

VIP Value In Parenting

Volume 7, Number 1

Winter-Spring 2005

Building Strong Healthy Families

By Robin Sloma, CSW and Brenda Reynolds, Parenting Education Coordinator, Cornell University Cooperative Extension, OC

What Is a Family?

A simple definition might be: A family is a group of people who live and work together to create a safe, trusting atmosphere in their home. The members in the family feel good about being together. They know that they belong in this family and that each person will help to take care of each other. Strong, healthy families are able to help each other with all kinds of problems.

Different Types of Families Make Up Our World

Today, many different family types exist. Nuclear families (mother, father, and their biologic children) are no longer the majority family type in our society. While research does not define any family type as the best, we do know that, regardless of family type:

- ◆ All children need to know that they are a wanted member of their family. It should not be assumed that children just know this. It is important that *all* adults in the family reinforce this each and every day.
- ◆ All adults need support in raising children. They also need recognition from other adults that they are doing a good job, and trying the best they can.

All Families are Unique

and today there are many different types of healthy families. No matter how a family comes to be, it is healthy when all members help each other grow. Regardless of the family type, the more strengths a family has the healthier the individuals from that family will be.

Some ideas to build upon your own family's strengths:

- ◆ **Make your family number one in your life.**
- ◆ **Practice good communication skills.**
- ◆ **Be willing to work to resolve conflict.**
- ◆ **Create rituals and traditions that the family enjoys.**
- ◆ **Show appreciation, affection and encouragement.**
- ◆ **Model positive adult relationships.**
- ◆ **Spend time alone with each child every day doing something you both enjoy.**

Some common family types today include:

Single Parents

At present, 70% of all children in the US will live with only one parent at some time in their life. Research has shown that children who are parented in single parent families are not at any disadvantage as long as there is evidence of a close relationship between custodial parents and child(ren). It is also best for families when non-custodial parents stay involved in their children's lives and maintain close ties. Parents who are raising children alone may benefit from the added support of extended family, friends and community resources. It may be wise to avoid introducing your children to new romantic friends until you are fairly certain that the relationship will be continued. *Parents Apart* is an Orange County program designed to help separating and divorced parents with these and other issues.

Step and Blended Families

When adults and children live together, but are not all biologically related, the families are known as Step or Blended. It is estimated that by 2010 this family type will be the most common type in the US. All step and blended families have a period of transition as members

(Continued on next page)

learn to adjust to each other and a new living situation. During this transition it is recommended that the biologic parent remain the disciplinarian until the child "grants the new parent authority." This may well take up to three years, depending upon the age of the children. Teens often have the most difficult adjustment. A step parent may find that it works better to say: "Your mom asked me to remind you that bedtime is at 10pm" instead of "I'm in charge tonight; lights out at 10pm."

Kinship Care Families

According to the 2000 US Census, 2.4 million grandparents reported that they were the primary caregiver for their grandchildren. Aunts, uncles, great-grandparents, cousins and siblings are also taking on the role of relative caregiver for children whose parents cannot care for them. This may be due to substance abuse, illness and death, abuse and neglect, economic hardship, teen pregnancies, mental illness, incarceration, divorce, domestic violence, war and other family and community crises.

In Orange County, close to 2,000 grandparents are caring for their grandchildren. Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Dependent Care Alliance recognized this growing concern and began the *Relatives as Parents Program (RAPP)* in 1998. RAPP provides help for kinship care families through support, education, youth programs, referral services and recreational events.

Extended Families

Extended families are made up of family members from different generations that live together and maintain the work of the family. They may also include non-relative members. Extended families can be as simple as a nuclear family that has grandma living in their home, or far more complex.

What are Family Strengths?

Feeling Good About Yourself as a Unit

When a family feels good about itself, it can manage most of what life "dishes out." Members of a family should feel that they come first, before those outside the family. A committed family can look to the future, setting goals and making plans to work and play together. Doing things together and believing in similar things helps family members feel good about themselves. Many families spend time on the weekends enjoying nature, sporting events, or doing volunteer work in their community. Strong families are supportive of each other even during hard times.

Celebrating With Family Traditions

A tradition is a familiar way of celebrating. Family traditions provide comfort and help everyone know that they belong. When spending time together, family members have the chance to slow down and take

notice of each other... something we rarely get to do because we are so very busy at work or school. Traditions provide structure to keep family members together and create a connection to past family members. This helps shape one's family history. Every time a tradition is repeated, children's feelings of connection to their family are strengthened.

