

## Building Strong Families

Families form the foundation of all human cultures. Strong families are essential to strong communities, and strong communities encourage and nurture strong families.

Recently there has been concern about the health of the American family – can families survive the many challenges facing them?

One positive perspective is that all families, including traditional two-parent families, single parent families, blended families, poor families, rich families, extended families, and older families, have strengths. But, just as all families have strengths, all have challenges and areas for potential growth. Life happens, and all face both good and bad times. But, families can learn to survive problems and grow closer and stronger. They can build on the strengths they already have.

### What are characteristics of a strong family?

In general, strong families create a sense of togetherness and nurturing for all family members. In addition, individual family members are respected and encouraged to develop their own personality and potential.

Based on research studies of family strengths across cultures, researchers at University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension cite six major characteristics that demonstrate family strengths. These are:

1. Appreciation and affection for each other. Members of strong families care for each other and intentionally express those feelings to other family members. There are many ways of showing appreciation and affection for each other. Some ideas for any family member to contribute are to give hugs; make a favorite dish for dinner; help with chores; say “I love you;” offer compliments for good work; listen to reasons your child, spouse, sibling or parent had a bad day (or a great day!); offer words of encouragement for trying something new or difficult.
2. Commitment to one another. Members invest time and energy to family activities, doing things together and showing a priority for family time over other activities. Commitment is the expectation that family members will be together in both good and challenging times. Commitment does not overshadow the individual; strong families understand that individual members develop their own identity and qualities. They support each other.
3. Positive communication. Strong families are able to identify problems and discuss solutions together. Strong families also spend time in active communication - talking and listening to each other and staying connected. Positive communication is being kind and encouraging, never intentionally hurtful or harsh. It is giving compliments, avoiding blame, and compromising. Positive communication also means being specific about what you need or expect from other family members, and sharing your feelings, thoughts and experiences.
4. Spend enjoyable time together. Strong families do activities together and enjoy the time they share. These activities don't have to cost a lot or even anything. Activities can be trips to the

playground or park; taking a hike; a regularly-scheduled family night with board games and popcorn; making breakfast together; or just committing time in everyone's schedule to eat dinner together. Strong families develop and celebrate family traditions and build positive memories.

5. Spiritual well-being. Spiritual well-being will depend on a family's beliefs, and may mean involvement in a faith-based community, volunteering in the community, or a commitment to an important cause. Different families demonstrate this attribute in different ways, but it focuses on looking beyond oneself to a greater purpose.

Other researchers include "family wellness" with this trait, and describe it as a positive holistic way of living that nurtures physical and mental well-being and a healthy lifestyle. A healthy lifestyle can involve healthy eating, exercise, and ensuring that family members get enough rest.

6. Ability to manage stress and crisis effectively. Strong families face stress and crisis in their lives but they possess the ability to manage daily demands and difficult crises effectively. They know how to prevent some problems and work together to meet the challenges that come. In the face of challenge or crisis, families can sometimes forget about their strengths and need to remind themselves of what they do well. Research shows that having a support system of friends, relatives, neighbors and other outside resources can help families get through stressful times. Staying flexible and adaptable to changes, using humor and laughter, taking one day at a time, maintaining a perspective that things will get better, and relaxation techniques and physical exercise are all suggestions for dealing with stress and life challenges.

It's important to note that family strengths develop over time. As families form, it can be difficult for members to adjust to changes and each other. Couples or families may start off with relatively few strengths, but over time create a strong, healthy and happy family. Strengths are often developed in response to life's challenges. Crisis can tear a family apart, and crisis can make families closer and stronger. All families have strengths, as well as opportunities to grow stronger. Strong families can work together to solve problems, meet tough challenges, and adapt to change. Family strengths form the base for positive growth and change in the future.

How strong is your family? What are your strengths and what are the areas you would like to grow? You can spend time as a family discussing how you can use the strengths you already have and develop those skills you would like to enhance. For additional information, the following resources are available.

Resources:

Building a Strong and Resilient Family. Suzanna Smith, University of Florida IFAS Extension.  
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/he326>

Creating a Strong Family: Looking at Life From a Family Strengths Perspective. John DeFrain, Dianne Swanson, Jeanette Friesen, Gail Brand, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension,  
<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/pages/publicationD.jsp?publicationId=1103>

Creating a Strong Family: What is a Strong Family? John DeFrain, Dianne Swanson, Jeanette Friesen, Gail Brand, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension.

<http://elkhorn.unl.edu/epublic/live/g1885/build/g1885.pdf?redirected=true>

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