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# Curriculum



Family Life Month Packet 1999  
Family and Consumer Sciences  
Campbell Hall  
1787 Neil Avenue  
Columbus, Ohio 43210

## Strong Families ... Strong Futures

# Characteristics of Strong Families

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### Overview

This lesson highlights Stinnett and DeFrain's research on the characteristics of strong families. Participants will learn to identify the six characteristics and will understand the importance of nurturing them within their families.

### Objectives

- 1) Given ten minutes, participants will write a paragraph describing one example or activity related to each of the six characteristics of strong families. Eighty percent of the participants will successfully complete the assignment.
- 2) On a scale of 1–5 with 1 = none and 5 = much, 90 percent of participants will agree that they learned new information during this session. A score of 3 through 5 will indicate that new information was learned.
- 3) On a scale of 1 = none to 5 = much, 90 percent of participants will agree that the information was useful. A score of 3 through 5 will indicate that the information was useful.
- 4) On a scale of (1) not thinking about change, (2) thinking about change, (3) definitely planning to change, or (4) already using the class recommendations, 80 percent of participants will agree that they are thinking about change, definitely planning to or already using the information.

### Target Audience

This program is intended to be presented to adults. Members of religious organizations, Family and Community Education, mother's clubs, grange groups, community service organizations, and PTOs should benefit from the program.

**Length of Lesson:** 1½ hours

### Equipment/Materials List

Overhead projector  
Overhead transparencies  
Blindfold  
2 c. measuring cup  
Large amount of dry beans  
Large container  
2 pairs of glasses (sunglasses and/or prescription)  
Unusual object to identify  
Screen  
Handouts  
Clear bucket  
1/4 c. measuring cup  
6 large rocks  
Telephone  
Art supplies  
Index cards for Attitude Charades

**Note:** Instructor comments appear in regular type. Activities appear in italics.

# Characteristics of Strong Families

Why are some families strong and others fragile? Why do some stay together while others fall apart? Do the strong families have easier lives, better health, less stress, more money? What are the dynamics within families that disintegrate? Two researchers, Nick Stinnett and John DeFrain from the University of Nebraska, wanted to find answers to these questions.

Stinnett and DeFrain surveyed over 3,000 families, about 80 percent of whom were from the United States. Thirty percent of the families lived in rural areas while 70 percent were from urban areas. The participants were from all economic levels, two-parent and one-parent families, black and white, from all educational levels, and many religious persuasions. They ranged in age from the early twenties to the mid-sixties. In spite of cultural, political, and language differences, the strong families within and outside of the United States had similar characteristics.

The researchers found that strong families share six major qualities. They are: commitment, appreciation, communication, time, spiritual wellness, and coping ability. Understanding what it takes to become a strong family is the first step toward becoming one. Nurturing the characteristics within one's family is the work of a lifetime.

## Commitment

Commitment is the foundation characteristic on which the others are built. (*Display overhead A.*) Webster's dictionary describes commitment as a pledge or promise. "Commitment means that the family comes first" (Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, p. 18). Commitment is steady and unwavering in strong families. These families live in the same world as everyone else, they have difficulties, hard times, quarrels and troubles. But, bad times don't destroy them. They work together to correct problems. They expect their commitment to endure. They take an "until death do us part" attitude.

Many issues threaten family commitment. Strong families have problems like everyone else. They are not immune to infidelity. Their lives get hectic. Work demands their time, attention, and energy. Overcoming a marriage crisis was the first step toward becoming a strong family for some couples.

For many of the families, commitment meant sacrifice. Just as athletes, musicians, and artists prioritize their lives and discipline themselves in order to perfect their skills, strong families make their relationship a priority. Sometimes that means sacrificing personal desires, cutting out activities, civic involvements, or work demands in order to enhance family life. An unselfish attitude, putting others interests ahead of one's own, is at the heart of sacrificing for the family.

In strong families, commitment means helping each other out, and doing what's best for everyone. An activity may help to demonstrate this point.

## Life's Path—Activity

*(Ask four participants to volunteer to be a family. Ask them to come to the front of the room. Blindfold one person. Tell the blindfolded person that you are taking him or her down life's path. Move back and forth through the audience so that returning to the starting point will be difficult. Turn the person around a couple of times. Make certain the path is safe—avoid steps and areas that are too narrow. Ask the blindfolded person to return to the front of the room. After a moment ask if he or she would like some help. Ask the family members [other volunteers] to help by suggesting which way to turn and how many steps to take. If it is really difficult, allow a family member to take the individual by the arm and lead him or her back. When back, remove the blindfold and ask the person what it felt like when trying to find his or her way back without instructions.)*

Family members go through life together—even though none know what the future holds. Committed families rely on each other to provide help, clues, and/or assistance to get to their destination. They know that they can depend on each other to get through difficult situations.

