

Creating a Strong Family Enjoyable Time Together: A Journey of Happy Memories

**John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development; Jeanette Friesen, Extension Educator;
Dianne Swanson, Extension Educator; Gail Brand, Extension Educator**

This is one in a series of NebGuides by UNL Extension Family Life specialists and educators who explore the attributes and experiences of strong families.

“Relax now. Close your eyes. And think back to when you were a child. Picture in your mind’s eye a really good time you had as a kid ... a really happy time. Go through several of these happy times until you come to the most memorable one of all. What was happening? Who were you with? Try to see it, hear it, touch it, taste it. When you open your eyes in a few minutes, I’m going to ask you to describe this picture to everyone in the room.”

The room gets very quiet. Some faces are lost in thought. Other faces have big smiles on them. After sufficient time, the group is asked to open their eyes.

“Now, let’s have several people stand up, one by one, and tell us all what they saw. What were these happy memories from childhood that you remember today, years later?”

This exercise has been done with literally thousands of people over the years, and their responses have been most instructive. Here are some stories:

“I saw my father and me. I was sitting on his lap before bedtime. He was a busy man, working hard to support our family, but he always had time in the evening to read me a story. I loved the smell of his aftershave, and he always made me feel so safe and protected and we had fun laughing together.”

“Every Saturday morning my mom and I would scrub the kitchen floor together. We would get all sudsy and wet and laugh and tease each other and talk girl talk.”

“Thanksgiving was always so much fun. All the aunts and uncles and cousins would come to our house, and we had an old pretty-much beat-up piano, and Mom would play and we would sing. But when the kids got tired of singing, we’d chase each

other around the house and have fun giggling and running until the grown-ups sent us outside to run some more. It was great!”

“We would go camping at the same lake year after year. It was like an old friend. Money was pretty tight for Mom after Dad left, but she still figured out a way for us to go camping. I think she borrowed a tent from a neighbor and off we’d go. We’d swim and laugh and read grizzly bear stories at night and eat s’mores. I never wanted it to end.”

“Grandpa would play checkers with me. Game after game after game. I was only 7 or 8 and he’d never let me win. I think he wanted me to try harder and harder to get good, and so he would play hard, also, and I never won. But he had a way of not discouraging me by saying, ‘Good playing, Paulie! You almost did it! Let’s try again!’ With my own kids, I let them win some and sometimes they even beat me legitimately. But the main thing is that we’re together enjoying each other.”

After listening to several stories of happy childhood memories, an audience can work together to construct a Theory of Enjoyable Time Together. “What did you hear in these stories? What themes?”

First, the group concludes, happy childhood memories most commonly center on activities that are shared as a family. Simply being together and delighting in each other’s company is the key. Second, pleasurable time together almost always focuses on activities that don’t cost a lot of money. We like to call these serendipitous good times. They occur when you’re simply hanging out together or looking for ways to have fun together. The creative genius of family members becomes the catalyst for enjoyment. We can’t program a happy memory or one that will last a lifetime. But we can take an ordinary event and look for positive ways to make it fun or enjoyable because it’s family time together. Family traditions can be started from the simplest of activities, resulting in memories that last for years.

The list of popular family activities that help cement the bonds of togetherness is a long one and includes meals together, spending time outdoors in nature together, house and yard chores, attending sporting events, long, quiet chats, board games and cards, and outdoor recreation, including camping, playing catch

and other yard games, canoeing, hiking, and picnicking. The particular activity isn't as important as the fact that the activity is a vehicle for human contact.

This publication has been peer-reviewed.

UNL Extension publications are available online at
<http://extension.unl.edu/publications>.

**Index: Family
Family Strengths**
Issued August 2008

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educational programs abide with the nondiscrimination policies of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.

© 2008, The Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska on behalf of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension. All rights reserved.