

New Principles of Parenting Series

Building Family Strengths

► The Principles of Parenting series provides tips and information to support positive parenting and family relations.

All families have stress at some time over time, money, and outside pressures. Sometimes homes can become the place where everyone is worn-out or angry. Despite these difficulties, families can become stronger and closer by building their strengths.

Difficult Times: A Personal Story

"My mother told us that her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer when she was very young. Medical bills piled up, and her family was in a state of distress. They had already struggled to make ends meet, but this created added financial stress. They had to prioritize their spending, only purchasing items to meet basic needs. She has shared with me what a difficult time this was for her family. Because of the financial struggle in her family, she has taught my brother and me the importance of responsibility and sharing, even when times are tough".
(College student)

This family had a difficult time, which began with a health issue. Although parents don't usually share all the details of budgeting with their children, this issue drew the family together. The story is shared in this family through the next generation, and carries important lessons about working together in tough times.

How can families be strengthened in ordinary times and difficult times? Researchers have worked on answers to this question for years. Seven important family strengths are discussed here, along with tips for activities that may help build or improve these strengths.

As you read about each of these family strengths, think about what stress might be affecting your whole family today. All of these strengths are interconnected. At the end, review the strengths and work with your family to decide what your best strengths are.



Seven Family Strengths

1. Caring and Appreciation
2. Commitment
3. Communication
4. Community and Family ties
5. Working Together
6. Routines PLUS Flexibility
7. Teaching Responsibility

Family Strength 1: Caring and Appreciation

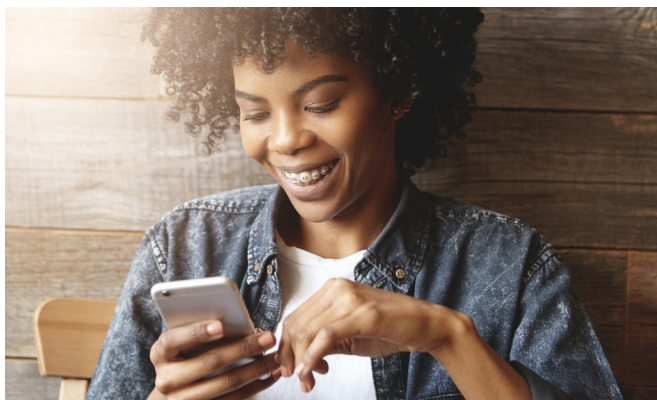
Expressions of care and appreciation strengthen families. When families encourage and uplift each other, they reassure family member that they are still loved, even if they make mistakes.

Families grow stronger when members notice and appreciate positive aspects of one another. For example, you might compliment another person's polite behavior or something they did or said. You might acknowledge your appreciation for the talents, skills, achievements, qualities, and characteristics that make the other person unique. Surprise someone by writing a short love note about something you notice and put it under the person's pillow or in a backpack, briefcase, or purse. Write something like, "Emily, I'm so proud of you for working so hard on your homework. Love, Dad." You also could send someone a kind text message saying something like, "I appreciate all that you are doing for our family. Have a great day at work (or school)." You could also slip them a little note in their lunch box, and write "You're awesome!". These little messages tell others that you appreciate and care for them.

Be polite to each other, as well as strangers. Good manners and everyday courtesy lets your child or partner know that they matter. Politeness also shows children how to behave with others.

- Ask family members to do extra things rather than telling them they should.
- Be clear about duties, and help teach children by helping them meet expectations.
- Follow up and be appreciate efforts with a thank you.
- Ask for opinions. Listen for comments.
- Avoid criticizing or telling people they did not do a "good enough" job.

Tip 1.1: When praising others, appreciate the behavior or effort rather than the person. Avoid saying things like "You're a nice person," as this labels the person (and suggest some people are not nice). Rather, say something like: "That was a kind thing you did for me. Thank you!"



Giving time is another way to show caring and appreciation. Children want parents to be available—to spend time together, to show interest, to do things with them, and to talk with them. Families that make time to be together find that quality grows.

