

Living simply with children

A VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY GUIDE
FOR MOMS, DADS, AND KIDS WHO WANT TO
RECLAIM THE BLISS OF CHILDHOOD
AND THE JOY OF PARENTING



CREATING MORE FREE TIME TO SPEND WITH YOUR CHILD

WHY YOU DON'T NEED A LOT OF STUFF TO HAVE A LOT OF FUN

SIMPLE HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS YOUR KIDS WILL TREASURE

MARIE SHERLOCK

WITH A FOREWORD BY VICKI ROBIN,
COAUTHOR OF *YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE*

Living Simply with Children

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Moms, Dads, and Kids Who Want to
Reclaim the Bliss of Childhood
and the Joy of Parenting**

MARIE SHERLOCK



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Foreword

It takes a corporation to raise a child.

Say what? Isn't that "It takes a village . . ."?

Well, look at the reality. Advertising jingles have replaced camp songs. Brands have replaced clans as a source of identity. Bonded day care has replaced the stay-at-home mom. Corporations are writing textbooks, funding television programming, setting style trends. In Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, an expectant mother, surrounded by a delivery room full of machines, is dismissed from participation in the birthing process by a patronizing doctor. "You're not qualified," he snaps.

Indeed, parents no longer feel qualified to parent. Our hurry-up, competitive, crowded, and commercialized world means you can't just send the kids into the backyard to play or down the street to Grandma or off to public school with the rest of the kids in town. Those days are gone for most of us. Parenting is privatized and professionalized. Parenting skills aren't just knowing when to hug and when to scold. They

now consist of a welter of choices involving much insecurity and research. Which diapers? Which preschool? Will they suffer if I don't get them the sneakers? Will they suffer if I do? Do I limit TV? Or throw it out the window? Or just be grateful the kids have some stimulation while I frantically manage the other thousand things on my list? Do I give them an allowance or make them work for it? Do I send them to private school for the academics or to public school for the socialization? Do I give them college or make them work for it?

Back when there were villages that raised us, there was no such thing as a single parent, or even an isolated nuclear family. Parenting came naturally to most because we learned it from all the adults who were parenting all the time. Ample free time and luxurious hours of socializing and ceremony quickly brought collective attention to any individual problem. This way of life persisted for tens of thousands of years. Indeed, ancient languages probably never made the social role—*parent*—into a verb.

The consumer culture, barely a century old, has changed all that. The first empowerment for parents now is just realizing that “the consumer culture” itself is an aberration. This is why it now takes determined, conscious, intentional, heroic simple living parents to raise a healthy child. It takes instructions such as you will find in great measure in Marie Sherlock's wonderful book, which you are lucky to have in your hands. So as you struggle with “parenting,” know that you are pushing against a massive surrogate parent—commercialism—that is trying to take your kids and raise them to be consumers.

Andy Lipkis, visionary founder of TreePeople in Southern California, once told me that if there were just a three-day ban on cars in Los Angeles the smog would completely clear. Smog doesn't “happen.” People “happen” it each morning when they crank their cars and join the rivers of polluting vehicles on L.A.'s network of freeways.

Would our minds similarly clear if we didn't crank over the 3,000 advertisements a day that keep the pall of consumer culture hanging over our heads? If we were to take the logos off clothing, make everything from panel vans to television to schools (especially schools) commercial-free zones, then how would it be to raise children in America? If we were to quiet the incessant pressure to buy, would we still see ourselves as greedy animals whose basic drive is to have "more"? I think we would so naturally live a simpler life that it would need no instruction or defense.

We would know that who we are is more important than what we own. We'd know that toys "r"n't us. And so would our children. We would have more parks and fewer malls. More libraries and fewer unread books in private collections. More teachers earning more money to guide our most precious resource—our youth—and fewer soldiers to protect our national "possession obsession."

We don't, however, have the social will to constrain the largest uncontrolled psychological experiment on human subjects in the history of the world—the advertising that promotes consumerism, commercialism, and materialism. So we must privatize "simple living." Individuals must choose it for themselves and risk social rejection, loss of status, and even financial insecurity. Because we can't stop polluting our minds, we must cleanse them with refreshing books like *Living Simply with Children*.

Living Simply with Children provides hundreds of ideas for parents. I'd like to single out three threads that speak to me.

First, simple living with children isn't a kind of hands-off program one can institute like day care or summer camp. It really does take a whole family to raise children who don't depend on consumption to make them happy. If parents are shoppers, they will raise shoppers. If parents are snobs about cars and colleges, they will raise brand-conscious kids. As

parents go, so go the children—so going down the path to simplicity starts with you choosing simplicity for yourself.

Second, some longings seem almost hardwired in humans. The desire for acceptance and belonging. The desire to stand out in some way. Simple living doesn't change humans, but it provides healthier ways to meet these and other basic psychological and social needs. Television works in part because it hooks into this "hardwiring." Likewise fashion, video games, and all the rest of the allurements of a commercialized childhood. They feed needs—real needs—with small zaps of satisfaction that don't last. Do you feel hopeless as you watch your child succumb, bit by bit, to these electronic seductions and desires bred by ads? This book gives you many ways to reshape your small household cultural environment so that you feed your child's imagination, creativity, and drive to meet developmental needs in simpler, healthier ways.

Third, everything of lasting value takes time—and time is at a premium these days. Parenting—like all arts—requires expanses of empty time for spontaneous, unbidden life to erupt through the humdrum of shuttling between appointments. Time isn't just clock time. It isn't just scheduled "quality time." Time is like a vast, shimmering Shangri-la that is accessed when we leave the manufactured, regimented world behind. It is always there for us, but we need to be there in it or it doesn't show up. Laughter happens in that kind of time. So does love. And meaning. We need time off from clock time. Sabbaths. Rest. Giggling. Lying in the grass. Snoozing with a baby in our arms. Time that is 24/7/365 is totally hostile to the rhythms of love. Simple living means taking time off from clock time, making Sabbath time more important than errands—and e-mails—and even grades and lessons and homework. Marie Sherlock's many suggestions about simple living with children create a bridge from the kind of time that kills love to the kind that fosters it.

