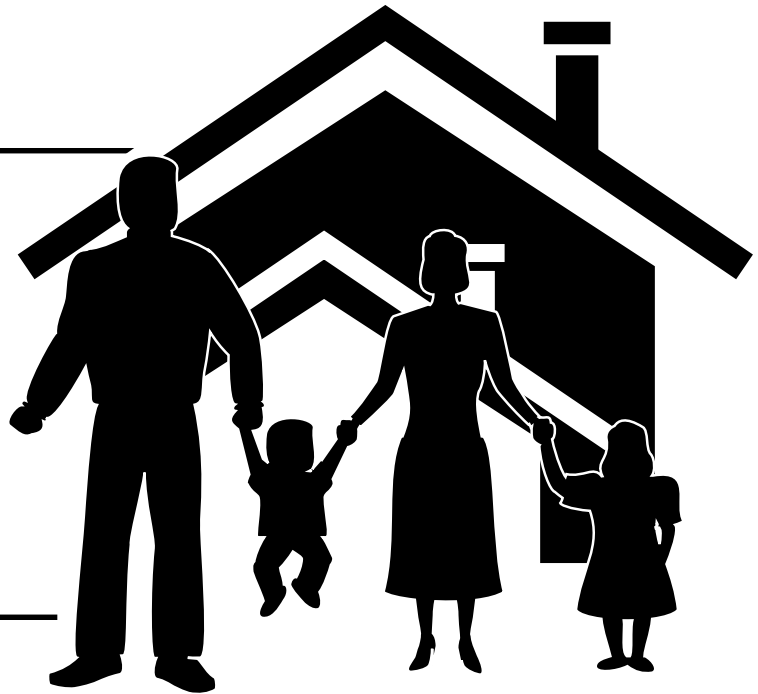


Develop Family Strength



The importance of strong families and the impact they have on the quality of life in communities and the nation are becoming more obvious every day. The home sets up a pattern that spills over into all other aspects of our society.

There are things you can do to help strengthen your family and to help promote the personal growth of each family member.

Several studies have identified these characteristics of successful families: mutual appreciation, quality time, effective communication, commitment, and spirituality.

Appreciation

Strong families appreciate the uniqueness and contributions of each family member—expressing feelings of appreciation in words and actions. Family members tell each other they are special. In the hurry of daily responsibilities, we often forget the importance of letting people know how much they are appreciated. It's so easy to take each other for granted, especially in families.

A teen sharing what she liked most about her parents said, "I like it when they do something special just for me. It's not my birthday or a special occasion but a time when it's unexpected. It's really a surprise and makes me feel so special." The need to be appreciated is a basic human need.

Think of what you can do to express appreciation for each member of your family. A special note or letter is one approach. Little notes, in lunch boxes or left on the refrigerator door, that express a thought for the day or just a simple "I love you" can make a difference. A "date" with your son, daughter, or spouse also sends, in a special way, the message that you care.

A gift "selected to match" a loved one is another way to say, "You're special." Remember, "It's not the biggest things with all their pomp and show, it's the little special things you do that help people grow."

Quality Time

Strong families spend a lot of positive time together in work and play and enjoy being together.

Activity overload is a major family challenge of our day. There are so many things to do and so little time to do them all. One study found that strong families intentionally cut down on the number of outside activities and involvements in order to minimize fragmentation of their family life (Stinnet).

Special time with the family or family members doesn't come easily. You must take the time or you can end up with only leftover time—a time you are tired, irritable, cranky, or exhausted. You need to schedule time for your family when you are fresh and have something positive to share. The ability to enjoy your family, with humor and playfulness, comes more easily to some than to others. Some parents find it hard to leave a carpet unvacuumed or a messy desk at the office in order to relax and enjoy each other or their children. Yet, time taken to spend happily with your family pays much bigger dividends than housekeeping tasks. The desk and the carpet will be cluttered many more times, but the moments to enjoy your family are never the same again.

If you want to build a stronger family unit, you must take some quality time when you have the energy, the inner peace, and the patience to give your best. You need to incorporate into busy schedules special times to share fun, special, and uplifting kinds of activities.

Effective Communication

"The greatest gift I can receive from anyone is to be seen by them, to be heard by them, to be understood by them, and to be touched by them." This quote by Virginia Satir expresses the keys to good communications in families.

How wonderful it is to have someone see your side of things and to really understand how you feel. However, if we're not careful, the needs and pressures of the moment often block this type of understanding. Families that are strong have developed an ability to look beyond each other's faults and see their needs. Family members should be consistent in their efforts to hear what the other person is saying and feeling.

Strong families have disagreements, but they also have the confidence to get things out into the open and to talk about them. Solutions that consider each person's needs are discussed and, hopefully, implemented.

Providing opportunities for all family members to share their concerns is important. A good practice is a family meeting, scheduled regularly, where individual and family concerns are shared, with open discussion of issues and possible solutions.

Listening is an important communication tool. Try to put yourself in the other person's place and hear what is being said; try to experience what the other is feeling. The realization that someone understands and cares eases a lot of tension and goes a long way in building strong families.

Another important part of communication is positive touch. A hug or squeeze, an embrace, a touch of the hand can communicate in many ways when words seem empty.

Commitment

Commitment is a positive quality that constantly appears in strong families. They share the kinds of experiences that make the family more attractive than other groups. Strong families are committed to helping and promoting the happiness of each other.

Commitment also comes from an active involvement in setting family goals. Each person has a chance to share what he/she thinks is important. This kind of involvement brings with it a commitment to see that the goals are met.

Teenagers are more willing to go along with a family vacation if they have some say on where and what is planned. This holds true in other areas. You need to take the time to get input from each member of the family involved in a planned trip or event. When you do this, you are saying, "You are important and what you have to say counts." This process takes time and some flexibility, but the benefits are worth the efforts. Commitment is a vital factor in developing a sense of unity among family members.

Spirituality

The families in Dr. Stinnett's study share a high degree of spirituality. In addition to attending a place of worship as a family, they share a set of common values and morals.

In their daily activities, they apply the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." They share the belief that there is a Supreme Being that is a guiding force.

Families that have developed these five characteristics are better able to meet the challenges of today. The unity they have developed makes it possible for them to draw upon the resources of each other, as they are needed. They become a source of strength to one another.



Revised and distributed by **Louise E. Davis, Ph.D.**, Extension Child and Family Development Specialist. Adapted from *How is Your Family's Well-Being*, Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service, Dr. Herbert G. Lingren.

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