



Strong Families

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It is a small miracle that strong families exist today. They get little positive attention in the media and little support from our society. Most of our models for family life are negative, such as those recently projected in television programs like "Dallas" and "Twin Peaks" and in most soap operas and movies. Families are shown as conflicted, troubled, and generally abusive. Only recently has a television show, "The Cosby Show," presented an intact minority family that has some real strength and viability. From what we see in the media, we could conclude that the family doesn't get much respect. The family gets little support from federal and state governments; and community organizations such as schools, which demand so much of adults' and youths' time and commitment, provide the least support of any nation in the Western world.

The family of today

When we define the family in our society, we should be aware of the diversity of ethnicity, structure, and types of families. We know that the traditional definition of the family-male breadwinner, female homemaker, and two to three children under 18—describes fewer than 10 percent of our families. More than 50 percent of American families are dual-career couples (in Hawaii this could be as high as 80 percent). About 25 percent of the families today are "blended" (step-families) in which one or both parents have already been married and bring together children from previous relationships. Single-parent families account for 25 to 30 percent of the current family types, and nearly 90 percent of these families are female-headed households.

Strong families

Family researchers have established some criteria for identifying strong families. Here are three of the specific criteria that appear to be important.

First, family members are able to cope with stress and problems in an efficient and effective way. This means being able to handle not only the daily hassles and events that come along, but also the more typical stressors that occur throughout the life cycle. These include adjusting to the birth of a child, dealing with the rebellion of an adolescent, adapting to the changing roles of mother (and father) as she moves from the home to the workplace. It also means being able to deal with crises (illness or injuries, job loss), which often have an immense impact on a family system.

Second, a strong family has and uses coping resources both within the family and outside the family. These internal resources include skills in communicating, negotiating, resolving problems, and handling differences. Strong families are able to rely on external resources such as friends and extended family. At times, they may rely on more broadly based community resources, such as counseling centers, local and state agencies, and religious groups.

Third, strong families have the ability to end up being more cohesive, more flexible, and more satisfied as a result of effectively overcoming stress and problems. In other words, the stresses of life can have a positive impact on a strong family. On the other hand, stress will tend to immobilize other families and create even more distress.

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Unfortunately, we know more about what makes families fail than we do about what makes them strong and viable. This is because most of the federal funding for research has been with dysfunctional and problem families. In a recent study of more than 1000 relatively healthy and intact families (including some in Hawaii), researchers were able to clearly identify eight major strengths of families that seem to help them cope more effectively with the stresses of living. Families having these characteristics are considered strong families.

Characteristics of strong families

Couple relationship

In intact families, the quality of the marriage was very important and a critical family resource. Happily married couples had better communication skills; they were able to talk about their differences; they were more realistic about marriage and the problems their marriage was going to have; they had more personality compatibility; and they agreed on and shared important spiritual and cultural values and traditions. If the marriage was good, no matter what stressors occurred (from daily hassles to major accidents), the families that had a good marriage seemed to survive and do well.

Closeness

There was a sense of togetherness or emotional bonding that family members felt for each other. They cared about each other and showed it through words and deeds. Family time was an important priority and was scheduled into weekly activities. These families also could balance their closeness with independence—they could each do their own thing, but they knew they had a home base they could count on.

Flexibility

The marriage or family system was able to change when needed. It could alter its power structure, its role relationships, and its family rules in response to a crisis or developmental stress. Leadership was more democratic and less authoritarian, and wife and husband shared in decision-making and in various adult roles. There were no set jobs for any person based on gender, and any person could fill in for another during a period of family crisis.

Communication

Family members could talk and listen to each other in a non-critical, non-judgmental, and non-threatening manner. They used positive, supportive communication skills. They listened with their hearts as well as their ears. They shared and respected each other's ideas without putting them down. They were able to say what they felt without insulting or criticizing the other person. They talked about what made them feel angry or sad or pleased. Strong families did have conflicts and members did argue. But they took the time to talk out their differences and share their feelings so as to better understand each other.

Family pride

Family members were proud to be in their family. They were not ashamed of each other or what someone in the family might be doing. They were committed to promoting the welfare and happiness of each family member. They invested a lot of time and energy in their family because it and the people there were nurturing and supportive. It was a safe place to be.

Fun and laughter

Strong families created and nurtured family jokes and patterns of play. They created and used pleasant times as a stress reducer. They played together and thoroughly enjoyed each other. Family members could laugh at themselves and could poke fun during difficult transition times or in difficult moments. There was a high degree of spontaneity and wit.

Positive coping with stress and crisis

Strong families effectively and efficiently used their limited resources when faced with a crisis. They could take a bad situation and see something positive about it. The family did not fragment or disintegrate, nor did they get into blaming, criticizing, or finding fault with each other. They stuck together to deal with the crisis as a family.

Community involvement

Strong families gave their time and talent to community activities and community affairs. They helped friends and neighbors, supported schools and community groups, and used their own support networks in time of trouble. They did not withdraw and isolate themselves during difficult times.

How well do these characteristics fit your family? The following questions will give you some idea about your family's strengths. Rate your family on scale of 1 to 5 (1 = seldom true, 2 = occasionally true, 3 = true about half the time, 4 = often true, 5 = almost always true).

- ___ Our family enjoys being together and doing things together.
- ___ Our family allows each person to express feelings and opinions without being criticized or put down.
- ___ We are proud of our family and proud of each person in it.
- ___ All family members express appreciation by saying "thank you," "please," "you look nice," "I love you."
- ___ Our family members share common values, goals, and beliefs.
- ___ Our family can work together and satisfactorily work out any problems that may arise.
- ___ Our family sticks together when trouble strikes and can see the positive in a bad situation.
- ___ Our family can laugh and have fun together, and there is a lot of humor and spontaneity.
- ___ Our family is in constant touch with friends and relatives, and is involved in school, youth, church, or community groups.

Scoring:

- 37-45: Family strengths are good in all areas. Make them even better.
- 27-36: Doing well in some areas. Need extra effort in others. 17-26: Your family life isn't reaching its potential! Work to make it more the way you want it.
- 17-0: Your family life has been ignored. Don't let it die of neglect.

Strong families as a national resource

Problems either begin or end up in families. While the family can be an important causal factor in creating problems, it can also be a very important curative factor. There is increasing evidence that families can either greatly facilitate or disrupt the recovery process from all types of emotional and physical problems. The problems can range from child abuse to drug abuse, from sexual abuse to physical abuse. They can include emotional problems like depression and suicide, and physical symptoms like headaches, backaches, stomachaches, and even more serious medical problems like heart disease and cancer.

The family is a critical resource in that it is a personal refuge and caretaker of people. The home is where you can be yourself, feel most comfortable, and recover and become rejuvenated. This home base provides the grounding and security we need to face the challenges and stressors of daily life. If the family doesn't perform these functions adequately, other agencies must step in and pick up the problem cases.

What we see all too often is that problem families produce more problem families. Unless resolved, family problems often repeat themselves and become more intense. Children not only learn dysfunctional patterns from their family of origin, but they often carry them on in a more abusive and extreme way in their future relationships.

Family strengths are important to us all. We begin in families. From our families we learn who we are and who we may become. They can sustain us in difficulty, share our dreams, and be part of our pleasures throughout life.