

**Information from****Human****Environmental****Sciences****Extension** ▼**HUMAN RELATIONS**

# Promoting Family Strengths

Kelly A. Cole, Extension Associate

Janet A. Clark, Associate Program Leader and Associate State Specialist

Sara Gable, Human Development Extension State Specialist

## Why are family strengths so important?

In our society, families take on many different structures. Although they may be formed in different ways, most families accomplish similar tasks, such as childbearing, providing for members' basic needs, providing emotional support, socializing members, establishing family traditions and delegating responsibility. By accomplishing these tasks, families influence the way individuals and society function. Few other social institutions have such a great impact on society. This profound influence makes evident the importance of strengthening families.

## Family diversity

American families are characterized by great diversity. The *traditional* family has undergone numerous changes in recent decades. Many of today's scholars refer to the current trend as the *post-modern* family. Factors that have led to this change include divorce, remarriage, adolescent childbearing and changing social values. Following are descriptions of common family types.

### Married nuclear families

- Husband, wife and children

### Joint-custody families

- Divorced parents sharing child custody



### Cohabiting families

- Unmarried men and women, and children, if any

### Single-parent families

- Children raised by one parent as a result of divorce, death, desertion or never marrying

### Voluntary child-free families

- Couples who choose not to have children

### Involuntary child-free families

- Couples who are unable to have children

### Blended and stepfamilies

- Husband, wife and children from previous marriage(s)

### Families headed by gay men or lesbians

- May or may not include children

### Grandparent-led families

- Children raised by grandparents because of adult child's death,

# Characteristics of strong families

## ■ Adaptability

Strong families are able to cope with everyday and unanticipated stressors.

## ■ Appreciation

Because they care about other family members, individuals frequently do positive things for one another.

## ■ Clear roles

Family members are aware of their roles and responsibilities and are able to remain flexible.

## ■ Commitment to family

Family members are committed to the family as a system, and members recognize each individual's worth and importance to the family.

## ■ Communication

Family members are open and honest with one another, and they are willing to listen to other members' views; conflicts are managed and resolved when they arise.

## ■ Community and family ties

Strong families are connected to the community and they are involved in community organizations.

## ■ Encouragement of individuals

Individual development is encouraged both inside and outside of the family system.

## ■ Shared time

Both quality and quantity time are shared.

parent incarceration, financial problems or other factors

## Family resilience

According to the National Network for Family Resiliency (1995), resilience is the ability of an individual, or in this case a family, to use its strengths in order to positively meet life's challenges. It involves the family's ability to return to previous levels of functioning following a challenge or crisis.

Throughout the 21st century, individuals and families will be characterized by increased diversity, which could be experienced as stressful. Because of this, individual and family resilience may become increasingly important.

Resilience is exercised when family members demonstrate such behaviors as confidence, hard work, cooperation and forgiveness. These behaviors contribute to the effectiveness of *Family Protective Factors* — factors that help families withstand stressors throughout

the family life cycle. For example, shared experiences such as family time, yearly vacations, holiday celebrations and other traditions can help strengthen the bonds among family members.

When a family is confronted with a crisis, *Family Recovery Factors* become critical. These are factors that help promote a family's ability to bounce back following a period of difficult family functioning. Events in which recovery factors may be especially beneficial include coping with a serious illness, an untimely death, the loss of a primary job or a natural disaster. Aids to recovery include the availability of family and community support, participation in recreational activities, optimism about the situation and shared family experiences.

## Building and maintaining healthy family relationships

In recent decades, a number of changes have contributed to a reshaping of American families.



Examples include high rates of adolescent and unmarried childbearing, a high divorce rate, single-parent households, stepfamilies and dual-earner families. Families need to be prepared to cope with these and other stressors and demands that may be placed upon them. Regardless of family type, there are times when all families need to be nurtured. Nurturing families in times of need can provide family members with a greater opportunity for building and maintaining healthy relationships.

