On Your Mind, with Dr. Jon Robinson

**May/June 2017 issue theme: Summer**

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 Every year my husband and I sit down and plan a vacation for a week or two that’s within our budget and when we can get time off from work. Our three children, ages 7, 10, and 12, seem to always find something wrong with our choice and plans. By this time we’ve made reservations and accommodations, but the kids just seem to complain, even though we are doing this for them! Go figure. Help.

Signed,

At Wit’s End

Dear At Wit’s End,

 Good for you for making annual plans to get away and have some fun. I’m sad that it seems the kids are intent on spoiling your efforts. I have some thoughts, though.

First, I ask two questions. Why this? Why now? Things don’t happen in a vacuum, and our kids will often take their cues from each other and from their parents. It sounds like your family has a bad case of the glass half empty. When making vacation plans, or for that matter any time things go awry, start with active listening. Remember, this is your go-to response when you see your child having an emotional fever. Listen for their feelings and say them back to them. When they feel heard, they will then become more agreeable.

Second, don’t let the kid’s gang up on the grown-ups. Remember, a family is not a democracy. There’s no voting. Parents are in charge, but the key is to be a benevolent despot. That is, understand the needs and feelings of all parties before making decisions. Also, I don’t know the make-up of your children, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the 7 year old is mimicking the older two to get their approval and attention. You might want to encourage individual perspective to avoid the power play.

Third, vacation planning is great opportunity for family meetings. Set the agenda a week ahead of time, and meet for an hour. If you need more time, set another meeting. Brainstorm any vacation ideas from anyone in the family. No comments, just list making. Then, go back through the list more realistically with regard to time, expense, and feasibility. Focus on ideas that meet the most needs and where each family member can find good about it. Encourage discussion, but not bickering. Set firm boundaries and hold to them. Assign something for each person to do in preparation for the vacation, so that all feel included. Always, where there is blow-back, start with active listening to help the tension come down. Have consequences for non-participation. Focus on the fun of it. The kids will take your lead and end up having fun themselves, and all of you will feel closer to each other. Enjoy. Have fun.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 You know that I love my kids, but summer time, when school is out, is exhausting for me!! Both my husband and I work full-time, so we share kid duty, but that seems to be 24/7 during the summer. I just hold my breath and count the days until school starts back up again. Suggestions?

Signed,

Frantic

Dear Frantic,

 I’m exhausted just reading your letter (LOL). It does seem that everything during the summer time off from school is inside out and backwards. You didn’t give me a lot to go on, but I’ll give it a shot. You said “kids,” so I assume you have more than one and that they are all in school with some variation in age and development. The key to survival with children in any family is structure, supervision, and accountability.

Structure begins with a family meeting where all parties voice what would be a fantastic summer experience. Brainstorm available activities and allow for those items within your time and financial constraints. If you don’t already have one, create a dry erase monthly calendar with big blocks for each day in the month. For kids old enough, they can post events on the calendar as well, as long as they are cleared with you. Review calendar events weekly, usually on Sunday afternoons, to keep it current and make corrections/additions. This structure will take a ton of stress off you. It spreads the load and each family member takes responsibility for their events. It also teaches to ask permission, plan ahead, and post. If it’s not on the calendar, it’s not going to happen.

Next is supervision. Kids 12 years and older can be left alone and/or in charge of younger siblings for up to 3 hours, but that’s a last resort. If finances exist, week-long, summer day camps are available and usually involve specific interests. My granddaughter is going to two weeks of cartooning camp at UGA this summer. Less expensive options include day camps at local schools, churches, or the YMCA. Idle time is the devil’s workshop, so keep your kids active and engaged. Computer gaming 24/7 in their rooms is not a viable option. Most studies limit gaming time to an hour per day for children. Social media may be engaging but also has its downside and should be likewise limited.

Finally, accountability is critical. Even older teens need to ask permission, check in, and advise when there is a change of plans. I encourage the principle of responsible freedom. That is, give your teen as much freedom as he/she demonstrates responsibility for. When he becomes irresponsible, pull back on the freedom. Kids 12 and older should be responsible for a cell phone with limited capability and a GPS app. If your kids are younger than 12, and you both are working with limited time off, you may want to consider hiring a local college student to be a work-day nanny for your children. Accountability also means talk about and follow through on The Rules, with attending reward and consequence.

Hopefully attention to these details will yield less stress, less worry, and more fun for all of you. Hang in there, Frantic, and you might re-name yourself Calmer.