So I say "Hallelujah!" for Marie Sherlock's guidance. Even if you don't have children, this guidebook will give you

courage—and a passel of good ideas. Don't let the corporations raise your children. And while you wait (and work) for the return of the village (real community), be the kind of simple living parent who can raise a child who will someday lead us all to wholeness.

VICKI ROBIN

Coauthor, *Your Money or Your Life*
President, New Road Map Foundation
Chair, The Simplicity Forum
Labor Day, 2002

PART 1



The “Whys”—Why Your Family
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Should Practice Simplicity
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Getting Started on Living Simply with Children

For most American families, “living simply with children” is the *ultimate* oxymoron.

Between Mom and Dad working full-time jobs, the kids being shuttled from day care to lessons to sports—wolfing down fast food along the way—and the never-ending need to buy and spend to “fit in” to America’s consumer culture, family life can indeed be incredibly complex.

But in reality, simplicity and childhood are natural counterparts. Left to their own devices, children lead down-to-earth, uncomplicated, *genuine* lives. This truth becomes profoundly clear when you hear an infant squeal with delight over a game of “peekaboo.” Or when you see the three-year-old birthday boy playing with the box instead of the battery-operated toy. You realize it when you witness the rapt expression of a kindergartner listening to a bedtime story.

As simple living mom Barbara Thomas notes, “Children are simple creatures. We bring the complexity.” Single mom Susan Kelly adds that “consumerism and advertising would

have us believe that children need a zillion things to have a good life, but children make the most of simple things.”

I heard this theme over and over as I interviewed families for this book: Living simply with children is the most natural and beneficial way to raise kids, parents said. And if families chose to live on deserted islands, far away from all of the forces and pressures of our consumer culture, then living simply with children would be a breeze.

But most of us aren't cut off from the rest of the world. We're trying to live simply within a larger community that leads a much more consumeristic and frenetic existence. Therein lies the complexity.

Living simply with kids in today's American culture presents gigantic obstacles. Among the hurdles are:

- Marketing aimed at kids and parents, indoctrinating them with the belief that happiness can be purchased
- Age-inappropriate and violent media
- The peer pressure of a society that believes more is better
- Overscheduling of children and adults
- Practices that harm the environment and, consequently, children's futures
- The commercialization of schools
- The sheer excess that has become the norm in America

The purpose of this book is to help parents navigate the maze of materialism and the frenzied pace that society sets up for them and their kids. It will show parents how they can shelter their kids from the corporate culture; teach and model important values like compassion, generosity, and respect for the earth; and slow down and enjoy both quality and quantity time with their families. And it will make clear to parents that by doing these things, their kids' childhoods will be focused on the good stuff, which of course isn't stuff at all.

Living Simply—With or Without Children

Focusing on the “good stuff” is what simplicity is all about. Living simply—sometimes referred to as downshifting or downscaling—is both the means and the end to a meaningful life. A downshifter weeds out those aspects of his or her life that are of no lasting value and concentrates instead on those matters that are important. For example, a typical simplifier may consciously conclude that owning expensive cars, designer clothing, and a palatial home are not among her values, but that spending time with her family, working on worthy causes, and showing respect for people and the planet are. Simplicity will help her live with the “good stuff” at the forefront.

Living simply is clearly a financial means to such a life. By living simply—and consuming less—you can work part-time or retire early (or both!), freeing up time to focus on those things that matter most to you. Living simply is also a psychological and spiritual pathway to a more meaningful existence. Without distractions, without financial worries, our minds and hearts are released to pursue our true interests.

Simplicity is also an end in itself. A life focused on the nonmaterial aspects of existence—family, friends, nature, social service, those things that most of us value—is the goal of simplicity. As an end, the adoption of simple lifestyles by Western megaconsumers is truly the only way we’re going to save the planet. And living simply is also the method we must employ if we care about global economic and social justice.

A few words on what simplicity is *not*. It’s not about being a penny-pinching miser. It *is* about consuming less, which often means saving considerable sums and/or being able to spend that money on other areas, like charitable causes, early retirement, kids, or travel. Simplicity is not about being supremely organized or having some Zen-like interior decorating scheme, although mainstream media might lead you to think so. De-

cluttering—getting rid of excess—can, however, lead to a natural sort of organization. And simplicity isn't necessarily about an easy life. Even those who manage to retire early by simplifying, by and large devote much time and effort to volunteer work. But while they continue to work, they're engaged in activities that they love—helping others, primarily—without the stress that many Americans feel, so it's easier on their psyches.

Contrary to some reports, simplicity is *not* about deprivation. Those practicing simplicity in North America typically are quite comfortable by global standards. The only thing they've given up is the unnecessary and unsatisfying excess that is common in America. In exchange, they receive the *luxury* of time, peace of mind, and happiness.

Because I believe that this misconception about deprivation keeps many people from simplifying, let me offer another way to look at it. The entire concept of simplicity is relative, both geographically and temporally. If a resident of a third world nation, or even one from one of the “developing nations”—in other words, about 80 percent of the world's population—were to visit my family's modest, by American standards, home, they would be in awe. Our 1,600-square-foot single-family house would stun them. Indoor plumbing! Electricity! Three bedrooms! Telephones! A refrigerator and microwave! CD player! Two computers! A VCR! A mansion of miracles!

The same thoughts would be harbored by my ancestors—even my own parents, who grew up without most of these things.

