

Creating a Strong Family

Looking at Life From a Family Strengths Perspective

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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.

The family strengths perspective is a world-view or orientation toward life and families, grounded in research with more than 24,000 family members in 35 countries around the world. It is basically a positive, optimistic orientation. It does not ignore family problems but relegates problems to their proper place in life: as vehicles for testing our capacities as families and reaffirming our connection with each other.

Over the past four decades, researchers at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, the University of Alabama–Tuscaloosa and affiliated institutions in the United States and around the world have studied families from a strengths perspective. A number of propositions can be derived from this work:

- *Families, in all their remarkable diversity, are the basic foundation of all human cultures.* Strong families are critical to the development of strong communities, and strong communities promote and nurture strong families.
- *All families have strengths.* And, all families have challenges and areas of potential growth. If one looks only for problems in a family, one will see only problems. If one also looks for strengths, one will find strengths.
- *It's not about structure, it's about function.* When talking about families, it is common to make the mistake of focusing on external family structure or type of family rather than internal family functioning. There are strong single-parent families, strong stepfamilies, strong nuclear families, strong extended families, strong families with gay and lesbian members, and strong two-parent families. For every family structure in the world, there are countless representative strong families. Likewise, every type of family structure in the world also has many families that are not functioning

well. Simply knowing what type of family one lives in really does not tell one anything about the strength of the family.

- *It's not about race or ethnicity, either.* There are strong black families, strong white families, strong American families, strong Afghani families. Every ethnic or cultural group has strong families. And, every ethnic or cultural group has families that are not doing well. One knows nothing about the quality of a family simply by knowing the group to which it belongs.
- *Strong marriages are the center of many strong families.* The couple relationship is an important source of strength in many families with children who are doing well. Parents – both fathers and mothers – cannot afford to neglect their relationship with each other, and it is important to find ways to nurture a positive couple relationship for the good of everyone in the family.
- *Strong families tend to produce great kids;* and a good place to look for great kids is in strong families (Stinnett & O'Donnell, 1996).
- *If you grew up in a strong family, it will probably be easier for you to create a strong family of your own as an adult.* But, it's also quite possible to do so if you weren't so lucky and grew up in a seriously troubled family (Skogrand, DeFrain, DeFrain & Jones, 2007).
- *The relationship between money and family strengths is shaky, at best.* Once a family has adequate financial resources — and adequate is a slippery and subjective word to define — the relentless quest for more and more money is not likely to increase the family's quality of life, happiness together, or the strength of their relationships with each other. Rampant materialism in Western culture can be a dead end, for as our couples and families over the years have told us clearly, "The best things in life are not things."
- *Strengths develop over time.* When couples start out in life together, they sometimes have considerable difficulty adjusting to each other, and these difficulties

are quite predictable. Adjusting to each other is not an easy task. Many couples who start out unstable end up creating a healthy, happy family.

- *Strengths are often developed in response to challenges.* A couple and family's strengths are tested by life's everyday stressors and also by the significant crises that all of us face sooner or later. For many couples and families, it takes several years before they believe they have become a strong family, and they know this because they have been tested over time and tested by fire by the significant challenging events that life inevitably brings.
- *Crises can tear families apart.* Crises also can make family relationships stronger. Families in crisis sometimes forget about the strengths they have and need to remind themselves.
- *A family's strengths are the foundation for positive growth and change in the future.* Families become stronger by capitalizing on their strengths.
- *Most families in the world have considerable strength.* Human beings wouldn't have lasted across countless generations without these qualities. There are many more strong families in the world than families that are deeply troubled. As a global human community, we cannot afford to forget this.

- *Families are about emotion. Strong emotion.* If family strengths could be reduced to one single quality, it would be a positive emotional connection and sense of belonging with each other. When this emotional bond is present, the family can endure almost any hardship.

Human beings have the right and responsibility to feel safe, comfortable, happy, and loved. Strong families are where this all happens.

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