



Family Vitality *characteristics* of strong families

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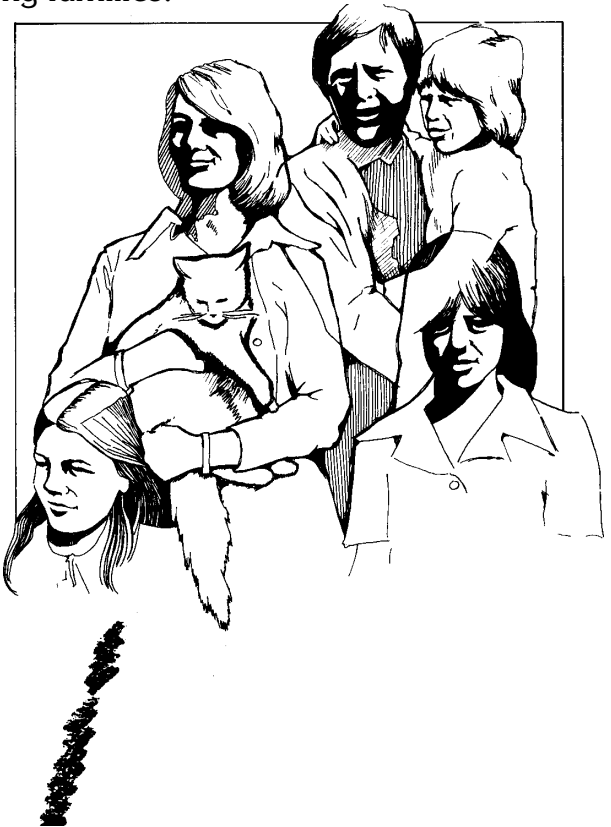
Television programs portraying perfect families can make even the strongest of families a little envious. Comparing real families to these fantasy families is like comparing astroturf to natural grass. From the living room, it looks pretty good. On closer inspection, weeds and all, most of us prefer the real thing.

Real families have problems. Unlike some of their television counterparts, real families are not perfect. Living in a family means living with constant change, and change often causes stress. Some families, however, consistently are better than others at coping with the stress that some problems create. Family scientists call these successful families "strong families." Various scales measuring factors such as the quality of the marriage relationship and the quality of parent-child relationships help to distinguish between strong and not-so-strong families.

Careful study and evaluation of strong families has revealed a variety of common characteristics. As you read over the following characteristics of strong families, keep in mind that no family is perfect. Be careful not to focus so much on the "weeds" that you can't see the "grass." Think about what you can do to make your family stronger.

■ **Commitment.** Strong families commit themselves to promoting each other's happiness. The commitment comes from sharing meaningful experiences, from involvement in setting family goals, and from seeing these goals carried out. Commitment is a vital factor in developing a sense of caring and unity among family members. Regular family discussions encourage family commitment.

■ **Expressed Appreciation.** Sure you appreciate your family and all the things family members do for you. Strong families do much more than feel appreciation, they express it. They let each other know, through words and actions, that they are special.



■ **A Strong Marriage.** The health of the marriage influences a family's well-being. When the marriage is a successful, happy partnership, this success spills over into other family relationships. Characteristics of strong marriages, such as clear communication, mutual respect, and self-disclosure, also build strong families. In successful blended families, a healthy marriage often is a particularly critical factor. Single-parent living, while very challenging, also can be the basis of a vital, healthy family. In families of divorce, a congenial, cooperative relationship with the ex-spouse is the desired situation.

■ **Time Together.** Strong families frequently work, play, eat, and attend religious and social functions together. They share responsibilities and structure their lives so they can spend time with one another. As necessary, strong families cut down on outside involvements in order to have quality time together on a regular basis.

■ **Good Communication Skills.** In strong families all lines of communication are open. Information flows freely. Members of strong families put forth the effort to hear what the other person says and feels. They also are comfortable voicing opinions of their own and are open to change. Though they don't always agree, they do get everything out in the open and handle disagreements creatively by using conflict management skills.

■ **A Healthy Lifestyle.** Proper nutrition, adequate rest, and plenty of exercise are essential for optimal wellness. Stress management skills, quiet time, and a healthy balance between work and family also are important. When all individuals within a family function at their best, the result is a strong family.

■ **Spiritual Strength.** Healthy families live by the golden rule, treating others as they would have others treat them. Many strong families read inspirational books and value activities such as praying, singing, and meditating. They share similar values and feel a guiding force in their lives.

■ **A Positive Outlook.** Strong families deal with crises in constructive ways. They search for the silver lining in each dark cloud they meet and they stick together. Strong families believe they can manage and survive any crisis that comes their way. They know that the crisis will pass and that there are many resources available in the community to help them.

■ **Acceptance of Individual Uniqueness.** Strong families look beyond each other's faults and see each other's needs. Family members also feel free to be themselves. They accept, appreciate, and support each other as wonderful, one-of-a-kind persons.

■ **Involvement with Friends and Community.** No family is an island. Strong families stay in touch with friends and relatives, are friendly with neighbors, and are willing to help others in time of need. They also admit problems and are willing to reach out to professionals and others for help.

■ **Forgiveness.** Mistakes, misunderstandings, and hurts are part of life. Healthy families teach and practice forgiveness. They refuse to nurse old wounds. They learn from mistakes and forgive others and themselves. They live each day in a fresh, full way. By forgiving and letting go of the painful past, they experience healing, peace of mind, and a deepening of love.

■ **Fun Times.** Strong families laugh together. Humor, spontaneity, and wit help to keep the family focused on the positive. They have fun together because they genuinely enjoy each other's company.

Family Vitality

family action plan

Discuss one or more of the characteristics of healthy families with your spouse, or better yet, with your whole family. With young children, be sure to talk on their level so they will understand. Brainstorm ways to strengthen a certain trait in your family. Pick out one or two ideas and write out a simple plan of action that each family member can sign. Hang it in a prominent place and promise to help each other follow through.



identifying family strengths

All families have strengths, and all families have room for improvement. Think about your own family. Complete the following scale focusing on your family. Review the explanations of the 12 strengths before marking your ratings. If possible, see how your spouse and perhaps other family members perceive your family's strengths.

	Very Strong	Some Growth Needed	Much Growth Needed
1. Commitment			
2. Expressed Appreciation			
3. A Strong Marriage			
4. Time Together			
5. Good Communication Skills			
6. A Healthy Lifestyle			
7. Spiritual Strength			
8. A Positive Outlook			
9. Acceptance of Individual Uniqueness			
10. Involvement with Friends and Community			
11. Forgiveness			
12. Fun Times			

Family Vitality

family talk

Gather family members, perhaps over dinner or over a big bowl of popcorn. Let each person answer the following two questions:

“What are two things you really like about our family?” and “What’s something about our family you’d like to be different?” Encourage discussion, honesty, and an accepting and positive atmosphere.

This fact sheet is one in a series of six on the topic of Family Vitality. Other fact sheets in the series include:

- Appreciation and Encouragement
- Time Together
- Building a Strong Marriage
- Family Council Meetings
- What You Can Do

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