In other words, my family's “simple ways” don't seem simple at all to most of the world's citizens. They'd consider them opulent. And I do too, to an extent. I consider myself incredibly fortunate to be able to live comfortably—with every *thing* I could possibly need or want. So while some of my contemporaries in this country consider my life a bit austere—

no cell phone, an older car, simple wardrobe, no high-speed Internet connection, DVD, or Palm Pilot—at least four-fifths of the world's people would be happy to trade places with me.

Simplicity, then, is about *not* being a typical American, because in today's society being an average American translates into being a consumer; indeed, a megaconsumer. That lifestyle is best described as materialism—the belief that acquisition and wealth are the highest objectives to be sought, rather than spiritual, intellectual, and humanitarian goals—and it's the opposite of simplicity.

Materialism dictates that you should try to meet your needs through the acquisition of things. It promises, at best, that happiness, acceptance, and love lie just around the corner with a bigger house, newer car, faster computer, trendier clothing.

But materialism never actually delivers on its promises. Each new purchase, latest promotion, bigger and better model, merely sets you up for the next acquisition.

At its worst, materialism ruins the natural environment, creates a situation where billions of people go without adequate resources, while a fraction at the top live in waste. And with its emphasis on things rather than people and nature, materialism robs our souls.

Simplicity is the antidote to all that materialism represents and to all of its soul-sapping, earth-exhausting consequences. Simplicity promises a life that is focused not on the unsatisfying accumulation of stuff, but on those issues, values, people, pursuits, and causes that matter most to you and that make life full and meaningful. And, unlike materialism, simplicity keeps its word.

In the final analysis, simplicity is about living our lives as we know in our hearts they were meant to be lived. This book will help you take that equation a step further and raise your children as you know in your hearts they were meant to be raised.

How to Use This Book

I think it was the Good Witch Glinda of Oz who said, “It’s always best to start at the beginning.”

Particularly for those of you who are new to simplicity, this is good advice. The values clarification process you’ll find in the next chapter is truly essential for beginners. The rest of Part 1—the “whys” or benefits of simplicity—will help you understand why simplicity is such a great lifestyle choice for families.

Those of you who’ve already embraced simplicity may be inclined to skip the soul-searching exercise, but I hope you’ll reconsider. Affirming your values will help you in every aspect of your life. It will reinforce your commitment to simplify and will assist you in living your values on a daily basis.

The balance of Part 1 may not be news to those who’ve downshifted somewhat. But you may well find that a reiteration of simplicity’s benefits will be a source of support and motivation for you.

Whether you’re a simplicity novice or a veteran, the second part of the book need not be read in a chronological fashion. If marketing to kids is your pet peeve, then by all means turn to Chapter 8. If the holidays are coming up and you dread the annual ordeal of excess, read Chapter 16 first. Use Part 2 as a resource, for information, ideas, and, hopefully, inspiration.

A Formula for Simplifying

For those of you who may want more of a blueprint for downshifting, I have included a basic six-step plan that you can start with, adapting it to your family’s situation. Here are the steps:

Note: Following this formula is not the only way to simplify. If you find that it doesn’t fit your family’s style, take those steps that *do* work for you.

1. SOUL SEARCHING

Perform the soul searching outlined in Chapter 2 and then read more about the benefits of simplifying in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Hopefully, this will lead to a commitment to simplify, to live your values, and a foundation for the changes you'll be making.

2. DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Gather information on the “hows” of simplifying. This is essentially what the rest of the book is about. Reading it will be a big step in your research. Other books can and should supplement your search, books like *Your Money or Your Life* and others listed under “Resources” at the end of this and subsequent chapters. Many wonderful organizations, also listed in “Resources,” are available for you to tap into. Consider joining the Center for a New American Dream and Seeds of Simplicity. Visit the Simple Living Network website.

Your research will highlight two primary areas: short-term ideas, which you can implement immediately; and long-term possibilities, those actions that will take more time, more effort. Both long-term and short-term ideas should be considered with an eye to honoring your family values (see Chapter 2).

Short-term actions might include starting a Family Night (see below) or other ritual, limiting TV time, doing away with fast food dinners, or paring down the number of outside activities. Long-term simplicity possibilities cover efforts like cutting back work hours or going to a part-time or job share situation. They may also involve selling a larger home and moving to a smaller one, or even moving to a different, less expensive area.

You'll uncover many approaches you'll want to consider with your family. Prepare two written lists from your research.

FAMILY NIGHT

One of the many easy-to-implement simplifying tactics your family may want to consider is establishing a weekly “Family Night.”

Setting aside one night each week that is dedicated to family fun is one of the most common rituals that simple living families adopt. Activities on Family Night can run the gamut, but many families take a low key approach to this ritual. Playing board and card games together are common; so are movies or a special meal.

Others plan more focused events. Karen Schneider-Chen, a simple living mom from Seattle, was a contributor to a comprehensive Family Night resource called *Just Family Nights: Activities to Keep Your Family Together in a World Falling Apart* (see “Resources” at the end of this chapter). This book includes details on sixty different “themed” family night concepts. Hundreds of less formal—and nearly effortless—ideas that work well as Family Night activities can be found in *Table Talk* by Steve and Ruth Bennett.

While Family Nights can vary greatly, these homespun gatherings have three important things in common: They should be regular weekly events; they should take precedence over all other activities on those evenings (except emergencies); and they should be fun, something the family looks forward to doing together.

Whether your own Family Night simply involves pizza and a video or a more elaborate affair, it will undoubtedly become a treasured childhood—and parenthood!—ritual.

(See Chapter 12 for more information on family nights and other rituals.)

(You’ll be sharing these lists with your family in Step 3, below.) One list will consist of your long-term simplifying ideas and goals. This inventory will have some items that may need multi-

ple actions, and many will be the type that Mom or Dad need to instigate. Your second list will detail short-term goals and actions. Many short-term goals will involve the entire family.

