

Creating a Strong Family

What Is a Strong Family?

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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.

One question that has fascinated researchers in the field of family studies for many years is, “What constitutes a strong family?” In essence, what qualities make for success in families? Finding an answer to this question is important, because with this foundation of knowledge, we can help people learn about family strengths and what’s necessary to create their own strong family.

Our research at the University of Nebraska for over 35 years has focused on not only American families but those around the world who believe they are doing well. Information was gathered through in-depth family interviews, observations and written questionnaires. Family members from all 50 states and 34 other countries around the world have participated over the years in a series of more than 60 studies. More than 100 researchers at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln and allied universities in America and other countries have been involved in these studies. More than 24,000 family members have participated in this research.

Amazingly, when you ask people around the globe, “What makes your family strong?” the answers are remarkably similar from culture to culture. These answers are summarized in six strengths.

Appreciation and affection — People in strong families deeply care for one another, and they let each other know this on a regular basis. They are not afraid to express their love. Families show appreciation and affection by:

- Caring for each other
- Friendship
- Respect for individuality
- Playfulness
- Humor

Commitment — Members of strong families show a strong commitment to one another, investing time and energy in family activities and not letting their work or other priorities take too much time away from family interaction. Families show commitment through:

- Trust
- Honesty
- Dependability
- Faithfulness
- Sharing

Positive communication — Successful families are often task-oriented in their communication, identifying problems and discussing how to solve them together. Perhaps even more important than this, however, is that strong families also spend time talking with and listening to one another just to stay connected. Some of the most important talk occurs when no one is working at connection: open-ended, rambling conversations can reveal important information that helps smooth out the bumps of family living. Positive communication includes:

- Giving compliments
- Sharing feelings
- Avoiding blame
- Being able to compromise
- Playfulness
- Agreeing to disagree

Enjoyable time together — One study of 1,500 school-children asked, “What do you think makes a happy family?” Few replied that money, cars, fancy homes, television sets, or trips to Disney World made a happy family. The kids were most likely to say that a happy family is one that does things together, a family that genuinely enjoys the times they share with each other. These qualities make time together enjoyable:

- Quality time in great quantity
- Sharing memories with each other
- Enjoying each other's company
- Simple, inexpensive good times
- Sharing fun times

Spiritual well-being — Religion or spirituality also can be important to strong families. Spiritual well-being describes this concept, indicating that it can include organized religion, but not necessarily so. People describe this in many ways: some talk about religious faith, hope, or a sense of optimism in life; some say they feel a oneness with the world. Others talk about their families in almost religious terms, describing the love they feel for one another with a great deal of reverence. Others express these feelings in terms of ethical values and commitment to important causes. Spiritual well-being can be seen as the caring center within each individual that promotes sharing, love, and compassion. Included in spiritual well-being are:

- Hope
- Faith
- Compassion
- Shared ethical values
- Oneness with humankind

Successful management of stress and crisis — Strong families are not immune to stress and crisis, but they are not as crisis-prone as troubled families tend to be. Rather, they possess the ability to manage both daily stressors and difficult life crises creatively and effectively. They know how to prevent trouble before it happens and how to work together to meet challenges when they inevitably occur in life. Families who manage stress and crisis well have these qualities:

- Adaptability
- Seeing crises as challenges and opportunities
- Growing through crises together
- Openness to change
- Resilience

Where does love fit in the family strengths model?

In earlier models of family strengths, all of the family strengths were seen in a circular fashion — intertwined, highly related, and essentially inseparable — and the concept of love was placed in the center. This model works well for cultures where love is a central concept. In fact, when a researcher asks many Americans about the strengths of their families, love is likely to be cited many times.

Love can be both a feeling one has for others, and a loving action that human beings demonstrate regularly toward each other. Loving actions toward each other lead to warm and loving feelings, and these feelings lead to loving actions in a reciprocal process. Though an abusive spouse may say, “I love you,” words without loving actions are meaningless.

Resource

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