

Building Strong Families

Having Fun with Your Family 365 Days a Year
Family Survival Activities



Building Strong Families

Caring and Appreciation

Family members do positive things for one another just because they care.

ACTIVITIES

Caring Days: We all want to be loved in our own way. Family members themselves can tell us the special things that make them feel loved.

Make lists of things that make you feel loved. Share your lists with family members and ask them to make a list of things that make them feel loved for all other family members.

Begin having “Caring Days” on a regular basis. On each Caring Day, every family member picks one thing from each person’s list and does what it says.

For example, if you pick backrub from someone’s list, you take time during Caring Day to give that person a back rub. If your daughter feels loved when you build sandcastles together, take some time on Caring Day to do that.

Kindling Kindness. Kindness does not have to cost money. It can just be showing thoughtfulness and consideration. Make kindness a habit.

Start by doing one kind act each day for a week, such as doing a chore for a family member, sitting with a new classmate at lunch or donating food and clothing to a local organization.

Love Notes. Appreciation and love can help us feel good about ourselves. Love notes are one way to express those feelings and can help family members notice good things about each other.

Suggest that family members recognize the things they like about each other. They may like the way a person behaves; admire their talents, skills, and achievements; or appreciate special qualities that make the person unique.

Encourage all family members to express their feelings by writing short notes to each other about the things they notice. Tuck the notes under the person’s pillow or slip them into a backpack, lunch bag, briefcase, gym bag, or purse. Write at least one note to each family member every week.

Pay attention to your children. Your children's sense of self-worth influences their future. How they feel about themselves will affect their choice of friends, how they get along with others, and how well they use their abilities.

Take time to talk to children, listen to them, and pay attention to their activities and interests. Find times when you are not hurried or tense and can focus on them.

Express affection through physical contact. With babies this means holding and cuddling. As children get older, you can offer hugs, kisses, caresses, an arm over the shoulder, or a pat on the back. Sometimes the right words are hard to find, but a gentle hug says it all.

Treat children with the same respect you show adults. Too often we reserve one set of manners for adults, and another for children. We may embarrass our children by scolding or criticizing them in front of others. Or we may get so involved in a conversation we forget their presence. Children are no less sensitive than adults and deserve the same kind of respect.

Tell children from time to time that they're appreciated. Don't wait until they get good grades or limit your praise to their good looks or manners. Let them know you enjoy them and think they're great all the time.

Respond to children with patience and understanding. When your child spills his milk for the third time in a row, or hits his sister over the head with a toy shovel, it's easy to treat him as a criminal. Try, though, to see the child as someone who needs your help in controlling his body and emotions.

Respect children's feelings and abilities. Because of their size, we can forget that children are people, too. They have a right to privacy and feelings of their own. We may have to remind ourselves not to carry children when they can get there under their own steam or to speak for them when they can speak for themselves.

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Time Together

Finding time to get the family together can be difficult. With family members, schedule specific activities to ensure that the family finds time.

ACTIVITIES

Mealtime. Plan for the family to be together for at least one meal each day. Involve everyone from the start with tasks such as setting the table or making salads. Turn off the television. Put newspapers, work from the office, and other cares aside. Focus on topics that make mealtime fun.

Invite family members to share interesting experiences, plans, upcoming events and news. Instead of rushing off when the meal is finished, sit around the table and talk.

Just the Two of Us. Make a point to spend special one-on-one time with each child monthly. List things you'd like to do, how much time they take, what you will need to do them, and how much each will cost.

At the beginning of the month, schedule a date, choose an activity from the list, and mark it on the calendar. Adults need to remember to schedule monthly dates with each other as well as the children.

My Very Own Book. It's never too early to begin reading. Reading aloud to infants combines two of their favorite things--the wonderful sound of their parent's voice and close personal contact.

You can easily make your child an interesting, low-cost book from an empty photo album. Help your child collect pictures of family members, friends, favorite animals, toys, etc. Mix-up different sounds, colors, shapes, and activities. Variety encourages language development. You can also use pictures from magazines, photos, postcards, and catalogs.

Fill the book, using one or two pictures per page. Albums with magnetic pages are sturdy, easy to keep clean and allow you to change pictures easily. Talk about the pictures and let your child rearrange them and add to them. This gift can grow with your child.

Little Sprouts. Your kids can learn about life from gardening. Like people, plants need love and care to grow. Food and water keep them alive, and extra acts of kindness help them thrive. Children also learn a sense of responsibility by watering and weeding plants.

Try these fun ideas:

- X Put a marker with each child's name beside the vegetable or flower he or she planted. After harvest, use the vegetable in a family meal and put the gardener's name beside the serving dish (for example, Carol's corn or Tom's tomatoes).
- X Fill an old tennis shoe with potting soil and plant grass or flower seeds in it. Keep it moist and in 5 weeks you should have a fine crop of grass or flowers.
- X Children will love to share homegrown vegetables or flowers with neighbors, grandparents and others. Have them add a note that says "homegrown with love by...."
- X Care for the garden together with a positive attitude. Make it fun--not a punishment or a chore.