3. THE FIRST FAMILY SIMPLICITY MEETING— BRAINSTORMING

Hold a special family meeting (see “A Primer on Family Meetings” on p. 12) to talk about the long-term and short-term simplifying ideas you’re considering. At the beginning of the meeting emphasize that the point of making these changes is to help the family better live its values. Your family will already have been involved in the soul-searching exercise, and this next step will make sense to them. You should also point out that some long-term tactics—for example, Mom and/or Dad cutting back work hours or opting for a job share position—will involve short-term actions on the part of the family, like “brown-bagging” lunches and doing without cable television. The kids can help you make the list of short-term cost-cutting efforts; they’ll be happy to do so when they know the goal is more time with Mom and Dad.

At this special family meeting, one parent should first read aloud the list of long-term simplifying ideas you’ve compiled. Then ask your family to brainstorm further long-term simplifying actions. (See “How to Brainstorm” on page 28.)

Next you’ll read aloud the list of short-term simplifying ideas. Again, ask your family to come up with additional short-term strategies.

When you’ve completed the brainstorming, you’ll have two (likely pretty lengthy) lists of ideas covering long-term and short-term actions.

Note: If your kids are still infants—or in the womb!—the two family meetings can be truncated into one discussion between Mom and Dad.

A PRIMER ON FAMILY MEETINGS

Family meetings are optimal times to discuss simplicity changes and to craft a Family Values and Vision statement (see Chapter 2). If you're unfamiliar with the family meeting model, here are some basics to get you started:

1. The primary purposes of family meetings are to promote family bonding and to help the family run smoothly, but they're also educational. Kids—and adults—learn to communicate, negotiate, compromise, troubleshoot, and to respect each other, all invaluable lessons.

2. Your kids should be old enough to participate verbally and tolerate fifteen minutes of discussion—about four or five years of age, depending upon their temperament and activity level. It's a good idea to begin with ten- to fifteen-minute meetings with preschoolers, and once your kids are a bit older—eight or so—to lengthen the meetings to a half hour.

3. Most experts recommend that family meetings take place weekly, although some families meet every other week or even monthly. A regular time—such as after Sunday dinner dishes have been cleared or at the start of Family Night—works well (see “Family Night” on page 10).

4. Each week a blank “Family Meeting Agenda” sheet should be posted for all to see. (Ours is on the fridge.) During the week, family members are invited to jot down concerns, proposed activities, and other issues that could be discussed at the meeting.

5. The meeting should be without interruptions. Unplug the phone or let the answering machine take calls. Keep the meetings short; thirty minutes is usually enough.

6. Use a simple notebook to record “minutes.” The notebook is also a good spot to list the “Meeting Rules.” One of these should be that all family members will listen and speak respectfully—that is, no “put-downs,” eye-rolling, or yelling.

7. At the appointed time, the chairperson opens the meet-

(continues)

(continued)

ing. Many families start by asking each family member to give a compliment to each of the other family members or to comment on something about the family that they're thankful for. This sets a positive tone for the meeting. (Many families rotate the chairperson duties and secretary/recorder role, although younger kids may have difficulty with the writing tasks.)

8. Agenda items are then addressed individually. If the item involves a complaint about a family member's behavior, the involved individuals are expected to present their cases respectfully. Then the entire family can help brainstorm resolutions (see "How to Brainstorm" on page 28). Experts recommend that resolutions be by consensus—that everyone concur in the solution. If a consensus can't be reached, the agenda item can be carried over until the next week.

9. At the end of the meeting, go over family and individual activities for the upcoming week. If you have a family calendar, have it handy and add any activities that the family has agreed upon at the meeting.

10. Consider serving dessert or a special treat after the meeting, as both incentive and reward for a job well done!

4. THE SECOND FAMILY SIMPLICITY MEETING— ADOPTING THE CHANGES

This meeting will be devoted to whittling down the simplifying ideas put forth at the first meeting to those everyone can agree on. Parents should ensure that the perceived drawbacks of particular ideas—for example, not eating out so much—are coupled with fun changes like game and pizza nights every Friday. Read through the two lists and ask for input, "yeas" and "nays." Write the approved ideas on a separate list.

Some worthy ideas may not receive a consensus of approval at first. If you feel that they're important, schedule them for discussion at a future family meeting. Those that

aren't as popular may take extra time and effort, or even rethinking entirely.

As a group, decide on three or four actions from the list to implement immediately. Record the simple living actions you decide to take on that week in your family meeting notebook. At your next family meeting, you'll review how those are going and commit to three or four more.

Part of this meeting's function is for each member of the family to figure out their roles in the actions. Parents can help kids determine how they'll be assisting with each strategy. For example, your ten-year-old could set up a recycling center; your kindergartner would be happy to help you bake bread. If your kids are older—say seven or eight or so—you could even assign a specific action for them to monitor that week. Remember that your kids can and should be involved in ways that make sense for them, depending upon their age.

5. THE EXTENDED FAMILY/FRIEND TALK

If some of your changes will impact your extended family or close friends, you'll need to clue them in too. If you've decided to abandon your weekly "night out with the gang," talk with "the gang" about substituting a potluck. If a "TV Turn-Off Week" is on your list, let the relatives know you'd like them to honor that commitment. Chapter 10 includes a section on "Relative Support—or Lack Thereof" that might help you as you attempt to enlighten your extended family.

6. FIND SUPPORT

You can also look to Chapter 10 for details on how to get the support you need to follow through on your simplifying changes. Many of the chapters in the "hows" section will also assist you with details on how to implement your simple living actions.

This blueprint approach may not work for you. Many of us take a zigzag route to simplicity. It's an individual thing! Follow your own path. The important thing is to move in the right direction.

