
RESILIENT FAMILIES

Qualities of Families Who Survive and Thrive

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Across America, rugged mountains stand strong against yearly assaults of wind and water. Vast plains yield surpluses of fruits and grains. In cities, skyscrapers stretch to awesome heights while high-tech transportation and communication operate at superhuman speeds. In the natural and constructed world, size, speed, productivity, and power all seem to mean strength. Our families, even life itself, appear fragile by comparison. What are the strengths that enable families to face daily challenges and crises?

American families have always shown remarkable resiliency, or flexible adjustment to natural, economic, and social challenges. Their strengths resemble the elasticity of a spider web, a gull's skillful flow with the wind, the regenerating power of perennial grasses, the cooperation of an ant colony, and the persistence of a stream carving canyon rocks. These are not the strengths of fixed monuments but of living organisms. This resilience is not measured by wealth, muscle, or efficiency but by creativity, unity, and hope. Cultivating these family strengths is critical to a thriving human community.

Across the diverse family groups in America, themes of mutual support, consistency, caring communication, spirituality, and community consciousness describe those who foster the growth of individuals, the family unit, and communities in which they live. Children and adults who learn the values and skills of resiliency, cope with stress, manage relationships, and contribute to others' lives more consistently than those without such strengths. Families who use crises to learn new coping skills reduce the financial and emotional costs of repeated crises. As Americans approach the twenty-first century, insights on resiliency can guide individuals, families, and communities toward more healthful and rewarding lifestyles.

"Family resiliency is the family's ability to cultivate strengths to positively meet the challenges of life."

--Family Resiliency Network, USDA
Cooperative Extension Service, 1993



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Traits That Build Family Strengths

A variety of individual and family strengths are reported by those who research and work with families. Traits of strong families often cited by these experts include:

Commitment: Working toward shared goals through self-sacrifice, persistence, and loyalty to other family members; cultivating an environment of trust and dependability.

Connectedness: Receiving support from and contributing to extended family, neighborhood, and community, resulting in a sense of belongingness as well as accountability to others.

Coherence: Acting with self-confidence and self-reliance, translating optimism into making a difference in improving themselves and their world.

Cohesion: Maintaining family identity and togetherness, balancing family priorities with support for member esteem and achievement, producing strong family bonds and freedom for individual self-expression.

Adaptability: Coping with change, balancing stable roles and traditions with flexibility to change rules and share decisions, with the consequence that challenges stimulate growth and health.

Communication: Engaging in clear, open, affirming speaking and consistent, empathic listening, resulting in constructive conflict management and problem solving.

Spirituality: Believing in a higher power and acting on a value system beyond self-interest, effecting a sense of purpose and divine support in everyday and difficult events.

Time Together: Creating daily routines as well as special traditions and celebrations that affirm members, connect them to family roots, and add creativity and humor to ordinary events

Studies of individuals and families in difficult situations (such as abusive families, poverty, and medical crises) reveal additional traits that develop resiliency:

Individual Assets: Developing talents, personality traits, and self-reliance to persevere to physical and mental “wellness.”

Community Support: Cultivating a protective environment in which families actively contribute to the physical and emotional survival, safety, and self-esteem of children and adults; and minimizing risks that jeopardize healthy development.

“Home-a place where, when you go there, they have to let you in.”

--Robert Frost

“Our lives are shaped by those who love us...and by those who refuse to love us.”

--John Powell, S.J.

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Activities for Building Strengths

Family strengths are “made, not born.” Learning new skills, adopting positive attitudes, trying, and trying again make a difference in the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

Commitment: Conducting family councils, planning vacations or projects around home such as a garden, coaching homework, supporting family members’ activities.

Connectedness: Neighborhood projects and community groups (4-H, Scouts, Big Brothers/Sisters, sports, church, or school support), time with other families, helping those in need.

Coherence: Recalling family successes and hopes, working through problems rather than giving up, praising and encouraging self-reliance skills in children.

Cohesion: Developing a family banner, photo album, family night games or crafts or reading, parent-child and spouse “nights out,” talks on changing privacy needs, celebrating differences.

