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HOME IMPROVEMENT GOAL:
Demolish selfishness.

HOME IMPROVEMENT TOOL:
Build kindness.



Chapter 1

BUILDING KINDNESS

Share the load ... the laundry load, that is!

#yougottalaugh

GARY: Early on, I wasn't considerate enough of Karolyn's needs. Thankfully, she was (and is) persistent in letting me know.

#Consider me way more considerate now than when we started out!

SHANNON: My kids won't let me not consider their needs. They're sweet, but very verbal . . . and very assertive. **#Consider me out for the count at bedtime!**

"THAT'S MINE!" "You're in my space." "We don't ever do what I want to do."

Do you frequently hear comments like these around your home? Are they typically said with an angry or critical attitude?

If you answered yes to these questions, you're not alone!

Comments and attitudes such as these suggest that your family, like many others, deals with selfishness. You're also not alone if "less selfishness" is at the top of your home improvement list.

For starters, you may be tired of your children arguing over toys or fighting about who gets to sit by the window or eat the last cookie. Like most parents, you just want a little peace and quiet. You ask, "Why can't you kids just get along?"

Plus, you may desire that your children grow up knowing how to share and get along with others. You realize that now, not later, is the time to train them in these skills.

Then there's you and your spouse. You each may wish the other person would step up their share of the work around the house or just be more supportive of your ideas and feelings. Cleaning, laundry, and bills are not going to do themselves, after all! You ask, "I thought we were a team. Why aren't you helping me?"

Just sharing a house can spark problems. If your family shares bathrooms, you know what I mean . . .

You have to wait to get in the bathroom and sometimes have to deal with sharing the space with another family member. Then you've got the issue of little to no counter space, which means other people's stuff gets mixed in with your stuff. For family members who prefer clean spaces, this can also mean a messy kid—or spouse—may regularly be undoing your tidying-up efforts. Or how about the person who takes forever in the shower?

Waiting. Sharing. Protecting our space and our stuff. Not fun! If we were talking about literal home improvement,

a bathroom renovation in this case would definitely be much appreciated. I can imagine renovators removing a wall, repositioning the shower or toilet, or updating the bathroom vanity to modernize and maximize space.

Similarly, selfishness in the family makes us feel cramped for space and time. We can't touch each other's stuff without backlash. We may be criticized if we want or take time to ourselves. Or we may fail to understand or offer help to each other when that help could go a long way in easing another's stress. Although the physical space issues that necessitate sharing can be annoying, the selfish attitudes behind the backlash, criticism, or lack of understanding can be even more frustrating.

Of course, we expect selfishness from small children. In fact, it doesn't seem to take them long to realize that they don't like someone messing with their stuff. But many adults continue well beyond childhood holding on to selfishness in one area or another. Our loved ones may call us out for our selfishness. We, too, may know we're being selfish. But it's up to us to decide whether or not we will resist our selfish tendencies for the good of our home life.

We hear about this all the time as we counsel families. Nearly everyone would like to build a family less selfish, more kind and considerate. But before we try to fix the problem, we validate people's feelings because that's an important part of home improvement—simply acknowledging that family members' thoughts and feelings matter. We then spend time talking through personal expectations and defining what selfishness is and how it negatively impacts family relations.

As part of those home improvement talks, I work with people to see that not all “selfish” thoughts and feelings are bad. Thoughts and feelings can sometimes represent valid desires for consideration or help. After all, a child may not truly be selfish in the worst sense of the word; she is

Not all
“selfish”
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and feelings
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merely young and heartbroken over having to share a favorite toy. Or a husband may have worked diligently to get household chores done in time to watch his favorite team play on television; he isn’t necessarily being selfish because of making a little time for his own special interests.

While increasing understanding is an important improvement tool, in this chapter, the primary tool I want to encourage you to add to your home improvement toolbox is kindness, and more specifically, consideration of your family’s needs.

Why kindness?

You’ve been kind throughout your life, so you know what kindness is. It’s making sure your spouse has his or her favorite peanut butter as opposed to buying the cheaper brand you’d prefer to buy; it’s listening to your spouse or child vent when you’d prefer to be reading your magazine or taking a nap; and it’s giving up watching your favorite home improvement television show so that you can spend time with your child who wants to watch SpongeBob.

You’ve also benefited from the kindness of others. So you know how it feels when your spouse texts you to check in on how you’re doing, when your child picks up her toys

to surprise you when you come home from work, and when your family treats you special on your birthday.

Why are you kind? Why did someone else's consideration of you matter? I believe the answer is the same for both questions—consideration makes people feel like their needs matter. We want our loved ones to know their needs matter to us, and we want to know that our needs matter to them. Selfishness, on the other hand, conveys the opposite—that our needs are more important than their needs. Just as no physical home is perfect, no home life is perfect. We're human, so we know to expect some selfishness. But the less selfishness and the more kindness, the better!



DRAWING UP THE PLANS

When renovating our home, we, or a contractor, envision in our minds, then draw on paper or computer what our desired improvements will look like. I encourage families to do the same thing with their home life improvement plans, or “blueprints.” You already know what you don't want. But what *do* you want?

