

HOME & FAMILY

On Raising Rural Kids

The Importance of Strong Families

By Celeste Carmichael

Raising kids is about much more than getting everyone to where they need to be on time, car pooling, exact discipline methods, and chore charts...isn't it?

Last winter I attended a conference in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina on Strengthening Families. It was organized by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Youth and Families Program. Looking back, I probably attended the conference for all the wrong reasons (did I mention that the conference was in Myrtle Beach?). Well, that is okay – because I came back with a lot of information and am still talking about what I learned.

"Begin with the end in mind", advised Toni Pipkins, former state 4-H Youth Development Leader from South Carolina and cap-

note speaker at the conference. "The way that we raise strong families is to think first about what we want our children to be like as adults. For most of us, what we are after in the "end" is caring, competent, contributing adults." Although how we get there might include a few car pools and chore charts...there really is much more to consider.

WHY TALK ABOUT STRONG FAMILIES?

These are stressful times for families. Strains on time, money and emotions can mean that home becomes the place where everyone is worn out or angry. Dysfunctional family relationships are often at the root of problems such as early teen sexuality, youth suicide, teen pregnancy, run-aways, substance abuse, childhood and adolescent depression, child abuse and neglect, and family violence.

Key Traits of Strong Families

Being caring and be appreciative

Even when a family member makes many mistakes, members of strong families find ways to encourage and support each person. Strong families notice positive behaviors, talents, skills and achievements and compliment each other.

Spending time together

When 1,500 school-age children were asked, "What do you think makes a happy family?" the children didn't list money, cars, big homes or televisions. The answer they gave most was "doing things together." Children want parents to be available, to have time, to show interest in their activities, to do things with them and to talk with them. Eating meals together, working together, making treats together, and watching movies or playing games are examples of shared activities.

Receiving and giving encouragement

Members of strong families feel they really belong in their family. Family members feel accepted for what they are and promote one another's self-esteem. They celebrate each other's successes and help each other learn from mistakes.

Showing commitment

Members of strong families are committed to the family. They value the things that make their family special. One way to build family commitment is to practice family traditions. The tradition may be as simple as stories before bedtime, or as elaborate as an annual big vacation. One of my kids' favorite traditions is "donut day". Donut Day is officially scheduled at our house on Saturdays when my husband and two year old son go for an early morning haircut.

Practicing good communication skills

Strong families communicate. They talk. They share themselves. They share their feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, joys, sorrows, experiences, growth, mistakes and needs. They also take the time to listen and respond to what others have to say.

Coping with change

All families develop habits, routines, and a set of rules. These patterns are ways to deal with day-to-day life. As changes happen in families, often routines are disrupted – increasing stress for the family. There are a number of common changes most families face. Children get older. Adults switch jobs or retire. Families are reshaped by birth, adoption, marriage, divorce, sickness, and death. Families move to different communities, etc. Being flexible, a good communicator and extra loving during changes helps family members to ease through change.

Being spiritual

Research confirms that those who find peace in their faith live longer, happier, more connected lives. Members of strong families share a belief in something greater than themselves. They agree about what is right and wrong and what is really important to them. Shared values and beliefs provide these families with purpose and meaning, and helps provide unity to their goals. They look to these values and beliefs for guidelines to live by. In strong families, spirituality is a powerful and important source of strength.

Nurturing community and family ties

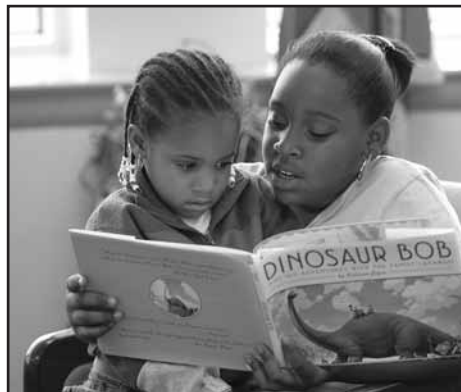
Although busy schedules can make it hard to spend time with people outside the family, ties with relatives, neighbors, and friends are especially important. Strong families draw on other people and institutions for support. If they have a hard time dealing with a problem, they are willing to seek outside help. Strong families also tend to be closely involved with the schools, churches, and local organizations that promote the well-being of the community and the individual.

