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## NF01-476 Creating a Strong: Family How To Be Nice

John Defrain

University of Nebraska--Lincoln, jdefrain1@unl.edu

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## Creating a Strong Family How To Be Nice

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*By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development*

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What makes a stable marriage? Many researchers in the United States and around the world have focused on that question. John Gottmann, a psychology professor, and his colleagues at the University of Washington conducted scientific experiments for 20 years on more than 2,000 couples.

The research team observed couples interacting with each other in a campus "marriage laboratory," using video cameras, EKG monitors and specially-designed instruments. The investigators looked at how couples talk to each other. They examined facial expressions, gestures, fidgeting behaviors, and so forth, as well as physiological clues including changes in heartbeat and breathing during disagreements.

What separated those couples who stayed together after the conclusion of the laboratory research from those who divorced within the next couple years?

I love Gottmann's answer: The couples in stable marriages were simply "nicer to each other."

Gottmann himself had to chuckle at the simplicity of the answer to the question that researchers pose. I find myself smiling when I think about his work, also, because it reflects our own understanding of successful marriages and families, also gained through many years of study and reflection. Not long ago the third edition of a textbook I wrote with David H. Olson at the University of Minnesota was published. As I thumbed through this "epic treatise," I wondered how many thousands upon thousands of words we had written in the 692-page volume on how to strengthen families.

"Goodness," I found myself saying out loud. "Six hundred ninety-two pages, and we could have covered the topic quite well in only three words: 'Love one another.'"

But if loving one another was all that easy, people wouldn't have as much trouble creating strong marriages and families as they seem to be having now. What, then, can be done in our efforts to love each other?

High on my list is the importance of keeping our interactions positive. Negative energy - such a

common element of human relationships - is destructive and demoralizing. It hurts us, takes away our confidence and self-esteem, and distances us from each other.

When we're upset about something, which is inevitable in life, the path of least resistance is to get angry and lash out at other people. Loved ones, amazingly, take the brunt of all this anger because if we were to act this way at work or school, we would soon be shown the door.

Under stress we regress, as the saying goes. We regress to the vicious and foolish behavior we learned on the playground, among other places, when we were young children. I must admit that when I see adults act in ways that would make a well-behaved 7-year-old shudder, I am at first fascinated. Then, revulsion and embarrassment set in, for I see the person is falling into the same trap I can so easily fall into. The old childhood tapes are still readily accessed, and I can play them with ease. A good tantrum makes us feel important and self-righteous. For awhile.

But soon after, the feelings of shame and foolishness set in. We know we have failed to do what is best. And what, again, is that?

Search carefully for positive ways to interact with each other. This includes positive talk and positive actions. In the world of words, there is always a way to say precisely what we want to say, and to say it in a positive manner. In the world of actions, there is always a way to behave with grace, dignity and kindness.

This is not the easiest path, by any means. It takes more time to use our head and create new ways of talking with each other, more time and thought than it takes to simply bark. But we can do it. No matter what happens, no matter how difficult the situation, we can find a positive way to respond. In both the short and long run, this will be better for our relationships with each other.

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