Some opportunities include:

- Eating meals together
- Sharing joys and defeats
- Making treats together
- Watching movies or shows
- Singing or playing music together
- Playing games (on-line, board games or outdoor games)

Families may want to pick one evening or time every week for family activities such as family game nights or movie nights or doing outdoor activities. You could take turns with each member choosing activities that they like. Spending time together, away from distractions such as a heavy workload or technology helps you all focus on one another and find out what is going on in each other's lives.

Touch, as in showing affection, love, and appreciation, is another good way of strengthening your family. No child can be spoiled by too much hugging! Small children often like to snuggle with their parents. A quick pat, a hug, a kiss, a handclasp, or an arm around their shoulder can say a lot to people of all ages. Don't forget your teenagers! They need hugs, too!

Spending time together, appreciating each other, sending love notes, and being polite are all ways of strengthening your family and make your family time an enjoyable time.

Family Strength 2: Commitment

Strong families are committed to each other. They value the things that make their family special. Even when times are hard, they work on problems together.

One way to build family commitment is to practice family traditions. A family tradition is any activity or event that occurs regularly and holds special meaning for the family. The tradition may be as simple as stories or prayers before bedtime or Saturday morning pancakes or as big as an annual vacation. Because these traditions have meanings that are special to your family, they create feelings of warmth, closeness, and togetherness. Traditions can build a feeling of stability and safety for family members, and they build memories that tell the story of your family.



The memories your family shares are another way to build a sense of family. Make time to share happy memories. Include older relatives by asking them to talk about their lives. Their stories contain a glimpse of their personalities and strengths and allows younger family members to feel more connected. If you don't have access to family elders, look for stories that help to tell the story of how your family came to be. If you have a blended family, make sure to value the connections you have in your family, but appreciate that children may have other families, too.

Building a sense of family helps the family during stressful times. Strengthen your family by nurturing it!

Family Strength 3: Communication

Families are stronger when members share their feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, joys, sorrows, experiences, growth, and needs. Families that make the time to listen and respond to what others have to say grow in their bonds. Here are four tips for improving family communication.

Tip 3.1: Make Time To Talk About Feelings

Feelings reflect what is important to us. Make time to tune in and talk about or respond to feelings. Choose low-intensity times, like when you are in the car or, while you are doing chores, or at bedtime. Turn off your screen and really pay attention. You can encourage each other to share by asking, "Tell me more," or "What was the best part of the day for you?" You could also reflect other's feelings by saying, "Wow, that must have been exciting (or frightening)."

Tip 3.2: Be An Active Listener

Listening to what others say and feel is one of the most powerful ways of showing love. To be good listeners we often must set aside our opinion and really try to understand the other person's point of view. The goal of active listening is for other person to feel understood. You do not have to agree with their opinions to empathize with their feelings. You can start by reflecting back to the other person, "It sounds like you feel [describe what you think the person feels.] Is that right?" The other person can then reply to say if he or she was correctly understood. Understanding takes patience, effort to understand, and acceptance of the other person's feelings.

Tip 3.3: When Your Family Has A Problem, Make Suggestions That Are Kind & Helpful

Try to suggest actions that you or others could take to improve the situation or solve the problem. Say things like "I would like some help bringing in the groceries." Even if you know you are right, telling someone else what to do may make that person feel blamed, frustrated, or helpless.

Tip 3.4: Talk Often & Be Curious

Think about ways that your family has successfully solved problems in happy ways. Usually, this is because conversation is already easy. If your family is new to talking like this, you could try by making a question list. Ask each person to suggest a general question. It can be silly, too! Example questions might be:

- How old would you like to be right now and why?
- If you could be an animal, what would you like to be?
- If you were on a desert island, what would you want to have with you and why?

Make sure the questions appropriate for the ages of the family members. Share your list and at family time, in the car, or while you are waiting for things, take turns asking people to pick the "get-to-know-you" question.

Family Strength 4: Community & Family Ties

Families are more resilient when they can draw on other people and community organizations for support. If a family has a hard time dealing with a problem, asking for help from outside the family may provide ideas, empathy, or sometimes, a practical solution. Being involved with community institutions like schools, faith organizations, or organizations that promote well-being strengthen families. When families already have relationships, they can share a problem before it grows into a crisis.

