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1992

## G92-1065 How Is Your Family's Well-Being?

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## How Is Your Family's Well-Being?

Whether or not the family is a healthy, cohesive, and nourishing unit depends on the individual family members and the ways in which they contribute to it.

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*Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Life Specialist*

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Being in good health has become a growing concern throughout our society. Great emphasis is placed on nutrition and exercise to keep our bodies slim, trim, and healthy. Unfortunately, somewhere between the sit-ups and the natural foods, we've forgotten that our family's "well-being" may also need a "checkup" and a "workout."

It takes much more than exercise and a balanced diet to keep a family "fit." Whether or not the family is a healthy, cohesive, and nourishing unit depends on the individual family members and the ways in which they contribute to it. Just as proper diet and exercise combine to make us feel, look, and function more efficiently, there are certain contributions each family member can make to help create a stronger, healthier, and more satisfying family life.

Some of the factors that characterize families with high well-being are: 1) a satisfying marriage relationship; 2) the sharing of family power; 3) open family communications; 4) accepting and appreciating each other; 5) spending quality time together; 6) managing conflict constructively; and 7) a good family spirit.

### **The Marriage Relationship**

More than any other single factor, the quality of family life in two-parent families is reflected in the

nature of the marriage relationship. The wife and husband's ability to communicate, negotiate and compromise, and show their love and affection toward each other provides a positive role model for their children.

Quite often, however, romance, caring, and helping are replaced by hostility and resentment. Not only is this detrimental to the couple's relationship, but it's also harmful to the emotional and physical health of the entire family.

Children learn much of their own behavior by observing how their parents relate to each other. In this way, the marriage relationship becomes the primary component in the development of healthy family relationships.

### **Shared Family Power**

Power in healthy families is shared power. This means that family decisions and rules are made with the input of each person. It should not be necessary for the father or mother to always try to dictate orders. This becomes an impossible and frustrating task. Each family member should be allowed to express opinions, generate ideas, and make suggestions. The family still needs a leader, but no one person should dominate all of the time.

This type of "power sharing" gives freedom to every member by allowing each individual to express himself. And, this sharing has many positive results: a) feelings of trust and cooperation develop; b) the cohesiveness of the family becomes stronger; and c) a greater number of solutions are offered and therefore contribute to more effective decision-making. In essence, "sharing power" is "caring power," and is an important element in building a satisfying family life.

### **Family Communication**

Communication affects everything that goes on between people. It determines what kinds of relationships are formed and how each person is perceived. All communication is learned and therefore susceptible to change and improvement. For effective communication to take place, the family must provide an emotionally and physically "safe" environment.

Conversation in healthy families is spontaneous, meaningful, clear and specific. Ideas and information are continually bounced back and forth. A family member can openly express all kinds of emotions, and knows that someone can and will listen and respond appropriately.

Listening is a valuable tool that indicates concern about, and involvement with, another family member. Unfortunately, few people take time to listen beyond the words--with the heart as well as the ears. But in order to communicate effectively in a family, *attentive* listening is essential. It opens doors by building feelings of respect and trust. Together, good speaking and listening skills form a solid foundation from which a family can begin to function more effectively.

### **Acceptance and Appreciation of the Individual**

Every family is made up of a variety of personalities, each playing an important part in the life of the family. Therefore, it is essential that all members develop a strong positive *attitude* about *themselves*, and about *each member* of the family--dad, mom, sister, brother--as well. Feelings of *self-worth* are a crucial factor in what happens "inside" people as well as between people. The family system is no exception. Being accepted by others helps develop a person self-concept and generates feelings of being

important, loved and appreciated. There is no place where being appreciated and accepted is more important than in the family.

Every family should recognize the individual accomplishments of each member. Simple statements such as "thank you for helping me, you did a nice job!" can convey appreciation for each member's efforts. This type of recognition helps set up a pleasant environment in which mutual respect can grow. Without being given respect, family members have little reason to try to improve their relationships with each other. Many family fights are caused by words of disrespect by family members toward one another.

## **Quality Time**

It requires a great deal of energy and work for a family to provide a nurturing environment for its members to grow up in. Nothing makes this easier than scheduling "prime time" as a tool for this growth. Planning a specific time and place each week for family members to be together is beneficial to the day-to-day activities of family life. A family council meeting is one structured activity where members can discuss ideas and concerns, and make decisions which affect their lives together.

