

Lesson 6

Enhancing Family Strengths

A lot of effort is needed to keep the family operating. Even more effort is required to enhance and affirm the strengths in a family.

Just as proper diet and exercise combine to make you feel, look, and function more efficiently, there are certain contributions each family member can make to help create a stronger, healthier, and more satisfying family life.

In addition to those family strengths discussed in Lesson 5, here are some of the factors that characterize strong, healthy two-parent families:

- A satisfying marriage relationship;
- The sharing of family power;
- Open family communications;
- Acceptance and appreciation of each other;
- Quality time together;
- Conflict management; and
- A good family spirit.

The Marriage Relationship

More than any other single factor, the quality of family life in two-parent families is reflected in the marriage relationship. The wife's and husband's ability to communicate, negotiate, and show their love and affection toward each other provides a positive role model for their children.

Children learn much of their own behavior by observing how their parents relate to each other. In this way, the marriage relationship becomes the primary component in the development of healthy family relationships.

Shared Family Power

Power in healthy families is shared. This means that family decisions and rules are made with the input of each person. It is not necessary for the father or mother to always dictate orders. Each family member is allowed to express opinions, generate ideas, and make suggestions. The family still needs a leader, but no one person dominates all of the time.

This type of "power sharing" gives freedom to every member by allowing each individual to express himself or herself. And this sharing has many positive results:

- Feelings of trust and cooperation develop;
- The cohesiveness of the family becomes stronger; and
- A greater number of solutions are offered that can contribute to more effective decision making.

In essence, "sharing power" is "caring power" and is an important way to build a satisfying family life.

Family Communication

Communication affects everything that goes on between people. It determines what kinds of relationships are formed and how each person is perceived.

Conversation in healthy families is spontaneous, meaningful, clear, and specific. Ideas and information are continually bounced back and forth. A family member can openly express all kinds of emotions and knows that usually someone can and will listen and respond appropriately.

Listening is a valuable tool that indicates concern about another family member. Unfortunately, few people take time to listen beyond the words—with the heart as well as the ears. But in order to communicate effectively in a family, attentive listening is essential. It opens doors by building feelings of respect and trust. Together, good speaking and listening skills form a solid foundation from which a family can begin to function more effectively.

Table Talk Activity

Strong families discuss a variety of topics and listen to each others' responses. This activity is a simple way to enhance family communication. It can be done around the kitchen table at mealtime, while traveling in the car, or any other place you are together.

Directions

Cut apart the Table Talk cards at the end of this lesson and place them face down on the table. Take turns drawing a card from the stack. Read one card to the family group and, starting with the person to the left of the reader, go around the table, giving each person a chance to answer. Respond to each other in accepting and encouraging ways. Have a good time but don't allow teasing, ridicule, or angry arguments. These negative responses turn people off. Use only as many cards as you can comfortably discuss in the time you have. Save the rest for another time. Add cards if you enjoy this activity. Be creative and come up with topics your family will enjoy discussing. If you enjoy Table Talk, tell other family members how you feel. Expressions of appreciation help build family strengths.

Acceptance and Appreciation

Every family is made up of a variety of personalities, each playing an important part in the life of the family. Therefore, it is essential that all members develop a strong positive attitude about themselves and about each member of the family—dad, mom, sister, brother. Being accepted by others helps develop a person's self-concept and generates feelings of being important, loved, and appreciated.

Every family should recognize the individual accomplishments of each member. Simple statements such

as, "Thank you for helping me; you did a nice job!" can convey appreciation for each member's efforts. This type of recognition helps set up a pleasant environment in which mutual respect can grow.

T.V. Time Activity

Talk about what makes up a family; then discuss the kinds of families that are shown on TV. List programs about families. Which family is most like yours? Are families pictured in a realistic way? Why or why not? Ask your children which TV family they would like to be a part of and why. In what ways is your family better than families on TV?

Quality Time

It requires a great deal of energy and work for a family to provide a positive environment in which members can grow up. Planning a specific time and place each week for family members to be together is beneficial.

Time should also be set aside for the family to work or play together. To help encourage the scheduling of quality time, the family must develop an action plan that fits their particular needs. Some suggestions:

- Spend 30 minutes every week alone with each member. Talk with, listen to, and enjoy each other. Get to know each other as a special person who cares about you and other family members.
- Couples can take a regular "date night" away from the kids. Time together as a couple is important for the growth of the entire family.
- Plan a family fun time each week. Try to do something that everyone can enjoy and benefit from. Do not emphasize winning, but instead stress having fun together.