Sow seeds of kindness often in your children. By telling them you love them--no matter what--you plant a seed that will grow into positive self-esteem.

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Encouragement

Family members who encourage each other promote a sense of belonging and help each other develop as individuals.

ACTIVITIES

Sharing Accomplishments. Ask family members to share things they've done during the past day, week, or month that made them feel good about themselves. Ask: "What was it that made you proud?"

Celebration Dinner. Have a celebration dinner one night a month. Plan a special meal and have each person "toast" the achievement of another family member. You can even hand out personal awards or certificates.

Hobbies. Help each family member find and pursue hobbies they enjoy. Someone might sign up for music or voice lessons. Others might try walking, reading more, painting, a new craft, cooking, writing or gardening.

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Commitment

A strong sense of commitment keeps the family together through good times and bad.

ACTIVITIES

Discovering Family Traditions. Make a list of your family's traditions. They can be such a part of family life that you may not even recognize them as traditions. They can be anything from a daily activity to a once-a-year event.

Go over the list and discuss the traditions. Are there some you'd like to do more often? Are there some that are no longer enjoyable? Cross off traditions you want to drop and put a star by those you want to do more often.

Finally, list ideas for new family traditions. Possibilities include some special way of saying goodnight; making your own birthday or holiday cards; or having video night every third Friday. Keep the list handy in case you want to add something.

In The Shade of the Family Tree. Tracing the family tree is a great activity for a parent or grandparent to share with a child. Work together to find family information. Share anecdotes and memories as the names are recorded.

You may want to record family events and stories on audio or video tape for future generations. Make copies of the family tree to give as presents to relatives.

Working with a grandparent to discover this information can help the child feel more secure. Grandparents' stories and remembrances also help link the past with the present. It's especially fun for kids to hear about their parents when they were growing up.

Public libraries and bookstores have books to get you started on tracing your family tree. Churches, organizations or community colleges sometimes offer genealogy classes.

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Coping with Change

The ability to cope with change helps a family deal with everyday events and unpredictable stress.

ACTIVITIES

Do What I Do: Part of coping with change is learning to take on new roles unexpectedly. Your family can practice doing that with this fun activity. Once a month, ask family members to think of a chore or a job they usually do that they would like to "give away" for a day. Have them write it on a sticky note or draw a picture of it.

When you have finished, trade notes with each other until everyone has a new task to do. For that day only, each person does that job.

The next day, set aside a few minutes to talk about how it felt to switch roles.

Was it easy to do the different job? Why or why not?

How can we prepare ourselves to be ready to fill in for each other in the future?

Repeat the activity once a month.

Prepare for the Unexpected: Be prepared for the unexpected. Develop skills for dealing with emergencies and other unplanned situations, and take time to practice them. Areas to consider include:

- X Social skills - how to answer the phone and take a message
- X Safety and survival skills - how to escape a home fire; how to perform the Heimlich maneuver and other first aid techniques; what to do if the power goes out; and how to call 911
- X Car maintenance - how to handle a breakdown on the road; how to change a tire
- X Household maintenance - how to operate the washer and dryer and fold laundry; how to do simple home repairs.
- X Meal preparation - how to make a few simple meals; how to operate the oven, microwave and other appliances
- X Financial management - how to balance a checkbook; how to pay bills
how to make plans for saving; how to write a will; how to prepare for retirement

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Communication

If family members are to keep in touch with each other and understand each other, significant interaction must occur. Yet, there is an amazingly small amount of such sharing in most families.

One researcher found that the average husband and wife “talk to each other” only about four minutes a day. Studies show that the average mother is engaged in active communication with her children less than one hour per day; the average father, only 10 to 15 minutes.

Perhaps the most important communication skill is listening. Listening to children is as important as talking with them. When you open yourself up to what your children have to say, you will get to know them better and deepen your relationship with them. Boost your children’s self-confidence by showing them you value what they have to say.

Strong families don’t just happen. It takes special effort. All types of families can grow stronger by talking together. Share your feelings, thoughts, dreams, and fears with each other.

ACTIVITIES

Family Investigation: How well do you know your family members? Develop a list of questions about any family member. For example:

What do you like to do in your spare time?

What do you like to do to relax?

What causes you the most stress?

You might also ask about the person's favorite color, meal, sport, friends, nicknames, or a famous person they'd like to meet.

Predict the person's answers and then compare your predictions with their answers to discover how much you really know about a child, parent, or spouse.

Families Need to Talk: Choose a good time for a discussion: at the dinner table, in the car, in the evening while relaxing. Eliminate distractions and allow enough time for everyone to talk and share their ideas and opinions. Develop the conversation based on the answers to these discussion starters:

- *My biggest goof last year was....*
- *One really good thing that happened to me last year was...*
- *One thing I do well is...*
- *If I were the parent in this family..*
- *Our family is really good at...*
- *If I could have my favorite meal it would be...*
- *One thing I like about each person in my family is...*

Value each person's comments. The reward is a stronger family.