Family members feel a strong sense of belonging as a result of their involvement with and support of each other. Members share goals and practice traditions. Common goals give direction and purpose to the family. Traditions help members feel safe and secure in a turbulent world.

Strong families take commitment seriously. To them, commitment describes a special kind of love—a love steady and sure that isn't subject to mood swings or the passage of years or hard times. It is a

love that is conscious and unconditional. Commitment love says, “I decide and promise to love you because of who you are—not what you do or how I feel” (Stinnett and DeFraun, 1985, p. 39).

## Appreciation

William James, a pioneer in the field of psychology in the United States has identified the need to be appreciated as the most important need of all. Strong families let each member know on a daily basis that they are appreciated.

It is vital that appreciation be communicated. In expressing appreciation we, in essence, say to someone, “You are a person of worth and dignity. I am interested in you, and am aware of your positive qualities.” That is a powerful message. When we are appreciated by others, our self-worth is enhanced (Stinnett and DeFraun, 1985, p. 45).

### Self Esteem Bucket—Activity

Dr. Don Clifton, a Lincoln, Nebraska, psychologist compares self-esteem in humans to a full bucket. I need two volunteers to help demonstrate this concept. Dr. Clifton believes that it takes about ten positive comments to repair the damage done by one negative one. To demonstrate this concept, we’re going to start with a full bucket of beans. We’ll let each of these dippers represent a comment. *(Use a clear bucket or container full of dry beans. Use a two-cup measuring cup to represent the negative comments and a 1/4 cup measuring cup to represent the positive comments. Point out that the demonstration is 8:1 instead of 10:1—so it will not be quite as strong as what the researcher found. Have an extra large container handy to receive the beans that have been bailed out.)* When you hear a negative comment, the negative dipper will remove beans from the bucket. When you hear a positive comment, the positive dipper will add beans to the bucket. Let’s listen to a typical day in the life of a teenager. *(Read the situation in Appendix A.)*

**Discussion:** What happened to the teenager’s self-esteem bucket? We started out with a full bucket and emptied it very quickly. In reality, our buckets aren’t full most of the time. What is going to happen when the teen starts the next day with an empty bucket? What could be done to change this family’s situation so that more appreciation and less criticism is shared? *(Let the audience respond.)* Sometimes redefining the situation helps. To redefine the situation, one uses mental gymnastics to view

the behavior as a positive quality that has been carried to the extreme. For example, why does the teen spend so much time on the computer? Is it because he or she likes to waste time or because he or she is curious? Is the parent nitpicking or paying attention to details? Is the parent being bossy or teaching leadership? The point is that we can view situations differently when we expect good intentions. Are there other examples in this story where we can apply this technique? Think about some of your spouse’s and children’s behaviors that annoy you. Then, redefine them with positive words.

Parents literally mold good or bad people out of their children by telling them they are good or bad. Their attitude creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. Appreciation helps children to grow and flourish as their self-esteem is bolstered. Just as a pebble dropped in a pond causes ripples all around, appreciation pebbles produce positive self-esteem ripples that carry into other parts of life. Strong families are conscious of the impact of appreciation.

Why do so many of us have difficulty expressing appreciation? Many of us have low self-esteem. It’s hard to feel good about others when we don’t feel good about ourselves. People who have never felt cherished and special are not able to acknowledge others.

Parents can teach children to appreciate others beginning at a young age. By about five years of age children understand what “thank you” means. Parents can encourage them to express their appreciation by telling others “thanks” for doing something special. Writing thank-you notes is another way to let others know they’re appreciated.

I want you to take Handout A labeled “Family Appreciation” out of your folder. Fold the paper in half lengthwise, and during the next five minutes, make a list of all your family members in the left column. In the right column, across from each person’s name, make a list of his or her good qualities. *(Give them time.)* Now, I want you to tell your family members how much you appreciate them when you get home.

There are many clever ways to let people know how special they are. You might leave a note on their pillow, or in their lunch box or book bag. You might write it on the bathroom mirror with soap. Go for a long walk with the special person and tell him or her how much you appreciate them. Does anyone have any other unique ways of showing appreciation that you are willing to share with the group? *(Allow time for responses.)*

## Communication

How much time do the average husband and wife spend in conversation each week? In the book, *The Friendship Factor*, A. L. McGinnis said that the average couple spends seventeen minutes per week in conversation. This is in contrast to the information supplied by strong families in the Nebraska studies. Strong families spend lots of time in conversation. They talk about the small, trivial matters as well as the complex, serious issues in life. The presence of strong communication patterns in strong families comes as little surprise to researchers. Communication helps us relate to and feel connected to others. Because members feel free to exchange ideas and information, strong families are more effective problem solvers. How do families learn to communicate? They spend time together. Although many of their conversations are spontaneous, some families plan special family council meetings where they talk about what is going well and what needs to be improved. Other strong families designate a mealtime each day for the entire family to be together to talk.

