

# About FamilyJournal

## What It Is

Guided journaling for family sharing.

FamilyJournal (FEJ) is a website that encourages parents and their children to share their thoughts and feelings without face-to-face communication. The ultimate goal of FEJ is to improve the family's relationship and face-to-face communication by reestablishing trust and rapport through honest, open and guided written communication.

The FEJ website is a closed environment, meaning information and messages can only be exchanged with other family members. FEJ facilitates communication through the use of the Daily Experience Worksheet (DEW). This short list of questions, when answered and read by all other family members, should provide insight into each member's daily thoughts and feelings. Further, more personal and private communication can be accomplished by writing memos to specific family members. Such memos may be tagged as "private" and only read by the intended family member(s).

FEJ is here to help you communicate.

## Who It Is For

Not just for families with problems.

It seems that every family in America, even the world, would benefit if communication was improved. Even families that seem to have excellent communication may still benefit from FEJ.

### The Typical Busy Family

FEJ may be most valuable for those families that think they "just don't have time". FEJ is accessible anywhere, anytime provided there is Internet access. With more two-income families, single parent and divorced families, and kids busy with increased requirements for graduation and after school activities, families barely have time to talk about what is going on from day to day let alone get into a deep, heavy, intense conversation where both people are really sharing and opening up.

FEJ gives you the time and flexibility to really express yourself to the people who care about you the most.

### The Family with Some Communication Issues

This is where FEJ can really excel. The differences between kids and parents can be so great and the gap seems to be ever increasing. With FEJ, even families that seem to have no verbal communication might be able to open the lines again.

**Parents:** We know you love your children but for one reason or another, the lines of communication have been broken. You want to be sure that your child is safe and healthy and staying away from high-risk behavior.

**Kids:** The research shows that you really do want to be able to talk with your parents but conversations can be difficult, embarrassing or turn into arguments. You've gotten to the point where it's easier just to



avoid your parents completely. We understand how out-of-control life can be and we want to help you get some of the happiness back.

For those families with communication problems, from the minor to the “we avoid each other at all costs”, FEJ might be just tool to reopen the lines of communication. By working with FEJ you might not even feel as if you are communicating with your family but if they’re reading your DEW then they’re getting to know what you’re thinking and feeling. If you take those few minutes a day to jot down your thoughts and feelings and read what your family members have written then you’re already getting back on track.

Without all the arguing and eye rolling and interruptions, you may finally get to “hear” their point-of-view and they will finally “hear” yours. Being in the same room may not be so difficult, over time, and eventually you will rebuild the trust and respect and even feel the love your family has for you.

## The Family with Serious Problems

Unfortunately, this is one area that may be beyond the means of FEJ. If your family is in need or already seeking professional help from a psychologist or family counselor then FEJ may not be for you. FEJ does not offer counseling or advice in any way. FEJ is intended to help bring families closer together by providing a forum for written, guided communication. If your family has more serious problems and are battling issues like severe depression, any kind of abusive behavior or other clinically defined disease or illness, please contact your health care professional or see the Links and Hotlines pages on our website.

Your health care professional may decide to recommend FamilyeJournal as part of your treatment and we would be more than happy to include you in our family.

## Why It Works

Taking advantage of the written word.

FamilyeJournal approaches family communication in terms of the written word. For decades attempts have been made to improve family communication with the philosophy that verbal communication, “talking”, is the best way. If this were truly working than tips for verbal communication would have ended years ago.

FEJ and the Daily Experience Worksheet (DEW) are not intended to spy on parents or children but rather provide a safe environment where family members can share their thoughts and feelings. The more people share the more “connected” they feel and the healthier they tend to be, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

The DEW is a series of four simple questions that change each day and are answered by each family member. By having all family members answer the same questions we remove any status or age biasing and establish a level of equality where no one family member is expected to discuss a topic while others are not. The level of sharing is up to the individual and over time, as trust and rapport improves, family members are likely to share even more openly and honestly.

At first glance users may wonder how such simple DEW questions can really improve connectedness. This is where the term “guided” really comes into play. Often times, in journaling, writing or just the thought of having a “conversation”, people say they “don’t know what to say.” FEJ opens the lines of communication and keeps them open by asking the question (i.e. the DEW) to help you start communicating. With each tiny bit of information you share and learn about a family member a natural feeling and new level of closeness is achieved. In the beginning, answers may be short and very basic but over time and with regularity, a greater trust and rapport will be built.

FEJ is not a “quick fix” to your family’s communication issues. It can very much be compared to dieting. The only true way to lose weight is by taking in fewer calories than what is expended each day. Then, little by little, the pounds will fade away. By sharing a little bit about yourself each day with the people who care about you the most, the closeness will come.