A number of recommendations have been offered that can help families build and maintain healthy relationships. Selected recommendations follow.

### Encourage open communication

- ✓ Communicate not only through words, but also through actions.
- ✓ Be aware of body language and tone of voice.
- ✓ Show that you understand what the other person is saying.
- ✓ Maintain good relationships with extended family members to increase sources of support and resources.



### Maintain and strengthen relationships in the family

#### Parent-child

- ✓ Set and enforce family rules; be a patient parent; praise your children's efforts and accomplishments.

#### Marital

- ✓ Share housework and child care responsibilities; agree on family priorities and goals; value and nurture the relationship.

#### Siblings

- ✓ Develop sibling rituals and traditions; acknowledge one another as individuals; provide encouragement.

### Manage crises and conflict

- ✓ Avoid taking things personally, which may help you avoid unnecessary conflict.
- ✓ When conflict does arise, resolve the problem before moving on.
- ✓ Direct attention to solving the problem rather than determining who is to blame.
- ✓ Understand what the conflict is about and model appropriate problem-solving strategies.
- ✓ Avoid holding grudges.
- ✓ Accept responsibility for your mistakes.
- ✓ Negotiations, compromises or apologies may be necessary before reconciliation is complete.

### Conclusions

Families have evolved in a number of ways over time, and these patterns of change can only be expected to become more common in the future. These transformations may be chal-

## Strategies for strengthening families

- ✓ Spend quality time alone with each child at least once a week.
- ✓ Respond to children with patience and respect their feelings and abilities.
- ✓ Encourage family members by asking them to share their accomplishments.
- ✓ Visit and find ways to help at your child's school.
- ✓ Eat a meal together as a family at least once a day and involve family members in mealtime tasks.
- ✓ Hold family meetings that give all family members an opportunity to talk openly.
- ✓ Develop a family mission statement that includes your family's purpose, goals and objectives.
- ✓ Develop and maintain family traditions and rituals.

lenging for families, but the strategies outlined here can help minimize the stress these families experience. It is important to remember that all families have some strengths, although these strengths may be more evident in some families than in others. Individual family members play a significant role in determining how well a family functions. Although each member's actions are important, strengthening family relationships requires the commitment and cooperation of all family members. By working together, family members can build and maintain close relationships during periods of normal family functioning as well as during times of stress.

To locate related MU Extension publications, visit the XPLOR site:

<http://muextension.missouri.edu/xplor/hesguide/humanrel/index.htm>

## Resources

Acock, A. C., and D. H. Demo. 1994. *Family diversity and well-being*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.

Kansas Sate University Cooperative Extension. 1995. *Families of all kinds: A guide for leaders*. MF-2024.

Lingren, H. G. 1995. *Creating sustainable families*. G95-1269. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension.

McCubbin, H. I., M. A. McCubbin, A. I. Thompson, S. Y. Han, and C. T. Allen. 1997. *Families under stress: What makes them resilient*. Adapted from the 1997 American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences Com-

memorative Lecture.

National Network for Family Resiliency. 1995. *Family resiliency: Building strengths to meet life's challenges*. Iowa State University Extension.

Schwebel, A. I., M. A. Fine. 1994. *Understanding and helping families: A cognitive-behavioral approach*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

*Many thanks to Brenda Procter and Lucy Schrader for reviewing this guide.*



OUTREACH & EXTENSION  
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI  
COLUMBIA

■ Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Ronald J. Turner, Director, Cooperative Extension, University of Missouri and Lincoln University, Columbia, MO 65211.  
■ University Outreach and Extension does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability or status as a Vietnam era veteran in employment or programs. ■ If you have special needs as addressed by the Americans with Disabilities Act and need this publication in an alternative format, write ADA Officer, Extension and Agricultural Information, 1-98 Agriculture Building, Columbia, MO 65211, or call (573) 882-7216. Reasonable efforts will be made to accommodate your special needs.