Good communication involves two things: talking and listening. Through active listening, members show that they respect and care about the speaker.

Active listeners notice facial expression, body posture, and voice tone as well as words. They nod or say “OK” or “go on” or something to indicate their attention (Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, p. 66).

Attitude charades will help us see how good we are at active listening.

### Attitude Charades—Activity

I need four volunteers to come and draw an attitude card. An emotional attitude is written on each card. Without letting anyone see what is written on the card and without talking, I would like for you to act out the attitude. Group members will watch your facial expressions, body posture, and gestures and then guess the attitude. You may begin. (*Give them time.*) How did you do? Was it easy or difficult to figure out the attitude?

Individuals who use good communication techniques ask for clarification when messages are not clear. They are able to get inside another person’s world and to see things from his or her perspective. It is common to hear teenagers say, “You just don’t understand.” Maybe they are right. Are we looking at issues through their perspective

or through our own? I think an activity will help to make this point. May I have two volunteers?

### Seeing the Big Picture—Activity

(*Ask them to come to the front. Give each of them a pair of glasses to put on. Have sunglasses and prescription glasses available. Ask each of the volunteers to identify the unusual object, i.e., a rock that looks ordinary on one side but looks like a jewel on the other. Turn the object over so that each volunteer sees something different. Their comments should be different. Explain that the variations in what they see illustrate the range in how differently people view similar matters in life.*)

Strong families don’t back away from problems and frustrations but work together to find a solution. They handle conflicts with creativity and caring. (*Display overhead B.*) They use these six strategies to resolve conflict situations: voice and deal with complaints while they are current; address one problem at a time; identify the specific problem—it is easier to treat a specific complaint such as “You never put away your book bag” than a general one like “You never put things away”; attack the problem not the person; avoid the vulnerable issues; and, check and recheck to assure understanding—actively listen for feelings as well as words.

... Good communication patterns do more than smooth the conflict; they sustain mental health and nurture intimacy. Effective communication insures that the commitment they have and the appreciation they feel are expressed. Communication truly is the lifeblood of strong relationships (Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, p. 79).

## Time Together

What makes a family happy? Take a few minutes, right now, to close your eyes and think back to some of your childhood memories. (*Give them time.*) Would anyone like to share their happiest memory? (*Let them share.*) Notice that the common factor in all these memories is doing things together. In a study conducted in the 1960s (Jacobsen, 1969), 1,500 schoolchildren were asked that question. Their most frequent response was doing things together. Strong families spend lots of time together.

There is much debate over whether quality time makes up for a lack of quantity time with loved ones.

George Rekers, a family therapist, uses a story about a steak to make clear the relationship between quality and quantity. He asks that you imagine you've gone to a new gourmet restaurant and that you decide to treat yourself to their best steak even though it costs \$18.00. The steak arrives on an expensive china plate, served with flair by an impeccably dressed waiter. You note with shock and dismay that the steak is a one-inch cube. In horror, you question the waiter, who assures you that quality is what counts and this steak is the best. But if you're very hungry, you know that quantity also counts (Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, p. 83).

Most families are hurried, stressed, and short of time these days. How do strong families make time for each other? How do they manage to have a weekly family time plus regular, one-on-one times with individual members? The following demonstration will help us understand how.

### Priority Time—Activity

I need a volunteer to help me with this demonstration. You will notice that on this table we have six big rocks and a container that is almost full of dry beans. Now assume that the container represents the next week of your life. The beans will represent all the things you normally do. The rocks will represent the six characteristics of strong families. (*Before the program, make sure that the rocks, beans, and container are the right sizes in order to make this activity effective.*) Even though having a strong family is very important to you, somehow, you just have not been able to fit them into your schedule (the container of beans). Now, I'd like for you to fit as many rocks as you possibly can into the container—your schedule—without going over the brim. (*Give the volunteer time to try.*) How do you feel? How can you rearrange the rocks—your priorities—so that they will fit into the container—your schedule? (*Ask the audience for suggestions.*) Maybe you should try another approach. Why don't you take the rocks out, and pour the beans into another container. This time, let's prioritize differently. Put the rocks in first. Now, how many rocks fit? (All of them should.) Now, pour the beans in over the rocks. Look how many of them still fit. The point is this: If you don't manage your time according to your priorities the things that are really important to you will seldom get done. Granted, some of your normal activities may have to be changed or eliminated. You have to decide what is really important.

