

Building a Family Charter

How to Build an Emotional Intelligence Family Charter

We all want homes filled with love and laughter, kindness and generosity. As parents, we want our kids to both have the best and be their best – and, we want to help them get there! We also want to live in accordance with our values and be our “Best Selves” as parents.

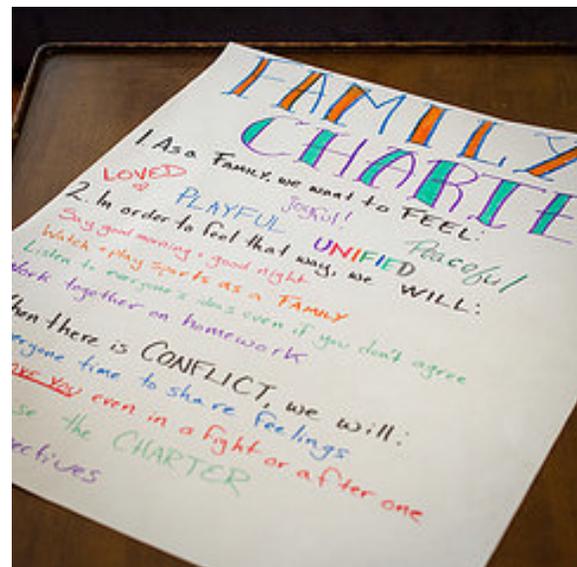
How can we make all of this happen? The answer likely can be found in a greater awareness of our own emotional lives as parents. With this awareness, we can model emotionally intelligent behaviors and guide our children through their own emotions.

What Is the Charter and why does it matter?

Emotions drive attention, memory, learning, and decision-making. Emotions influence relationships, health, well-being and success in life. This is well founded in scientific research.

The Charter establishes agreed-upon norms and guidelines, rather than rules, to help create an emotionally safe environment.

Your child (or children) may already be expert at building a Charter! The Charter serves as a foundation for a warm and productive learning environment and as a reminder for how everyone wants to feel and should behave so that these feelings exist in school. It sets the climate for the classroom.



Similarly, the first step to bringing RULER to families is to build an

Emotional Intelligence Family Charter. Your Family Charter will be a written pact that details how each member of your family wants to feel in your home. You will work as a family to list the commitments that each of you will make to each other so that you can all live together happily and peacefully. Developing your Family Charter together will be a creative and powerful experience that will likely enhance your family bond. Hopefully, each member of your family will enjoy the process of creating it too!

What you will need:

- Given the collaborative nature of developing a Family Charter, it's important to find the right time—when everyone is feeling calm and warm—and the most comfortable place to begin working on it. The Family Charter can take a while so make sure everyone can commit at least an hour. If your child (ren) is (are) younger, you can break up the process and develop the Family Charter in two or three family meetings.
- You will need chart paper or a blank sheet of paper to work on as well as colored pens or markers. Or, if you prefer, you can create your Family Charter on the computer and then print it out!

Feelings, not Rules

To begin, encourage your children to brainstorm with you about family rules. We all have them – everyday rules that somehow become part of the family culture. They are the rules that govern your household: “don’t do this” or “do this.” For example, no elbows on the dinner table; don’t chew with your mouth full; use your inside voice; no running down the stairs; everyone takes a turn; no television or videogames before homework is done; say “please” when you ask for something.

What are the rules in your house? With your son(s) or daughter(s), please list all the household rules you can. Importantly, give some thought to which of the rules your family actually follows.

We know that rules alone don't make for a happy home! They may help define expectations and behavior, but rules don't address directly what everyone wants and needs to feel in their own home. Your child's school has embraced the science that shows that emotions matter. Students have been told and seen firsthand how emotions matter a great deal for their performance in school, their daily decisions, and their interactions with their friends and teachers. Let your child know that you support learning about emotions through the RULER program and that you would like to establish the same type of Charter for your home.

Steps to creating the Family Charter:

There are three steps to creating a Family Charter, each of which is associated with a specific question. The first question pertains to how each family member wants to feel at home. The second question focuses on what everyone needs to do in order to have these feelings consistently. The third question centers on ways each family member can both prevent and manage uncomfortable feelings and conflict. Active listening (e.g., maintaining direct eye contact, showing interest by smiling, nodding, leaning in closer, asking open-ended questions) is critical to the success of this activity. Indeed, if your family members are not skilled in this area, it may be added to the Family Charter as one of key behaviors in Step 2. Let's begin!

