

Promoting Family Strengths

Kelly A. Cole
Extension Associate

Janet A. Clark
Associate Program Leader and Associate State Specialist

Sara Gable
Human Development Extension State Specialist

Why are family strengths so important?

In our society, families take on many different structures. Although they may be formed in different ways, most families accomplish similar tasks, such as childbearing, providing for members' basic needs, providing emotional support, socializing members, establishing family traditions and delegating responsibility. By accomplishing these tasks, families influence the way individuals and society function. Few other social institutions have such a great impact on society. This profound influence makes evident the importance of strengthening families.

Family diversity

American families are characterized by great diversity. The *traditional* family has undergone numerous changes in recent decades. Many of today's scholars refer to the current trend as the *postmodern* family. Factors that have led to this change include divorce, remarriage, adolescent childbearing and changing social values. Following are descriptions of common family types.

- **Married nuclear families**
Husband, wife and children
- **Joint-custody families**
Divorced parents sharing child custody
- **Cohabiting families**
Unmarried men and women, and children, if any
- **Single-parent families**
Children raised by one parent as a result of divorce, death, desertion or never marrying
- **Voluntary child-free families**
Couples who choose not to have children
- **Involuntary child-free families**
Couples who are unable to have children
- **Blended and stepfamilies**
Husband, wife and children from previous marriage(s)
- **Families headed by gay men or lesbians**
May or may not include children

- Spend quality time alone with each child at least once a week.
- Respond to children with patience and respect their feelings and abilities.
- Encourage family members by asking them to share their accomplishments.
- Visit and find ways to help at your child's school.
- Eat a meal together as a family at least once a day and involve family members in mealtime tasks.
- Hold family meetings that give all family members an opportunity to talk openly.
- Develop a family mission statement that includes your family's purpose, goals and objectives.
- Develop and maintain family traditions and rituals.

Building and maintaining healthy family relationships

In recent decades, a number of changes have contributed to a reshaping of American families. Examples include high rates of adolescent and unmarried childbearing, a high divorce rate, single-parent households, stepfamilies and dual-earner families. Families need to be prepared to cope with these and other stressors and demands that may be placed upon them. Regardless of family type, there are times when all families need to be nurtured. Nurturing families in times of need can provide family members with a greater opportunity for building and maintaining healthy relationships.

A number of recommendations have been offered that can help families build and maintain healthy relationships. Selected recommendations follow.

Encourage open communication

- Communicate not only through words, but also through actions.
- Be aware of body language and tone of voice.
- Show that you understand what the other person is saying.
- Maintain good relationships with extended family members to increase sources of support and resources.

Maintain and strengthen relationships in the family

- **Parent-child**
Set and enforce family rules; be a patient parent; praise your children's efforts and accomplishments.
- **Marital**
Share housework and child care responsibilities; agree on family priorities and goals; value and nurture the relationship.
- **Siblings**
Develop sibling rituals and traditions; acknowledge one another as individuals; provide encouragement.

Manage crises and conflict

- Avoid taking things personally, which may help you avoid unnecessary conflict.
- When conflict does arise, resolve the problem before moving on.
- Direct attention to solving the problem rather than determining who is to blame.
- Understand what the conflict is about and model appropriate problem-solving strategies.
- Avoid holding grudges.
- Accept responsibility for your mistakes.
- Negotiations, compromises or apologies may be necessary before reconciliation is complete.

