

## **Collaborative Conversations: Creating Positive Family Dynamics**

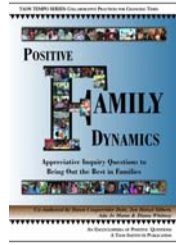
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# Collaborative Conversations: Creating Positive Family Dynamics

Dawn Cooperrider Dole, Jen Hetzel Silbert, & Ada Jo Mann

**Where appreciation is alive and generations are reconnected through inquiry, hope grows and family expands.**  
- David Cooperrider

*This article's authors; Dawn Cooperrider Dole, Jen Hetzel Silbert, & Ada Jo Mann, have worked together (with Diana Whitney) on the book Positive Family Dynamics, a wonderful resource for parents and family members who want to bring out the best in their families. The questions, stories and activities in this book help to create relationships within the family which will nurture respect, love, and care.*



In our work, we help people in organizations and communities around the world engage with each other in meaningful conversations and very frequently, our clients have expressed their desire to have these kinds of conversations at home with family members. We know that everyone, no matter their age, gender or race, has a meaningful contribution to make; and that being invited to share ideas, thoughts and feelings builds self confidence and relationships. We were moved by this yearning and the result was our book, *Positive Family Dynamics: Appreciative Inquiry Questions to Bring Out the Best in Families*<sup>1</sup>.

Appreciative Inquiry questions are intended to be seeds, ideas to stimulate your curiosity and communication. They may be used in a one-on-one conversation or in a small group conversation among several family members. Here are six ideas for how to use positive questions to bring out the best in your family and create positive family dynamics.

## 1. Stimulating meaningful communication.

Meaningful questions lead to meaningful conversations. To stimulate interesting and energizing communication in your family, get in the habit of asking meaningful questions about the things you really care about. Try these: "How was your day?" Or, "What was the most creative thing you did today?" Each question stimulates a different kind of response. Question two requires thoughtfulness and description – the two ingredients of meaningful communication. Whether you are having a family dinner, taking a walk in the park, or driving to visit

friends, you have an opportunity to ask a question to stimulate a meaningful conversation. A positive question is contagious.

*Before Paul's son headed off to college he asked his son what were his fondest memories, greatest joys and the best parts of his life so far. Within that conversation, they found a powerful tool to dissolve the usual generational gap and forge opportunities for new conversations in the future.*

## 2. Honoring and remembering family elders.



Appreciative questions are a great way to start the flow of story telling. Consider questions like, "What was the best part of life growing up on a farm? What did you like most about having a large family? What was the most exciting thing about going to college?" Questions can draw out the positive experiences of the family's elders and enable them to share their past with other family members. Likewise, in remembering our family elders, appreciative questions help us learn and become aware of the specialness in one another. By being heard, family members feel cared for, affirmed and included. Healthy, dynamic families grow and develop through the continued skill of listening and learning.

**Perhaps the greatest social service that can be rendered by anybody, to the country and to mankind, is to bring up a family.**  
- George Bernard Shaw

*At my father's funeral, we asked everyone present at the luncheon to share a story, an appreciation or a memory of my father. In the span of two hours, almost everyone shared something special about my dad. I learned so many ways in which my dad had touched people's lives and how he cared for them and supported them. I will forever be changed knowing how many lives my dad touched in meaningful ways during his life.*

### 3. To bring your family history to life.



Some families make a practice of telling stories about their family history. When the stories are positive, family members gain pride and confidence about who they are and what they can contribute to society. One way to seed family stories is to ask questions about the past. Positive, appreciative questions can be used to gather a family anthology, a collection of stories about people and events in the family's history. One family we know made Christmas ornaments of family events and each year hung them on the family tree. Another family uses birthday celebrations as an opportunity to tell stories about their "proudest moment" or "greatest joy," drawing from joyful memories of the person being celebrated. A simple question such as, "Share a story about our family, current or past, that makes you glad to be a family member" can illicit great stories and bring your family history to life.