Some examples of traditions are: Grandma always makes brisket at Passover. The family always shops for a Christmas tree together. When dad picks up the kids to spend the weekend at his house, they always have pizza. On the fourth of July, the family always goes to see the fireworks in their town. *What are your family traditions?*

Building Strong Adult Relationships

Regardless of the family type, it is important that all adults living in the home are able to communicate well, respect each other, effectively resolve conflicts, and work as a "parenting team." A healthy adult relationship helps children feel safe and secure. This can be especially important in times of hardship or transition. Research has shown that intense adult conflict that involves angry fighting, name calling, or physical abuse is very damaging for children.

Adults in a family need to TAKE TIME to care for themselves and feel good about each other so they can be a good parenting team. Simple adult "together time" could be going for a short walk, watching a movie, raking the leaves or meeting for lunch.

Coping With Stress and Crisis

Family stress is tension that can come from a crisis, daily pressure or any demand that impacts on the members and might require change. It is a part of everyday family life. Young children may feel that they are to blame for family problems. This is especially so when children are moving between homes or getting to know new significant adults. Healthy families can "weather these storms" and are helped by the belief that they will work things out together. To work through times of stress and change, families can:

- ◆ laugh together
- ◆ get physical exercise inside and outside of the home
- ◆ develop friendships
- ◆ help others
- ◆ practice spirituality
- ◆ be flexible and adjustable

Community Involvement

Strong healthy families give their time and talent back to the community through participation and volunteering at neighborhood and civic events. They help friends and neighbors, become involved in their schools and contribute to community groups. When

healthy families need help, they reach out to others. Asking for help from one's community is a family strength, not a weakness!

Family Management and Decision Making-

It is important for all persons living together in a household to feel as if they are responsible to it. Contributions to one's family helps to keep the members connected, and reinforces the idea that each member of the family is necessary for its health. Also, many hands make light work!

All family members can help with age appropriate chores.

- ◆ The two year old can count the napkins and place them on the table.
- ◆ The pre-schooler can carry the plastic pitcher of water.
- ◆ The eight year old can feed the pets.
- ◆ The ten year old can help his little brother with homework.
- ◆ The fourteen year old can cook a simple meal.

Some families find that it is helpful to have regular family meetings. They use this time to discuss important family matters and learn to work together as a team. "Where should we go for vacation this year and how can we save enough money to afford it?" Through discussions like these, children learn and practice basic negotiation, problem solving, and financial planning skills. When families talk, plan and work together everyone learns responsibility and feels that their contributions are important.

Practicing Positive Communication

In any family, adults must be positive role models for the children living in the household and set positive examples for the family. Talking with your children clearly and respectfully and expecting clear and respectful treatment of all family members is much easier to reinforce when children are still young.

Much research shows that families that communicate in effective ways are best able to maintain positive, healthy relationships inside AND outside of the home. It is easy to learn how to discuss conflicts and disagreements, and learn to solve problems together. Studies also show that blow-ups can be prevented when family members talk on a regular basis. Good conversations are more than just giving instructions or managing the day to day activities of the family. Healthy families have learned to do the following things:

- 1. Listen** – Pay attention to the speaker. Avoid talking while the other person is speaking. Lower the television or other distracting noises.
- 2. Rephrase** – The listener repeats what he /she has heard to make sure they understand what the other person has said. Then the speaker knows that they have been

heard correctly. This can be quite simple:
Child: "I had a terrible day at school!"
Adult: "I'm sorry your day went badly."
Then, you can add: "Do you want to talk about it?"



- 3. Ask Questions** – Questions invite the speaker to say more about her/his feelings or give more details about the situation. Ask open and specific questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer.

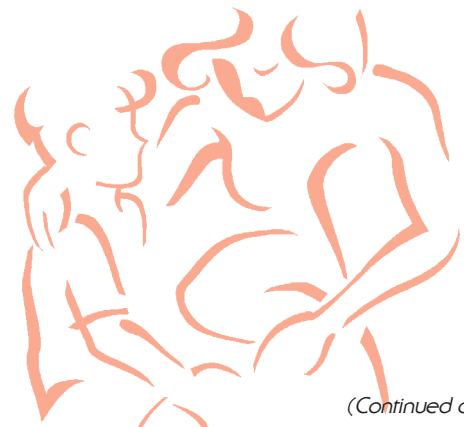
For example, say: "Tell me about your day" or "Anything good happen today?" instead of "Did you have a good day?"

