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Family Scene 13: Tips to Strengthen Families

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What are your hopes, dreams and expectations of family life? What do you believe about families generally? What are your family's strengths? How often do you identify and celebrate them?

It is our hope that the following indicators of family strength will not be thought of as "shoulds" — as a set of rules that must be followed or as a checklist by which you grade your own or other families. Rather, they are tools to aid family discussion and interaction and means of learning more about your family.

1. All families can be strong and healthy.

In 1950, the typical family consisted of a working father, an at-home mother and at least two children. But conditions have changed and so have families. Most still have the picture of the "ideal" family as the kind that existed in the 50s. The families of the 80s are different. Today, there are more single-parent, two-worker, step-parent and childless families. What makes a family strong does not depend on who makes up the family but how well they work together to accomplish necessary tasks, such as meeting individual member's needs, teaching children what is expected of them and how to carry out required tasks, maintaining the family unit, and developing a shared set of meanings, values and goals. Nontraditional families, and that includes most of us, must learn new ways of accomplishing these tasks.

2. Healthy families spend "prime time" together.

Strong families set aside "prime time" to be together. By spending pleasant, positive time together, families build up a reserve of good feelings. When trouble comes it has to be shared with the family and resolved. If the problems are not balanced by shared pleasures, in time, people may come to associate family life with unpleasant rather than pleasant things. So when your life begins to be too fragmented, you might want to cross other things off your list and spend more time:

- Talking together
- Planning together
- Working together
- Playing together
- Laughing together

3. Strong families build connections with other families and people.

The extended family — grandparents and other relatives — is a significant source of support for most

families. Extended families not only help during crises but are frequently a source of on-going companionship. We as adults, and especially our children, also need opportunities to interact with adults and children outside the family, with whom we can have fun and from whom we can learn. Building and maintaining supportive relationships among family members and people in the community is important for you and your children.

4. Strong families plan for change.

A family does not have to wait for things to happen. They can make them happen. Some conditions are beyond our control — weather, disasters, disease. Learning to distinguish between those things we can control and those we can't, and using our energy to change the things we can, is critical to improving the quality of family life. For example, all families have a set of rules that govern the who's and how's of family life — who cares for the children, how decisions are made, what topics are appropriate to discuss, how differences of opinion are handled. When faced with change, a healthy family does not rigidly stick to these rules but is flexible and adaptable. They make adjustments in the rules in order to help family members deal with changing conditions.

5. In healthy families, members are committed.

Are you proud of your family? Another indicator of a strong family is that members are proud to belong to the family. They are committed to each other and the family as a unit. Family members think of each other as friends with whom they can talk and have fun. They enjoy each other as individuals and like being together. They recognize that functioning together as a family is not always easy — there is conflict, things are not perfect — but they work at making family life more enjoyable and satisfying. Even though they are as busy as other families, they make sure they spend time together in order to discover the qualities and abilities of each member and to build ties among members.

6. Healthy families share responsibility

It is important that all members of the family be involved in decision-making. Children need to be given opportunities to make decisions (within the limits of their ability), to participate in family decision, and to observe their parents' decision-making process and results. Typically, involvement in planning and decision-making brings with it a commitment to the plan or goal and cooperation in carrying it out. For example, children are more likely to carry out chores if they have been given some choice in what those chores are. Each family member should be allowed to express opinions, generate ideas and make suggestions. The family still needs a leader, but no one person needs to lead all the time. Trying to be the "boss" becomes an impossible and frustrating task.

7. Strong families have shared values and beliefs.

It is important in family life for family members to sort out and clarify the things they prize, cherish and believe. Healthy families share a high degree of religious orientation. This involves an awareness of a higher power that provides a sense of purpose, support and strength to each person and to the family unit. It allows family members to be more patient, forgiving, positive and supportive toward one another.

It is important that the family's values and beliefs are talked about and used in daily situations. Children learn about values, attitudes and beliefs in small doses every day in the process of growing up.

