

BUILDING FAMILY STRENGTHS

OVERVIEW

Families are critical in the physical, emotional, spiritual, and social development of children. Research indicates that families are unique and individual, yet share common strengths. We must remember that . . .

- families are the source of love, protection, and identity for their members;
- all families have strengths, but many today face exceptional challenges; and
- families are the backbone of communities.

Effective families contribute to positive individual development, a quality workplace and workforce, caring communities, and a healthy nation. All families must be strengthened through experiences which teach youth and adults coping skills, effective communications skills, effective decision-making, and an appreciation of heritage. Research recognizes the uniqueness and diversity of families and thus foster and support the idea that strong families:

- believe in open and honest COMMUNICATION,
- experience CONTENTMENT with their lifestyle,
- have a sense of family HISTORY,
- have a sense of HUMOR,
- have a sense of OPTIMISM about life,
- exhibit RESILIENCY during change,
- have high SELF-ESTEEM,
- have a sense of SPIRITUALITY,
- encourage UNITY and family togetherness, and
- share common VALUES.

**STRONG FAMILIES BUILD
STRONG COMMUNITIES**

COMMUNICATION

Strong families communicate easily and well – frequently, openly, clearly, and directly. They do a good deal of sharing of themselves – their feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, joys, sorrows, experiences, growth, and needs.

Perhaps the most important communication skill is listening. Active listening is essential to effective family communication and is vital to hearing and being heard in the family unit.

“The presence of an effective communication pattern is one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of strong families.”

—Swihart, 1988

CONTENTMENT

Strong families base their life style on what they can afford and can reasonably enjoy – on a concept of stewardship that stresses gratitude for what they have, not whining after what they do not have.

Contentment is the state of being happy enough with what one has or is; not desiring something more or different. Contented families are steadfast and do not allow others to define for them what they have to be and have as a family.

“Don’t let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.”

—John Wooden



HISTORY

Strong families have a need for connection to the past – they have a history and are affected by that history. Family history provides ROOTS, a sense of belonging.

Family history can be promoted by telling favorite family stories; teaching important events/activities to family members; keeping up with family members when they move away; going to family gatherings; communicating through letters, e-mails, video tapes, audio tapes, etc.; making sure children know their family members; keeping family traditions alive; and remembering special family vacations or outings.

“In each family a story is playing itself out, and each family’s story embodies its hope and its despair.”

—Augustus Napier

HUMOR

Families who have joy in their lives are more likely to feel good about themselves. It also seems fairly obvious that having a sense of humor helps families cope with life’s stressors and crises. Humor can ultimately be used as a coping tool for families.

Humor is very beneficial in strengthening families. It gives families perspective and sense of power. Humor also dispels anger and aggression and relieves tension among family members.

Families that learn to find humor even in some of the grim realities and emotion-packed challenges of daily life have an edge on peace of mind. Changes in this mind set takes practice.

“The most completely lost of all days is the one on which we haven’t laughed.”

—French Proverb

OPTIMISM

Strong families change their focus from what they have not done to what they can do; from what they do not have to what they do have; from where they have not been to where they can go; and from their weaknesses to their strengths. Optimism, or positive thinking, can help families feel hopeful during times of negative situations. They tell themselves “I can” rather than “I can’t.” They see the glass as “half full” rather than “half empty.”

“When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.”

—Alexander Graham Bell

RESILIENCY

“Family resiliency is the family’s ability to cultivate strengths to positively meet the challenges of life.” Strong families help children learn resilient behavior when they teach problem-solving skills and provide noncritical support and sense of togetherness. The values and skills learned at home give individuals the power to shape their lives.

Families that learn how to cope with challenges and meet individual needs are more resilient to stress and crisis. Strong families solve problems with cooperation, creative brainstorming, and openness to others.

“Resiliency is what happens when one regains functioning after adversity.”

—Norman Garmezy, 1993

SELF-ESTEEM

High self-esteem – feeling good about oneself – makes it easier to meet the challenges of life. Families that believe in their ability to succeed are most often able to carry it out. Good self-esteem provides the basis for a strong family unit.

Families that encourage and foster high self-esteem are able to accept some failure as normal and not

let it keep them from trying again; able to cope with the day-to-day challenges or problems that come their way; and able to look toward their future with excitement and confidence while working toward fulfilling their goals. Families with high self-esteem are not likely to let others make their decisions for them or to influence them to do things they do not want to do.

“Experience is not what happens to a person. It is what a person does with what happens to him.”

—Aldous Huxley

SPIRITUALITY

Families with a sense of spirituality carry a gratitude and sense of hope that recognizes even the little things of life as special events.

However, spirituality of America’s families has diverse meaning, extended beyond as well as among family members. The spirit that transcends “self” is seen in many forms.

Spirituality provides a way to deal with successes and also failures, especially in family relationships. It teaches us to ask forgiveness when we have wronged another and accepted forgiveness when we have been wronged.

“Great are they who see that spiritual is stronger than any material force, that thoughts rule the world.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

UNITY

Strong families recognize that there are benefits and pleasures to be gained from time and activities together. They also realize that they have contributions to make to the family and its members and some obligation to do so. They value the family bond that makes efforts to preserve time together for family activities and interaction.

Family unity encourages families to create daily routines as well as special traditions and celebrations which affirm members, connect them to

family roots, and add creativity and fun to ordinary events. Families can build a secure nest in many ways. The nest must shelter without smothering and allow room for all members to “test their wings” under protection and encouragement.

“We need 4 hugs a day for survival. We need 8 hugs a day for maintenance. We need 12 hugs a day for growth.”

—Virginia Satir

VALUES

Values are a reflection of who we are, of our culture and our own unique heritage. Being clear about our values enables and empowers us to establish priorities and make decisions that we can live with and by. What we learn from our families in childhood serves us throughout our lives. Families guide personal growth and education, while offering love and protection. When families are strong, our neighborhood is strong, and our nation is strong, and we can be more hopeful about the future.

Values have an influence at every stage of making a choice. Values shape what we perceive. They influence our goals, the alternatives we select, and the ranking of these alternatives. Values are a consistent response to situations with common factors. True values are principals and ideals you live by.

“If you wish to know the mind of a man, listen to his words.”

—Chinese Proverb

SUMMARY

All too often we do not do the things that help our family grow stronger. Strengthening our families will not just happen; it takes some effort. Regardless of whether a family is two people or twenty, every family possesses strengths. When people have strong families, they are likely to become responsible, productive citizens.

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