

Building Strong Single-Parent Families

by Sandra J. Bailey, MSU Extension Family and Human Development Specialist

There are many kinds of families, but regardless of the arrangement, loving, supportive families seem to share certain characteristics. This publication lists characteristics of successful single-parent families and offers ideas on how to strengthen any family.

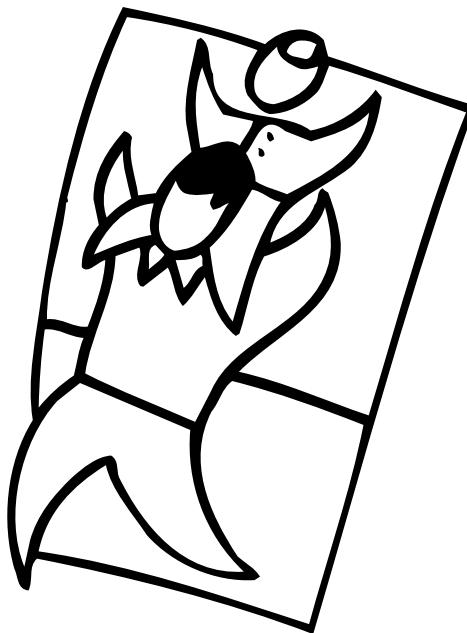
WHAT is a Family?
Families have always been diverse, but today we see more families who have experienced divorce and remarriage. Families come in all shapes and sizes.

Here are some examples of families.

- Marcie and her daughter, April, live with Marcie's sister, Ann. Ann has two children. They are a family.
- Jerry's son lives with Jerry's former wife. Jerry and his son are a family.
- Jerome and Sarah married last year. Jerome's children live with his former wife but Sarah's children live with Jerome and Sarah. They are a family.
- Alice lives with her son and daughter. They are a family.
- Josh lives with his grandmother. They are a family.

Families are where children learn how to act in the world. Family members care for one another by providing love and support. Families provide for members' basic needs such as food and shelter. They also provide financial support.

All families have strengths. Knowing what makes families strong can help you and your family.



What do successful single-parent families look like?

Research shows that successful single-parent families have the following characteristics.

- Parents accept the challenges presented to them as single parents and they are determined to do their best.
- Single parents make parenting their first priority.
- Discipline is consistent and democratic. Parents are neither permissive nor too restrictive.

- Parents emphasize open communication and expression of feelings.
- Parents recognize the need to care for themselves.
- Parents develop or maintain traditions and rituals for their families.
- Parents become financially self-sufficient and independent.
- Parents move forward with their lives in a positive manner.
- Parents are successful in managing family time and activities.

What sort of characteristics do strong families have?

The same characteristics that make single-parent families strong are found in strong families in general. In *Secrets of Strong Families*, John Defrain and Nick Stinnett identified six characteristics of strong families as follows:

1. Family members spend quality time with one another.

- Find time to spend with your children each day.
 - Read together
 - Prepare meals together
 - Ride a bike or walk the dog together
- Build in family fun weekends or trips.
 - Go camping, fishing, or hiking
 - Attend a sporting event
 - Go to a museum
 - Visit friends or relatives

2. Strong families are committed to one another.

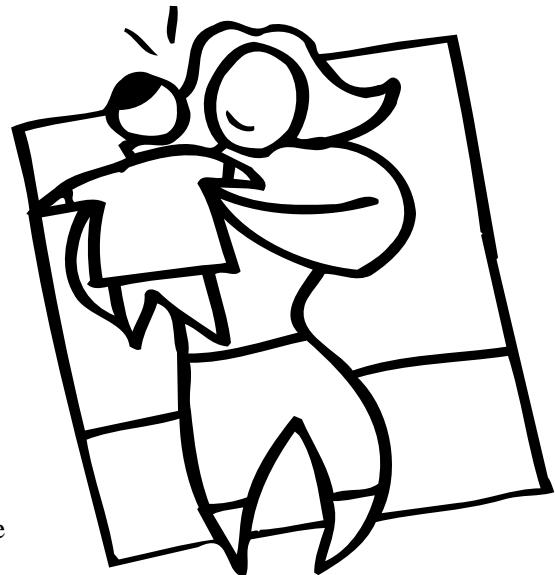
- Discover and encourage your children's activities and interests.
- Remind children that you are there for them.
- Work together to solve problems.

3. Family members show each other appreciation.

- Tell your children that you love them.
- Say thank you when they complete family chores.
- Leave notes of appreciation for family members.

4. Communication skills are good in strong families.

- Use "I" statements when working through problems. For example, "I get worried when you don't come home on time. I need you to call if you won't make your curfew."
- Ask your children about their day using questions that require more than a one-word response. For example "What was the best part of your day today?"
- Avoid interrupting one another and really listen when others are talking.
- Turn off the television and eat dinner together.



5. Crises and stress are viewed as opportunities for growth.

- Work on handling your own stress in a positive manner to provide a model for your children.
- Use community resources to get help.
- Encourage one another throughout a crisis.
- Talk about what will be learned from the experience and how that can strengthen the family.

6. Family members value spirituality.

- Discuss your family views on spirituality.
- Practice your family's view on spirituality whether it is appreciating nature by hiking or camping or attending organized religious activities.

Assessing your family's strengths

No family is perfect and there is no one right way to be a family. Think about what is important for your family.

The chart on the next page may help you assess your family and plan ways to strengthen it. Use the six characteristics of strong families as a guide.

- First read the questions about your family. There is space for you to answer the questions.
- Then indicate whether or not you are satisfied with your family's current situation.
- Finally, for those areas you would like to strengthen, write down ideas you will try.

Question	Response	Satisfied or not? (Y/N)	Ideas we can try
What does our family do daily to spend time with one another?			
What fun activities do we do as a family?			
How does my family show commitment to one another?			
When was the last time I told my children that I am there for them?			
What did I do today to show appreciation to my children?			
Do I have a ratio of saying five positive things to my children for every one negative comment?			
Do I really listen to what my children tell me?			
Do I model using “I” statements with my children?			
Would it be helpful for my family to schedule family meetings to discuss family issues?			
How does my family handle crisis?			
What do I do when I am feeling under stress?			
Who do I rely on for support when the family has a crisis?			
What values do I want to pass on to my children?			
Does my family have a sense of spirituality?			
What does my family do to practice spirituality?			

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Acknowledgments:

Thank you to the following individuals who reviewed this guide:

Jill Thorngren, Ph.D., assistant professor, MSU Department of Health & Human Development

Sue Traver, M.S., Extension educator, University of Idaho

Sarah Stenseth, parent and family & consumer science major, MSU Department of Health & Human Development

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File under
Human Development
B-7 (family life)
Printed December 2001
141-2000-12-01-MG