- Involve children in decision-making. It allows them to see values in action.
- Review family rituals and traditions. These are important expressions of family values as well as contributors to family cohesion.

8. Strong families manage conflict and disagreements constructively.

All families have disagreements and healthy families are no exception. In fact, in a healthy family where individual uniqueness is being encouraged, disagreements can be expected. A major aspect of building a healthy family is learning to deal with conflict constructively. When arguments start getting loud and ugly, it's time to remove yourself from the situation. Go off and count to ten or take a walk around the block. Give yourself some time alone to look at the situation as objectively as possible. It might be helpful to write a letter to the person expressing your feelings about the disagreement. Sometimes just the act of committing your thoughts to paper can make it easier for you to express your feelings face-to-face. And don't forget to express love.

9. Healthy families balance home, work and outside activities.

All of us are busy and we sometimes feel as if we have so many things to do that we are pulled in a thousand different directions at the same time. When life gets too hectic and you find you are not spending as much time with your family as you want, sit down and make a list of the different activities in which the family members are involved. Go over the list critically. Inevitably, there will be some things that you really don't want to be doing, that do not give much happiness, or that really are not important. Scratch those off the list. This frees time for the family, will relieve some of the pressure, and is a good way to strengthen your family.

10. In strong families, members show appreciation for each other.

Every family is made up of a variety of personalities, each playing an important part in the life of the family. Therefore, it is essential that all members develop a strong positive attitude about themselves, and about each member of the family.

Feelings of self-worth are a crucial factor in what happens "inside" people as well as among people. The family system is no exception. Being accepted by others helps develop a person's self-concept and generates feelings of being important, loved and appreciated. There is no place where being appreciated and accepted is more important than in the family.

Every family should recognize the individual accomplishments of each member. Simple statements such as "Thank you for helping me, you did a nice job!" can convey appreciation for each member's efforts. This type of recognition helps set up a pleasant environment in which mutual respect can grow. Without being given respect, family members have little reason to try to improve their relationship with each other.

11. In healthy families there is effective communication.

Communication affects everything that goes on among people. For effective communication to take place, the family must provide an emotionally and physically "safe" environment. Conversation in

strong families is spontaneous and specific.

- Try to find more time to talk about things important to your family. Deliberately turn off the TV for an hour or so.
- Talk while riding in the car, while performing chores or before bedtime.
- Talk about your communication. What are the communication patterns in our family? What communication problems exist? Are people willing to express themselves? Do we listen well? What family rules exist regarding speaking and listening?
- Play communication games. The old parlor game "Gossip" can demonstrate most of the sources of communication error. There are various communication games available from game shops.
- Participate as individuals or better yet as families in "Communication Training" sessions or family retreats. Read about active listening, "I-messages" and nonverbal communication.

12. Healthy families recognize that effective communication involves effective listening.

Perhaps the most important communication skill is listening. Yet for a variety of reasons, many of us don't listen as well as we might. We are either too busy or allow our pre-judgments to distort our receiving. Remember, when we listen, we always interpret what is said. Since our interpretation is based on our values, beliefs and experiences, it could be incorrect. Checking out your interpretation with the speaker, "getting feedback," before responding or acting is a good way to reduce misinterpretation.

- Be interested, listen sensitively and for meanings, watch for feelings.
- Look for the main idea or issue, listen actively and get feedback.
- Be aware of how your feelings and beliefs filter and even distort what you hear.
- Read nonverbal as well as verbal language.

13. In summary:

- Be realistic, accept your family's status, discover its strengths.
- Strengthen parent-child relationships. Children can learn to respect themselves and accept differences if they have a parent who is willing to help them.
- Learn management skills. Making the best possible use of your time involves increasing time management and organizational skills as well as learning to delegate responsibility to others.
- Build connections with others in order to build a support base for yourself and provide a variety of role models for your children.
- Strong families do not just happen. They are built over time from many little parts. Most of these

are simple everyday occurrences, things we share with one another within our families.

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