

March, 2000

## Building Strong Families for Our Children

We all know families are important to our society. However, few of us really consider why or how they are important. It is simply a known fact. This issue of Balancing Act is dedicated to the notion of promoting or building family strengths.

Every family, no matter the structure, has characteristics or traits that allow the family to function and meet challenges. These characteristics help families withstand stressors and crisis through the family's "life."

Research has recognized the following characteristics of a strong family:

♥ **Adaptable:** Strong families are able to adapt or cope with everyday and unanticipated stressors.

♥ **Appreciation:** Because they care about other family members, individuals frequently do positive things for one another.

♥ **Clear roles:** Family members are aware of their roles and responsibilities and are able to remain flexible.

♥ **Commitment to family:** Family members are committed to the family as a system, and members recognize each individual's worth and importance to the family.

♥ **Communication:** Family members are open and honest with one another, and they are willing to listen to other members' views; conflicts are managed and resolved when they arise.

♥ **Community and family ties:** Strong families are connected to the community and they are involved in community organizations.

♥ **Encouragement of individuals:** Individual development is encouraged both inside and outside of the family system.

♥ **Shared time:** Family members do things together on a regular basis.

All families have strengths. Though some strengths are more evident in some families than in others. Build on your strengths to provide a strong foundation for your children and society.

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### Inside This Issue . . .

- ✓ Be a Mean Mom
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## Are You a Mean Mom?

I know mine was. We had the meanest mother in the world! While other kids ate candy for breakfast, we had cereal, eggs, and toast. When others got junk food for lunch, we had to eat sandwiches. And, you can guess we had a healthy supper at the table together with no TV, too! Mother insisted on knowing where we were and who we were with at all times. We were ashamed to admit it, but she

had the nerve to make us work. We had to wash dishes, make beds, cook, vacuum, do laundry, and other cruel jobs.

She always insisted on us telling the truth. By the time we were teenagers, she could read our minds. Then, life really got tough! Mother wouldn't let our friends just honk the horn when they drove up. They had to come up to the door so she could meet them. While everyone else could date when they were 12 or 13, we had to wait until we were 16.

Because of our mother we missed out on lots of things other kids experienced. None of us have ever been caught shoplifting, vandalizing other's property or ever arrested for any crime. It was all her fault. We never got drunk, took up smoking, stayed out all night, or a million other things other kids did.

Now that we've left home, we're all educated, honest adults. We're doing our best to be mean parents just like Mom. That's what's wrong with the world today: No Mean Moms!

## Building Strong Families: You Can Make it Happen

We all want to have the "best" families. But, few of us have any training to make that happen. We rely on our experiences from our own families to translate into our own strong families. But, things have changed in our society. The role models I had don't help me understand my family and the interactions we are having as I work outside the home and cope with fast-paced technology and the feeling that everything must be done and must be done "right." Simply understanding and making sense out of family issues would help today's families.

Luckily, we have a newly developed curriculum entitled Building Strong Families is available from University Extension. The curriculum has 13 lessons including goal setting, identifying family strengths, parenting, self esteem, balancing work and family, money management, working, child self care, stress management, food and fitness, alert consumer, healthy house, and communication. This curriculum can be offered to an existing group such as a church group, a PTO, or a civic group such as a sorority. The group would select at least three topics for each 2-hour lesson. Of course, groups could choose to use all 13 topics if time and interest permitted. Call Lisa Wallace at the Henry County Extension Center at (660) 885-5556 or E-mail her at wallacel@missouri.edu for more information.

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## Don't Be an Outlaw with Your In-laws

"I love my in-laws. We get along great and they have great advice," exclaimed Annie as she talked with a friend recently. "I wish I could say the same for my in-laws. All they do is criticize everything I do," moaned Kelly. In-law relationships can make a family stronger...or they can break families apart by putting stress on marital relationships.

Research shows that mothers-in-law have the greatest tendency of taking the brunt of blame for problems followed by the sister-in-law, the brother-in-law, the father-in-law, the daughter-in-law and finally, the son-in-law. Conflicts with any "in-laws" may make family relationships strained and can result in longstanding strife.

Research conducted at Utah State University offers the following guidance for sons or daughters-in-law to minimize "out-law" relationships:

1. Get to know your spouse's family members. Meet regularly.
2. Share the responsibility for communication with in-laws. Both spouses should call, write or plan visits with the in-laws.
3. Make your own decisions

regarding finances, children, housing, employment, etc. as a couple. It's okay to ask for advice from parents and in-laws, but make sure you make your own decision in consultation with your spouse.

4. Remember that financial aid received from in-laws is often more than a gift of money. Make sure you know what strings, if any, are attached to the money and abide by those expectations or decline the financial aid.

5. Don't compare families.

6. Look for or find some new ways to learn to like and appreciate your mother and father-in-law. You won't change them, so learn to like them.

7. Show respect. Refrain from telling mythical in-law jokes. When making references to your mother or father-in-law, do so in a

positive way.

8. Pay public and private tribute to your in-laws where appropriate, making sure you are sincere in giving that tribute. Remember, our mothers taught us, "If you don't have something nice to say, say nothing at all." Listen to your mother's voice!

9. Recognize that a mother and father-in-law change very slowly. Fault finding seldom, if ever, speeds the process.

One way to put aside annoying habits or opinions from in-laws is to consider that your in-laws are your spouse's parents and you love your spouse! Be thankful for the way they parented him/her and be grateful that he/she is the one you love.

### Q&A Q&A Q&A Q&A Q&A Q&A Q&A Q&A

**Q:** I'm a single mom and my third grade daughter worries that we aren't a family because her father doesn't live with us. How do I explain that we are a family?

**A:** First, tell her that the amount of people doesn't define a family. Our society has all kinds of "families" around us and they all take on different structures. Although they may be formed in different ways, most families do similar things such as childbearing, providing member's basic needs, providing emotional support, socializing members, establishing traditions, and delegating responsibilities. More information on family diversity is available in a free publication ***GH6640 Promoting Family Strengths*** from your Extension Center.

## Does Your Calendar Reflect Your Family's Importance?

Give me your calendar and I will tell you what is important to you! My minister said that one Sunday in a sermon and I, being the astute time management presenter thought, "Hooray, it's good to hear others talk about showing your 'values' by how you spend your time." Of course, he was talking about spending time helping others and choosing to be active in church. We were learning about stewardship and he emphasized that, though we don't all have the same amount of money, we do

all have the same amount of time. Our time is a limited quantity. He wanted us to realize that some people "had the time" and others didn't.

What does your calendar tell you about yourself and the importance of your family? Chances are, you write down all your meetings, appointments, special events and dates on your calendar. Do you fill it up with work, social activities and events and leave little room for family or self?

Our children are with us a

short time when you consider your possible lifetime...fill their time in before you run out of time! Fill in some time for fun with your family, don't just put in the school events, doctor and dental appointments and necessities!

Don't leave yourself out! Jot down time for yourself. You are a much easier person to be around when you are rested and happy. Take time for yourself and you are likely to be less irritable and moody.

Look at your calendar. Is your family important to you?