How will you and your family be more considerate of one another going forward? What would home life look like if you and they were more considerate of one another? I encourage you to think through your specific goals and talk with your family about it as well. They may be curious about and encouraged by your desire to involve them in a home improvement project. They also may have helpful

insights and input about how to decrease selfishness and increase consideration. You're wise to hold these types of family meetings during dinner, at bedtime, or at other peaceful times when you have your family's attention. This is generally more effective than trying to discuss and decide upon family goals during times of conflict.

You might begin by asking each family member to make a list of the complaints they have heard from others. Perhaps Mom has complained that Brent does not put his toys in the closet when he has finished playing. The complaint reveals an area where Brent can be more considerate.

To help you generate ideas for increasing consideration, let me share with you a few examples of people with whom I or Shannon have worked over time.

We should work for less conflict rather than no conflict.

One mom told Shannon, "I feel like my kids fight all of the time. I guess they're no more selfish than the average teenagers, but I wish they could talk through problems and get along better."

Shannon reminded the mom that getting along, or having less conflict, is a well-intentioned goal. Some parents unrealistically want no conflict at all. Instead, we should work for less conflict rather than no conflict. We will share practical help in resolving conflicts in chapter 4.

Another mom shared with me that she was tired of fussing at her children to help around the house. Her home improvement plans included wanting the children to follow through with their chores as expected rather than she

or her husband having to remind them. For this to happen, we need to communicate clear consequences of what happens when they don't do their chores. Make a list of chores for each child and the consequences if they do not complete the chores on time. Then consistently apply the consequences. Affirm the children when they do the chores in a timely manner.

Here is an idea that many couples have found helpful. Agree to share with each other one request each week as to what would make life easier for you. Before you make the request, tell your spouse two things you like or appreciate about them. Then make your request. Notice I say "request" and not "demand"! You are giving them information. It is their choice to consider your request or not. Once the two of you begin to make changes to please the other, your family life will be enhanced.



DO-IT-YOURSELF

You're perhaps familiar with the phrase "do-it-yourself," which is commonly abbreviated DIY. When it comes to home renovations, DIY means that instead of calling a professional, you complete a home improvement project on your own.

For Shannon and me, DIY takes on a whole new meaning. Yes, families must do their own work; Shannon and I can't go house to house fixing people's families. But more than doing your own work, DIY for us means that you

have to model for your family the behavior you want to see them exhibit. You must do it yourself. In this case, if you want more consideration in your children and spouse, you must increase your consideration of your children and your spouse.

Here is where it gets tough for many of us. We would rather talk about how selfish and inconsiderate our spouse or children are than look at our own selfishness and lack of consideration. That's a bad habit that we have to break if we want to make real and lasting home life improvements.

You have to model for your family the behavior you want to see them exhibit.

A good DIY starting place in the area of kindness is to step up your self-awareness. Watch how you interact with your loved ones. Notice when you're being inconsiderate and the effects it has on your family. Or better yet, notice when your family is upset with you, then ask yourself, how am I being inconsiderate of my family at this moment? Also notice your reaction to what you perceive as selfishness by your loved ones. Are you reacting to their selfishness with your own selfishness? On the flip side of that, did your selfishness and lack of consideration of their needs in some way contribute to their selfish behavior?

The fact that you haven't closed the book at this point is a good sign that you're willing to consider DIY. It's hard to look at our own shortcomings, but we clearly see shortcomings of others. Through a more compassionate lens, we can increase our self-awareness and take more responsibility for our own selfishness.



ALL-IN BUDGET

My favorite home improvement shows often talk to people about their “all-in budget.” A couple will say, for example, that they have \$100,000 for home renovations. The renovation team then works within the couple’s budget to provide as many of the desired renovations as possible within that budgeted amount.

For Shannon and me, “all-in” in home life improvement means two things. First, families need to be all *in*, or fully committed to making change, even though it may take lots of hard work. Second, families need to be *all* in so that no one family member is expected to take on the brunt of the work. You are a team, after all, and need to work together to improve your relationships and interactions with one another.

Commitment needs to be initiated and sustained by the parents. Just as home renovators often work with construction crews, you as parents are the crew chiefs and must lead well and involve your family (your crew) so that more progress can be accomplished more quickly. If you lack commitment as the team leader, your family will also likely lack commitment.

Your unity is an important foundation that positively affects all other family relationships. As the old saying goes, “many hands make light work.” Home life improvements are family projects! You can’t “make” people change, and you can’t do each other’s part to bring about the change you desire. But if as a couple you are working together, and you lead your family to join you, the possibilities for change are limitless!

Commitment and teamwork are important home life improvement tools that help make change more achievable. How can commitment and teamwork foster consideration of others? Think about your own plans for demolishing selfishness at home.