Busy schedules can make it hard to spend time with people with family. Strengthen your communication with loving family group texts, a family social media page (use privacy settings to protect your privacy), or sitting down together as a family to plan everyone's events in the week. Families can develop traditions by regularly visiting with certain people in their extended networks or bringing people together for special occasions or holidays.

Families are also strengthened when they reach out to help or have fun with people in their own extended families, neighborhoods, and communities. A family might help an elderly person or couple with house chores, fixing or repairing things, offering a ride, or bringing a meal over. Families may also lean on other members in their community for childcare. For example, families may trade off taking children to school, or supporting them at sporting events. Being together helps create memories and bonds as a family and as a community.

Children learn from the behaviors their parents model, so parents can teach their children to become good community citizens by getting involved in community issues. Parents are modeling when they advocate to improve a local park or sports-field, or work with other community members to improve something. In doing this, parents are teaching their children the importance of leadership, being aware, and working with others to help everyone. Family ties are strengthened by working together, in the community, as a family, and by setting aside time to connect.

Family Strength 5: Working Together

Working together as a family means sharing decisions, solving family problems, and helping each other. Everyone participates. Parents are the leaders, but the children's opinions and efforts are invited, encouraged, and appreciated. For example, a preschool-aged child



can help in grocery shopping by taking simple things off shelves for you, like cereal or fruit tins. They feel important and they are busy, which helps you, even if you have to help them finish the task. You can help a child make a decision between the number of bananas, and it helps them learn to count, too. A school-age child who is learning to read can help read prices on shelves. A teenager might go to a separate aisle and pick up a short list of things. Helping children teaches them how to work together as a family and shows your trust as they grow in their ability.

Making real decisions, even small ones like helping you with grocery or other tasks, is good practice. Children need opportunities to watch their parents' decision-making process. When they understand how choices are made, they can understand the results. They also learn the way different adults make choices in different ways. As they see you make choices, they learn how to deal with unexpected outcomes, too.

Asking children for their opinion, or letting children take part in appropriate choices lets them know they are important, and what they say counts. Considering everyone's opinion engages everyone in sharing what matters to them. Children are more likely to accept limitations on purchases, for example, if they are aware of how spending decisions are made. Teenagers are will be happier on a family vacation if they help decide where to go and what to do. Everyone might have more fun too!

Tip 5.1: Hold A Family Council

Some families like to get together in a family council. A family council is a meeting that gives every member of the family the opportunity to express opinions and ideas, offer compliments or complaints, and most importantly, be listened to.

Whether you get together regularly with a family council or not, share decision-making with each other as well as future planning to bring your family together.

Family Strength 6: Routines PLUS Flexibility Builds Resilience

Changes in life are unavoidable. As in the story at the beginning, families are reshaped by birth, adoption, marriage, divorce, illness, and death. Families move to different communities. Children get older. Adults switch jobs or retire. Family relationships are stronger when they can adapt to these changes. At the same time, families develop habits, routines, and a set of rules. These patterns are ways to deal with day-to-day life.

Ask yourself:

- Who cooks, washes dishes, does the laundry, or takes care of the car?
- When is homework done?
- Who has the right to make what decisions?
- How are differences of opinion handled?
Are the adults always right?
- How are anger, affection, or other emotions expressed?

Many families find it helpful to have routine chores or expectations; however, being too rigid is not helpful. Parents can set an example for an appropriate balance between routine expectations and flexibility by paying attention to what each person needs and can do. For example, parents can offer to help a child who has an unusually heavy load of homework or other activities. Parents can also excuse a child from their chores when they have extra homework or other duties. This helps a child feel like the “team” is there for them.

While parents can be caring and flexible, it is important to stay clear and consistent about expectations over the longer term. Being consistent helps children feel secure because their world is predictable. Children are learning both about how to be a member of the “team” and about how to be caring to share the burden. Parents can pay attention, praise their children and appreciate a job that is well done. Showing them how their helpfulness makes a positive difference raises their self-esteem and builds resilience for the future.