Once you are all together in your family meeting:

Step 1

Ask everyone to think about how they would like to *feel* at home. What are the *feelings* and *emotions* everyone wants to have in your home? You can ask everyone to write the feelings down and then share or just go around and list all of the feelings that everyone mentions. Make sure you list all of the feelings. Then, as a family, discuss each word and work toward a top 5 list. For example, you might want to feel *respected, loved, connected, appreciated, and understood*. Write down your 'top 5' on a new piece of paper.

Step 2

For each word, discuss the things each person can do – the observable behaviors that each family member would need to exhibit in order to have the feeling as often as possible. It is important for both the adults and kids to discuss the things they could do each day to ensure each feeling is experienced – they likely are different for adults versus children, although sometimes they are the same. For instance, a parent may feel respected if their child offers to help clean up after dinner without having to ask. However, a child may feel more respected if the child's parent respects his or her privacy.

Spend a few minutes on each feeling and agree on one to two behaviors in which everyone can engage on a daily basis so that feeling can be present. Make sure each of the behaviors listed are concrete and readily observable. For instance, being 'nice' is not a real behavior, but smiling or

saying “good morning” to each other are observable behaviors (a behavior that everyone can see). As an example, if you want to feel respected, you might want family members to ask your opinion before family decisions are made, to make eye contact with you during discussions, to be ready to leave at a certain time in the morning, to return the things they borrow from you in a timely way, etc.

Step 3

No matter how much everyone tries to get along, conflicts and uncomfortable feelings are inevitable from time to time. Reflect on what can happen when someone doesn't behave in the ways you just listed in your Family Charter. It certainly will happen at some point that someone in the family will slip and not behave in a respectful way. For example, someone may scream and yell or do something to make you feel unloved. What will you do? How will you resolve that conflict or repair the hurt that was caused?

Brainstorm with your family: what specific behaviors would help your family regroup and re-align with the ideal feelings and behaviors mentioned in your Family Charter when uncomfortable feelings are experienced or unwanted behaviors are exhibited. List everything and then try to come up with five or so agreed-upon ways to both prevent and manage conflict. For example, you might agree as a family that a genuine apology in person or in a note is appropriate when someone hurts someone else, that talking things out in a timely fashion is necessary after a fight, that not holding grudges is important, and that allowing each person to have time to reflect is helpful before talking out a challenging situation.

Putting it all together:

Now its time to pull all aspects of the Family Charter together. This often is the most fun part of the project. Think art project! Be creative! Be original! Using your family's talent and ingenuity, have fun together as you assemble your Family Charter. There are no limits: it can be big or small, colorful, and embedded with pictures. You can use printed images from your computer, magazine cutouts, or draw or paint your own pictures. If you prefer a simpler, cleaner Family Charter, use just words and phrases—type it up and print it, or have each family member write out a certain part. It's up to you and your family! What's most important is that you have a final document that reveals the top 5 feelings, associated behaviors, and agreed-upon ways to prevent and manage conflict. Importantly, once the

Family Charter is complete, everyone must sign it and it should be displayed prominently in your home.

Keeping the Family Charter alive:

Once your Family Charter is displayed prominently in your home, it's everyone's job to make sure it's followed and kept alive. When will you review the Family Charter? How often will you read it as a family? Visible changes and lasting results will only be celebrated when the Family Charter becomes central to how your family communicates. Here are some general ways to keep the Family Charter alive. Surely, you and your family will generate additional ways.

- Schedule weekly or monthly family meetings to review the Charter.
What's working?
What's not? What do we need to do to make the Charter a larger part of our family's daily lives?
- Have each family member set a daily or weekly goal related to a part of the Charter he or she finds the most challenging to honor.
- Be creative – post weekly quotes, send out family emails, perform random acts to demonstrate the feelings in the Charter and show your appreciation for your family members following it.
- Revise the Family Charter, as needed. It should be a living document.
- Share your pride and your achievement. Tell friends and other families about your creating the Charter and how good you feel about the changes in your home as a result.