All About Us Activity

This is an interesting activity to learn more about the other members of your family. When everyone is together, see if each family member can fill in the following blanks for other family members. For example, what is Dad's favorite kind of music? Did you guess correctly? Do you learn something new about other family members?

Favorite food: _____

Nickname: _____

Favorite kind of pet: _____

Most prized possession: _____

Best friend
(outside of family): _____

Last book read for fun: _____

Favorite kind of music: _____

Best vacation ever taken: _____

Dream vacation: _____

Favorite famous person: _____

Growth Through Conflict

Individuals who have unique personalities and who are trying to develop a meaningful family life will experience conflict. This is normal. It is not conflict itself that presents the problem. Instead, **what really matters is how families deal with conflict.**

Healthy families handle conflict in a creative and nondestructive way. They recognize issues early and make decisions based on the input of each family member. They consider each person's ideas carefully and weigh the consequences of different alternatives.

Members of a healthy family do not give in to conflict or feel intimidated by it. Every family member is allowed to express his or her opinion without the fear of being rejected. When real negotiation takes place, the members feel a deeper sense of what being in a family means, and all benefit from going through conflict and decision making together.

Deciding to Decide Activity

The purpose of this activity is for family members to discuss how decisions are made in the family—those that are made satisfactorily and those that could be improved.

Directions

Give each person a paper and pencil to make his or her decision lists. First, each person lists the areas where he or she has total control over a decision (examples: sports activities, decorating rooms, clothes selection, food choices, etc.). Next, list decisions that an individual has little or no control over. How does each person feel about that? What changes could be made? Finally, what decisions could the family be making more efficiently? Discuss ideas such as vacations, meals, chores, money matters. What decision-making guidelines are needed?

Family Spirit

A family operates more smoothly when everyone shares feelings of affection for each other and enjoys being together as a family. In some families, members don't want to be associated with each other, but in healthy families they are proud to belong.

In healthy families, members think of each other as friends with whom they can talk and have fun. They enjoy each other as people and like being together. They use their time and energy to become more aware of their own resources and those of other family members. They work hard to develop their potential as a more satisfying and healthy family, and they recognize that functioning together as a family unit is not always easy.

Quite often, it is the difficult times that bring them closer together and the fun times that help keep them that way.

Share the Highs Activity

It is normal to have "lows" and lots of "middles" along with the "highs" of day-to-day family life. This activity concentrates on strengthening the "highs" so they will happen more often and will be appreciated.

Each person can talk about the family times he or she enjoys the most. It may be a specific time, like "our family camping trip," or a type of time like "whenever Dad takes a day to do stuff with us kids." Then everyone has a chance to share and talk about the differences and similarities of the "highs." What are some ways your family can work to have even more "highs?"

Family Life

Now you know the essentials of a healthy family. To what extent are these qualities a part of your family? The Family Life Inventory Activity can help you assess and enhance the health and well-being of your own family life. Remember, even if a family's lifestyle seems satisfactory, there is always room for improvement!

Family Life Inventory Activity

This inventory could be completed in two ways—(1) family members could complete the inventory individually and then compare perceptions, or (2) the family could work together to come up with a group rating on each quality.

Directions

For each of the seven areas in the inventory, evaluate your family's relationship in terms of how satisfied you are with it right at this moment. Use a 1 to 10 scale.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not satisfied at all Somewhat satisfied Very satisfied at this moment

Place your rating under the column marked actual. After completing this for each of the seven areas, compare the actual with the ideal.

Have each family member look at the difference in ratings and discuss what your potential as a family could be. **Let each member participate in determining where the problem spots are and what has caused them.** Then, **write out a plan of action** that will enhance your satisfaction and help you develop your family's unrealized potential. This means writing out what you are going to do, who will do it, and when it will be done. Don't expect miracles at once though. Give your plan time to work.

	Actual	Ideal
Marriage relationship		10
Shared family power		10
Open system of communication		10
Acceptance and appreciation of individual members		10
Quality time spent together		10
Creative use of conflict		10
Positive family spirit		10
Total		70

Conclusion

Lesson 6 ends the Stress of Our Lives Series. We hope it has provided useful information and skills on dealing with stress facing families today—both as an individual and as a family. If you wish more information on coping with stress, contact your local county Extension office.