I-Messages: This activity can help family members develop skill in expressing their feelings or concerns without insulting or fighting.

Place I-messages on slips of paper using a format like this:

I feel good about... because....

I'm happy that...because...

I'm sad about...because...

Place the folded slips in a dish. Take turns drawing slips and filling in the blanks as you read the statement aloud.

Share an example of a completed I-message such as: *I feel good about getting a raise because I like having extra money to do fun things.*

Explain that I-messages are a way to express feelings without blaming other people for the way you feel.

Getting in Touch: Couples can set aside some time (15-30 minutes) each day to talk together. Use the time to get in touch with each other. Take a walk together or share a meal. Get up early enough to have time for conversation before the children get up. This same idea can be adapted for parent-child talks.

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Spirituality

It is important for family members to sort, clarify and share the things they cherish and believe. Sharing about spirituality can provide families with a base of common values.

Spirituality may involve an awareness of a higher power that provides a sense of purpose, support and strength. For some families, it may involve development of a set of moral principles to guide the family's interactions with each other and others.

Belief in a higher power or common principles can allow family members to be more patient, forgiving, positive, and supportive toward one another.

ACTIVITIES

First Things First: Examine your central values and how well you live by them. Ask yourself questions like:

*What is most important to me?
How well do my daily activities mirror my values?*

Take steps to narrow the distance between your talk and your walk--between what you say you believe and what you do.

Help your children clarify what is most important to them. Participate in activities that reflect the values you want to instill in your children. For example, if you value helpfulness, be a helpful person inside and outside the home.

Spiritual Routines at Home: Have the family make a list of things you want to do regularly to build spiritual strength. These activities might include reading inspirational books, attending church together, caring for someone who needs extra support, using a mild voice when speaking, or giving each other time for reflection and solitude.

Choose one or two of the practices and begin doing them. You can take turns making sure the family actually follows through.

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Community and Family Ties

Healthy families are connected to others in the community, building a mutual support system of family and friends that they can count on in times of need.

Children learn a sense of caring for others by watching parents' examples. Actions truly speak louder than words. When parents welcome a new neighbor, call on a sick friend, or donate clothing that has been outgrown, they are teaching their children to be involved with the larger community.

ACTIVITIES

Citizenship: Visit the city council, a county commissioner's meeting, state legislature or U.S. Congress. Watch regulations and laws being made. Interview a lawmaker. Take the kids to see a public, pre-election forum or watch public affairs programs on television and discuss them afterwards. Learn the process for making policies and laws, and practice influencing it.

Neighbor to Neighbor: Strengthen ties you have with neighbors by finding ways to be helpful (for example, splitting wood, installing fencing, pet sitting, sharing a favorite dessert, shoveling sidewalks, bringing in the newspaper, shopping for someone who is ill, or sharing plants and garden produce).

School Connections: Strengthen ties between home and school. Help out at your child's school. Share a talent in a classroom, participate in fundraising or a playground work party. Attend parent-teacher conferences. Support school events such as performances and sports activities. Work closely with the teacher to promote your child's success at school.

Make your home a learning place. Show your children you love to learn. Read books and magazines. Take continuing education classes. Tell your children about new, interesting things you learn. Keep many good books in your home.

Plan family learning activities. Go to the library. Visit museums, historic sites, planetariums, science exhibits.

Reduce, Recycle, Reuse: Recycling can be a fun, educational project for the entire family to share. Spend time discussing that when we collect certain materials for recycling we are saving money, energy and natural resources to help the environment.

A home recycling center takes only a small amount of space and a few minutes a day to use. Set up a system that fits with how your community collects recyclable materials. If you don't have a recycling program in your community, talk to city officials about how you can help get one started.

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Clear Roles

Strong families share in household responsibilities and work as a team to accomplish household tasks. When family members have a clear idea about their roles and responsibilities, they find it easier to be flexible and adapt in times of need.

ACTIVITIES

Daily Duties: Responsibilities teach us to be accountable for our actions. Homework must be completed or grades will suffer; clothes must be washed or there will be nothing to wear. We need to be consistent in expecting each family member to contribute to the operation of the household.

The family can make a daily schedule of each person's responsibilities. Examples might include: chores, homework, jobs, pet care, school activities and sports.

Include some responsibilities that involve working together. For instance, Jimmy helps Joan set the table on Monday and Wednesday. Be sure the scheduled duties fit the ages and abilities of family members.

Post the schedule where everyone in the family can see it. Review responsibilities weekly.

Family Fun-Raising: Family members can rotate the role of "fun raising." The fun raiser brings the family together to plan for having fun.

Make a list of fun activities. These activities can be free things such as going for a hike or playing games or other activities like going to the movies or a ball game.

Choose activities that appeal to everyone, and list the activities on a fun-raising chart. Write what the family wants to do, how much it will cost, what is needed to prepare for it, and when the family will do it.