Building Strong Families

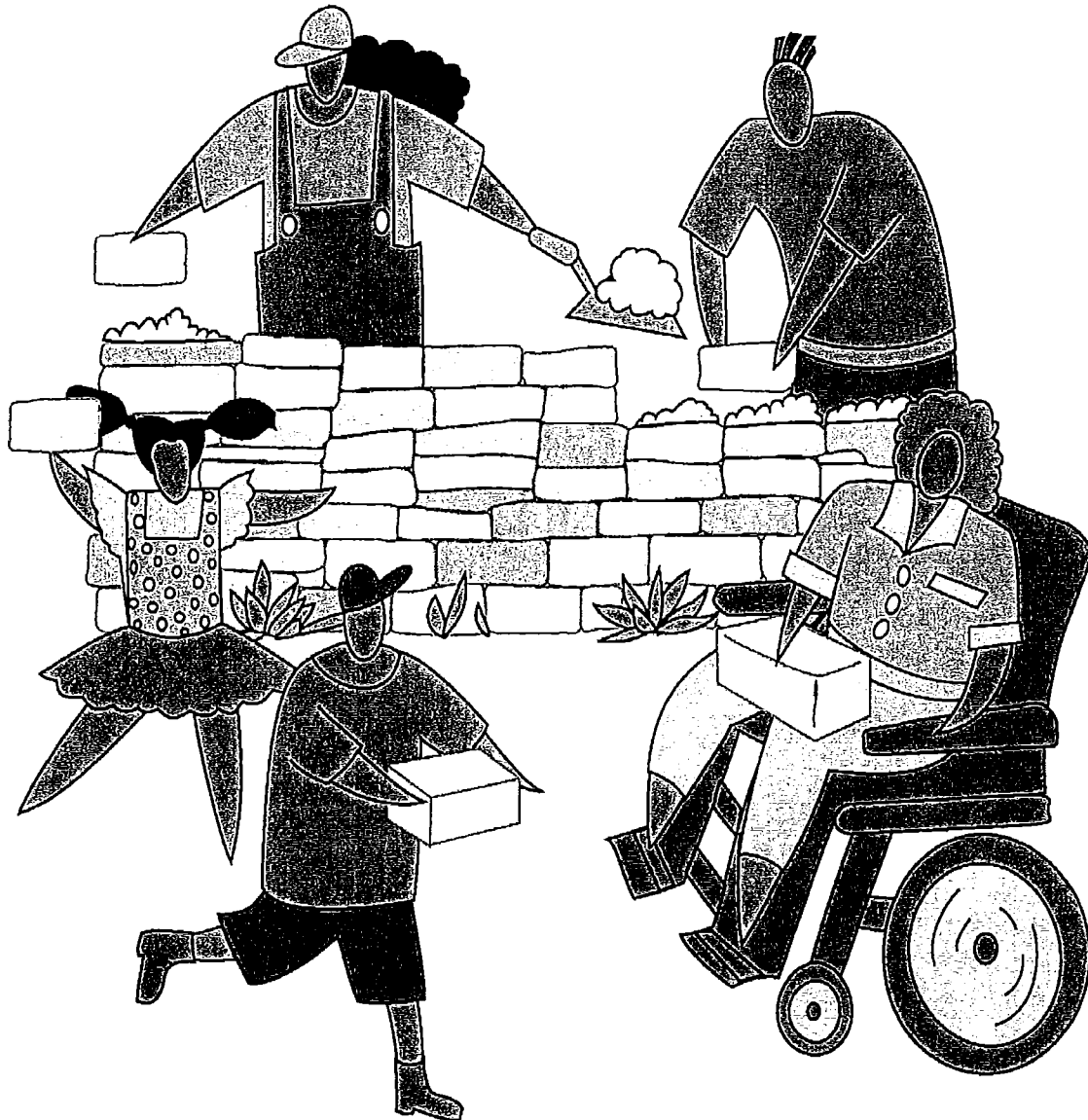
My Family's Strengths

Put an "X" in the appropriate box next to each strength. List one thing you can do to make your family stronger in relation to the individual strength.

Family strengths	Very strong	Needs some strengthening	What we'll do to make our family stronger	When
Caring and appreciation				
Time together				
Encouragement				
Commitment				
Communication				
Coping with change				
Spirituality				
Community/family ties				
Clear roles				

Building Strong Families

Having Fun with Your Family 365 Days a Year
Family Survival Activities



Pay attention to your children. Your children's sense of self-worth influences their future. How they feel about themselves will affect their choice of friends, how they get along with others, and how well they use their abilities.

Take time to talk to children, listen to them, and pay attention to their activities and interests. Find times when you are not hurried or tense and can focus on them.