Additional Resources

Stress Management
<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/famlf2/EP105.pdf>

Stress Management
<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/famlf2/MF776.PDF>

Celebrate Your Family
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/info-u/families/BE908.html>

Childhood Stress
<http://extensionenespanol.net/tmppdfs/24139011-E2954.pdf>

Children, Stress and Disaster
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/5000/5152.html>

Holiday Stress
http://ohioline.osu.edu/bb-fact/pdf/bb_k_4.pdf

Stress and Humor
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/flm97/pdf/fs11.pdf>

Families and Young Children
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/5000/5169.html>

Grandparents and Stress
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/ss-fact/0156.html>

Fostering Resilience in Children
http://ohioline.osu.edu/b875/b875_3.html

Caregiver Stress
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/ss-fact/0118.html>

Coping Skills
<http://www.family.samhsa.gov/get/copingskills.aspx>

Helping Children Cope
<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pdfs/fcs457.pdf>

National Mental Health Association
<http://www.nmha.org>

National Institute of Mental Health
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/index.cfm>

Staying Healthy in Stressful Times
<http://www.extension.uiuc.edu/ruralroute/stayinghealthy.pdf>

Farm Stress Management Plan
<http://www.fcs.uga.edu/pubs/PDF/CHFD-E-36.pdf>

Time Management—Making the Most of a Limited Resource: <http://www.agnr.umd.edu/MCE/Publications/PDFs/FS671.pdf>

Transitions and Changes
<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/consumer/10214.html>

Transitions and Changes
<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/consumer/10215.html>

Supporting Families Following a Disaster:
http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting_families/

Lazarus, J. (2000) Stress Relief & Relaxation Techniques. Keats Publishing, Los Angeles, CA: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group Inc.

Study Questions

Lesson 6

Keeping the Family Operating

1. What are the characteristics of strong, healthy families?

2. Positive communication is important in healthy families. What are some better ways of saying the following statements?

Instead of this:

- a. Don't run in the house!
- b. Don't hit the dog!
- c. You missed four on your test!
- d. Go finish that chore!
- e. Don't get so emotional!

Try this:

3. Becoming a good listener takes concentration. List ideas to improve listening skills.

4. List ways to tell family members they have done a "good job."

Study Answers

Lesson 6

Keeping the Family Operating

1. A satisfying marriage relationship, the sharing of family power, open family communication, accepting and appreciating each other, spending time together, managing conflict, and a good family spirit.

2. Instead of this:

- a. Don't run in the house!
- b. Don't hit the dog!
- c. You missed four on your test!
- d. Go finish that chore!
- e. Don't get so emotional!

Try this:

Remember that running is for outside.
Be gentle; pet the dog like this.
You got 46 right on your test!
I need to have that chore finished by (time).
I bet that really embarrassed you.

3. Stop what you are doing and pay attention to the other person, be aware of facial expressions and gestures, listen until they have finished and don't think ahead to what you are going to say, keep trying.

4. Here are some additional ways to say "good job":

- Good work!
- Terrific!
- You did very well!
- You are really working hard!
- Great!
- Good for you!
- Keep it up!
- I'm proud of you!
- That makes me feel good!
- I like that!
- You're really going to town!
- Much better!
- Wonderful!
- Super!!

Other comments:

Let's Talk

<p>If you could go back in time, what period would you choose and why?</p>	<p>If you could sleep for the next 20 years, what do you think life would be like when you woke up?</p>	<p>If you were the guest on a TV talk show, what would you want to talk about and why?</p>
<p>Tell what you expect from your best friend.</p>	<p>Tell what family activity you most enjoy and why.</p>	<p>Tell which TV ad is your favorite? Which is your most hated?</p>
<p>What is your favorite room in your house and why?</p>	<p>If you could be invisible for a day, what would you do?</p>	<p>Tell something about your family that makes you feel proud.</p>
<p>Tell what part of a newspaper you read first and why.</p>	<p>Your family just inherited \$1,000,000. What is something you'd want to do with it?</p>	<p>Who is the fairest person you know? What is his or her secret?</p>
<p>What's one thing you really want to do in your lifetime?</p>	<p>What is one habit you wish to overcome?</p>	<p>Tell how you think a birthday should be observed.</p>
<p>If you were President of the United States, what is one thing you would do?</p>	<p>Your family decides to watch no TV for a month. What will you do instead?</p>	<p>What is one thing that happened to you this week that you feel good about?</p>
<p>What is your favorite holiday and why?</p>	<p>What is the scariest thing that ever happened to you?</p>	<p>Tell about a bad experience that taught you something positive.</p>

This lesson was revised and reviewed in 2009 by Clemson University Professors, Deborah J. Thomason, Ed.D., CFLE and Pamela A. Havice Ph.D. Original lessons were adapted from the “Stress on the Farm Home Study Course”, developed by Iowa State Cooperative Extension and the “Farm Family Stress” series developed by Michigan State Cooperative Extension Service.

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