



Family relationships

<https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/mental-health-matters/family-relationships>

Children thrive on feelings of belonging and affection that come from having caring and supportive families. Research affirms that the quality of family relationships is more important for children's wellbeing than the size or composition of the family. Whether families have one parent or two, whether they include step-parents, grandparents or other carers, they can build strong, positive family relationships that promote family wellbeing and support children's mental health. The keys to developing [healthy family relationships](#) include making relationships a priority, communicating effectively and providing support for each other. However, [building better family relationships](#) with children and with all family members is not always easy. Different needs arising within the family may create tensions between family members, and pressures that come from outside (eg work or financial pressures) may also impact on families and children. Sometimes these pressures can make the development of positive family relationships more difficult. Yet, even taking these influences into account, there is much the adult or adults in the family can do to build strong family relationships. [Happy families work together](#) to make decisions and make sure each family member's needs are being adequately met.

Families are different

Families vary in the expectations they hold regarding children's behaviour and the roles of parents and carers. This leads to differences in family relationships and communication styles. Many beliefs about what makes for strong family relationships are influenced by the values and experiences that parents and carers were exposed to in their own families while growing up. Cultural background can also impact on the values and goals adults have for children's development. For example, it is common in Western industrialised societies like Australia for parents and carers to value children's independence, whereas parents and carers from other [cultural backgrounds](#) sometimes give more emphasis to family responsibilities than to children's independence. There are also many differences within cultures. Differences in the ways that families are made up lead to different relationship and support needs.

Meeting different kinds of relationship needs

Two-parent families are built on the primary couple relationship and this continues to have a major influence on relationships amongst all family members. Parents can find it a challenge to meet children's needs as well as their own needs as partners; however, ensuring that some time is set aside to attend to the couple relationship is very important. When conflict between parents is not resolved, it may impact directly on children and/or on parenting effectiveness. Maintaining effective communication and support for each other as parents enhances the couple relationship and supports positive relationships in the family as a whole. [When parents separate](#), it can be a challenging time for all. Sole parents are a diverse group. They may miss the support that having another parent or carer would provide and may feel over-stretched by the responsibility of caring for children alone. For sole parent

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families in particular, having a support network of friends and relatives makes a big difference. Separated sole parents and children also benefit from having a positive co-parenting arrangement with the other parent. This can be achieved when parents and carers value and respect the importance of children having opportunities to develop their relationships with both parents.

[Blended](#) and step-families can have more complex relationship needs to take into account. Children may feel their prior relationships with parents or carers are displaced by the new couple relationship. Family members, especially children, may still be [grieving the loss of their original family](#). New relationships between children and parents or carers need to be [negotiated and old ones renegotiated](#). Children may spend time with two families who have different expectations of them. These changes can cause significant strain and stress to children as well as to parents and new partners.

It is important to reassure children that they will still have the love and support of both parents. Taking things slowly helps by allowing time for everyone to adjust to new circumstances. Making realistic expectations and house rules clear to all step-family members is very important. For example, it is especially helpful for children and step-parents to recognise that they don't have to love one another but they are expected to treat each other with respect.

What supports strong family relationships

Two main dimensions of the parenting role have been found to have important effects on family relationships and on children's development, no matter what kind of family children are raised in. These are:

- communicating with warmth and care
- establishing clear and appropriate limits for children's behaviour

Positive styles of communication are a common element that supports both of these dimensions. All families experience ups and downs as they strive to do their best for children and deal with challenges that come along.

A recent study* asked Australian families of different kinds to nominate what they considered to be the characteristics that made their families strong in spite of any difficulties they might face. This table shows the eight characteristics that were identified. They form the [building blocks of healthy family relationships](#).

Family strengths as identified by Australian families

Communication - listening to each other and communicating with openness and honesty.

Togetherness - sharing similar values and beliefs that create a sense of belonging and bonding.

Sharing activities - spending time together doing things they enjoy, for example, sports, reading, camping, playing games.

Affection - showing affection and care on a regular basis through words, hugs, kisses and thoughtfulness.

Support - offering and being able to ask for support, with family members knowing they will receive assistance, encouragement and reassurance from one another.

Acceptance - understanding, respecting and appreciating each family member's unique personal qualities.

Commitment - seeing family wellbeing as a first priority and acting accordingly with dedication and

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loyalty.

Resilience - being able to withstand difficulties and adapt to changing circumstances in positive ways.

Families in this research also identified that the biggest challenges in family relationships were communication breakdown, parenting issues and difficult relationship dynamics. Acknowledging existing family strengths is a good starting point for addressing challenges and building stronger family relationships.

* 1 Geggie, J., DeFrain, J., Hitchcock, S. & Silberberg, S. (2000). Family Strengths Research Project. Newcastle NSW: Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle.

See also:

[Family relationships: Suggestions for families, schools and early childhood services](#)

[Family relationships: Further resources](#)

