

## SECRETS OF STRONG FAMILIES

Despite the media attention focused on the down side of family life, a research project asking for information from successful families brought responses from thousands of families that considered themselves to be strong and healthy. Several qualities, some of which are listed below, were mentioned repeatedly.

### 1. COMMITMENT

Make your family come first. It is an investment of time, energy, spirit, and heart. Beware of the demands of outside interests and work that distract from your most important job--the family. As one man in the Stinnet and DeFrain study said, "If I'm a good father to my sons, they're likely to be good parents, too. Someday, after I'm gone, and certainly after that report has rotted, my grandchild or great-grandchild will have a good father because I was a good father."

\* Next time family member need you to help them or spend some time with them, try rearranging your schedule or giving up some time to show the family members that they are important to you.

### 2. TIME TOGETHER

Instead of giving in to the complaint that there just isn't enough time, healthy families view time together as a controllable resource. Family time is a priority and they set aside time for each other. When 150 children were asked what makes a happy family, they said, "doing things together."

Healthy families spend a lot of time together playing, working, eating meals, or talking. Is quality time better than quantity of time? Actually, there must be both. The time spent together should be meaningful, but there must also be an adequate amount of time spent together. Children and spouses need you when they need you, not just at your convenience. Let them know you are always available to them.

\* Try having family dates. Think of something fun to do and then invite someone in the family or the entire family to do it with you. What could you do as a family with young children? With school-age children? With teenagers?

### 3. APPRECIATION

Feeling worthwhile and valuable is one of the most basic human needs. Healthy families express positive feelings for each other and give each other emotional support. When words of praise and encouragement replace fault-finding and belittling, family members and families themselves gain trust and confidence.

\* Write love notes to family members. Leave a note in a schoolbook, on the mirror in the bathroom, anywhere a certain family member will see it. Say, "Thanks for cheering me up when I needed it this afternoon," "I appreciate you washing my clothes for me," or "Good luck on your test today."

### 4. COMMUNICATION

Good communication helps create a sense of belonging in a family and increases understanding and empathy between its members. But strong families stress that good communication doesn't just happen—it takes effort and practice. Effective communication means sharing feelings, not just words.

\* Use "I" messages to let others in your family know what you think or how you feel without insulting or criticizing the other person. Start with "I think. . ." or "I feel. . ." Add what you

are thinking or feeling (I feel annoyed when you ask me who is on the phone every time I use it.) Explain what you said without blaming or criticizing. ("I guess I just need to feel like I have some privacy.")

\* Next time a family member expresses a feeling or relates an event to you, give him/her your undivided attention. Listen with your eyes and ask questions or make comments with sincere interest. Try to understand how he/she feels. Work at deciphering messages and body language. If your mom asks whose socks are on the floor, pick them up and put them away instead of just saying, "They're mine."

Healthy families often have "The Talk" when a potential stressor threatens. "We need to have a talk" emerges when a child misbehaves or a couple disagrees. It's a preventative measure that keeps a family from letting problems turn into wedges between them.

#### 5. DECISION MAKING AND RESPONSIBILITY

Healthy families, including children, cooperate with each other in making decisions. Explanations for family rules and discipline are clearly communicated. The parents maintain authority in the family, but are flexible rather than rigid.

\* Negotiate with your family. If there is a decision you don't agree with, tell your family you'd like to talk about it. It will work best if you 1) describe the problem from your point of view without getting angry, 2) suggest different ways to solve the problem, 3) discuss the pros and cons of each solution, 4) compromise, combining parts of your ideas with others, and 5) try it for awhile before you decide whether or not you like it.

In strong families, all members share household responsibilities. A home is a cooperative effort, requiring everyone to pitch in and help each other. Kids in these families feel more ownership in the family and more pride in their abilities.

\* Try helping one of your parents in one of the jobs that they do (preferably one you usually take for granted). See if you don't feel a little pride in having done it and in having made a contribution to your family.

#### 6. PROBLEM SOLVING

Strong families are not without problems, but they have the ability to surmount challenges when they arise. They have confidence in their ability to meet problems and solve them. They believe in the future and in their ability to be successful as a family.

\* Many times we tend to just look at all the things that are wrong with our families. List and describe three times your family did a good job at something. (Example: helped someone else who was having a hard time, remodeled the family room, coped with a death, etc.)

#### 7. VALUES AND SPIRITUAL WELLNESS

Healthy families have a strong moral base in values and spiritual beliefs. They have shared goals and ideals about what is important. They have a caring center within that promotes sharing, love, and compassion for others which they practice in everyday life.

\* You may want to talk to your family about their values and what they think is right and wrong. It may be hard to discuss these issues. One way to do it is to read the letters to Ann Landers or Dear Abby. Read the article to your family and ask them what they think about it. Discuss it.

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