



Building Strong Families

Vince Parrish, L.C.S.W.

As a group, physicians and their spouses are remarkably intelligent and highly educated. Despite this, they have rarely had a moment's worth of education on "how to build a strong family." Our modern educational system rarely troubles itself with such matters. Families generally struggle to "get by" using a mixture of intuition, trial-and-error and whatever they can glean from popular culture. Sadly, we know that "being smart" and relying on our instincts and cultural information are insufficient to ensure healthy family functioning.

Today's families face abundant difficulties. Many do not survive. For those who do, shortages of time, money and other resources create ongoing pressures. Modern families face unprecedented challenges, like violence and murder in schools. Is there any wonder there is so much family stress? Fortunately, the news is not all bad. Many families *are* happy, productive, and strong. They are not just surviving, they are thriving!

Researchers have taken note of these families, seeking to identify the characteristics that account for their success. These characteristics are not a secret; some of them will be discussed in this article. Most experts agree that "good communication" is central to family functioning – family members simply must talk to each other. However, it is not just the act of "talking." It is *how* they speak with each other. In strong families, members are open, honest and direct with one another. They speak with respect and without sarcasm and criticism. They don't interrupt. They hear each other out. Conversations are often free, easy, and spontaneous. These actions result in members feeling "heard." The bottom line: effective families enjoy talking and listening to each other.

Another characteristic of strong families is kindness. Family members authentically care about each other and they demonstrate it by expressing appreciation and encouragement. They hug, kiss, share "pats on the back" and perhaps most importantly, comfort and console each other when adversity arises. They invariably say "I love you" a lot.

Strong families are also *committed*. One of the things they commit to is spending time together. Families cannot easily communicate and express kindness if they are constantly apart. Despite relentless time demands from outside, strong families insist on finding time to be together. They vacation together. They often worship together, sharing opportunities to develop a spiritual orientation to aid them during the good and bad times. Some conduct scheduled or spontaneous family meetings to air problems or make plans. While much has been made of the notion of *quality* time, the reality is that *quantity* matters too. Happily, functioning families make it a priority to be together with everyone participating.

Effective families have fun together. Members have a sense of humor and the freedom to express it. Time to play, to be silly and simply to have fun is vital to a family's sense of well being. True, family life is complicated and often fraught with difficulties that must be conquered or endured, but playfulness and humor afford relief when inevitable calamities and setbacks occur.

Strong families create, honor and maintain traditions and rituals. Some are adopted, some are original, but they are regularly observed. Whether it be bedtime stories, a mealtime blessing, “Saturday morning breakfast with Dad,” weekend dinners with extended family or birthday celebrations, these activities help the family foster an appreciation of its own unique story. From such traditions families grow a legacy of meaning and identity.

Lastly, healthy, strong families understand that it’s all right and sometimes necessary to go outside for help – no single family has the answers to all the problems it may face. Strong families are not afraid to admit this or to seek the counsel of a rabbi, pastor, trusted therapist, teacher or wise fellow physician. Effective families reach out. They view asking for help as a sign of strength, not weakness.

Some have observed that strong families are our nation’s backbone and a most treasured resource. Yet we know such families do not automatically spring from the social landscape. They must be built. If we value and are to benefit from the contributions strong families make, then we all share a responsibility to support and encourage this ongoing building process.

To make a tax deductible contribution to the Physician’s Health Program (PHP), contact TMF Administrator Michael Todd at (615) 467-6411, or write to the Tennessee Medical Foundation, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Brentwood, TN 37027. For more information on the TMF or the PHP, log on to www.e-tmf.org.