Express affection through physical contact. With babies this means holding and cuddling. As children get older, you can offer hugs, kisses, caresses, an arm over the shoulder, or a pat on the back. Sometimes the right words are hard to find, but a gentle hug says it all.

Treat children with the same respect you show adults. Too often we reserve one set of manners for adults, and another for children. We may embarrass our children by scolding or criticizing them in front of others. Or we may get so involved in a conversation we forget their presence. Children are no less sensitive than adults and deserve the same kind of respect.

Tell children from time to time that they're appreciated. Don't wait until they get good grades or limit your praise to their good looks or manners. Let them know you enjoy them and think they're great all the time.

Respond to children with patience and understanding. When your child spills his milk for the third time in a row, or hits his sister over the head with a toy shovel, it's easy to treat him as a criminal. Try, though, to see the child as someone who needs your help in controlling his body and emotions.

Respect children's feelings and abilities. Because of their size, we can forget that children are people, too. They have a right to privacy and feelings of their own. We may have to remind ourselves not to carry children when they can get there under their own steam or to speak for them when they can speak for themselves.

Little Sprouts. Your kids can learn about life from gardening. Like people, plants need love and care to grow. Food and water keep them alive, and extra acts of kindness help them thrive. Children also learn a sense of responsibility by watering and weeding plants.

Try these fun ideas:

- X Put a marker with each child's name beside the vegetable or flower he or she planted. After harvest, use the vegetable in a family meal and put the gardener's name beside the serving dish (for example, Carol's corn or Tom's tomatoes).
- X Fill an old tennis shoe with potting soil and plant grass or flower seeds in it. Keep it moist and in 5 weeks you should have a fine crop of grass or flowers.
- X Children will love to share homegrown vegetables or flowers with neighbors, grandparents and others. Have them add a note that says "homegrown with love by...."
- X Care for the garden together with a positive attitude. Make it fun--not a punishment or a chore.

Sow seeds of kindness often in your children. By telling them you love them--no matter what--you plant a seed that will grow into positive self-esteem.

Building Strong Families

Commitment

A strong sense of commitment keeps the family together through good times and bad.

ACTIVITIES

Discovering Family Traditions. Make a list of your family's traditions. They can be such a part of family life that you may not even recognize them as traditions. They can be anything from a daily activity to a once-a-year event.

Go over the list and discuss the traditions. Are there some you'd like to do more often? Are there some that are no longer enjoyable? Cross off traditions you want to drop and put a star by those you want to do more often.

Finally, list ideas for new family traditions. Possibilities include some special way of saying goodnight; making your own birthday or holiday cards; or having video night every third Friday. Keep the list handy in case you want to add something.

In The Shade of the Family Tree. Tracing the family tree is a great activity for a parent or grandparent to share with a child. Work together to find family information. Share anecdotes and memories as the names are recorded.

You may want to record family events and stories on audio or video tape for future generations. Make copies of the family tree to give as presents to relatives.

Working with a grandparent to discover this information can help the child feel more secure. Grandparents' stories and remembrances also help link the past with the present. It's especially fun for kids to hear about their parents when they were growing up.

Public libraries and bookstores have books to get you started on tracing your family tree. Churches, organizations or community colleges sometimes offer genealogy classes.

Building Strong Families

Coping with Change

The ability to cope with change helps a family deal with everyday events and unpredictable stress.

ACTIVITIES

Do What I Do: Part of coping with change is learning to take on new roles unexpectedly. Your family can practice doing that with this fun activity. Once a month, ask family members to think of a chore or a job they usually do that they would like to "give away" for a day. Have them write it on a sticky note or draw a picture of it.

When you have finished, trade notes with each other until everyone has a new task to do. For that day only, each person does that job.

The next day, set aside a few minutes to talk about how it felt to switch roles.

Was it easy to do the different job? Why or why not?

How can we prepare ourselves to be ready to fill in for each other in the future?

Repeat the activity once a month.

