



## **BUILDING AND MAINTAINING STRONG FAMILIES**

Many of us know what characterizes or what constitutes a strong family, but maintenance is the glue that binds us and separates a weak family from a healthy one.

Recently the media has noted that children who grow up in environments full of conflict (i.e., yelling, arguing, critical) are more likely to have sleep and appetite problems, interpersonal problems, irritability, and other stress related symptoms.

In addition, children who experience conflicts related to separation or divorce are more likely to seek mental health assistance as opposed to those who do not have this experience. Calmness, consistency, and stability are key components to a healthy family environment.

Television, over the years, has provided us with what the ideal or perfect family ought to be. Leave it to *Beaver*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Happy Days*, and numerous others made us feel good and wished we could be like them. In reality this was not the norm but rather the exception. The shows of the 70's and 80's made us take a hard look at ourselves and were probably more reflective of our society (e.g. *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*).

Although television shows are entertaining, one is not likely to develop healthy families from emulating them. Turn the television off, grab your spouse, children, dogs, cats, etc. and get together, play, and talk!

What is being a good steward of our families then? Watching less television, going for a walk, not being negative, paying attention, providing encouragement, loving unconditionally, being an active listener are some fundamental elements which lay the foundation for a healthy family. Here are guidelines to maintain a strong and healthy family.

- 1. Realize it is an ongoing, developing system that requires effort and commitment.** Strong families have just as many problems as unhealthy families but it is how they resolve their differences that is the key. It is much like being in a long race...pacing yourself, preparing for obstacles, and having many tools available to help you along the way.
- 2. Strong families let each other know, routinely, that they have self-worth and note the positive qualities they possess.** This enhances our self-esteem and as well as our own self-image. A term used in mental health which represents this area is unconditional positive regard. This is recognizing everyone has some positive qualities.
- 3. Talk, talk, talk to family members.** Strong families talk about everything. For example, what did you do in school today? **Talking and asking questions** allows us to improve our chances of resolving our differences. A colleague once told me that he and his family went to a restaurant, once a week and this naturally lead to conversation and made it difficult for anybody to leave the table and go to their room, answer the phone, watch television, etc.
- 4. Strong families get together a lot.** They celebrate birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, any event that calls for a get together. History has repeatedly shown us that those individuals who have significant adjustment problems are those who are lonely and separated from others.
- 5. Strong families have a spiritual connection.** Studies have indicated that many individuals who are ill or who have some adversity in their life and believe in a greater power are more likely to be happier and well-adjusted.
- 6. Strong families learn to handle the stresses of life by understanding how to resolve conflicts as well as how to cope.** This along with not being selfish, being flexible, seeking outside help if necessary, being positive, and maintaining a realistic view is the glue that holds us together and allows us to grow strong for many years.
- 7. Strong families have routines.** They eat together regularly, go on vacations together, talk on the phone, e-mail, attend social and spiritual functions together, and do so on a regular, consistent basis.
- 8. Strong families maintain stability and consistency in their approaches to handling conflicts or difficulties.** This requires a calmness and an ability to (in spite of anger, anxiety, frustration, and wanting to give up) handle everyday stresses. One has to be emotionally tough and solve family differences.

I encourage you and your family to get together today and make a concerted effort to build a strong, healthy system. Remember: be flexible, talk, listen, commit to the long

haul, get together, share with each other, resolve differences but respect family member's opinions, think and act positively, be realistic and know that every day won't be a perfect day.

For more information, please refer to the following:

- **The 7 Highly Effective Habits of Effective Families**, by S. Covey.
- **Secrets of Strong Families** by N. Stinnett and J. DeFrain

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