



Building Strong Family Relationships

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Our society thrives on strong families.

Our family teaches us how to function in the world. It should provide love and warmth to all of its members. A strong family gives its members the support they need to make it through life's toughest spots.

Strong families have good communication.

Strong families have open lines of communication -- where all family members feel heard and respected. One of the best ways to strengthen your family is to increase your listening skills and those of other family members. Until we can hear each other, we cannot build strong relationships.

To build strong family relationships, listen actively to each other.

- Give the person your full attention, turn off the TV or put down what you are doing.
- Focus on what the person is telling you -- rather than thinking about your reaction or response to what is being said. (There will be time for that.)
- Listen for how the other person is feeling and relay back what you think they were saying and how they are feeling. —I hear you saying that you don't like your sister. You look pretty mad. Did something happen?
- Resist giving advice or your reaction until you are certain you have fully understood what the person was saying to you
- Encourage setting healthy boundaries. Use clear communication to express your needs

and limits, and encourage your family members to do the same. This fosters a relationship with respect and improves well-being.

Use "I" messages rather than "You" messages when talking.

- I messages are more difficult because they require us to be clear about our own thoughts and feelings. They, however, increase the chances that our message will be heard and decrease the chances that a fight will begin.
 - "I don't like all this fighting. It upsets me to see the two of you not getting along." Rather than — "What's wrong with the two of you? You' are making me crazy! Can't you ever get along?"
- Teach everyone in your family to talk with "I" — messages as much as possible. —I am feeling.... (upset) when I see you (playing video games before you finish your homework).
 - "You" messages should be discouraged because they often lead to bad feelings and increased fighting. — "You" messages seldom resolve the problem.

Encourage all family members to share their thoughts and feelings.

Strong families allow all family members -- no matter how young or small -- to talk about their thoughts and feelings. This does not mean that members are not respectful of one another, but rather that feelings and ideas are respected.

Everyone should be expected to express themselves in appropriate ways -- such as with — "I" messages. When people feel heard and respected, they feel better about themselves, are more open to solving

problems, and are more likely to allow others to express themselves.

Express gratitude.

Research shows that expressing gratitude reduces family stress and improves relationship satisfaction. Set an example: let your children know that they are valued, and express gratitude when they do something nice for you. Teach your children to say "thank you" and show appreciation to others.

Strong families spend time together.

In today's busy world, it can be difficult for families to find time to be together. All relationships need attention -- and this includes the family as a whole.

Family rituals can offer a set time for families to get together and give each other the attention needed. A family ritual is simply a time that is set aside on a regular basis for a family to get together. This can mean having dinner together, celebrating a holiday together, going to church together, or going for a walk together. It is important that the family ritual be predictable and that other activities are not allowed to upset it.

Family rituals help define who we are as a family. It allows time for the family to get together, to share experiences with one another, and to reconnect with each other. Knowing that the family will have time together can help us deal with those times when we are apart. Even though parents may work, children can know that each evening, each weekend (or whenever works for your family) they will have some "special time" with you.

Every child is special and every child needs some special time when he can have his parent all to himself.

Giving your child some "special time" helps develop a close relationship with your child. If you can make it a predictable ritual, your child can depend on it and look forward to this time with you. Be sure that this "special time" is not easily interrupted by other activities. For example, don't answer the phone during this time.

Allow your child to help you decide how to spend this time. You could read books, sing songs, go for a walk, play a game -- or whatever your child enjoys. The

more you are able to spend —special time with your child, the stronger your relationship will be.

Look for opportunities to connect with your child.

Although setting aside time with your child is important, also look for small moments that you can use to connect with your child. Researchers say that spending frequent, brief amounts of time (as little as 1-2 minutes) involved in child-preferred activities is one of the most powerful things parents can do. You can make up stories together while doing chores, talk about concerns while on the way to the grocery store, read a book together while waiting for dinner to finish. We often think we have to wait for our "special time" but all these small moments help us stay connected in between the more scheduled times.

Strong families handle their conflict fairly.

All families have conflict – it's a natural part of human relationships. Strong families are able to work through things they disagree about by focusing on the problems, rather than by "tearing each other down."

Stay focused on the behavior or problem.

Use "I" messages to express your thoughts and feelings about the problem. For example, if you and your child are arguing about bedtime, you could say "I get angry when you continue to argue with me even after I've told you my decision. I want you to go to bed now." instead of "You never listen to me. Go to bed now or I'll spank you."

Stay focused on the present problem.

Do not bring up old issues and problems. These only distract from the present issue. You can discuss them later.

Respect each other's right to safety.

Fights should never become violent. When people are so angry that they feel like hitting one another or throwing things, call for a timeout. We agreed to get together to talk again after everyone had a chance to calm down.

Use your problem-solving skills to create new solutions to the problem and teach your kids to think of ways to resolve conflict.

It is not useful to fight about what isn't working. Instead, focus on what has worked in the past or what could work now.

For bedtime problems, you could say, "I am tired of always arguing with you about your bedtime. Let's come up with some new ways that you can get to bed without all this hassle." Then you and your child could think of some solutions and decide which one to try. The more you include your child, the better problem solver he will be -- and the more likely to follow through with the plan.

Develop Routines

Building family routines not only has great benefits for the child, but also for the family as a whole. Research shows that consistent family routines foster a sense of unity, lead to greater expression of thoughts and feelings, and reduce conflict—ultimately strengthening overall family relationships. Routines can be incorporated into family life multiple times throughout the day, including in the morning time, mealtimes, weekend, and after-school hours. Family routines may also incorporate chores, homework, or cultural, religious, or spiritual practices/celebrations.

Strong Families Develop Trust.

Strong, healthy families recognize the importance of developing trust. Trust is the glue that holds relationships together.

Some ways to develop trust in your family are:

- **Give your child opportunities to earn your trust.** Let her do small tasks around the house and praise her for doing it on her own.
- **Show your child that you can be trusted.** Children need to know that they can count on what their parents say. Follow through with the things you promise to do.
- **Allow people in your family to make amends.** We all make mistakes. Teach your child to forgive and allow yourself to forgive others. Holding on to past hurts often only hurts us.
- **Teach everyone how to say "I'm sorry."** Taking responsibility for our good and our bad behaviors is important and helps to develop trust. People learn to trust that they can be loved even though they are not perfect.

Do not be afraid to seek professional help.

If your family is struggling with communication, conflict resolution, or simply needs a bit of help building stronger bonds, you can talk to a professional for assistance. Individual or family therapy may provide you with the knowledge and tools needed to strengthen your relationships.

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