Prepare for the Unexpected: Be prepared for the unexpected. Develop skills for dealing with emergencies and other unplanned situations, and take time to practice them. Areas to consider include:

- X Social skills - how to answer the phone and take a message
- X Safety and survival skills - how to escape a home fire; how to perform the Heimlich maneuver and other first aid techniques; what to do if the power goes out; and how to call 911
- X Car maintenance - how to handle a breakdown on the road; how to change a tire
- X Household maintenance - how to operate the washer and dryer and fold laundry; how to do simple home repairs.
- X Meal preparation - how to make a few simple meals; how to operate the oven, microwave and other appliances
- X Financial management - how to balance a checkbook; how to pay bills how to make plans for saving; how to write a will; how to prepare for retirement

Families Need to Talk: Choose a good time for a discussion: at the dinner table, in the car, in the evening while relaxing. Eliminate distractions and allow enough time for everyone to talk and share their ideas and opinions. Develop the conversation based on the answers to these discussion starters:

- *My biggest goof last year was....*
- *One really good thing that happened to me last year was...*
- *One thing I do well is...*
- *If I were the parent in this family..*
- *Our family is really good at...*
- *If I could have my favorite meal it would be...*
- *One thing I like about each person in my family is...*

Value each person's comments. The reward is a stronger family.

I-Messages: This activity can help family members develop skill in expressing their feelings or concerns without insulting or fighting.

Place I-messages on slips of paper using a format like this:

I feel good about... because....

I'm happy that...because...

I'm sad about...because...

Place the folded slips in a dish. Take turns drawing slips and filling in the blanks as you read the statement aloud.

Share an example of a completed I-message such as: *I feel good about getting a raise because I like having extra money to do fun things.*

Explain that I-messages are a way to express feelings without blaming other people for the way you feel.

Getting in Touch: Couples can set aside some time (15-30 minutes) each day to talk together. Use the time to get in touch with each other. Take a walk together or share a meal. Get up early enough to have time for conversation before the children get up. This same idea can be adapted for parent-child talks.

Building Strong Families

Community and Family Ties

Healthy families are connected to others in the community, building a mutual support system of family and friends that they can count on in times of need.

Children learn a sense of caring for others by watching parents' examples. Actions truly speak louder than words. When parents welcome a new neighbor, call on a sick friend, or donate clothing that has been outgrown, they are teaching their children to be involved with the larger community.

ACTIVITIES

Citizenship: Visit the city council, a county commissioner's meeting, state legislature or U.S. Congress. Watch regulations and laws being made. Interview a lawmaker. Take the kids to see a public, pre-election forum or watch public affairs programs on television and discuss them afterwards. Learn the process for making policies and laws, and practice influencing it.

Neighbor to Neighbor: Strengthen ties you have with neighbors by finding ways to be helpful (for example, splitting wood, installing fencing, pet sitting, sharing a favorite dessert, shoveling sidewalks, bringing in the newspaper, shopping for someone who is ill, or sharing plants and garden produce).

School Connections: Strengthen ties between home and school. Help out at your child's school. Share a talent in a classroom, participate in fundraising or a playground work party. Attend parent-teacher conferences. Support school events such as performances and sports activities. Work closely with the teacher to promote your child's success at school.

Make your home a learning place. Show your children you love to learn. Read books and magazines. Take continuing education classes. Tell your children about new, interesting things you learn. Keep many good books in your home.

Plan family learning activities. Go to the library. Visit museums, historic sites, planetariums, science exhibits.

Building Strong Families

Clear Roles

Strong families share in household responsibilities and work as a team to accomplish household tasks. When family members have a clear idea about their roles and responsibilities, they find it easier to be flexible and adapt in times of need.

ACTIVITIES

Daily Duties: Responsibilities teach us to be accountable for our actions. Homework must be completed or grades will suffer; clothes must be washed or there will be nothing to wear. We need to be consistent in expecting each family member to contribute to the operation of the household.

The family can make a daily schedule of each person's responsibilities. Examples might include: chores, homework, jobs, pet care, school activities and sports.

Include some responsibilities that involve working together. For instance, Jimmy helps Joan set the table on Monday and Wednesday. Be sure the scheduled duties fit the ages and abilities of family members.