*Recently some cousins and I engaged in a spontaneous inquiry into memories of our belated great grandmother, Oma. But more than sharing memories of her, we brought back the many stories she used to tell us about her childhood in Germany – her*

*memories of what it was like during the war, the tragic death of her brother, and arriving to the US for the first time. Those stories reminded me of the larger legacy to which I now belong, and I now have the pleasure of sharing them with my own daughters and keeping that precious history alive for generations still to come.*

### 4. To bring out confidence in family members.



Self-confidence is not something that happens once and lasts forever. All through a person's life, events and relationships can bring out self-confidence or they can knock it off center. A great way to bring out a family member's self-confidence is to remind them specifically what it is that you appreciate and value about them. This means asking yourself the question, "What do I appreciate and value about this family member, and how can I express it to them?" You may write your answers on a card, leave them on a voice message, or share them face-to-face. We are never too old for sincere appreciation that specifically describes our unique gifts and abilities.

Another way to build self-confidence is to ask the other person questions about their unique gifts, abilities, hopes and dreams. People often have low self-confidence when they are disconnected from the self they wish to be. Asking them to share their dreams with you, and taking time to listen to them is one way to help people remember what is important to them. What we ask determines what we find, which determines how we talk, how we imagine, and ultimately what we achieve.

*When I prepare school lunches for my children each morning I include a special note on a napkin or colorful paper. This note expresses my love along with an appreciation, acknowledgement or compliment for something he/she has done recently, or an encouragement for an upcoming challenge. I use this gesture to nurture their confidence and self-image – for the person they are and can be.*

### 5. To strengthen relationships among family members.



Families are rich networks of relationships that cross genders and generations. Taking time to discover what others in the family care about and aspire to deepens relationships. One way you can create collaborative conversations to strengthen relationships is to create a birthday process for family members to acknowledge their relatedness. Imagine having family members tell you what they value and love most about you as a mother, sister, aunt, spouse, grandmother, etc. Or perhaps on Valentine's Day, members of your family send letters declaring, "What I value and love most about you as my sister, brother, parent is..."

The key to using positive questions to deepen relationships is to make them fun and age-appropriate. Affirming the value of relatives deepens relationships, builds confidence, and celebrates roles within the family and contributes to a positive emotional climate that can nurture creativity and self-expression.

*One very athletic family started the practice of asking each other at dinner to name all of the really good plays they observed when they attended one of their siblings athletic events. Not only did this practice make the person being celebrated feel proud, but it also helped develop the appreciative eye of each of the siblings*

### 6. To create a family vision and path forward.



All generations want to have a say in their own lives. Dynamic families include the ideas of all family members in creating their vision. A vision is a description of a family when it is at its best. Positive questions can help you discover your family values as you create the family vision. For example, "If you woke up tomorrow and our family was exactly like you always wished it could be, what would be different? Imagine that our family got an award for the family of the year, what award would we get and why? Using questions to bring out the best in families relies on the willingness to listen to peoples' stories with sincere curiosity and compassion. By having the opportunity to be heard, family members feel cared for, affirmed and included.

*A Nepalese friend of mine informed me that there are thousands of families throughout Nepal who are now spending time as a family using appreciative questions to guide their families. They are creating a family vision through dialogue and this is being encouraged in villages across the country. He told me that they want to be the first country to be called an "Appreciative*

*Inquiry based" country and they believe this starts with the family.*

The gift of a dynamic family is the ability to ask for and then listen to peoples' stories with sincere curiosity and compassion. By being heard, family members feel cared for,

affirmed and included – no matter the distance in miles or difference in age.

What story, if asked, would you be most proud to share about your family?

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<sup>i</sup> Excerpts of this article were taken from the book, *Positive Family Dynamics: Appreciative Inquiry Questions to Bring Out the Best in Families*, co-authored by Dawn Cooperrider Dole, Jen Hetzel Silbert, Ada Jo Mann, and Diana Whitney, available through the Taos Institute [www.taosinstitute.net](http://www.taosinstitute.net).