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Creating a Strong Family: Looking at Life From a Family Strengths Perspective

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

The family strengths perspective is a world-view or orientation toward life and families, grounded in research with more than 21,000 family members in 27 countries around the world. It is basically a positive, optimistic orientation. It does not ignore family problems but relegates problems to their proper place in life: as vehicles for testing our capacities as families and reaffirming our connection with each other.

Over the past 25 years researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa and affiliated institutions in the United States and around the world have studied families from a strengths perspective. A number of propositions can be derived from this work:

- *All families have strengths.* And, all families have challenges and areas of potential growth.
- *If one looks only for problems in a family, one will see only problems.* If one also looks for strengths, one will find strengths.
- *It's not about structure, it's about function.* When talking about strong families, it is common to make the mistake of focusing on external family structure rather than internal family functioning. But, there are strong single-parent families, strong stepfamilies, strong nuclear families, strong extended families, strong families with gay and lesbian members, strong two-parent families. For every family structure in the world, there are countless representative strong families. Likewise, every type of family structure in the world also has many families that are not functioning well. Simply knowing what type of family one lives in really does not tell one anything about the strength of the family.
- *It's not about race or ethnicity, either.* There are strong black families, strong white families, strong American families, strong Afghani families. Every ethnic or cultural group has strong families. And, every ethnic or cultural group has families that are not doing well. One knows nothing about the quality of a family simply by knowing the group to which they belong.

- *If you grew up in a strong family as a child, it will probably be easier for you to create a strong family of your own as an adult.* But, it's also quite possible to do so if you weren't so lucky and grew up in a seriously troubled family.
- *Strengths develop over time.* When couples start out in life together, they tend to have considerable difficulty adjusting to each other, and these difficulties are quite predictable. Adjusting to each other is not an easy task, but many couples who start out shaky end up creating a healthy, happy family.
- *Strengths are tested through normative developmental transitions.* For example, couples commonly have many challenges to face when their children reach adolescence and young adulthood. These transitions are also quite predictable, and once the period has passed and the younger generation has gained relative independence from the parents, the family settles back into a more emotionally connected and comfortable mode.
- *Good things take time.* A family's strengths are tested by life's everyday stressors and also by the significant crises that all families face sooner or later. It takes many couples and families several years before they believe they have become a strong family; they know this because they have been tested over time and tested by fire, by the significant challenging events that life inevitably brings.
- *Crises can tear families apart.* Crises also can make family relationships stronger. Families in crisis sometimes forget about the strengths they have and need to remind themselves.
- *A family's strengths are the foundation for positive growth and change in the future.* Families become stronger by capitalizing on their strengths.
- *Most families in the world have considerable strength.* Human beings wouldn't have lasted across countless generations without these qualities. There are many more strong families in the world than families who are deeply troubled. As a global human community, we cannot afford to forget this.
- *Families are about emotion. Strong emotion.* If family strengths could be reduced to one single quality, it would be a positive emotional connection and sense of belonging with each other. When this emotional bond is present, the family can endure almost any hardship.

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