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Creating a Strong Family Why Are Families So Important?

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

The late David R. Mace, a pioneer in the field of marriage and family enrichment, was fond of saying, "Nothing in the world could make human life happier than to greatly increase the number of strong families."

I agree with him, and for that reason I applaud the work being done in many Nebraska communities to strengthen and support families. Families, in all the diverse patterns, sizes, creeds and colors they come in, are, indeed, the heart and soul of our society.

Marriage and family are perhaps society's oldest and most resilient institutions. From the beginning of human life, people have grouped themselves into families to find emotional, physical and communal support. Although in recent years social commentators have predicted the demise of both marriage and the family, they not only survive but continue to change and evolve. Family structures may vary around the world, and yet, the value of "family" endures.

Families are the basic, foundational social units in society. Therefore, healthy individuals within healthy families are at the core of a healthy society. It's in everyone's best interest, then, to help create a positive environment for all families. This can be a labor of love for all of our social institutions: educational institutions, businesses, human and family service agencies, religious institutions, health organizations, literally everyone involved in the daily life of a community.

Families are our most intimate social environment. They are the places where we begin the vital processes of socializing our children, teaching them - in partnership with countless others in the community - how to survive and thrive in the world.

Many marriages are experiencing difficulties today, and part of the challenge to building family-friendly communities is to also build marriage-friendly communities. A good way to do this is to develop couples enrichment courses and activities. This can be done through teamwork among various institutions, including schools and colleges, religious institutions, volunteer groups and family service organizations such as Cooperative Extension.

Involving fathers in the day-to-day life of families is crucial. Of course, there are countless single-parent families who are strong and emotionally healthy in our country. Besides, in many cases involving violence, sexual abuse, alcohol or other drug abuse, it's probably best that the father is out of the picture for the rest of the family's personal well-being and safety.

But in most cases, I think it's important for communities to find creative ways to strengthen and support two-parent families and make it possible for fathers to enjoy the benefits of increased time and involvement with their children. Moms shouldn't have to carry all the burdens of childrearing alone. And dads shouldn't miss all the wonderful feelings a parent experiences watching one's children grow and learn.

Sometimes marriages get lost in all the hubbub surrounding modern life. We attend to the children's needs. We make the boss happy at work. But we often let our own personal health and well-being slide, and we borrow time and energy from our marriages to satisfy other demands in our world. The problem with this is that a healthy marriage is at the heart of a healthy two-parent family. I'm reminded of the saying, "The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother."

Life in families can bring us great joy or excruciating pain, depending upon how well family relationships are going. A healthy marriage and family can be a valuable resource for helping us endure difficulties that life inevitably brings. Unhealthy or dysfunctional relationships can create terrible problems that may persist from one generation to the next.

By working together in our communities, we demonstrate the importance of families to the well-being of the total community, and we contribute to the happiness of all.

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