A Few Caveats About This Book

Although I tried to avoid too much repetition, the topics in this book often overlap. This overlap is inevitable. I see it as an outgrowth of the interconnectedness of simplicity. A couple of examples illustrate this: Limiting or doing away with your television will help you deal with marketing aimed at your kids, assist you in protecting them from peer pressure, give you more family time together, and help you teach your kids to manage their money better. Consuming less is perhaps the foremost environmental action, yet it also is the mechanism for working less, for deemphasizing the material world while focusing on people and causes, and for enjoying our communities more.

Something else you may notice about this book is what it *doesn't* cover. I couldn't include every family simplicity-related topic here. My approach was to cover, as comprehensively as I could, those subjects that directly relate to raising kids simply. I especially wanted to address those issues that are "hot buttons" for downshifted parents, subjects like peer pressure, advertising directed at kids, and holiday excess.

I've left several, more general simplicity topics to others. For example, the mechanics of living on less, on economizing, have been covered so thoroughly and so well by others that they're not detailed extensively here (although you'll find some cost-cutting ideas and tactics in Chapters 13, 14, and 15, among others). There are dozens of books out there that deal with living on less financially. Start with *Your Money or Your Life*. If you need more detailed guidance, try *The Com-*

plete Tightwad Gazette. (See “Resources” at the end of this chapter for these and other titles.)

Likewise, I haven’t covered organizational and decluttering issues. Again, there are many books available on how to organize your “stuff.” (Of course, the primary way to do this is to have less of it!) “Simple” food is also not addressed except in passing in Chapter 14. You’ll find much help in books like *The More-with-Less Cookbook*, among others.

If you have a specific simplicity topic you need help with, or find the information in this book inadequate for you, I recommend that you visit the Simple Living Network website—www.simpleliving.net—and go to their Forums. You’ll find dozens of subject areas—“Family Matters” is one of them—and hundreds of helpful “virtual” friends to assist you.

Another caveat: Please realize that my family does not hold itself out to be any kind of simple living paragon. We’re far from perfect! Through my research on this book, I’ve become acquainted with many families who practice a much purer form of simplicity than my family does. We’re all somewhere on the simple living continuum and we’re all trying to live our values as best we can. Some of us will emphasize community more, others the environment, still others rural living. These individual responses to simple living are to be expected. After all, simplicity is about living consciously, mindfully, with integrity—and being true to ourselves.

Finally, before you begin this book, you should know that living simply takes an open mind. If you’re not willing to look at the status quo and question it, you’ll probably not last long in the simplicity movement. This is particularly true for parents. Kids are the segment of our population most bombarded with commercial messages—and their parents right along with them.

If fitting in is of the utmost importance to you, then saying “No!” to the corporate culture’s message of “more is better” and “this product will change my life, make me happy, et cetera” will be especially difficult. I hope that if you’ve made

it this far, you've convinced yourself that you don't want to spend your parenting years raising a "good little consumer," that you've questioned the dubious "values" of our consumer culture and concluded you aren't buying them. Keep questioning!

The Wisdom of Many

The materials in this book aren't just my personal thoughts. It contains the collective insights of the more than sixty simple living families I interviewed or surveyed.

I've profiled several families in Chapter 6—my own included—and ideas and quotes from dozens of others are peppered throughout these pages. I occasionally mention a few pertinent facts about these families but often I simply share their anecdotes, words, and feelings. You should know that all of these families are practicing downshifters, at some juncture on the simple living family continuum. They're almost all solidly middle class, they're bright, often well-educated, always caring, always thoughtful. They were certainly an inspiration for me, as I hope they'll be for you.

Over the past year, I've had a number of heartfelt conversations with these families. We've talked about the many roadblocks to raising kids simply in the most commercialized and materialistic country in the world. We've also wondered out loud together why so many others, who seemingly should know better, continue to live the way they do.

As parents longing to bring some sanity into our family's and others' lives, it's easy to feel hopeless today. If millions of other Americans are wedded to the idea that more is better, is there any possibility that we'll make a difference? While we're asking our kids to plan our errand route in order to use the least amount of fuel, our national leaders continue to raise the issue of opening the Alaska wilderness to oil drilling and are renegeing on commitments to decrease carbon dioxide

emissions. We cringe as our kids' schools struggle financially, turning to corporate "partnerships"—advertising—to make up the difference.

On the other hand, there is also much to be hopeful about. While researching this book, I found that there are many simple living advocates who are getting the word out about this lifestyle. And the sixty-plus parents I interviewed are just a small sampling of those families who've concluded there's a better way.

I have a T-shirt that a dear friend gave me years ago. It's stained, frayed, and misshapen, but I'll never throw it out. In fact, I'm wearing it as I type this. On it is an oft-quoted thought of Margaret Mead's: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

As I interviewed downshifted families for this book, the sentiment on my simple T-shirt has become especially apropos. As we lead downscaled lives, help our kids to embrace simplicity, and spread the word about its many benefits, we can, indeed, change the world. And have the time of our lives in the process!

Resources

Note: Many of the resources mentioned throughout this book are available through Alternatives for Simple Living on the web at www.simpleliving.org; (800) 821-6153 and the Simple Living Network at www.simpleliving.net; (800) 318-5725.

DECLUTTERING

Tara Aronson. *Simplify Your Household* (Pleasantville, New York: Readers Digest Books, 1998).

Jeff Campbell. *Clutter Control: Putting Your Home on a Diet* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1992).

Ronni Eisenberg with Kate Kelly. *Organize Your Family* (New York: Hyperion, 1993).

Ronni Eisenberg with Kate Kelly. *Organize Your Home* (New York: Hyperion, 1994).