Having a clear role.

Members of strong families have a clear idea about their day-to-day roles and obligations to the family. Strong families also make decisions, solve family problems and do family work together. Everyone participates. Parents are the leaders, but the children's opinions and efforts are encouraged and appreciated.

SO... WHAT MAKES FAMILIES STRONG?

Researchers have worked hard to answer this question and agree that strong, healthy families have some important traits in common (see sidebar.) These traits are found in families across the board – different races, social backgrounds, nationalities, and religious beliefs.



One way to build family commitment is to practice family traditions, which may be as simple as reading stories before bedtime,

When a family is pretty balanced in all of these areas, it is more likely to bounce back from the normal kicks and bruises that life gives. The good news is that intentionally building in time to build up healthy family traits can help us keep it all together.

Celeste Carmichael is Program Specialist with the NYS 4-H Youth Development Office.



Simply spending time together is one of the key traits of strong families..

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Advice For Building a Strong Family

Interview with Reverend Nancy Rehkugler

By Celeste Carmichael

Reverend Nancy Rehkugler is Senior Pastor of the Fayetteville United Methodist Church and Elder of the North Central New York Conference. She has counseled many families over the years and has the added experience of being the mom of four.

Q. Given all of the stresses that families experience these days, what advice do you have for families?

A. I should first say that from where I sit I have learned that there is no such thing as a "perfect" family. But a healthy family – one that is respectful and loving to one another, kind and generous...that is something to work towards.

I would say that the first on my list of advice would be to be intentional - know and live your values. Work together as a family to figure out what is most important to all of you. Take time to talk and figure out - what are your values? Make a family project of it. As a family grows and matures daily choices should be consistent with family values. Ask yourselves regularly – "are the things that we are doing consistent with our values?"

I would say to strive for balance. There are so many choices today. Families should be aware of and do activities that fulfill their mind, body and spirit. People don't acknowledge their need to be spiritual in this day and age. Being spiritual includes service to others, being a part of a faith community etc. What spiritual is to one family may very well be different in another family depending on cultural values. Balance also includes being attentive to your physical well being. We need to be good stewards of our bodies as well.

And I would say it helps to love learning, and always be willing to learn and grow. When parents model this, kids more often find learning enjoyable.

Q. What observations have you made about families today?

A. People have a tendency to over-schedule their lives so that there is no time to just "be" together. Being in constant motion is also not conducive to the spiritual life,

which requires some contemplative time. It is tough to go against the grain of hyper-activity, since this is what everyone is doing, but sometimes the best thing is just to say "no" to activities. Do the things that you love...but don't try to do everything. Focus on the things that you are really passionate about. Become excellent at a few things. Spend some Sabbath time each week.

I would also observe that today's families seem to have a difficult time resisting the temptation of materialism. Parents give their children everything. This makes it more difficult to "be spiritual" because too many possessions actually numb the spirit.

Q. If you could suggest two approaches to becoming a healthier family, what would they be?

A. Family dinners! I think that family dinners should be a priority. From having a time to be thankful and grateful together to sharing the highs and the lows of everyone's day it is a great way to spend time together.

I would also recommend participating in community service together. Working together on a service project brings the family together around something that is above their own self-interest. This might simply be establishing a tradition of Christmas giving to a needy family, an organization, or a ministry of your choosing.

Thank you Pastor Nancy for these insightful comments! Parenting is tough work...but well worth the time, and energy...especially if we think about what we are working towards.

Celeste Carmichael is Program Specialist with the NYS 4-H Youth Development Office. If you would like to nominate a friend (or yourself!) for an interview in this column contact Celeste at 607-255-4799 or cjc17@cornell.edu. Any topic related to rural youth will be considered.



Reverend Nancy Rehkugler