Strong families agree that their relationships are important. They know that quantity and quality go together. Stinnett and DeFrain describe a newspaper report of historical researchers' studies of the lives and backgrounds of many modern assassins. The investigators found that the assassins shared several characteristics: isolation, loneliness, and a feeling of being separated from the rest of the world. Family time provides an antidote to these feelings. It eases loneliness and isolation, nurtures relationships, and helps to create a family identity. Strong families understand that communication isn't going to be good unless they have some time together. What do strong families do when they're together? (*Show Overhead C.*)

- They eat meals together on a routine basis. (Optional: Read "The Family Dinner Table"—Appendix B.)
- Strong families work together as a team to get chores done. Small children can set the table or make a salad while parents prepare the main dish. Children can rake while parents mow the yard.
- They play catch; go camping, picnicking, or bicycling; take a walk; and enjoy other outdoor activities.
- They get involved in indoor recreation. They play games, read books, tell stories, watch movies, put together puzzles.
- They participate in community activities. They go to church; school games, concerts, plays, and activities; participate in 4-H or Scouting.
- They celebrate special events. Holidays, birthdays, and vacations are seen as times when the entire family should be together.

### Spiritual Wellness

Strong families believe in a greater power that can transform lives, can give strength to survive the difficult times, and can provide hope and purpose. Having spiritual beliefs is one of the secrets to the success of strong families. The strong families in the survey describe the spiritual dimension in various ways:

faith in God, faith in humanity, ethical behavior, unity with all living things, concern for others, or religion.... The *Scribner-Bantam English Dictionary* defines spiritual as "non material; of or pertaining to the spirit or soul." .... Jerry Lafferty, in "A Credo for Wellness," describes spiritual wellness as encompassing integrity, honesty, loyalty, consci-

entiousness, virtue, ethics, values, usefulness, self-esteem, and significance.... Spiritual wellness is illustrated by our strong families as a unifying force, a caring center within each person that promotes sharing, love, and compassion for others. It is a force that helps a person transcend self and become part of something larger (Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, p. 101).

These are broad definitions. You may recall that I said the sample of strong families was very diverse. The families were from various backgrounds and had a wide range of specific beliefs. One of the most important elements of spiritual wellness was the presence of a shared family conviction. The shared beliefs help to create a bond between family members. (*Display Overhead D.*) Spirituality adds to family life in the following ways:

#### **Gives life purpose**

Spiritual beliefs help individuals answer questions like “What is life about?” “Why am I here?” It gives their life purpose and meaning.

#### **Promotes a positive outlook**

A belief that life has meaning helps members maintain a positive perspective. They don’t let temporary problems get them down.

#### **Provides guidelines for living**

Spirituality helps provide guidelines for living. Most promote values that encourage positive relationships. The “golden rule”—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—is a good example of this.

#### **Gives freedom from negative emotions**

By tuning in to spiritual beliefs, many individuals experience a release from feelings of guilt, worry, anger, anxiety, and fear.

#### **Encourages friendship and support of like-minded people**

During good times, strong families enjoy fellowship with and encouragement from like-minded people. Friends serve as role models for behavior, supports for their value system, and confidants. During times of illness, death, or disaster, friends can be relied upon for support and assistance.

### **Supports traditions**

Strong families participate in religious traditions and rituals. These are seen as outward expressions of their inner commitment.

### **Integrates religious heritage**

These families rely on timeless spiritual truths for support and guidance for daily living. Religious or spiritual history and heritage provide guidelines for living, good models for character development, and a sense of belonging to a larger group (Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, p. 114).

### **Involves prayer**

Prayer is a great source of power to strong families. One survey participant said, “You know, a person’s life goes better when that person can get in touch with the resources of wisdom and peace that lie within each one of us. Usually people barely tap those inner resources because they are never still or quiet long enough to do it. Prayer is a way of getting in touch not only with our inner resources but with the unlimited resources of God. Through our prayers we can touch God’s great wisdom, love, and peace” (Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, p. 115).

The researchers monitored the effects of meditation and prayer during controlled studies in laboratory settings. Their investigation revealed

that many persons experience a lowering of blood pressure, a movement to higher-level brain-wave activity, and a heightened sense of peace and well-being (Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, p. 116).

Members of strong families agree that their spiritual resources, including love, security, purpose, hope, and peace, help make the challenges of life tolerable.