FAMILY NIGHTS

Steve and Ruth Bennett. *Table Talk: 365 Ways to Reclaim the Family Dinner Hour* (Holbrook, Massachusetts: Bob Adams, Inc., 1994).

Susan Vogt, editor. *Just Family Nights: Activities to Keep Your Family Together in a World Falling Apart* (Elgin, Illinois: Faith Quest, 1994).

ORGANIZATIONS/WEBSITES

Alternatives for Simple Living: www.simpleliving.org; (712) 274-8875. Numerous resources to help you live simply and justly, challenge consumerism, and celebrate responsibly.

The Center for a New American Dream: www.newdream.org; (877) 68-DREAM. Helps Americans change the way they consume to enhance quality of life and protect the environment.

Frugal/Mindful Living Resources: www.igc.apc.org/frugal. Many great simple living ideas/resources.

Overcoming Overconsumption site: www.verdant.net. Ideas and resources for dealing with materialism.

Positive Futures Network: www.futurenet.org. Promotes sustainability and publishes *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*.

Seeds of Simplicity: www.seedsofsimplicity.org; 877-UNSTUFF. Works to help build a strong voice for voluntary simplicity.

The Simple Living Network: www.simpleliving.net. Comprehensive simplicity site, a cornucopia of information and links to other valuable sites.

PERSONAL FINANCE AND COST CUTTING

(SEE ALSO CHAPTERS 13 AND 14)

Jacqueline Blix and David Heitmiller. *Getting a Life: Strategies for Simple Living Based on the Revolutionary Program for Financial Freedom, "Your Money or Your Life."* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

Amy Dacyszyn. *The Complete Tightwad Gazette: Promoting Thrift as a Viable Alternative Lifestyle* (New York: Villard, 1998).

Andy Dappen. *Shattering the Two-Income Myth* (Brier, Washington: Brier Books, 1997).

Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin. *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

Jonni McCoy. *Frugal Families* (Elkton, Maryland: Full Quart Press, 1998).

Lisa Reid. *Raising Kids with Just a Little Cash* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Ferguson-Carol Publishers, 1996).

SIMPLE FOOD

Christine Berman and Jacki Fromer. *Meals Without Squeals* (Palo Alto, California: Bull Publishing, 1997).

Annie Berthold-Bond and Mothers and Others for a Livable Planet. *The Green Kitchen Handbook* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1997).

Doris Janzen Longacre. *More-with-Less Cookbook* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2000).

Frances McCullough and Barbara Witt, editors. *Great Food Without Fuss: Simple Recipes from the Best Cooks* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992).

Helen Nearing. *Simple Food for the Good Life* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 1999).

Eric Schlosser. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

Carol Simontacchi. *The Crazy Makers: How the Food Industry Is Destroying Our Brains and Harming Our Children* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2000).

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY IN GENERAL

Cecile Andrews. *The Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

Mark Burch. *Stepping Lightly: Simplicity for People and the Planet* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 2000).

Duane Elgin, rev. ed. *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (New York: Quill, 1993).

John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor. *Af-*

fluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2001).

Doris Janzen Longacre. *Living More with Less* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1980).

Janet Luhrs. *The Simple Living Guide* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997).

Jerome M. Segal. *Graceful Simplicity: Toward a Philosophy and Politics of Simple Living* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999).

Simple Living Oasis (formerly *Simple Living Journal*); www.simpleliving.com. Quarterly publication that inspires and supports people to live simply; \$18 per year; (800)318-5725.



First, Some Soul Searching

Like Americans everywhere, I was stunned, saddened, and horrified by the events of September 11, 2001.

Also like many Americans, I immediately began searching for answers. I took to reading, among other sources, the letters to the editor in our local daily newspaper, and saw that people had very divergent views on why this tragedy happened and what we should do about it. But I came across one letter that I think no one could disagree with.

The writer noted that those who made phone calls before their deaths—whether on the planes or in the buildings hit—didn't say things like "I wish I had bought that new car," or "If only I'd gotten that promotion." They said, instead, "I love you."

This is as it should be, said the writer, because in our last moments we realize what truly matters to us. The writer then emphasized that the best way to honor the victims of the attacks is for all of us to figure out what's important to us and then to live each day with those things at the forefront. "This means," the letter writer concluded, "living our lives with no regrets."

ticular attention to the ads. Hang out at the mall and observe teenagers, who are, of course, mimicking all of those advertising themes. Watch the Academy Awards! The message the larger culture tells us and our children is *form over substance*. These values are almost the exact opposite of the values we wish to pass on to our kids.

You may say, “C’mon now. Those aren’t really American values. Our values are freedom, liberty, independence, good stuff like that.” But I didn’t say that these are *American* values, I said that they are the values of our consumer culture. And, like it or not, they are the ones we and our kids hear and see most, because the vast majority of the messages we receive from day to day are those of corporations—on TV, in movies, at the mall, in magazines and newspapers, on our “logoed” clothing, even on the backs of toilet stall doors. They’re the ones that dictate most of our expenditures, our thinking, our hopes, dreams, and goals—even our interactions with our family, friends, and neighbors. And corporate messages have but one goal: to make you buy more.

If it’s difficult for Americans in general to live their values in today’s society, it’s even more so for parents. Why? The overwhelming pace of our consumer culture leaves mothers and fathers with little energy left for self-reflection. They’re on the work-spend-work treadmill along with the rest of the country, *plus* they’re trying to raise kids. In addition, parents must deal not only with the influences of culture on their own behaviors, but also with the impact of those forces on their children, who are prime targets for the American marketing machine, as you’ll see in Chapter 8.

As one parent I interviewed remarked, “I don’t want the values I pass on to my kids to be those of Nike and Reebok.” But if you’re raising children in North America today and you’re not consciously addressing the effects of commercialism on their psyches and beliefs, then you’ve essentially handed your child’s soul over to corporate America. You might as well say, “Here, mold this child into another mindless consumer.”