Post the schedule where everyone in the family can see it. Review responsibilities weekly.

Family Fun-Raising: Family members can rotate the role of "fun raising." The fun raiser brings the family together to plan for having fun.

Make a list of fun activities. These activities can be free things such as going for a hike or playing games or other activities like going to the movies or a ball game.

Choose activities that appeal to everyone, and list the activities on a fun-raising chart. Write what the family wants to do, how much it will cost, what is needed to prepare for it, and when the family will do it.

Resources

Lott, Lynn, and Intner, Riki. *The Family That Works Together...Turning Family Chores from Drudgery to Fun*. Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1995.

ParentLink Connection Center Library
1-800-552-8522

References

Lott, Lynn, and Intner, Riki. *The Family That Works Together...Turning Family Chores from Drudgery to Fun*. Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1995.

McGarvey, Suzanne, and Clark, Jan. *Family Councils: The Key is Communication* (GH6641). University of Missouri-Columbia: University Extension 1-800-292-0969, 1997.

Working Together was adapted from *The Death of Supermom or We All Live in this Mess Together* Guidesheet (EP249), written by Gail R. Carlson, Ph.D., Child and Family Development Specialist. Adapted with permission by Lucy Schrader, Building Strong Families Program Coordinator, University Outreach and Extension, University of Missouri-Columbia. It was adapted further by Gail Rice, Literacy Specialist and Consultant.

Household Tasks

Tasks	Who	How Often	Time
Kitchen and Dining Room			
Prepare supper			
Set table			
Clear table			
Wash dishes			
Load dishwasher			
Dry dishes and put them away			
Wipe table			
Wipe counters			
Clean cabinets			
Sweep floor			
Mop floor			
Living Room and Family Room			
Pick up belongings			
Straighten tables			
Recycle old magazines and newspapers			
Dust			
Vacuum			
Bathrooms			
Scrub tub			
Scrub sink and counters			
Clean toilet			
Wash floors			

Tasks	Who	How Often	Time
Laundry			
Sort clothes			
Wash clothes			
Dry clothes			
Fold clothes			
Iron clothes			
Put clothes away			
Other			
Wash windows			
Clean out garage			
Take out trash			
Pay bills			
File taxes			
Plan fun events			
Select gifts			
Change diapers			
Bathe children			
Outside work			
Wash car			
Sweep walk and driveway			
Pull weeds			
Water flowers and trees			
Water grass			
Cut grass			
Trim shrubs			
Rake leaves			
Paint fence/house			

Working Together

What if you have to move a heavy desk from one room to another all by yourself? More than likely, you will not be able to move it. You can try hard and give it all your energy. But you may end up feeling as if you have gotten nowhere.

Now, what if others are helping you? Each person takes a side, and together you move the desk easily. All of you are pleased that you finished the job quickly. The group might even decide to celebrate a job well done!

As you think about your family chores, ask these questions: Are you a one-person cleaning crew? Do you feel like you're doing everything by yourself? Do you push and nag other family members, but get no results? What if the family could work together to get jobs done more quickly?

The following ideas will help your family work together to get chores and jobs done around the house. If your family members already work together, you may get some new ideas.

How can you work together?

- 1. Talk to family members at any other time than when the problem is happening. Call a family meeting.**

What if you talk to family members while the problem is happening? You and others will probably get upset. For example, suppose that you are angry that your children do not pick up their clothes. If you argue with them when you walk into their room and see clothes all over the floor, it will probably backfire.

If you raise your voice, your children may shout back, "You're always yelling at us! This is our room!" A different plan is to ask for a time to talk later about the issue. You can say, "I have a problem that I need your help with. Can we call a family meeting and talk at 3:00 this afternoon in the living room?"

2. At the family meeting, involve all family members (including young children) who are part of the problem in order to solve the problem.

Ask all family members to meet to talk about the issue. Even very young children will learn that they are part of the family and that their ideas matter.

Go to the place you have chosen at the set time. At first, you might have to remind the children or other family members that it is time to meet.