What bonds your family together? What convictions do you share? Please take Handout B titled “Family Crest” out of your packet. I want you to think about the beliefs/priorities in your family. During the next five minutes, I’d like for you to design your family emblem. Feel free to be as creative as you like. There are art supplies available on the resource table. (*Give them time.*) Would anyone like to share their creation? (*Let them respond. If no one comments, continue on.*)

## Coping with Crises

How do you define crisis? (*Write responses on Overhead E.*) Most of us describe a crisis as something negative. (*Display Overhead F.*) However, *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines crisis as "a turning point in the course of anything; decisive or crucial time, stage, or event." A crisis is a time of decision that may ultimately produce either a positive or negative outcome.

Some families fall apart when faced with terminal illness, death, or other crisis situations. Others pull together and draw strength from each other when challenges come along. What helps some families be resilient while others are not? Stinnett and DeFrain identified six strategies that strong families use when they face crises. Most do not use all six during a given situation. But, strong families often use at least one of the six strategies. (*Display Overhead G.*)

### Maintain a positive perspective

Strong families look for something positive in each situation and focus on it. Their ability to see something good in a crisis or bad situation helps them to maintain a more balanced perspective; it prevents them from becoming so depressed and despondent that they cannot function. In other words, the ability to see something positive in a bad situation gives them hope (Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, p. 127).

### Pull together

I would like to have three volunteers help me demonstrate this point. (*Choose at least one who appears to be physically fit and strong. Invite them to the stage. Ask one of them to be the timer—the contest will last one minute, one to be the score keeper, and one to be the wrestler.*) I want to challenge you to an arm wrestling contest. I have never lost an arm wrestling contest. Even though you look stronger than me, I know that I can beat you. (*Make eye contact and keep a serious expression as you say this. Ask the groups seated closest to you to fund the activity.*) If I put him/her down, I get a nickel, if he/she puts me down, he/she gets the nickel. (*Begin the match. As the contestant starts to push, let your arm go limp. Push your way back to the starting position and then let it go limp again. Continue this for a few seconds. Then suggest, "Hey, why can't we both win?" The other person usually gets the message, and begins taking turns. Before long,*

*you begin moving back and forth rhythmically. When the time is up, ask the funders how much money they owe. Point out that there was a big shift in thinking during the one minute contest.*) We began the contest as adversaries, but ended as teammates. By cooperating together, we both gained far more than either of us would have struggling against the other.

Strong families understand this concept. Members pull together to manage difficulties. Each person contributes by focusing on "What can I do?" No one feels totally responsible for the problem. No one carries the load alone. They work together.

### Go get help

Strong families have a strong social support system. They are smart enough to seek out help from their church, friends, neighbors, professionals, and other associates.

### Use spiritual resources

Spiritual beliefs are helpful in crises by providing a philosophy of life, by giving perspective, and by giving hope and comfort (Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, p. 132).

### Keep communication open

Good communication skills help strong families solve problems. Crises cause individuals to feel strong emotions. Anger, fear, guilt, and anxiety are common. Open communication allows individuals to express their feelings.

### Be flexible

Flexibility is a key to weathering the storms of life. Members of strong families are willing to adapt to change. They are willing to change jobs, learn a new role or skill, further their education, move, or do whatever is necessary to overcome the crisis.

Thankfully, most families don't have to face major crises often. However, day-to-day stress and strain takes a toll on almost all of us. Stinnett and DeFrain identified several ways in which strong families cope with chronic stress. They incorporate a healthy sense of humor into everyday life; divide complex tasks into small segments and focus on them one at a time; don't worry; talk about petty irritations so that they don't get out of hand; participate in pleasant and/or relaxing activities to restore their



minds, souls, and bodies; exercise; avoid becoming over-committed; enjoy the unconditional love and affection given by pets; and have a sense of purpose. They expect a positive resolution to crisis.

## Summary

Historically, society has prescribed roles for family members. The husband was expected to earn the family's living while the wife stayed home to rear their children. Today, family roles are as varied and unique as the individuals who make up the families.

### Telephone Deregulation—Activity

*(Pretend the telephone is ringing. Answer it. Say, I have decided to use ABC long distance telephone service. Thanks anyway, goodbye.)* Just as telephone carriers have been deregulated, so too, have family roles. Family members can choose their roles and their priorities. We have identified the six characteristics of strong families—commitment, appreciation, communication, time, spiritual wellness, and coping ability. In your packet you will find Handout C titled “Characteristics of Strong Families.” You can take it home and refer to it again. I challenge you to think about the priorities in your family. If you have not

already done so, commit to becoming a strong family so that others may see your family's vitality and model their lives after yours.

## Evaluation

Distribute the class evaluation and ask the participants to complete and return it.

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For more information, visit the Department of Human Development and Family Science web site at:  
<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/index.htm>

# Attitude Charades

Cut each of the attitudes out and glue them onto a 3" x 5" card.

