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IFAS EXTENSION

Building a Strong and Resilient Family¹

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Recently there has been a great deal of concern expressed about the breakdown of the American family. Another point of view is that American families are diverse, complex, alive, and changing with our the times. All families, including single parents, blended families, working couples, and older families, can survive stress and grow closer. One way to do this is to develop their strengths and learn to meet daily pressures and manage life's changes.

Characteristics of Strong Families

Strong families share common characteristics:

- commitment to each other;
- physical, spiritual, and emotional wellness;
- effective family communication;
- appreciation of all family members;
- meaningful and sufficient time together;
- effective strategies to deal with stress.

These family strengths create a sense of togetherness and belonging. At the same time, individual family members develop their own personality, self-esteem, and potential. These strengths help families solve problems and adapt to change. It is more important for families to move toward these strengths than to try to achieve all strengths simultaneously. This process is often called building family strengths.

Commitment

Commitment is the expectation that the family will be together forever, in good times and when problems come up. Committed families feel a sense of trust, belonging, and unity. They solve problems together and look toward the future; this gives the family purpose and direction.

Family commitment is characterized by giving time and energy to the family on a daily basis and by developing family interests. Strong families make choices about what activities are important to them. By reducing unnecessary pressures, you can increase time for your family.

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Commitment does not mean the family overtakes the individual. Strong families know that family members will grow and develop individual identities. They affirm and appreciate positive qualities, and encourage and support each other.

Family Wellness

Wellness often refers to an individual's physical and psychological health, but this is an important word to families too. Research shows that individual wellness helps a person manage daily pressures, and this has a positive impact on family well-being. Family wellness also means that all family members have a healthy lifestyle that includes proper nutrition, regular exercise, adequate rest, and relaxation. Family wellness goes beyond just physical health. It is a holistic way of living that nurtures and develops the body, mind, and spirit.

The spiritual aspect of family wellness means looking outside the self and tuning in to the feelings, needs, and welfare of others. It means going beyond the self and becoming part of something larger in the world, such as nature or a spiritual presence. A family's spiritual strength comes from sharing similar values and finding a guiding force. Families may interpret and express their beliefs in different ways, such as going to religious services, spending time outside, meditating, or volunteering in the community.

Communication

Effective family communication maintains positive, healthy relationships, helps solve problems, and lowers stress. Effective communication means:

- listening to words and nonverbal messages
- showing understanding through rephrasing and asking questions.

Also, **positive speaking** is being kind and encouraging the other person. Honesty is part of this, but it is never brutal. Positive speaking also involves being specific about what you need or expect from others, and sharing your own feelings, thoughts and experiences.

Strong families that communicate well do have conflict. Conflict is an emotionally-charged disagreement or attempt to force another person to change. Strong families deal with conflict quickly and directly by using effective communication and problem solving skills. Keep the following guidelines in mind when dealing with conflict.

1. Adopt a two-winner model—one where both people will benefit.
2. Seek solutions in small steps. Focus on one thing at a time. Resolve the small problems before going onto more difficult issues.
3. Understand that there are stages of conflict and it is normal to feel *angry*, then *fatigued*, by the intensity of emotions. Try to quickly get beyond arguing to *negotiation*. Practice *problem-solving* skills to negotiate a solution. An *agreement* is reached when the discussion can be summarized and acknowledged by everyone concerned, and everyone agrees to share the changes.

Appreciation

Showing you care brings family members together. You can show appreciation in three ways.

1. Accent a person's good qualities. Congratulate family members on their accomplishments. Use positive words to describe each other.
2. Show you care through words, a hug or touch, or other gesture, such as leaving notes of encouragement or love in a briefcase or on a door.
3. Accept the appreciation sent by other family members. Although accepting appreciation is difficult for some people, it is important because it establishes trust and good will between people as well as builds self-esteem.

Family Time Together

Strong families spend meaningful time together and they do this often. Family members may cut down on outside activities to reserve time together on a regular basis.

Time together gives the family an identity and a sense of unity. Time with supportive people nurtures positive self-identity in individuals and reduces feelings of isolation. Researchers have found that strong families eat, play, work, and share outside activities together. Strong families celebrate traditions that enrich family life and build memories for the future. See the exercise below on commitment and family time.

EXERCISE IN COMMITMENT AND FAMILY TIME

With your family, make a list of all your activities, as individuals and together. Go over the list and discuss the following:

1. What is important, individually and together?
2. What is least important, what you don't want to be doing, or activities that don't give you much happiness?
3. What activities do family members feel they can scratch off from the list?
4. Develop some suggestions about how to use this extra time for your family, and plan an activity together.

Keep a time use chart. Block off days of the week into one-hour periods. For one week keep track of how you spend your time. At the end of the week note ways you can reduce wasted time or reorganize your priorities to have more time.

Strategies to Deal With Stress

Family stress refers to the tension that arises from pressures or demands that call for a family to change. These periods are marked by uncertainty and anxiety. Research has shown that the following characteristics help families cope with stress: support from friends, relatives, neighbors, and others in the community; a positive outlook or long-range view that things will get better; and a way to work together to overcome difficulties.

To be prepared to deal with stress and crisis, you may want to practice the following strategies.

- Keep a perspective on things. You are not alone in feeling stress. Things will get better.
- Develop and use humor. Laughter helps reduce tension and keeps things in positive perspective.
- Set priorities and simplify things. Prioritize your activities and choose carefully how to spend your time.
- Let go of worries, relax, take one day at a time. Learn relaxation techniques and get physical exercise. Spend time outdoors.
- Get outside yourself. Develop friendships, help others, and practice your spiritual beliefs.
- Stay flexible. Strong families are resilient and can adjust to many changes. Survival depends on being flexible and adjustable.
- In crisis, pull together, seek outside help, draw on spiritual resources, and maintain open communication.

More information about family stress and coping is found in other publications in this series.

Conclusion

How strong is your family? As you read this publication, you may have recognized many of your family's strengths, and areas you would like to develop. Spend some time thinking and talking about the strengths you have as individuals and as a family. Think about how you can better use these skills to improve and build your family's health and well-being.

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