Family Strength 7: Teaching Responsibility

Parents like children to be responsible, but it starts by modelling responsibility for one’s own behavior. Admitting mistakes, working towards goals, accepting supportive feedback, and helping others are ways of modelling responsibility. You are teaching when you do this!

Modeling responsibility helps children as they grow into teenagers and adults. A great way to teach responsible habits is by helping children learn to choose, learning to accept what is chosen and any disappointment when only one thing can be chosen.

Tip 7.1: Be Age-Wise

Children younger than about 5 years old are not old enough to understand the concept of responsibility; however, they can learn skills related to responsibility. They can learn to wait, to share, to be kind to others, and to follow your lead in being a good, caring person. These skills, of self-control, prepare them to be responsible. Praise them as they learn patience and choice. Let them know you value their efforts as they learn. Comfort them when they are frustrated and disappointed.

Another way to teach children about responsibility is to be appreciative when they work as part of the family “team.” Parents set this up when they set appropriate expectations and guide their children to success. For example, ask a child to help you do a small chore, like tidying up the living room at the end of the day, or setting the table for dinner. The feeling of being a helper is a reward in itself when you appreciate them. Taking

care of pets is also rewarding and you can help children learn to respond when pets need something like water, a pat, or cleaning up after. Adolescents might want to make meals on their own, run errands to a store, or organize a family outing. Keep children's helping easy and fun. If you need help, for yourself, it is a good time to ask some of your community or family connections. Letting children help you, though, helps them learn how to set a goal, work with others and contribute as part of a family "team."

Tip 7.2: Happy Reminders

You can help young children meet their expectations by helping them create a simple chore chart or list to remind themselves. Let young children give themselves a sticker when they do well (but don't count the failures). This is especially helpful for children who have trouble remembering. You can suggest tasks as simple as brushing your teeth, or the steps for getting ready for school. They might add chores for their dolls or pets! You can also add family chores like putting their plate in the dishwasher after dinner or making their bed in the mornings. Let them catch you doing your duty, too! Appreciate their success.

Tip 7.3: Balance Needs & Wants

Some families use an allowance as a reward system, while others families discuss their resources and share the wealth. Whichever way your family does it, you can help older children learn about money by helping them save for goals that are important to them. They might earn money by doing extra chores for other people or for you, or you might take turn helping each other meet their needs. Teaching children about money and responsibility is about making the distinction between needs and wants. For example, a fancy pair of shoes might be a wish, but parents need to make sure everyone gets basic shoes.

Tip 7.4: Share To Care

Have family meetings with your children and share an appropriate amount of information about your financial goals. Do not leave children in the dark about money, whether your family is financially stable or not. Teens, especially, can benefit greatly from discussing financial goals and they might feel a sense of trust if you share goals or burdens you are working to meet in a simplified way. Knowing how you manage big purchases, think about insurance, borrow money, or save your earnings teaches them that these are the responsibilities you have, and that they might need to think about in the future.



Reflect On Your Family's Strengths

Think about the family story at the beginning, or your own family story. What would a crisis reveal? What are your family's secret super-powers that would help you get through a crisis?

Spend some time together, as a family, thinking about your family's strengths. Ask each person to share their thoughts. Different people have different viewpoints. Which family strengths get an A+? Does everyone feel the same?

Celebrate your strengths!

As a family, choose one strength that can help your family grow. Become involved in activities that will help your family build that strength. Ask for help and ideas from your friends, family or community. Agree on a special way you will celebrate your work in building family strengths!

Building Family Strengths Together

1. What stresses does your family have?
2. What are your strengths?
3. What can you all focus on together, now?
4. What is your goal (set a realistic timeline)?
5. What will you do to celebrate together?

Read More

- If you want to know more about alternatives to punishment, read:
 - Something Better Than Punishment, HE-0687
- If you have a baby who cries a lot, you may be interested in:
 - Infant Crying: I'm Trying to Tell You Something, HE-0717
- If you are worried about spoiling your child (being too permissive), read:
 - Am I Spoiling My Child? HE-0718





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