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BUILDING FAMILY STRENGTHS

*T*hese are stressful times for families. Most families face difficult strains on time, money, and emotions. Sometimes homes become the place where everyone is worn-out or angry. But, in spite of these difficulties, there are ways that our families can remain strong and happy.

What makes some families strong? Researchers have worked on answers to this question for years. This publication discusses six of the most important of these family strengths. It also provides activities that may help build or improve these strengths in your family.

As you read about each of these family strengths, decide where your family is already strong. Then identify one area where you want to be stronger. It is probably not a good idea to work on several areas at once, as the family might get overwhelmed. Work on developing one identified area at a time. In addition to using the exercise in this publication, you might invite family members to suggest ways to build in the area that you are working

Family Strength 1: Caring And Appreciation

Families are strengthened by expressions of caring and appreciation. Even when a family member makes many mistakes, members of strong families find ways to encourage and support each person. Strong families notice and share positive aspects of each other. For example, they pay attention to another person's polite behavior or something nice he or she did or said. They notice the talents, skills, achievements, special qualities, and characteristics that make the other person unique. You might show appreciation by writing short love notes about one of these things, and put the note under the person's pillow, or in a backpack, briefcase, or purse. Write something like "Emily, I'm proud of you for working so hard on your homework. Love, Dad." Giving time is an important way of showing caring and appreciation. Children want parents to be available – to have time, to show interest, to do things with them, and to talk with them.

A strong family finds that opportunities for quality time occur as they spend quantity time together. Eating meals together, sharing joys and defeats, working together, making treats together, and watching movies or playing games are examples of shared activities. Some families even

schedule one evening every week for special family activities.

Physical expressions are good ways of showing affection, love, and appreciation. Small children often like to snuggle with their parents. A quick pat, a hug, a kiss, a handclasp, or an arm around the shoulder can say a lot to people of all ages.

Consider making gift certificates for each other. Be sure to follow through and do what the certificate promises. Good manners and everyday courtesy to a child or a spouse lets the person know that he or she matters. Ask children and other family members to do things rather than demand that they do them. Compliment good behavior. Thank family members for their efforts. Ask for opinions. Listen to comments. Avoid saying anything that is critical or unkind.



Family Strength 2: Commitment

Members of strong families are committed to the family. They value the things that make their family special. Even when times are hard, they work on problems together.

One way to build family commitment is to practice family traditions. A family tradition is any activity or event that occurs regularly and holds special meaning for that family. The tradition may be as simple as stories and prayers before bedtime, Saturday morning pancakes, or as elaborate as an annual big vacation. Because these traditions have meanings that are special to the family, they create feelings of warmth, closeness, and specialness. Traditions can build a feeling of stability and safety for family members.

One way to build family loyalty and commitment is to compile a family history. Ask older relatives to talk about their lives. Their stories contain a glimpse of their personalities and strengths. Learn about your family's heritage. Discover what country your ancestors came from, when they lived, how they lived, and what they did for a living. Find books, magazines, tapes, films, or pictures that relate to the countries your ancestors lived in and the things people did in those countries.

Family Strength 3: Communication

Strong families communicate. They talk. They share themselves. They share their feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, joys, sorrows, experiences, growth, and needs. They take the time to listen and respond to what others have to say. There are a number of things that can improve family communication.

Make time to talk. It is especially important to talk about feelings. You may decide to turn off the TV so the family can talk. Talk about feelings and experiences while driving in the car, while sharing household chores, or before bedtime. You can encourage family members to share by saying, "Tell me more." "Wow. That must have been exciting (frightening, etc.)." "What was the best part of the day for you?"

You might try playing a talking game. Write down on small pieces of paper questions about topics important to your family. Questions might range from "What age would you like to be and why?" and "What animal would you like to be?" to more serious questions like "Do you think it is ever all right to tell a lie?"

Make the questions appropriate for the ages of the family members. Place the questions in a box and have each person draw out a sheet of paper and respond to the question. This game can be played at dinnertime or during special times set aside for talking.

When your family has a problem, make suggestions that are kind and helpful. Try to suggest actions that you or others could take to improve the situation or solve the problem. If you criticize another person's actions without helping that person come up with an alternative, he or she may feel frustrated and helpless.

Be a good listener. Listening to what others say and feel is one of the most powerful ways of showing love. To be good listeners we often must set aside our lectures and really try to understand from the point of view of the other person. The goal is simply to hear, understand, and accept the other person's feelings and views.