Adaptability: Continue or invent daily and special traditions, share and trade household tasks, make/change rules (and consequences) together, use challenges to learn new skills.

Communication: Reward honesty, accept feelings, use consistent discipline, listen from the other person’s viewpoint, look for points of agreement in conflict, solve problems one step at a time.

Spirituality: Read inspirational books, pray, encourage critical thinking about values, talk about simple and major life choices, find concrete ways to “practice what you preach.”

Time Together: Daily routines such as wake up/dress, meals, reading, or play together, quiet talk times, birthday parties, drama and song nights, Christmas crafts, and Fourth-of-July picnics build consistency.

In addition, families can support individuals by supporting talents, accepting differences, and teaching siblings to resolve conflicts. Families can also “make room” for friends without support (such as foster children, neglected kids, and elders without kin).

Families working together can create enrichment and support groups for all ages; strengthen schools; organize task forces for safe, healthy, drug-free neighborhoods; support family self-reliance (welfare reform, literacy training, CPR/first aid training); and use community problems to heal rather than ignore or punish other families in their community.

“I asked, ‘Why doesn’t somebody do something.’ Then I realized I was somebody.”



“Success in family life comes not from avoiding stressful events and problems, but from coping with them effectively.”

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Clues to Strengths and Vulnerabilities

Every family has strengths.

Reflect and write down an example of how your family overcame difficulty with loyalty, listening skills, determination, or another strength.

Every family has some strengths, or positive attitudes and skills for meeting its daily challenges. Families considered “at risk” due to drug abuse, poverty, or violence often demonstrate high levels of patience, resourcefulness, and loyalty that keep them together through troubled times.

Every family has vulnerabilities.

Reflect and write down an example of how an asset in your family had disadvantages or limited your family’s ability to cope with new problems.

On the other hand, families who have it made financially may be at risk for arguments over money. Physically healthy families may have anxieties about illness that those with health difficulties have learned to cope with.

Balance and growth are the keys.

Reflect and write down an example of your family’s strengths in your current stage or family structure that would need to be modified in another stage or family structure.

Every stage or situation in family life challenges families in some unique ways. Each member’s needs must be balanced with family and community needs; past traditions and rules must be weighed against demands for change. Families that maintain open communication, strong but respectful parent leadership, and that allow members to reach their potential typically build on their strengths and learn from their difficulties.

Low Stress Families in Various Stages and Structures:

Young couples maintain good health practices, talk out personality and financial issues, and enjoy leisure activities together.

Families with younger children build unity with marital strengths, child orientation, and joint recreation and problem solving. Financial and communication skills and social support also help.

Families with teens work on good time and money management, use communication skills to resolve personality issues, share support and leisure with friends, and work to keep their marriage strong.

Older couples sustain good health practices, quality-of-life priorities, and successful patterns of conflict resolution.

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Single-parent families at each stage add priority on family time, social and financial supports, and shared responsibilities.

Stepfamilies at each stage add realistic expectations, clear communication, gradual relationship-building, and flexibility.

Profiles of Strong Families

1850s Dr. Charles Ross Parke was one of thousands in the family of '49ers with gold fever on the Oregon Trail. His diary records 2000 miles of mud, lightning storms, grasshopper plagues, poison springs, cholera, smallpox, accidents, and shootings. Yet a resilient spirit is seen in emigrants' perseverance, kindnesses, and celebrations--such as making peppermint ice cream at South Pass on the Fourth of July. His journal is ***Dreams to Dust***, 1989, University of Nebraska Press.



1900s Melva Cummins Westbook and her mother, deserted in Missouri, migrated west in 1907 to homestead alongside extended kin near Clearmont, Wyoming. Ploughing hard ground from 9 years old, she weathered sub-zero winters, broke horses, and faced down squatters, rattlesnakes, and rowdy cowboys through personal determination and family loyalty and cooperation. Her story is preserved in ***Mom and Me***, 1971, Worland Press.

"In each family a story is playing itself out, and each family's story embodies its hope and its despair."

