

Creating a Strong Family

Talking About Religion and Spirituality in Families

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

The following discussion was part of research on strong families conducted by John DeFrain.

When David and Marian welcome us into their home, it is readily apparent that religion is important in their lives. The first thing we see in the foyer is an ornate antique cherrywood table covered with an elaborately crocheted white cloth. A large family *Bible*, passed down through several generations, rests on the table, opened to a favored passage, 1 Corinthians 13:4: "... Love is patient and kind." The message intended upon seeing this altar and reading these words is quite clear: The family's home is a sacred place, and we will be treated with kindness.

While conducting research on strong families in Australia, my wife Nikki and I have had the honor of living with 11 different families for periods of three days to a month. It has been a rare opportunity to see happy families from the inside out. Each family has been special to us, and all in very different ways. David is a kind, deeply religious man with a gentle sense of humor. On the second day of our visit with his family, I hear him chuckling in the living room. I walk in and sit down.

"What's so interesting?"

"Oh, it's a letter I just received from my son James. He's 23 years old now and away at graduate school back East. It's an eight-page letter and he's telling me in detail why he doesn't believe in God."

David's comments grab my attention right away. Working with college students for more than 30 years has given me countless opportunities to hear about religious disputes in families from the young person's perspective. Usually the story is one in which the son or daughter goes off to the university, begins to question the family's faith and ends up

in a fierce argument while eating Thanksgiving turkey when he or she comes home to visit.

James is expressing his need to create a belief system that is meaningful to him personally. David's response comes from a perspective that I don't commonly hear.

"Eight pages on why he doesn't believe in God?" I respond, gently digging deeper.

"Yes," David continues. "See how well he writes, and his thinking is very logical ... You know, when I was young, I went on my own spiritual journey and found a way that works for me. James is clearly on his own spiritual journey right now."

"You aren't going to write back an argumentative, angry letter?" I ask.

"Oh, no. I don't want to ruin our friendship. He has expressed some very personal thoughts. He is finding his way in the world. I can share my own beliefs, which are very, very important to me, and different from his. But I can't make him believe something that makes no sense to him. The best thing I can do is love him and listen to what he's thinking. It would be terribly sad to me if he couldn't talk with his father about religion. It's such a vitally important topic."

It's been several years since my conversation with David. I hope to get a chance to sit down with him in his living room again sometime and see how the theological discussion is proceeding. I'm confident that David is keeping the lines of communication open with his beloved son, for David has found a way to maintain family ties without stifling individual differences. In fact, I believe that by stifling individual differences in families, the ties are not made stronger but start to unravel.

What often happens is that young people, fearing an angry or sorrowful response from their parents, simply close them off. When parents overreact to a young person's searching questions, the young person quickly learns not to bring up anything important — "It will just make my parents mad." Parents may feel that different beliefs are a sign of disrespect and betrayal. More likely, different beliefs are evidence of hu-

man intelligence at work: By searching and questioning, we create new ways of looking at the world, and sometimes the quality of life is dramatically improved by using our natural human curiosity to good advantage.

In every strong family, each individual sees, thinks, and feels differently about the world. They all have their own opinion, and necessarily so. It is a strength of families to be able to discuss similarities and differences, calmly and rationally. The approach is not one in which someone wins the argument and someone loses. The approach is to gain understanding from each other and to learn from each other.

A parent, for example, should listen and ask questions before responding to the thoughts and decisions of children and young people on their opinions of religion and spirituality. Conclusions of children almost automatically will be different than those of parents because life experiences are different. Opinions of a 12-year-old will be different than of a 16-year-old; and those of a 16-year-old will be different than of a 26-year-old. Parents are also on a journey. They have answers to current questions, but may change their thinking as time passes. Parents should not feel they are responsible for knowing all the answers but rather should be open to learning and growing right along with their children.

Here are some questions to help open the discussion:

- How does what you believe influence the way you live?
- What spiritual event stands out in your life?
- What was your spiritual high point?
- What was your spiritual low point?
- Which significant people have played a role in your spiritual journey?
- Where would you like to go from here in your spiritual journey, and what steps do you need to take to get there?
- What about your spiritual belief system gives you comfort and support in difficult times?

For more ideas see: DeFrain, J., (2007). *Family treasures: Creating strong families*. New York, Lincoln, NE, Shanghai: iUniverse/University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension.

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