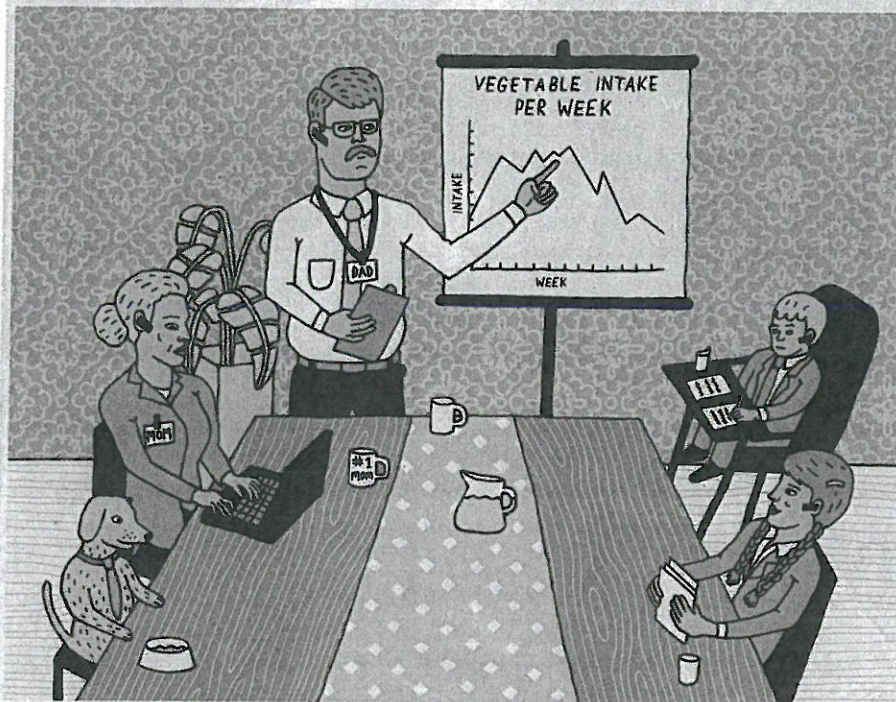


# Family



## Executive Parenting. New books show how to run your family like a business

By Bonnie Rochman

ONE FRIDAY NIGHT LAST YEAR, A MOM AND a dad and their 7-year-old twins were making Jiffy Pop while brainstorming about how to brand their family. This was no idle exercise. At stake was the sanity of the parents, Linda Rottenberg and Bruce Feiler.

Getting their daughters out the door in the morning was a daily disaster. Their evenings—trying to feed the girls, bathe them and scramble them into bed—were no better. Traditional parenting guides served up advice that struck Feiler, a best-selling author, as tired and outdated. He started poking around elsewhere and found that the world of business management offered plenty of ideas that could be applied to child wrangling: regular meetings, team-building exercises, even a mission statement that articulates a family's shared values. (Feiler and family's statement, excerpted: "We live lives of passion. We love to learn. We don't like dilemmas; we like solutions. We are joy, rapture, yay!")

Feiler lays out his sunny management

ethos for domestic life in *The Secrets of Happy Families*, which views child rearing as a kind of graduate-school case study, pushing data-driven solutions—from business, sports and peace negotiations—to calm the cacophony. In the like-minded *Family Inc.*, authors Caitlin and Andrew Friedman advocate holding an annual meeting just as a board of directors would and treating babysitters, nannies and housekeepers as bona fide employees, complete with HR-style job descriptions and on-the-job training.

"We're conditioned to seeing home as a place to relax, but that's not the reality," Caitlin Friedman says. "You go home from work, but you still have a bunch of to-dos. If you treat running a family like a business, you can be really efficient."

A buttoned-up, task-oriented approach may find particular resonance among workforce veterans who waited until later in their careers to have children. "This data-driven model appeals to them," says Sarah

Schoppe-Sullivan, an associate professor of human sciences at Ohio State who focuses on family dynamics. "People are already thinking about work at home and home at work, so applying business principles may be a way of bridging the conflict."

No doubt, the swing to business-inspired plans for raising Junior might strike some parents as contrived. Family branding? Accountability checklists for 5-year-olds? But perhaps it's no surprise that parents want an all-business retort to culturally oriented blockbusters like Pamela Druckerman's *Bringing Up Bébé*, which marveled at French parents' emphasis on self-control and autonomy, and Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which spun tales of hard-charging Chinese-style parenting geared toward producing superachievers. This year the advice is straight out of an American MBA program: Parent like a corporate executive.

As long as this trend holds, it provides a moment to ditch the usual, well-credentialed child-development talking heads. In *The Secrets of Happy Families*,

Feiler reaches out to Warren Buffett's advisers for insight on meting out allowances, to members of the Harvard Negotiation Project for tips on resolving family conflicts, and to fans of agile development, a beloved tool of software-industry execs, for ideas on punching up his family's productivity. Agile devotees hold a weekly review to consider three key questions. Feiler adapted the practice to his family, asking, What worked well in our family this week? What went wrong in our family this week? What will we work on this coming week?

Parents—and I'm one of them—might notice that business best practices are making forays into other child-centric zones. My 10-year-old's public school has created a "vision and values" statement, and his soccer league distributes an agile-esque "parent expectations" document urging moms and dads to deconstruct the sporting life by posing four questions to their kids: What did you enjoy about the game? What did you do well? What did you learn? What do you want to improve before the next game? When I recently asked my son what he enjoyed about his game, he wasted no time on introspection: "Winning."

Spoken like a true captain of industry.

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL WINKLER FOR TIME