Your active involvement in teaching your child values that truly reflect your own beliefs, values that put people first and “stuff” much further down the list, that promote the preservation of the planet, is essential.

Soul Searching

Discerning your true values—that first hurdle to living a “life with no regrets”—is an indispensable task. You obviously need to know what your values are before you can align your existence with them.

There are two steps to this values clarification process: the first is to brainstorm your values, determining what truly matters to you as a family.

You’ll be referring to your brainstorming notes as you tackle the second step of the clarification process: assembling your Family Values and Vision Statement. (You can call it whatever you like, your family beliefs document, values inventory, simplicity statement, or something else; it’s up to you.) This document is the end result of distilling your brainstorming ideas down to reveal your highest values, your strongest beliefs, and how you want your family to live those. It’s a recitation of what is truly important to you—individually, as a parent, and as a family. You can think of it as a sort of spiritual road map, a document you can refer to time and again to get yourself back on track should you falter or need guidance in making decisions. It’s really a blueprint for living a “no regrets” life.

It’s important that both spouses/partners participate in this soul-searching exercise, along with your kids, if they’re old enough, because participation precedes ownership of the final document—and a much greater likelihood that all members will honor the values expressed. (Your kids are old enough if they can participate in a family meeting. See “A Primer on Family Meetings” on page 12.)

Even if you're convinced of simplicity's merits, you should perform this exercise. The act of contemplating these questions and writing down your answers will bring them to the forefront. Seeing your answers in black and white will help you clarify them, and then internalize them. Unless you're already living an intentional, conscious existence, it is nearly essential to do this.

An aside here: The soul-searching step is of pivotal importance for those couples who aren't "on the same page" regarding simplifying. Through this process, that reluctant spouse will likely realize that his or her values are, in fact, simple values. Soul searching could provide "the big *ah-ha!*" as one simple living parent describes the epiphany that takes place when you finally "get it" about simplicity.

STEP ONE: THE BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS

Use the questions listed below as conversation starters and food for thought. Family meetings are optimal settings for discussing the questions, but you can also use other situations, like mealtimes. You'll need to appoint a secretary—usually Mom or Dad—to draft intermediate and final documents.

The brainstorming questions are getting at two things: what your family's values are, and how those values look in day-to-day life. You'll probably want to break this exercise into at least two brainstorming sessions—one for Values, and one for Vision.

Values Brainstorming Meeting

Some of these questions may speak to you more than others. If so, focus on those. The purpose of asking them is to bring out family members' thoughts and feelings about the values they cherish. Here are the questions:

1. How do *you* define "success"? You might want to rephrase this question, in terms of how you would define a

“life with no regrets.” What would your life look like without regrets? How would you spend your time?

2. What do you think our purpose is here on earth? Why are we here? As Wendell Berry asks in one of his essays, “What are people for?”

3. What matters to you most? What do you hold sacred? When do you feel most at peace? What brings you the most fulfillment?

4. What characteristics do you value in your friends?

HOW TO BRAINSTORM

Brainstorming is a tried and true method of generating solutions, of unearthing insights, feelings, and even flashes of brilliance. This is how it works:

Introduce the topic or question and then ask for input. You might want to go around the room and ask for each person’s opinion. Write down *every* suggested idea or solution. Using a chalkboard or easel with a large piece of paper is a good method, or one family member can simply write down ideas in a notebook.

During a brainstorming session, there are no bad ideas. Everyone is heard and encouraged. The premise of brainstorming is to open your mind to *all* of the possibilities, good, bad, and indifferent. This “no holds barred” approach gets the creative juices flowing. (Ultimately, the suggestions will be narrowed down to those that are truly meaningful.)

If your kids are a little older, you’ll likely hear “joke responses.” For example, when you ask what family members truly value, kids might say, with mischievous grins, “lots of money,” “chocolate,” or “a Nintendo game cube.” Have a good laugh, then write down their answers and draw them out with, “What is it about video game systems that you value?”—or candy or wealth. You’ll get to the underlying value—happiness, security, or fun—and have a good discussion in the process.

5. What are families for? What does our family believe in? What's important to us? What do we stand for?

6. What makes you happy? What activities give you the greatest joy? What activities do we like to do together as a family?

Once you've hashed over these questions, the secretary needs to take time to go over the notes and find those values that keep popping up over and over. Some values can be combined—for example, compassion and caring, or generosity and sharing. Keep the inventory of values to a manageable number, no more than about six or seven. These should be listed on a piece of paper, then copies made and given to all family members at the next session—the Vision meeting.

Vision Brainstorming Meeting

At the Vision meeting, family members will review the proposed family values list and agree to it or make suggestions for changes.

Then it's time to brainstorm again. Take each value and ask, "What are some examples of this value in action in everyday life?" Think of daily activities—how time is spent, interactions with others—when asking this question. For instance, the value of kindness might manifest itself in your family becoming a "no put-down zone"; the practice of peace might mean that siblings seek compromises when they disagree.

Next, the family will ask about each value, "What would our family look like if we practiced this value every day?" And, "What would the world look like if everyone practiced this value daily?"

The point to these questions—and the lesson that your children will hopefully learn—is that practicing each of these values begins at home, with our families, but that their impact is much broader. If we all practiced compassion, for example, it would be a very different world indeed. The message is that

(continued)

Caring for the Earth: We know that small efforts add up when caring for our planet, things like buying and driving less, turning off lights, and recycling.

Having Fun: Playing cards and board games, having water balloon fights, and telling jokes are some of the many ways we have fun.

Learning: We learn by going to school, reading, talking to others, observing nature—even by making mistakes.

Healthy Living: Eating nutritious food, exercising, getting enough sleep, and relaxing all promote health.