The other person may feel understood if you say to him or her, "It sounds like you feel [describe what you think the person feels]. Is that right?" The other person can then say if he or she was correctly understood. Real acceptance and understanding take patience and active listening. Other ideas on effective listening are available in Extension Circular HE-682 in this series, ["Being Understanding: A Key To Developing Healthy Children."](#)



Family Strength 4: Community And Family Ties

Strong families draw on other people and institutions for support. If they have a hard time dealing with a problem, they are willing to seek outside help. Strong families also tend to be closely involved with the schools, churches, and local organizations that promote the well-being of the community and the individual

Ties with relatives, neighbors, and friends are especially important. Busy schedules can make it hard to spend time with people outside the family. But relationships can sometimes be kept up by having family members write brief notes. Or the family can make it a special point to visit with certain people.

Helping people in need – in our own extended families, in our neighborhoods, and in our communities – can be very rewarding. A family might choose an elderly person or couple who need help with raking leaves, caring for a lawn or garden, or cleaning or repairing a house. They might read to someone. Or the family might just visit.

Parents can teach their children to become involved citizens. Look for a local, state, or national issue in newspapers, magazines, television newscasts, or radio news. Find out which public officials would be interested in the issue. Write a letter to a city commissioner, school board member, legislator, or even the President! Let each family member, even younger ones, compose his or her own original letter. Save the replies to the letters in a scrapbook.

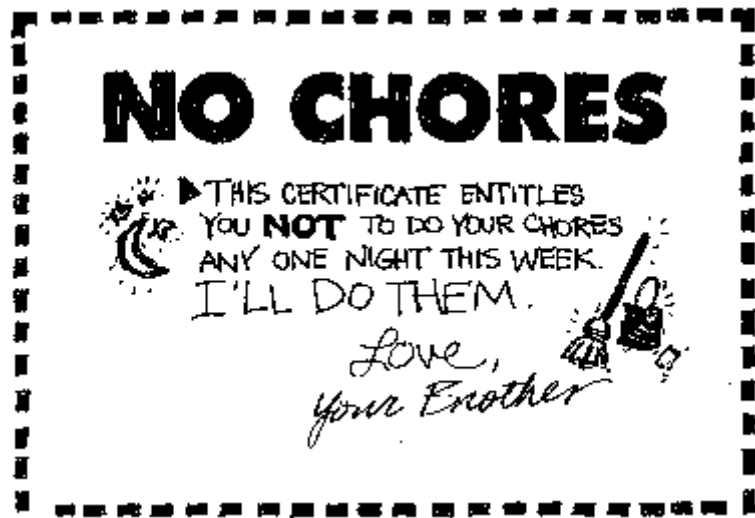
Family Strength 5: Working Together

Strong families make decisions, solve family problems, and do

family work together. Everyone participates. Parents are the leaders, but the children's opinions and efforts are invited, encouraged, and appreciated. For example, a toddler can be involved with you in grocery shopping. Explain that you need a helper when you shop for groceries. Decide which simple food items the helper can choose, such as cereal or fruit snacks. When you get to the right aisle, give the child a few moments to make a decision. An older child can be taught to use the information on product labels to make decisions. Provide plenty of encouragement for their efforts.

Making real decisions is good practice and can help children grow up to be responsible adults. Children need opportunities to make decisions, to participate in family decisions, and to observe the parents' decision-making process and results.

Children are more apt to carry out their responsibilities if they have some choice as to what those responsibilities are and can see how these particular tasks help the family. Teenagers are more willing to go along on a family vacation if they help decide where to go and what to do. Youngsters are more likely to accept limitations regarding purchases if they have an awareness of the family's financial situation.



Letting children take part in decision-making says to them "You are important, and what you have to say counts." Many families have found that a family council improves communication and decision-making. The family council is a meeting that gives every member of the family the opportunity to express opinions and ideas, offer compliments or complaints, and most importantly, be listened to.

Family Strength 6: Flexibility And Openness To Change

All families develop habits, routines, and a set of rules. These patterns are ways to deal with day-to-day life. Some of the more obvious

patterns are who cooks, washes dishes, does the laundry, or fixes the car. Other less obvious patterns include: Who has the right to make what decisions? How are differences of opinion handled? How are anger, affection, or other emotions expressed?

Many families find it helpful to have a chart of household tasks and to rotate the assignments. Parents can set the example of flexibility by offering to help out a child who has an unusually heavy load of homework or other activities.

The development of a stable family pattern is necessary to deal with all the things a family must face, decide, and accomplish in daily life. But a family must also be able to adapt to new needs and circumstances.

There are a number of common changes most families face. Children get older. Adults switch jobs or retire. Families are reshaped by birth, adoption, marriage, divorce, sickness, and death. Families move to different communities. Family relationships are most likely to remain healthy and strong if family members adapt to these changes.

Summary

Spend some time together identifying your family's strengths. Then celebrate them. From that foundation of existing strengths, choose additional strengths that you can add to your family. Become involved in activities that will help your family build those strengths.

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