**Happy**

**Excited**

**Angry**

**Worried**

**Sad**

**Concerned**

**Commitment—“a pledge or promise.”**

**Source: Webster's Dictionary**

# Creative Conflict Resolution

- 1) air and deal with complaints while they are current,
- 2) address one problem at a time,
- 3) identify the specific problem,
- 4) attack the problem not the person,
- 5) avoid vulnerable issues,
- 6) check and recheck understanding.

Source: Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, pp. 74–78.

# Strong Families

- eat meals together,
- share household chores,
- enjoy outdoor activities,
- get involved in indoor recreation,
- participate in community activities,
- celebrate special events.

Source: Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, pp. 90–94.

# Family Spirituality

- gives life purpose,
- promotes a positive outlook,
- provides guidelines for living,
- gives freedom from negative emotions,
- encourages friendship and support of like-minded people,
- supports traditions,
- communicates religious heritage,
- involves prayer.

Source: Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, pp. 103–115.

# Crisis

# Crisis

**“a turning point in the course of anything; decisive or crucial time, stage, or event.”**

**Source: *Webster's New World Dictionary.***



# Strategies for Facing Crises

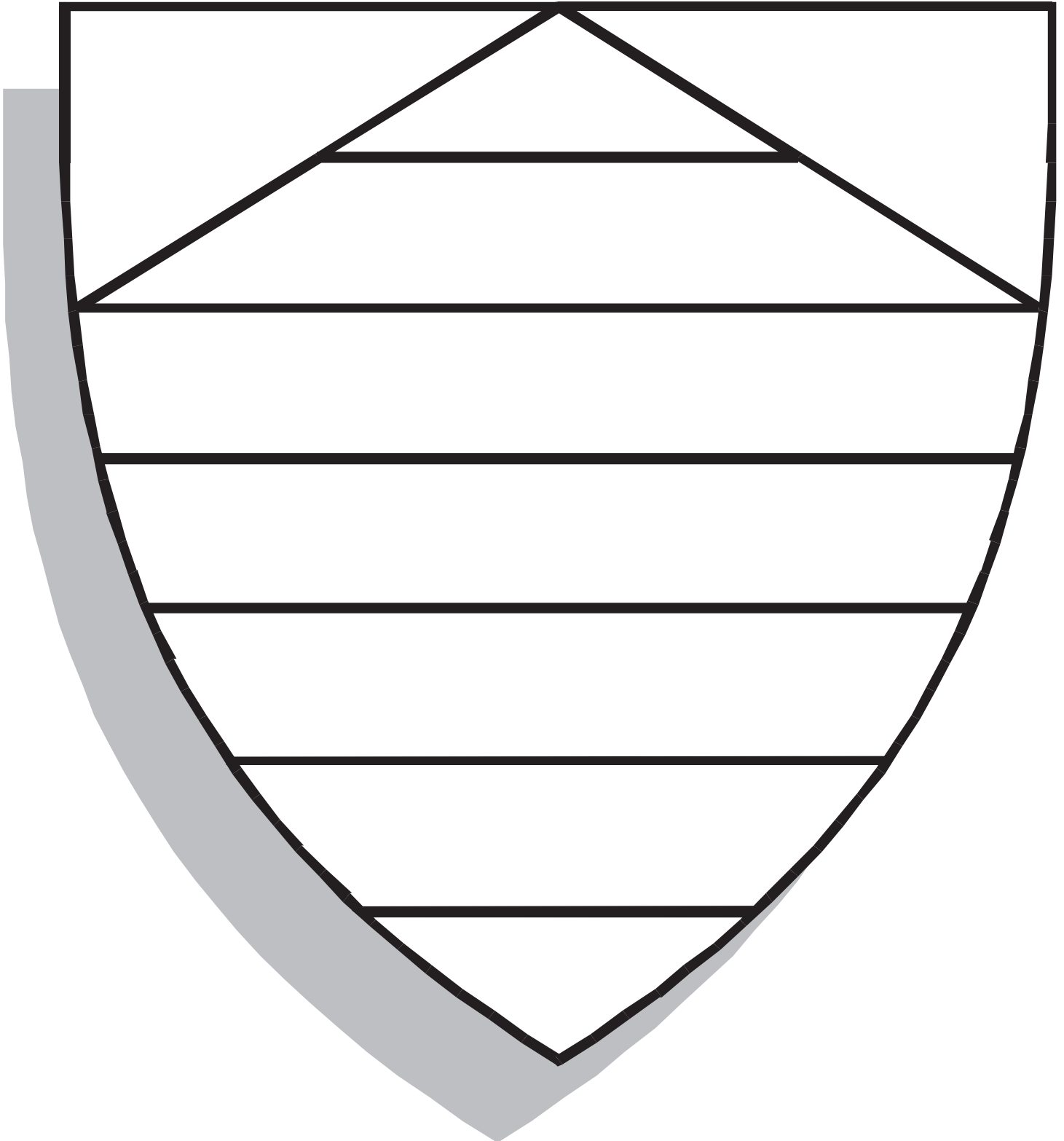
- maintain a positive perspective,
- pull together,
- go get help,
- use spiritual resources,
- keep communication open,
- be flexible.