FEJ encourages its users to share their thoughts and feelings even when not specifically asked by the DEW. The DEW provides additional space to write about any topic on that user’s mind. They can write as much or little as they choose and all other family members will have access to it.

If a user wishes to discuss something more private and personal they can use the Memo feature. Writing a memo is just like writing an email message but this feature is local to the FEJ website and can only be used to send a message to someone in his or her own family. Just imagine how much easier and more productive it will be to discuss the more sensitive life topics?

FEJ works because it takes advantage of the disinhibiting effects of cyberspace. Dr. John Suler, author of the online ebook *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, describes in detail, why people are more likely to share their more private thoughts and feelings online. Dr. Suler sites six reasons why communicating online is so effective and these principles are applicable to FEJ.

1. **Anonymity** – Separating what you write from your real world actions provides a level of dissociation and a feeling of a distinct, online identity.
2. **Invisibility** – When your audience isn’t physically present to trade non-verbal communication like disapproving frowns and looks of embarrassment, you’re more like to write about topics you wouldn’t normally be comfortable discussing.
3. **Asynchronicity** – Since you are not interacting in “real” time readers have time to think before responding and writers can maintain a train of thought often leading to a deeper expression of how they think and feel.
4. **It's All in My Head** – Written communication is “heard” with your “mind’s ear” where dialogue is free and safe. The safety in your mind may translate to your writing where you are more likely to openly communicate than if you were speaking face-to-face.
5. **Leveling the Playing Field** – Online status is mostly determined by your skill in communicating (including writing skills) and the quality of your ideas. Authority is minimized and relationships feel more “peer-like” so people are much more willing to speak (or write) their mind.
6. **Interaction Effects** – The online disinhibition effect will interact with each personality differently. In some cases resulting in a small deviation from the person's baseline (offline) behavior, while in other cases causing dramatic changes.

FEJ is also successful because it encourages self-disclosure. Psychotherapy requires a certain degree of self-disclosure. Similarly, writing about emotional experiences has been shown to serve as a means of communication and has led to significant improvements in physical and mental health (Pennebaker, 1997). Writing and sharing personal experiences through the DEW and interpersonal memos can be thought of as a writing paradigm. A successful rapport on FEJ could lead to a much improved face-to-face relationship and improvement in its user's behavior.

## Why We Need It

### Communication is Key

It may seem obvious why family communication is so important but what really happens when the lines of communication breakdown?

In researching the topic of family communication we found that while poor communication hurts all family members, it is the child that seems to be hurt the most. When families aren't communicating the sense of connectedness goes away. Many studies have been done on this topic and the results show that when the feeling of connectedness is gone, the child is more likely to participate in high-risk behavior.

For a multitude of reasons, ranging from today's "rush" society to changing family dynamics to hormonal changes, the gap between what parents think and what their children think and do is still increasing, especially in the areas of high-risk behaviors.

Studies show that teenagers top concern is that they do not have enough time with their parents. Oddly enough, teens were three times more likely to say this than their parents. Furthermore, even when parents and teens are talking, their ideas are not getting through. For example, one study showed that 64% of parents think they talk to their children about values and beliefs on a frequent basis but teens are only hearing it 41% of the time.

"Reality gap" is a term used to describe the difference between what parents think their children are doing and what the children say they are actually doing. For example, 56% of parents believe their teens would call them for a ride home from a party where they have been drinking while only 13% of teens say they would call their parents for transportation.

The lack of communication and miscommunication between parents and teens has far reaching ramifications. Teens rank "Teen Suicide" as fifth on their list of concerns whereas parents rank it as 17<sup>th</sup>. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in 15-19 year olds and fourth leading cause of death in 10-14 year olds (CDC, 1996) supporting the notion that teens really do, and parents do not, understand today's teen issues. More recently, suicide has been reported as the fourth leading cause of death for 10-24 year olds (CDC MMWR, 2012)

In the end, it is the quality of the relationship between the parent(s) and the child that has the greatest influence on the child's behavior. When young people are close to their parents and family they are less likely to report involvement in high-risk behavior, and parents need both the skills and support to form caring, connected relationships with their children.

Study after study shows that improved communication between parents and their children leads to less risky behavior. At the same time, society's current solutions focus on "tips for communication". All these references are focused toward improving face-to-face, verbal communication. In today's society, where nearly 50 percent of American households have a computer and 41 percent have access to the Internet (US Census Bureau-Home Computers, 2000) and new wireless and portable devices being offered every day, the opportunity to improve communication within a family through the use of this technology is only a few keystrokes away.

FamilyeJournal solves the communication problem using the technology of today.

*Note: While this document was originally written in 2003 it has been reviewed for accuracy in December 2012.*