



A Military Child Education Coalition® Initiative

Family Strengths

Family Strength #1—Caring and Appreciation

- Recognize your child's positive attributes
 - * Verbal praise and encouragement
 - * Written notes
 - * Physical affection
- Spend quality time with your child
 - * Create an activity list

Family Strength #2—Communication

- Make time to talk
- Make it fun
- Face the tough stuff

Family Strength #3—Commitment

- Practice family traditions
- Compile a family history

Family Strength #4—Community and Family Ties

- Teach children and youth to think beyond themselves

Family Strength #5—Coping

- Family meetings

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The Weekly Family Meeting

What went well in our family this week?

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What things could we improve in our family?

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What things will you commit to working on this week?

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What help do you need to reach your goal?

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Parent-Child Communication Basics

There are many ways to define a family, but they all have one common idea: caring. Whether a particular family is a nuclear family, a stepfamily, a single-parent family, or an empty-nest family, it usually consists of related people who care about each other. Regardless of type, all families also need to be nurtured and strengthened from time to time. This publication will offer some suggestions for improving and strengthening relationships in your family.

What Makes a Family Strong and Successful?

There are at least five "L's" which contribute to strong family relationships.

Learning—Families are where we learn values, skills, and behavior. Strong families manage and control their learning experiences. They establish a pattern of home life. They select appropriate television programs. They guide their children into the world outside the home. They do not let social forces rule their family life. They involve themselves in neighborhood, school, government, church, and business in ways that support their family values. Strong families teach by example and learn through experience as they explain and execute their values.

Loyalty—Strong families have a sense of loyalty and devotion toward family members. The family sticks together. They stand by each other during times of trouble. They stand up for each other when attacked by someone outside the family. Loyalty builds through sickness and health, want and good fortune, failure and success, and all the things the family faces. The family is a place of shelter for individual family members. In times of personal success or defeat, the family becomes a cheering section or a mourning bench. They also learn a sense of give and take in the family, which helps prepare them for the necessary negotiations in other relationships.

Love is at the heart of the family. All humans have the need to love and to be loved; the family is normally the place where love is expressed. Love is the close personal blending of physical and mental togetherness. It includes privacy, intimacy, sharing, belonging, and caring. The atmosphere of real love is one of honesty, understanding, patience, and forgiveness. Such love does not happen automatically; it requires constant daily effort by each family member. Loving families share activities and express a great deal of gratitude for one another. Love takes time, affection, and a positive attitude.

Laughter is good family medicine. Humor is an escape valve for family tension. Through laughter we learn to see ourselves honestly and objectively. Building a strong family is serious business, but if taken too seriously, family life can become very tense. Laughter balances our efforts and gives us a realistic view of things. To be helpful, family laughter must be positive in nature. Laughing together builds up a family. Laughing at each other divides a family. Families that learn to use laughter in a positive way can release tensions, gain a clearer view, and bond relationships.

Leadership is essential. Family members, usually the adults, must assume responsibility for leading the family. If no one accepts this vital role, the family will weaken. Each family needs its own special set of rules and guidelines. These rules are based on the family members' greatest understanding of one another, not forces. The guidelines pass along from the adults to the children by example, with firmness and fairness. Strong families can work together to establish their way of life, allowing children to have a voice in decision making and enforcing rules. However, in the initial stages and in times of crisis, adult family members must get the family to work together.

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Life Patterns of Strong Families

In studies conducted in the United States and around the world several characteristics of strong families were found. These qualities are:

Commitment. Members of strong families are devoted to the well-being and happiness of the other members. They value family unity. Commitment serves as a firm foundation for strong family relationships. This means that:

- the family comes first.
- work responsibilities come second.
- each family member is precious.
- bad times do not destroy relationships.
- forgiveness is readily available.
- priorities must be established.
- some sacrifices must be made.
- some common goals must be shared.
- traditions are established and cherished.

Appreciation. Members of strong families show and talk about their appreciation for one another. Along with our need for love, our most important human need is the need for appreciation. Some of why we work so hard in life is not so much motivation by money, power, or position; it is the desire to feel appreciated. And appreciation is vital in healthy families. Each family member's self-esteem is enhanced when he or she feels appreciated. Appreciation helps motivate all members to continue to behave positively toward one another. Appreciation in families means:

- looking for the positive instead of the negative.
- treating family members like our best friends.
- showing love in small ways every day.
- expressing lots of appropriate affection.
- saying, "I Love You" a lot.
- praising the accomplishments and strengths of family members.
- gracefully receiving compliments as well as giving them.
- creating a positive environment in the home.
- remembering (even if you need a list) and celebrating birthdays and special occasions.

Communication. Members of strong families work at developing good communication skills and spend a lot of time talking with each other. They talk about the small, trivial things as well as the deep, important issues of life. Communication is the lifeblood of relationships. It is the way that love and other emotions are expressed. Relationships are played out in the context of communication. We cannot help but communicate, and it is largely up to us whether the communication in our families will be effective or ineffective. Effective communication means:

- being open and honest, yet kind.
- listening carefully, without distraction.
- checking the meaning of messages which are not clear.
- avoiding "mind-reading."
- walking a mile in the other person's shoes.