- 4. Be Kind and Encouraging** – Always look for a positive thing to say, and help each child in the family feel that you want the best for them. Let them know you are on their side! Children's concerns are important to them and deserve the attention of adults without judgement or criticism. Sometimes when a parent shares their own mistakes, concerns, hopes and dreams with their children, special bonds of trust are built and communication is made easier.

- 5. Resolve Conflicts** – When in conflict, parents and children may voice intense feelings and opinions. *Everyone needs to be heard to be understood*, then the family can work together to find a solution. First work on the simplest part of the problem, and then, the most difficult. Be confident that you can solve your differences, no matter how hard it might seem at the time!

In the Smyth family no one wanted to do chores, especially cleaning the bathroom. After discussion they all agreed that they would take turns each week doing a different job. They also agreed that no one could play with friends or talk on the phone (even the adults!) until the chores were done.

- 6. Show Appreciation and Affection** – Healthy family members can make each other feel wanted and special through words, physical touch and specific actions. "Thank you," "Please," "I love you," and "You are important to this family," are words that are heard in strong families. They hug and/or touch, or use other gestures, such as leaving notes of encouragement. All types of families can learn to give and accept love and appreciation from each other, though it does require practice!



(Continued on next page)

To be physically healthy and build strong minds and bodies, people take vitamins, exercise, eat nutritious food, and go to the doctor for check-ups. To be a strong and healthy family, use the ideas in this newsletter as your vitamins and nutritious food. And remember, help is there when in need.

For Local Help:

Parents Apart, Dispute Resolution Canter - 294-8082
Relatives as Parents Program (RAPP), Cornell Cooperative Extension - 344-1234
Orange County Parenting Coalition, Cornell Cooperative Extension - 344-1234
Healthy Orange - 649-2214
Orange County Youth Bureau 845-291-2399
Mental Health Association in Orange County, Inc. 291-2355. 800-832-1200 (24 hr. Helpline)

Children's Books:

Love Is A Family, Roma Downing
Feast For Ten, Cathryn Falwell
Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families, Laurence & Marc Brown

Adult Resources:

University of Nebraska, *Creating Sustainable Families*
University of Florida Extension, *Building a Healthy Family*
Search Institute, *Building Strong Families*
<http://www.search-institute.org/families/>
The New York Times, Feb. 16, 1995 *The Silent Family: Together, but Apart* by Pepper Schwartz
Children's Defense Fund:
<http://www.childrensdefense.org/>

FAMILY ASSESSMENT QUIZ

How well do these characteristics fit your family? The following questions will give you some idea about the strength and sustainability of your family. Rate your family on a scale of 1 to 5.

- 1 = almost never true,**
- 2 = occasionally true,**
- 3 = true about half the time,**
- 4 = often true,**
- 5 = almost always true**

Scoring:

- 37 - 45:** Family sustainability is good in all areas. Keep working for greater enjoyment.
- 27 - 36:** Doing well in many areas. May need extra effort in other areas.
- 17 - 26:** Your family isn't reaching its potential! Work to make it the way you want it.
- 0 - 16:** Your family life has been ignored. Don't allow it to die of neglect.

- Our family enjoys being together, we have fun together and we do things together.
- Our family listens to each other and allows each person to express feelings and opinions without being criticized or put down.
- Our family members express appreciation by saying "thank you," "please," "I like you".
- Our family supports each person's welfare and happiness and we are proud of each other.
- Our family shares a set of ethical principles and religious values and we participate regularly in spiritual growth and/or religious activities.
- Our family has friends and we participate in school, youth, religious, community and civic organizations.
- Our family sticks together during a crisis and we make good use of all available help.
- The adults in our family can talk about differences and share important decisions together.
- Our family works together as a team to manage our resources and set priorities.

(Resource: University of Nebraska: Creating Sustainable Families)

VIP Value In Parenting

For more information on parenting education and/or the Orange County Parenting Coalition Action Team, contact Cornell Cooperative Extension at 845 - 344 - 1234.

www.cce.cornell.edu/orange

Cornell Cooperative Extension provides equal program and employment opportunities.



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
Orange County



Children



EMPIRE
BLUECROSS
BLUESHIELD



Editorial Staff: Denyse Variano: Cornell University Cooperative Extension, Orange County; Stephanie Sosnowski, Maternal Infant Services Network.

Graphics: Nancy Kaip, Cornell Cooperative Extension, O.C.

Funding / Distribution: Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, National Accounts Division, Middletown, NY; Orange County Partners for Children, a component of Healthy Orange, Inc. Orange County BOCES, Cornell University Cooperative Extension.