Source: Stinnett and DeFrain, 1985, pp. 125–136.

# Family Appreciation

# Family Crest

In each section of this Family Crest, write a word or draw a picture that represents one of your family values.



# Characteristics of Strong Families

Why do many families stay together while others fall apart? Do strong families have easier lives, better health, less stress, more money? Two researchers, Nick Stinnett and John DeFrain at the University of Nebraska, found that strong families share six major qualities. They are: commitment, appreciation, communication, time, spiritual wellness, and coping ability.

## Commitment

Webster's dictionary describes commitment as a pledge or promise. Strong families make their relationship a high priority. They take an "until death do us part" attitude. These families live in the same world as everyone else. They have difficulties, hard times, quarrels, and troubles. But, bad times don't destroy them. They work together to correct problems.

## Appreciation

William James, a pioneer in the field of psychology in the United States, has identified the need to be appreciated as the most important need of all. Strong families let each member know on a daily basis that they are appreciated.

## Communication

In the book *The Friendship Factor*, A. L. McGinnis said that the average couple spends seventeen minutes per week in conversation. This is in contrast to the information supplied by strong families in the Ne-

braska studies. Strong families spend lots of time in conversation. They talk about the small, trivial matters as well as the complex, serious issues in life. Because members feel free to exchange ideas and information, strong families are more effective problem solvers.

## Time

Strong families spend lots of time together. Family time eases loneliness and isolation, nurtures relationships, and helps create a family identity.

## Spiritual Wellness

Strong families believe in a greater power that can transform lives, can give strength to survive the difficult times, and can provide hope and purpose. Having spiritual beliefs is one of the secrets to the success of strong families. The shared beliefs help to create a bond between family members.

## Coping Ability

Some families fall apart when faced with terminal illness, death, or other crisis situations. Others pull together and draw strength from each other when challenges come along. Stinnett and DeFrain identified six strategies that strong families use when they face crisis. They are: maintain a positive perspective, pull together, get help from the social support system, use spiritual resources, keep communication open, and adapt to change by being flexible.

# A Day in the Life of a Teenager

- 5:45 a.m.** It's time to get up.
- 6:00 a.m.** Come on, it's 6:00. You've got to get up.
- 6:05 a.m.** Hurry up and get dressed.
- 6:06 a.m.** They're probably under your bed. I told you if don't put your clothes in the laundry, I'm not going to wash them.
- 6:15 a.m.** Hurry up. Quit poking around. Wash your face, comb your hair, and get your teeth brushed.
- 6:20 a.m.** I won't be home until late tonight. Have you got the house key, your glasses, and your lunch money?
- 6:25 a.m.** Here comes the bus. Have you had anything for breakfast? Do you have everything?
- 6:27 a.m.** Have a good day. I love you. Try to leave that attitude here.
- 6:00 p.m.** Hi, I'm home. How are you? Did you have a good day?
- 6:05 p.m.** Why isn't the dishwasher empty? Have you fed the dogs and cats?
- 6:10 p.m.** Put this darn book bag away. How many times do I have to tell you not to leave it lying here?
- 6:30 p.m.** Dinner's ready. Come on, let's eat.
- 6:35 p.m.** How many times do I have to tell you to come and eat? Turn that computer off and get out here right now. You're not allowed to be on it anymore tonight!
- 6:40 p.m.** You're going to have to start carrying your share of the load. I'm not your slave and I don't have time to do all the work around here. It won't hurt you to do a few chores.
- 6:45 p.m.** If you're done eating, unload the dishwasher. I've already asked you to do it once.
- 7:00 p.m.** Do you have homework? I told you not to use the computer anymore tonight.
- 7:15 p.m.** Turn the TV down. What in the world is that anyway? Who was eating while they were watching TV? I've told you a million times not to leave wrappers laying around. I don't collect them. Do you like to hear me scream?
- 9:15 p.m.** Good-night. I love you.
- 10:00 p.m.** Turn that stereo off and get to sleep. You're going to be late again tomorrow.

# The Family Dinner Table

I cut out my wedding dress at the same place where I memorized my spelling words. It was in that same place that I ate Archway cookies every day after school. And it was there that I prepared for my SAT. My husband-to-be was grilled mercilessly in that same spot. Much of what I have learned and hold dear is inextricably intertwined with the kitchen table. This 4-by-6 scratched and worn piece of furniture was a small physical part of my home. Yet as I look back on what we did there, I realize that it was a key to the life I now have.