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- trusting one another.
- avoiding criticizing, evaluating, and acting superior.
- dealing with one issue at a time.
- dealing with specifics rather than generalities.
- attacking the problem, not each other .
- having an understanding attitude.

Time together. Strong families spend time—quality time in large quantities—with each other. Some families may say, "We don't spend much time together as a whole family, but what little time we are together is quality time." The studies on strong families indicate that both quality and quantity are necessary for good relationship formation and maintenance. A lot of time together filled with bickering and arguing won't make for a strong family. Neither will small pieces of high-quality activity. Nurturing family relationships takes a lot of good times. Family memories are built around family activities, time spent together. Family time spent together:

- helps eliminate isolation, loneliness, and alienation.
- helps the family develop an identity—a group unity and a sense of their place in history.
- helps avoid the "fizzle and die" of some marriage relationships.
- enhances the communication process.
- allows opportunity to build on other family strengths.

But what exactly are families to do when they are together? The answer is just about anything. They can share:

- Mealtimes
- House and yard chores
- Picnics
- Camping
- Outdoor sports
- Walking or hiking
- Indoor recreation, such as jigsaw puzzles, table games, or a favorite video
- Bowling or to the movies
- Religious services
- Scouting or 4-H activities
- School activities
- Special events like holidays and birthdays

Spiritual wellness. Whether they attend formal religious services or ceremonies or not, strong family members have a sense of a greater good or power in life, and that belief gives them strength and purpose. Spirituality is described by some as a force that helps us reach beyond ourselves and become a part of something larger than ourselves. Spirituality normally encompasses our better nature, the aspects of our lives which are most noble. Most people believe human beings have a spiritual dimension within them. Regardless of the way we describe our spirituality, we need to acknowledge and nurture our spiritual side. For many, spiritual principles help provide the answers to life's most perplexing questions, "What is life about?" and "Why am I here?" The spiritual dimension in families provides many possible benefits. Spirituality:

- helps family members maintain a positive outlook on life.
- provides guidelines for living.
- provides a sense of freedom and peace.
- offers support from people who share in a belief system.

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- provides meaningful tradition and ritual.
- provides a spiritual heritage.
- provides an expression of character in everyday living.
- gives an awareness of a divine presence in life.
- helps families cope during times of trouble.
- encourages a sense of awe and reverence for life itself.

Coping ability. Members of strong families are able to view stress or crisis as an opportunity to grow and learn. They have good coping skills. A history of problem-solving increases our confidence that we can deal with most things that comes our way. A variety of coping strategies have been found in strong families, including the following:

- The ability to find something positive, in any situation and to focus on that positive element. Counselors refer to this as "reframing." It is the ability to see the rose rather than the thorns. A positive perspective allows us to cope with bad situations without becoming overwhelmed.
- Family members unite and pull together when things get tough. No one individual within the family has to bear the total responsibility for resolving the situation. By sharing the responsibility, every family member can focus on the things he or she can do to help solve the problem.
- Strong families get outside help when needed. While many problems or crises can be resolved within the family, strong families are smart enough to know when they are in over their heads. They are not hesitant to seek the assistance of outside resources, such as their church or synagogue, friends, neighbors, extended family, or helping professionals. Some crises seem so overwhelming that it takes a person from outside the family to help put things into perspective, to help the family get their lives back to manageable proportions.

Many families rely on their spiritual resources to get them through times of crises. Spiritual beliefs can help sustain people in times of trouble by providing a philosophy of life, by giving perspective, and by providing hope, comfort, and a sense of peace.

Open channels of communication make problem-solving easier. Crises are times of change and uncertainty, and family members may feel angry, anxious, fearful, depressed, or guilty. Effective communication allows members to express their feelings freely, which is an important part of surviving the crisis.

Flexibility is another important strategy that strong families use to help get through crisis situations. Strong families bend, change, and adapt, and when the storm is over they are still intact.



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How Can You Strengthen Your Family?

Although each of the six characteristics of strong families is important in and of itself, one does not work in isolation from the rest. All six qualities interact, overlap, connect, and reinforce each other in complex ways that form a net of strength. For example, a person who isn't *committed* to the family isn't likely to give much *time* to those relationships and may not feel the need to pull together with others, in a *crisis* or to improve *communication*. Families who spend *time together* reinforce *commitment* and *communication*. The expression of *appreciation* reinforces *commitment*. Effective *communication* is necessary in *crisis* resolution and in expressing *appreciation*. *Spiritual wellness* is a valuable key in *coping with crises*, *appreciating* the value of people, valuing *time together*, and in being *committed* to each other.

Learning and understanding these six qualities of strong families is only the first small step in actually making our family relationships work happily together. Achieving these things to a high degree may well take the rest of our lives together. The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, "A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step." You can begin your journey to a better family situation by, taking these initial steps.

1. Decide to make a special effort to make your family stronger by working on the six areas mentioned in this publication.
2. Learn about family life, marriage, and parenting.
3. Keep your priorities and values in mind.
 - Most people value their families, although many people are not aware of the importance of improving their family life. It takes hard work to make a successful family. The work you put into making your family stronger, however, can be well worth the effort.

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