If your plan includes family members talking through problems rather than arguing for their own way, then commitment and teamwork to increase consideration might mean that you and your family call a “time out” before or during an argument to cool down and approach the matter more calmly. You can then hear better what the other person’s point of view is and perhaps share your perspective in a more reasonable way so that the other person can better understand your viewpoint.

Or perhaps one of your family goals is that people consider the importance of each other’s personal space. You and your family talk about why Mom’s home office is special to her, why Dad’s workshop is special to him, why a brother’s collection is special to him, why a sister’s art table is important to her. Each of you commits to honoring these special spaces in reasonable ways, and then you remember to thank each other whenever another person honors their commitment. Commitment and teamwork are needed to make your personal space goal possible.

Right about now you might be saying, “Gary, that will never work in our house. We’ve tried!” You’re right, it won’t work unless you have a plan, unless you DIY, and unless you and your family are all in!

Jeremy and Lori had similar doubts. After several half-

hearted attempts at change, they decided it was time to step up their efforts. They explained to their children what kindness is and what they wanted it to look like for them as a family. Lori told me later, “The children really got into it and started calling everybody out, including us, whenever we were inconsiderate toward someone. At first, that was a little annoying, but it actually started to sink in. We’re still not perfect, but we’ve come a long way.”



SWEAT EQUITY

Time and effort! As in literal home improvement, we just can’t seem to get away from work, can we? Although we wish we could automatically have the home life and relationships we want with no extra effort on our part, that’s just not realistic for any individual, couple, or family. We have to put in the hard work, or sweat equity, to have the home life we desire.

In chapter 1, we’ve explored the home improvement tool of consideration. The following is a recap of important tips for decreasing selfishness and building kindness in our home:

- **Be realistic.** Children don’t come fully equipped with consideration skills. As you establish your home improvement goals, factor in your kids’ age and stage of life so that you’re not asking more of them than they’re developmentally ready to accomplish. In fact, simple, achievable goals will help foster the kindness you desire.
- **Be patient.** Adults don’t break selfish habits overnight.

You all need time to learn new habits. However, this shouldn't be an open-ended excuse for not considering and attending to the needs of your loved ones.

- **Don't stop believing!** We sometimes see home improvement shows and think, "That's out of my range." We may also look at other families in the same way: "I wish we could be like them, but we never will." Many families are discouraged and doubt their potential for change. But this is where you have to decide: "Do I do nothing? Or do I do *something*?" Doing something—even making the smallest effort—is progress. As Shannon often says, "Small steps forward are better than big steps backward."
- **Prioritize.** Because small steps take time, you're wise to prioritize which attitudes and behaviors you want to target for home improvement. I like to call these "work orders," or the specific tasks families work on at any one time that help them accomplish their home improvement goals. In building kindness, you may want to focus on some simple but powerful work orders such as: 1) we notice and say thank you to each other every chance we get; 2) we offer a genuine apology anytime a loved one calls us on our selfishness; and 3) we ask each other how we can help one another.
- **Expect setbacks.** Inevitably in literal home improvement, there are unexpected issues that arise and require extra money, time, and effort to correct. Similarly, when families begin working on their home life and relationships, there will be setbacks of one kind or another. My encouragement to you is to acknowledge when a

setback is happening. For example, perhaps you and your spouse have enjoyed several instances of mutual consideration, but then get into a major argument about something altogether different. This can be a setback to the home improvement work you're doing. But commit to yourself and to each other that you won't let that setback deter you from your home improvement projects.

- **Work together.** They say, "Teamwork makes the dream work." That's true in literal home improvement and in our efforts to improve our home life. Believing in and committing to teamwork is, itself, a considerate mindset. A strong team is made up of strong teammates who value their teammates as much as they value themselves. Team-minded families unite and work together to avoid the division that selfishness can cause.



BIG REVEAL

Imagine this. Your family loads into the car, and you hear your six-year-old say to his younger sister, "I don't mind. You can sit there." Or you know your wife is equally exhausted after a long day at work, yet she says, "Sure, I'll take the trash out." And you begin to hear and see these attitudes and behaviors more often than in the past. You think, "Kindness! It's working!"

I don't know what your "big reveal" moments will look like, but they will multiply over time as you and your loved ones get more serious about working through challenges

and working toward new and improved ways of being with each other.

Home improvement shows often end with their own kind of big reveal. A couple has waited anxiously and now gets the first glimpse and the first walk-through of their newly improved home. They sometimes say things like, “I don’t even recognize it. That’s the same house, right?”

I encourage you to celebrate with your family as you and they begin considering each other in little and big ways. Notice kindness, celebrate kindness, and enjoy the fruit of your labor, which, in this case, will be less selfishness and more consideration.



TALK IT OVER

- 1. What are some examples of selfishness you’ve witnessed in your home in recent days? What did you do about it?**
- 2. What challenges hamper your efforts at decreasing selfishness?**
- 3. What makes it hard for us to regard one another as more important than ourselves?**
- 4. What is one way you can DIY and model more kindness toward your loved ones this next week?**
- 5. What is one teamwork goal you and your family can begin working toward to show greater consideration of each other this next week?**