our sights on getting a good school for her," Tsui says. "To adapt better to primary school, she spent a lot of time studying and doing her homework. Now she has settled in and has done well in her exams. As a reward, the family will go for a trip next year."

"My goal now is to find a school that provided good drama and musical training, as my daughter loves both. We agreed she could attend two to three lessons in drama and music every week. We want to take her mind off academic studies and let her pursue what she likes."

RESOLUTIONS AREN'T only made at the New Year in psychologist Yvonne Becher Herbst's family. They make pledges whenever there's an opportunity for a rethink, like during school breaks.

"But for this New Year's Eve, I am pleased to hear my 11-year-old daughter, Danielle [now in secondary school] say that she wants to improve her time management. Of course, as parents we will do our best to support her," Herbst says. Her resolution as a parent is to help daughters Danielle and Alex, 13, to become more independent and help out more in the family.

"This starts with everyday tasks like packing bags for outings on their own, being on time, and taking out the household rubbish," she says.

Like the Yan family, Herbst has adopted a cash incentive system. "Depending on the set tasks, they get money ranging from HK\$1 to HK\$5. Our children like saving money. We always make them pay half for valuable items they fancy, like bikes or mobile phones."

"Alex surprised us by making everyone's beds in the morning without prompting. So it looks like she has taken to it more than Danielle. Maybe it's time to review if the rewards are attractive enough." elaine.yau@scmp.com

BLISS AND TELL

What constitutes a happy family? It's a question that every generation struggles with. Maybe an answer is in sight: the recently launched Joyful Family Nurturing Centre hopes to find some clues to fostering contentment in the home.

"The number of single-parent, cross-border or weekend-parent families is increasing. Each type of family faces unique problems. We want to study what causes the trend and what measures can be taken to help those families," says Wan Wai-lan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong Central Youth Service, which set up the centre in October.

"The traditional family system is crumbling," Wan adds. "Kids growing up with the digital revolution often lack respect for their elders. At the same time, parents face growing work pressure and devote less time to their kids. They are more concerned about youngsters' academic achievement than their emotional well-being."

The centre aims to help promote the culture of family by, for example, offering courses on how to raise happy children.

A recent survey of families from different socio-economic backgrounds by the centre found that low-income families were happier than high-income ones.

Lee Man Yuk-ching, an assistant professor at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, says low-income families tend to be more satisfied with life and have more time to communicate with each other.

"Many middle-class families have two parents working full time in stressful jobs. [Their children] do not lack material goods. But possessions do not have much effect on children's level of happiness. What makes for happy kids is close bonding time with parents."

Parents were also asked whether they attach importance to communication, division of labour in the family, and the establishment of rules and regulations. While communication was important to 72 per cent of the 292 parents polled, only 38 per cent thought division of labour mattered, and only 19 per cent valued setting clear rules.

Man says parents should not overlook the importance of setting moral standards or behavioural constraints for children.

Elaine Yau



Wan Wai-lan says the traditional family system is crumbling. Photo: Jonathan Wong