Time should also be set aside for the family to work or play together. To help encourage the scheduling of quality time, the family must develop an action plan that fits their particular needs. Some suggestions that may help are:

- Organize a family council meeting each week. This time can be used to talk about family business, finances, responsibilities and decision-making.
- Set aside a specific time for some "positive bombardment." During this time the family comes together and each person tells each other member something positive about themselves (for example, why the person is important to the family). This can include mentioning an act of kindness by a particular member, or one positive characteristic of each
- Spend 30 minutes every week with each family member. Talk to, listen to, and enjoy each other. Get to know each other as a special person who cares about you and other family members.
- Take one night out each week for Mom and Dad *away* from the kids. Time together as a couple is important for the growth of the entire family.
- Plan a family fun time each week. Try to do something that everyone can enjoy and benefit from. Do not emphasize "winning," but instead stress having fun together.

## **Growth Through Conflict**

Individuals who have unique personalities and who are trying to develop a meaningful family life as well will experience conflict. This is normal. It is not conflict itself that presents the problem. Instead, it is how families deal with conflict that really matters. Healthy families handle conflict in a creative and non-destructive way. They recognize issues early and make decisions based on the input of each family member. They consider each person's ideas carefully and weigh the consequences of different alternatives. They deliberately try not to hurt each other.

Members of a healthy family do not give in to conflict or feel intimidated by it. Every family member is allowed to express his opinion without the fear of being rejected. When real negotiation takes place, the members feel a deeper sense of what being in a family means, and all benefit from going through conflict and decision-making together.

## **Family Spirit**

A family can be considered healthiest when everyone shares feelings of affection for each other and they enjoy being together as a family. In some families, members don't want to be associated with each other, while in healthy families they are *proud* to belong.

In these families, members think of each other as friends with whom they can talk and have fun. They enjoy each other as persons and like being together. They don't feel hostile or antagonistic toward each other when they are together. Instead, they use their time and energy to become more aware of their own resources and those of other family members as well. They work hard to develop their potential as a more satisfying and healthy family. And, they recognize that functioning together as a family unit is not always easy.

Quite often, it's the difficult times that bring them closer together, and the fun times that help keep them that way. "Families that play together, stay together."

### **Family Well-Being**

Every family has the ability to be happy, healthy and satisfied--to truly love and enjoy being together. However, it takes a great deal of time and effort. It also means facing up to what your family strengths and problems are--and being willing to work toward improvement. The components of family well-being are:

- Developing a satisfying marriage relationship. The quality of the marriage relationship is reflected in the quality of family life.
- Allowing each person a voice in family decision-making and rule setting. Sharing power is caring power.
- Accepting and appreciating each individual. This helps in the development of each person's self-worth and contributes to the health and well-being of the entire family.
- Spending quality, prime time together. By setting aside a special time each week for family togetherness, stronger bonds are formed between members.
- Using conflict in a creative, constructive way. Healthy families deal with conflict in a way that allows individual expression and results in potential for growth.
- Enjoying each other and having fun together as a family. This creates feelings of pride and satisfaction within the family relationships.

### **Family Life Inventory**

Now you know the essentials of a healthy family. To what extent have you considered these attributes as a part of your family relationships? The Family Life Inventory has been created to help you assess and increase the health and well-being of your own family life. Remember, even if a family's lifestyle seems satisfactory, there is always room for improvement!

For each of the seven areas in the Inventory, analyze the well-being of your family's relationships in terms of how satisfied you are with it right at this moment. Using a 1 to 10 continuum scale, evaluate where you believe your family is now in realizing its full potential.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not satisfied at all			somewhat satisfied				very satisfied at this moment		

Place your rating under the column marked *actual*. Now go back and evaluate your family's well-being in respect to where you'd *like to be* in each of these areas.

	Actual	Desired	Potential
1. Marriage Relationship			
2. Family Power			
3. Open System of Communication			
4. Acceptance and Appreciation of Individual Members			
5. Quality Time Spent Together Each Week			
6. Creative Use of Conflict			
7. Positive Family Spirit			
Total			

For example, you might place a "3" in the area of "Creative Use of Conflict" under *actual* but a "9" under *desired*. After completing this for each of the seven areas, compare the actual with the desired. Place the difference between the scores in the *unrealized potential* column. Total all scores in each column and compare them. The total score in the *unrealized potential* column refers to how much more healthy and satisfied your family could be.

Have each family member look at the difference in ratings and discuss what your potential as a family could be. Let each member participate in determining where the problem spots are, and what has caused them (poor communication, reluctance to show appreciation, inability to grow from conflict, etc.). Then, write out a plan of action that will enhance your satisfaction and help develop your family's unrealized potential. This means writing out what you are going to do, who will do it and when it will be done. Don't expect miracles though. Give your plan time work and revise it if necessary.

Do it now! The sooner you begin, the more results you'll see, and the happier and healthier your family will become.

*The assistance of Gail Lepp, graduate student in Human Development and the Family, in the preparation of this publication is gratefully acknowledged.*

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***File G1065 under: FAMILY LIFE***

***F-6, Relationships***

*Issued June 1982; 7,500, printed.*

*Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.*

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