

# Making Our Families Stronger

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Extension Guidesheet GH6640, *Promoting Family Strengths*

Adapted by Gail Rice, Literacy Specialist and Consultant

Written by Kelly A. Cole, Extension Associate,  
Janet A. Clark, Associate Program Leader and Associate State  
Specialist; and Sara Gable, Human Development Extension State  
Specialist.



## Why are families so important?

There are many different types of families. But even if families are different, they all do important jobs:

- They raise children.
- They meet the needs of family members.
- They teach family members how to live in society.
- They decide who will do what jobs so that the family can function.
- They carry on customs or traditions.

Because they do all these jobs, families greatly affect each family member and society. And because families are so important, we must work hard to make families stronger.

## Families have changed

American families have changed a lot in the last thirty years. That is because:

- More couples divorce.
- Many divorced people remarry.
- More teenage girls and unmarried women are having children.
- In many families, both parents work.
- Social values have changed.

In the past, when people thought of “a family,” they thought of a husband, wife, and their children. But today there are many other types of families. Some of these families are:

- Unmarried couples living together. They may or may not have children.
- Couples who never have children. They may not want to have children, or they may not be able to have children.
- Single-parent families. Single parents may never have married. Or their spouses may have died, left the family, or divorced them.
- Joint-custody families. In these families, divorced parents share the care of the child.
- Blended and step families, with a husband, wife, and children from previous marriages.
- Foster and group-home families. Foster children may live with families temporarily or permanently. In group homes, children and adults may live with several others in a group setting.
- Cross-generational families. Grandparents may raise grandchildren; or grandparents, parents, and children may live in the same home.
- Gay and lesbian couples. They may or may not have children.

## Coping with stress

Families are likely to become even more different in the future. All these changes and differences can put stress on families. That’s why families need to be strong. They need to cope with the stresses in everyday living.

And if there is a crisis (like death, sickness, or unemployment of a family member), the stress is much greater. But if a family is strong, it can recover from a crisis, even though it may take time. The family can “bounce back” from the crisis and function well again.

## What makes families strong?

Here are some traits of strong families. As you read about them, think about your own family’s strengths.

- **Family members can adapt.** They can change in order to cope with stress and crisis.
- **Family members appreciate each other.** Because they care about each other, family members often do good things for one another. They show that they appreciate each other.

- **Family members have clear roles.** They know their roles and tasks in the family. But they can change roles and tasks if they need to.
- **Family members are committed.** They value the family unit and each family member.
- **Family members communicate clearly with each other.** They share what they think and feel, and they listen to each other. And when there is conflict, family members deal with it and settle it.
- **Family members have ties to the family and the community.** Strong families have ties to their relatives. They are also active in their community. When they need it, they can get help from their relatives and the community.
- **Family members encourage each other.** Members urge each other to learn and grow, both inside and outside the family.
- **Family members spend time together.** Members spend plenty of time with each other. And when they are together, they really pay attention to each other.

### Ways to make families stronger

Here are some ideas to make your family stronger:

- Spend time alone with each child at least once a week.
- Eat a meal together as a family at least once a day. Have family members carry out mealtime tasks.
- Be patient with your children. Respect their feelings and abilities.
- Encourage family members by asking them to talk about their successes.
- Visit your child's school. Find ways to help out there.
- Hold family meetings where all family members can talk openly.
- Write a family mission statement. This should tell about your family's purposes and goals.
- Start family customs or traditions. Then keep them up.

### Building and keeping up healthy family relationships

Strong families have healthy family relationships. That's because family members work hard to build relationships and keep them up. Here are some ways to do that in your family:

- **Communicate clearly with each other.** You communicate not just with your words, but also with your actions, body language, and tone of voice. Really listen to another person. Then give feedback to show that you understand what the person says.
- **Build strong relationships with each family member.**
  - If you are a parent, be patient with your children. Praise them not just for succeeding, but also for trying. Set up family rules, and enforce them.
  - If you are married or in a long-term relationship, share housework and child care with your spouse or partner. Agree on goals and values. Value and take care of your relationship.
  - If you have brothers or sisters, value them and encourage them. Start your own traditions with them, or keep up traditions you already have.
  - If you have extended family members (like aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents), spend time with them. These relatives may support and encourage you when you need help.
- **Deal with conflict and problems.** What can you do when your family has problems or conflict? First, try to understand what the conflict is about. Work to solve the problem, not to blame someone else, and try to solve the problem before moving on. You may be able to show family members some useful ways to solve problems.

When you are in a conflict, you may not be able to get what you want. Sometimes, to settle a conflict, you may have to bargain with family members or agree to change. If you have made a mistake, admit it. You may need to say you are sorry to heal the relationship. Try not to take things personally or hold grudges.

## Some things to remember

Many families are under stress. But the stronger a family is, the better it can cope with stress. That's why we must make families strong. Although you may not see them, all families have some strengths to build on.

What are your family's strengths? What can you and your family members do to make your family stronger? It's not just one family member that affects how a family functions. All family members need to be committed to the family and to each other. They need to work with each other to build and keep up strong relationships. Then the family can be strong, not only when things function normally, but also during times of stress.

## Resources

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