“Remember when I stopped by your room this morning? We agreed to meet this afternoon.” The more you meet, the more the family meetings will become part of your family’s routine.

At your meeting, tell what the problem is. Ask for everyone’s input. Then decide who will do what and by when. For example:

Parent: “I get very upset when you leave clothes all over your room. I don’t like yelling, and I don’t like it when we are mad at each other.”

Children: “We don’t like you yelling at us either.”

Parent: “What can we do to work together?”

Children: “We’ll put the clothes away in the mornings, right after we get up.”

Give the children some time to come up with a way to solve the problem. If they can’t think of anything, offer a couple of choices that you can live with.

Parent: “Do you want me to set a timer for 10 minutes each afternoon, and you put your clothes away then? Or, do I not say anything in the afternoons, and you can have until dinner to put them away? If you haven’t put them away by then, I can remind you once.”

Note:

Let family members choose the jobs they will do. You may have to assign some jobs that no one wants to do. Do not divide jobs into male and female tasks. Family members need to learn many different skills. From time to time, you can switch chores, especially those chores that no one wants to do.

3. Make and use pictures or visuals to remind people of the plan.

A new plan for jobs and chores may be hard to remember. At your meeting, decide how family members will remember to do their tasks. Should someone remind another person? Can there be a timer or a chart to help? (See the "Weekly Reminder" chart for an example.)

If the children decide to use a timer to put their clothes away, they can see how much time they have left and hear the timer when it goes off. If they decide they have until dinner to put clothes away, they might cut out magazine pictures of clothes and someone eating. They can hang the pictures in their room to remind them.

4. Show family members what to do. Then give them time to practice and change.

Don't expect children to be perfect. Parents could easily do some jobs better and faster by themselves. When they do, however, the children don't get helpful on-the-job training. Remember that what is easy for you may not be easy for your children. You may have done the task "a thousand times," but they may be doing a new job. They need you to help and direct them.

New habits are sometimes hard to learn. People do not change overnight. Suppose you had a cook, a gardener, someone doing your laundry, and a driver. Then suppose that they were all taken away from you. You might be angry and upset at having to do all of the jobs yourself. Also, you might not know how to do the jobs.

5. Try the plan for a set time. Then come back together and evaluate the plan. Decide if it is a good plan.

Try the plan for a week. If the children choose to put clothes away in the mornings, let them try it on their own. Come back again for a meeting and see how things worked. You might find that it is hard to get things done in the mornings, and the clothes are not getting picked up.

At the next family meeting, talk about the past week. Try to find new ways to solve the problem. Get everyone's input.

Parent: "I'm still upset because we're so busy in the mornings that you don't have time to pick up your clothes. I think we need to try something else." You can ask if the children have other ideas or offer some yourself.

As a family, decide on a new plan, and try it for a week. Then meet again and evaluate the new plan.

6. Decide on consequences, and follow through on decisions.

Make sure you follow through with whatever plans the family members decide on. Agree on when certain jobs will be done—before breakfast, after school, on Saturdays. Set time limits, and decide as a family what will happen if the chores are not finished. Children should have some say in when and how quickly they will do their tasks.

Children need to know the positive and negative consequences of what they do. What are the good or bad results if they do their tasks or don't do them? Family values and goals will help you decide what the consequences will be.

Some parents think that they should pay or reward children for doing household tasks. Other parents feel that children should do chores without pay because they should help out, cooperate, and learn to be responsible. Still others believe that not all jobs are enjoyable, but they need to be done anyway because they help everyone (like cleaning the house).

Here is an example of giving consequences: "If you don't clean up within 45 minutes after a meal, you won't get to watch TV for the night."

7. Celebrate and have fun!

Make sure that all family members have time to enjoy their own interests. You need time for yourself, and your children need time for themselves. That's why families need to share tasks. Working together will give family members more time for family activities and more time to meet their own goals.

Celebrate what you do! You can have a picnic in the backyard or work on a puzzle together. You can take a walk in the woods or watch a movie. Decide what to do as a family, and have fun!