3. Our Family and World Vision. We believe that practicing these values can make a difference:

Caring/Compassion: If our family practices caring, we will all feel loved and cherished. If the world practices caring, no one would be left out or friendless.

Social Justice/Fairness: If our family practices justice, none of us will feel unfairly treated. If the world practices justice, there would be less suffering, less fighting, and perhaps no more wars.

Caring for the Earth: We keep our local environment beautiful and healthy with earth-friendly practices. If everyone did their part, there would be less pollution, more trees, an ozone layer—in short, an abundant planet for us and future generations.

Having Fun: If our family has fun, we'll enjoy each other more and work will be more like play. If people smiled and laughed more, it would be a more relaxed and peaceful world.

Learning: If our family seeks to learn more, we'll discover amazing facts, acquire useful skills, and entertain ourselves. With more learning, there would be less ignorance, bigotry, and prejudice.

Healthy Living: By taking care of ourselves, we're better able to enjoy life, even live longer. If the entire world were healthier, there would be fewer people dying unnecessarily and less suffering.

may want to make a point of reading it at family meetings or on some other regular basis.

Throughout this book—throughout your life—you’ll want to consult with this document, asking, for example, “Am I communicating and modeling my values? Is this activity or ritual in sync with our family’s beliefs? Does this school—movie, board game, book—teach the standards and principles that I want my children to learn?”

Sometimes you’ll forget to ask. And sometimes the answer will be “Not really,” but maybe you’ll allow the item or activity in question anyway. We’re only human! But the mere existence of this document will help keep you on the path. And referring back to it regularly will be a great aid in keeping the values you’ve expressed at the forefront, leading you to a much greater possibility of “living a life with no regrets.”

The Values of Simple Living Families

When I asked dozens of simple living families what their values were, they recited such principles as:

- Compassion
- Love
- Charity
- Family
- Community
- Respect for people and the earth
- Social justice
- Harmony
- Honesty
- Generosity
- Understanding
- Cooperation
- Peace
- Nonmaterialism
- Kindness
- Tolerance
- Diversity
- Responsibility

I will be focusing on these and other similar values in this book, whether the issue is how to communicate them, when

and how to protect your kids from sources that oppose them, or how rituals and other practices can enhance them.

Patti Idrobo of Livingston, New Jersey, one of the parents I interviewed, echoed the sentiments of many simple living parents when she spoke of her values: “I am most concerned with contributing toward making a more just world where there is less poverty, fewer human rights abuses, and less suffering. In my own circle of relationships, what matters to me is creating places of kindness and respect.” She defines success simply as “doing something important to make a better world.”

Nearly every family I interviewed included this concept in some form—contributing to the world, being a positive influence on the planet, giving back to the community, caring about others and the planet—in their values. Perhaps this is the overriding commonality of simple living values: Simple living families don’t just want the “good life”—more meaning, less stuff—for themselves; they want it for everyone and for the earth too.

I also asked the simple living families I interviewed what values they hoped to teach their kids. They noted, again almost without exception, that they wished to instill in their children a desire to make the world a better place. Living simply will help them do just that.

Resources

SOUL SEARCHING

Viktor E. Frankl. *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963).

Robert Fulghum. *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988).

Harold Kushner. *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).

Stephen Levine. *A Year to Live: How to Live This Year As If It Were Your Last* (New York: Bell Tower, 1997).

Bo Lozoff. *It’s a Meaningful Life: It Just Takes Practice* (New York: Viking/Arkana, 2000).



Quality and Quantity Time

At every stage of my kids' lives, I've wanted to freeze time. To keep them giggling, sweet smelling infants forever. To remain a bit longer as the hub of their toddler and preschooler universes. I hoped, futilely, that my oldest would always tell me stories about his imaginary friend, allowing me a peek into his whimsical four-year-old world. I never wanted my youngest to pronounce his L's properly, wishing he'd keep saying, "Mom, I yuv you a yot!"

My kids are nine and eleven now, but they're still young boys. My eleven-year-old grabs my hand as we walk along, even in public (though not in front of his friends). My nine-year-old still sits on my lap every morning, snuggles, and shares his dreams with me.

But they're growing every day. The time will come soon when my oldest will stop searching for my hand, and then my arm will hang limp at my side. Those spontaneous hugs may even cease along with the little "Love you, Mom" that he adds to the end of every phone conversation. My youngest will stop leaping into my arms and quit delivering on the

coupon for “free kisses and hugs for life” that he gave me one year on my birthday. He’ll forget to ask me to sit down next to him at night and “have a conversation.”

So I keep wishing, as many parents do, that time would stand still. Not for the sake of my aging body. I would gladly accept unlimited gray hair, cellulite, and crow’s-feet just to keep these boys young for a few more years. . . .

Childhood is a magical time. It’s also fleeting. Those years when you can claim to be at the center stage of your kids’ existences pass by all too quickly. And for many of us they coincide with our primary wage earning years. Not long ago I overheard two teachers talking about their upcoming retirements at my sons’ school. One teacher said she was looking forward to her leisure time but lamented that it all seemed a bit backward. “Shouldn’t we have our free time when our kids are young?” she wondered.

You can—by simplifying.

For those of us with children, more time with our kids is perhaps the greatest benefit that simplifying can offer. To me, simplifying is the closest thing to a magic wand, a sorcerer’s spell that appears to make time stand still.

Some individuals outside the simplicity movement are under the impression that the ultimate objective of living simply is to accumulate money. It’s not. Rather, freeing up money is one of the tools for achieving the true goals of voluntary simplicity, and chief among these goals for parents is having more time with their families.

Long on Things but Short on Time

That we haven’t enough time—for ourselves and for our kids—has been demonstrated over and over again.

We haven’t enough time to be with the people we love and to do the things we enjoy because we’re putting too many