Each night during my youth it was the kitchen table where I was held accountable for the day's events. "When is the next report card?" "Did you clean up the mess in the basement?" "Did you practice your piano today?"

If you wanted dinner, you had to accept the accompanying interrogation that would have violated my Miranda rights if I had done something more than attempt to bathe the neighbor's parakeet. There was no escaping the nightly confrontation with accountability.

But that kitchen table was not just a source of fear, it was my security blanket. No matter how rough the day's taunting had been and no matter how discouraged I was over long division, the kitchen table and its adult caretakers were there every night to comfort and support.

The fear generated by the Cuban missile crisis and my fourth air-raid drill in a week disappeared in the daily certainty of a family gathered around that table graced with Del Monte canned peas, cloverleaf rolls, and oleo (margarine). Regardless of the day's schedule or demands, the kitchen table brought us all back together for roll call at 6:00 P.M. every night.

And following my dismal task of doing dishes at a time when automatic dishwashers were country club novelties, I returned to the kitchen table to sweat bullets over homework. I read "Dick, Jane, and Spot" stories aloud to my father, who then did his "homework" while I wrote and rewrote the math tables I carry in my mind even today.

Each morning that table sent me off fed and duly inspected for clean fingernails and pressed Bobbie Brooks. No one left that table without a review of the day's events and assigned chores. That kitchen table nurtured. It was my constancy amid the insecurities of crooked teeth, more freckles than skin, and geography bees on state capitals.

Years have gone by since my days of Black Watch plaid and white anklets. Life has given me more challenges, joy, and love than I could have fathomed as my legs shook beneath that kitchen table when faced with parental in-

quiries. When I return to my parents' home to visit, I find myself lingering after breakfast to enjoy their company around the kitchen table. After dinner, the dishes wait as my father and I discuss everything from the Jackie Onassis estate auction to potty-training.

And then shortly after we restore the kitchen to its spotless pre-dinner state, my children return. We sit together, three generations, as Breyer's ice cream and Hershey's syrup melt, drip, and stick to new tiny faces at that old table.

They tell Grandpa of their spelling tests and which word they missed. And Grandpa explains, "Your Mother missed the same word. We sat right here and reviewed it. She still got it wrong."

Perhaps it is in the genes. Or perhaps it is that kitchen table. That magical simple place where I learned responsibility and felt love and security.

As I struggle each night to get dinner on my kitchen table and round up my children from the four corners of our neighborhood, I wonder why I just don't send them to their rooms with a chicken pot pie and Wheel of Fortune. I don't because I am giving them the gift of the kitchen table.

In all the treatises on parenting, in all the psychological studies on child development, and in all the data on self-esteem, this humble key to rearing children is overlooked.

A recent survey revealed that only half of our teenagers eat dinner on a regular basis with their parents. Ninety-eight percent of female high school students who live with their birth parents go on to college. Teenagers who don't have dinner with their families are four times as likely to have premarital sex.

Last year my daughter said she could only find one other student in her home room who had dinner each night at the kitchen table with her family. They are both honor students. The other kids, my daughter explained, "make something in the microwave and then head to their rooms to watch TV." They have no company, no questions—just Wheel of Fortune, and the grades to show for it. How sad that not all children's lives are touched by the miracle of childhood. There's something about a kitchen table.

Source: Marianne Jennings, "Kitchen Table Vital to Family Life," *Deseret News*, February 9, 1997, in Covey, S. R. (1997). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*. New York: Golden Books.



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## Strong Families ... Strong Futures

# Characteristics of Strong Families Evaluation

- 1) Write a paragraph describing one example or activity related to each of the following characteristics of strong families:

Commitment:

Appreciation:

Communication:

Time Together:

Spiritual Wellness:

Coping with Crisis:

Over ...

2) Please circle the following on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 being “none” and 5 being “much” for quality of presentation, learned new information, and usefulness of information.

<b>Quality of Presentation</b>					<b>Learned New Information</b>					<b>Usefulness of Information</b>				
none				much	none				much	none				much
1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

3) Mark an “X” on the statement that best describes you. If you are planning to make changes, please answer the last question.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am *not* thinking about making a recommended change that was suggested in today’s class.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am *thinking* about making a recommended change within six months.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am *definitely* planning to make a recommended change in the next month.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am already using recommended practices that were suggested in today’s class.

Will you please share the change(s) you plan to make?

Please list the last four digits of your phone number: \_\_\_\_\_.

**Thank you!**

For more information, visit the Human Development and Family Life web site at:  
<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/index.htm>