
Building Strong Families

What is a family?

In earlier times, we used the word *family* to mean a biological mother and father and their children. Today's families come in a lot of different varieties:

- Mary and her son, Joe, live with Mary's sister, Sue and Sue's two children. They are a family.
- John and Karen married last year. John's children live with his former wife, but Karen's children are living with John and Karen. They are a family.
- Barbara lives with her two daughters. They are a family.
- Lisa and Marion are lesbian partners in a committed relationship who live with Lisa's daughter and son. They are a family.



Families teach children how to act in the world. Family members care for each other and give love and warmth, especially during difficult times. Families provide shelter and food and financial support. Any family type can be "the best" as long as there's caring and support among family members.

All families have problems

Even a family that looks perfect to others may not seem that way to the family members. Someone in the family could be lonely or sad. A family member might be ill, suffering an addiction, doing badly in school, or spending too much time at work. Family members might argue.

Families handle problems differently. Problems are like bumps in the road when you're driving. Some drivers go around them, some try to go over them, and some ignore them. Although there may be differences in how families respond to problems, stronger families acknowledge and deal with their problems and move on.

Traits of a strong family

Strong families share many of the same qualities. Adopting some of these traits can help to strengthen your family.

Show love and affection

No matter what children say or do, they need to know their parents love them. For example, a parent may recognize his or her children's individual efforts, even when one child gets all A's and the other gets C's and D's. These children know they're loved even though they have different strengths and weaknesses.

And if children make mistakes, parents can let them know they're loved as they help them discover how to learn from the mistake. Strong families show caring in many ways. Family members say to each other "I love you," or "I'm happy we're in this family together." They give hugs and show affection in other small ways. They may call each other nicknames. They enjoy remembering family stories.

There are many ways to show your love to your children. Other families have found these ideas helpful:

- Ask your child to pick a number between one and three, then kiss her that many times.
- Go for walks together.
- Draw a happy face on your child's napkin at lunch.
- Have a special apron for your child to use when he helps to set or clear the table.
- Have a sing-along in the car.
- Snuggle together in a special chair and talk about the day's activities.
- Keep a scrapbook together.
- Read to your child or have him read to you.

Build trust

Strong families build trusting relationships by following through with promises. For example, because she promised to read with her daughter before bed, Jane decides not to do the laundry after dinner so she has time for her daughter. Seventeen-year-old Juan shows his father he's trustworthy by meeting his curfew.

Strong families also recognize that trust can be mended. For example, Maria forgot to start dinner before her mom came home from work. Mom explained that starting dinner helps to save time. It also shows that Maria is responsible and independent. Her mom then asked Maria to start dinner for the next evening.

Show you're committed

Strong families feel like a team. They share traditions: having a family picnic every July 4th, taking walks after dinner, or making a special breakfast on the weekend. Family members show commitment to the family by making time for family events and making sacrifices. With limited free time, this involves not doing something for themselves in order to have time for family activities.

Family members learn about family history. Parents might share photographs and tell stories about relatives immigrating to the U.S., surviving a war, or growing up in a small town. A parent may describe her own childhood. Children and parents talk about fun times and hard times they've had together.

Participate in the community

Strong families are involved in their neighborhoods and communities. They know they can get help from neighbors and services in their communities. Families may join sports teams, use the library, volunteer, or have neighborhood parties. Family members might join a parenting support group or a task force to prevent crime.

Communicate

Members of strong families talk to one another about important decisions and daily plans. They discuss feelings as well as day to day activities at school or work.

When conflicts develop, members of strong families take time to cool down before responding. They don't bottle up their anger or let it get out of hand. They talk about possible solutions to their problems. Then they work together to carry out the best solution.

They learn to ask open-ended questions like, “Can you tell me what happened with your teacher?” instead of closing off communication by saying, “You need to learn to respect adults!”



Participate in the community

Strong families are involved in their neighborhoods and communities. They know they can get help from neighbors and services in their communities. Families may join sports teams, use the library, volunteer, or have neighborhood parties. Family members might join a parenting support group or a task force to prevent crime.

Grow through crises

All families experience crises. Strong families use these experiences to learn and grow. They know even bad experiences can bring about good changes and help them to become closer. They look for the positive in a job loss, divorce, illness or other crisis. They admit problems instead of hiding them. They seek help when they need to.

Spend time together

Strong families spend time together talking, reading, playing games, taking walks, or cooking special dinners. Some special times involve closeness, such as reading a good-night story and tucking children into bed with a kiss.

Encourage each other

Members of strong families encourage each other. Children may encourage their parents to become involved in a hobby or to quit smoking. Parents may encourage their children to try out for a team or submit a poem to the school newspaper.

Have fun as a family

Strong families know that having fun is very important, and they make plans to have fun together. They may plan family trips or parties. Having fun doesn't have to cost a lot of money. Families can have fun on hikes, at the beach or playing volleyball in the backyard.

Strong families know that laughter is important. They use humor to help reduce stress. Family members laugh with one another, not at one another. Positive humor strongly influences the family socially, emotionally and intellectually.

Making your family stronger through family meetings

Family meetings are a great way to bring your family together, set some goals, and solve problems. Set aside a time when you can connect for 15 to 30 minutes each week. For many families, right after dinner or before bedtime is a good meeting time. Use meetings to make plans, work out conflicts and decide on jobs, roles and rules in your home.

When your family meets, work to solve problems in positive ways. Listen to all family members. When you and your children speak, try not to blame others. Respect the feelings of everyone in your family.

If your children live in two homes, remember that life in the other home may be different. Talk with your children about the different family rules and responsibilities. Remember, as you attempt to set rules and solve problems, it's important to be clear and explain why rules exist.

Balance family time and time with others

Everyone needs time with the family, but we also need other people. Get to know other families with similar interests. Join community events like fund-raisers, school activities or sports.

Have fun!

Here are some ideas for family fun time:

At home:

- Read together.
- Make a special meal once a week.
- Play games with children (cards, board or computer games for inside; croquet, Frisbee, badminton, skating, or softball for outside).
- Plant a garden together.
- Go through old snapshots.
- Invite friends over and dance.
- Build traditions to celebrate holidays.

In your neighborhood:

- Visit local historical sites.
- Use your library.
- Take a walk together.
- Go to a ball game.
- Have a potluck dinner with your neighbors.

In your community:

- Visit some places where your children have gone on field trips.
- Go fishing.
- Watch the newspaper for free events in your area.
- Do volunteer work together as a family.

With a pencil and blank piece of paper, write down ways you will strengthen your family this week and this month.

Sources

DeGenova, M.K., & Rice, R.P. (2002) *Intimate relationships, marriages and families*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.

Duncan, S. *The family times*. Montana State University Cooperative Extension.]

Family time: Single parent style. University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service.

Graham, J. (1995). *Family issues*. University of Maine Cooperative Extension Service.

Nelson, P. *Solo parenting*. University of Delaware, Cooperative Extension.

Fact sheet developed by Mary W. Temke, UNH Cooperative Extension, Human Development Specialist, with help from UNH graduate students Wendy Walsh and Rebecca Carman. Updated 5/06 by Emily Douglas, Extension Family Education & Policy Specialist

Visit our website: ceinfo.unh.edu

UNH Cooperative Extension programs and policies are consistent with pertinent Federal and State laws and regulations on nondiscrimination regarding age, color, handicap, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veterans status.