--Augustus Napier

1930s Elmer Jepson had more than his share of hard work in the Midwest, Wyoming oilfields, and of grief in the death of two wives and one child. His daughters resented and teased the housekeeper who later became their stepmother; but her patience, the birth of a brother, and the support of an aunt won them over. Story by Marge Claytor, Casper, Elmer's daughter.

1940s Estelle and Arthur Shigeharu Ishigo were a hard-working California couple in the prime of life when they were stripped of jobs, home, and possessions and shipped with over 10,000 Japanese-Americans interred at Heart Mountain, WY. Despite bitter winters in boxwood barracks, barbed wire enclosures, surveillance, homesickness, and stress, they helped the community pull together, raise crops, start schools, care for the sick, begin arts and drama programs, laugh and play together. Their story, with Estelle's drawings, is in ***Lone Heart Mountain***, 1972/1989, available from the Japanese American National Museum, 941 East Third Street, Suite 201, Los Angeles, CA 90013.

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1970s Pete and Stella Ortiz of Rawlins didn't ask to become full-time grandparents when their daughter, Margie, and her four kids moved in. Yet their deep religious faith, time together fishing and talking, and financial support helped mom achieve a successful career and their grandchildren gain careers in law, business, teaching, and parenting. Later in life, the support of Margie, her children, and their church sustained the couple in their old age.

1990s Debbie Foote, youngest daughter of Frank and Alberta Foote of Ft. Washakie, recalls encouragement of school success by her parents and grandmother, support across extended family during Sun Dance, holidays, and everyday problems, working together through financial stresses, and a spirit of both pride and tolerance in a family which included Shoshoni, Northern Arapaho, and Caucasian traditions. Debbie works at Ft. Washakie Head Start.



Resources for Learning More

Popular and Extension Materials

Bogenschneider, Karen; Stephen Small; & Dave Riley. (1990). An ecological, risk-focused approach for addressing youth-at-risk issues. Chevy Chase, MD: National 4-H Center.

Hayes-Bautista, David. (1992). The strengths and strains of immigrant families. *The Family in America*, 6, (11), 1-8.

Minuchin, Salvador. (1993). *Family Healing: Tales of Hope and Healing from Family Therapy*. New York: Free Press.

Napier, Augustus. (1978). *The Family Crucible*. New York: Bantam Books.

Stinnett, Nick; & John DeFrain. (1985). *Secrets of Strong Families*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.

Wolin, Steven J.; & Sybil Wolin. (1993). *The Resilient Self: How Survivors of Troubled Families Rise Above Adversity*. New York, NY: Villiard Books.

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Research Studies

Bronfenbrenner, Urie. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dugan, Timothy; & Robert Coles. (Eds., 1989). *The Child in Our Times: Studies in the Development of Resiliency*. New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel.

McCubbin, Hamilton I.; Marilyn A. McCubbin; & Anne I. Thompson (1993). *Resiliency in Families: The Role of Family Scheme and Appraisal in Family Adaptation to Crises*, pp 153-180. In T.H. Brubaker (ed.) *Family Relations: Challenges for the Future*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Olson, David H.; Candyce S. Russell; & Douglas Sprenkle. (Eds., 1989). *Circumplex Model: Systemic Assessment and Treatment of Families*. New York, NY: Haworth Press.

Walsh, Froma. (Ed., 1993). *Normal Family Processes*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Teaching Materials

Achord, Bill; Margaret Berry; Gine Harding; Kerry Karber; Susan Scott; & Lois O. Schivals. (1986). *Building Family Strengths*. Lincoln, NE: Center for Family Strengths.

Hovey, Bette M.; Becky L. Dahl; & Mary Lou Ruby. (1992). *All Families Have Strengths*. Moscow, ID: University of Idaho Cooperative Extension Service.

Other Resources

The Cooperative State Research Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), USDA, initiated a National Network on Family Resiliency in 1993. Supported by over 35 institutions, the network has facilitated conferences, electronic mail dialogue and information resources, and resource/research projects on parenting, adolescent sexuality, and youth violence prevention. For further information contact nnfrs@extend.mes.umn.edu, or write your state family life specialist at University of Wyoming, P.O. Box 3354, Laramie, WY 82071-3354.

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