

The building blocks of healthy family relationships

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Healthy family relationships—what are they?

Healthy family relationships help all members of a family feel safe and connected to one another. While all families go through good and difficult times, a family with healthy relationships is still able to interact with one another in a safe and respectful way. Positive interactions between family members outnumber difficult ones.

In healthy family relationships, people are able to trust and rely on each other for support, love, affection and warmth. Families often share common goals and try to work together to reach those goals. For example, children may help their parents and carers to get the dinner dishes done so that everyone can relax or everyone in the family may do their own bit to help save some money to go on a family holiday. Some things we may see in families building positive relationships include:

- ▶ each person in the family is valued and respected
- ▶ two-way communication exists
- ▶ each family member makes an effort to understand and trust the other's point of view
- ▶ family members check in with each other, especially when making important decisions
- ▶ adults share responsibility, where possible, for caring roles.



One study¹ asked different types of Australian families to suggest what they considered to be the qualities that made their families strong even when facing difficulties. Eight characteristics were identified:

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 (e.g., sports, reading, camping or playing games)

Affection: Showing affection and care regularly through words, hugs, kisses and thoughtfulness

Support: Offering and asking for support, with family members knowing they will receive help, encouragement and reassurance from one another

Acceptance: Understanding, respecting and appreciating each family member's unique qualities

Commitment: Seeing family wellbeing as a first priority and acting accordingly with commitment and loyalty

Resilience: Being able to tolerate difficulties and adapt to changing situations in positive ways.

Families also identified that the biggest challenges for family relationships were communication breakdown, parenting issues and difficult relationship patterns. To build stronger family relationships, it helps to first recognise family strengths before working on challenges.

Children benefit from healthy family relationships

Children thrive on feelings of belonging and affection that come from having caring and supportive families. The quality of family relationships is more important for children's wellbeing than the size or composition of the family. Whether families with children have one parent or two, whether they include step-parents, grandparents or other carers, they can build strong, positive relationships that promote family wellbeing and support children's mental health.

When children receive love and support in a warm family environment, they are better able to take on the childhood tasks of exploring their world and learning new skills. They also learn from the family environment how to connect to other people and build healthy relationships. This helps them experience more positive peer relationships and teaches them how to interact with adults. Children who learn the skills of building healthy relationships are more likely to grow up to become confident and resilient individuals.



¹Geggie, J., DeFrain, J., Hitchcock, S., & Silberberg, S. (2000). *Family strengths research project*. Newcastle, NSW: Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle.

Families come in different shapes, sizes and numbers

Families with children have different expectations of their children's behaviour and the roles of parents and carers. This leads to differences in family relationships and communication styles. Many beliefs about what helps create 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 also influences the values and goals adults have for children's development. There are also differences within cultures, meaning that no two families will have the same values, even if they come from the same community. For example, it is common in western industrialised societies like Australia for parents and carers to value children's independence, such as personal responsibility for interactions, whereas parents and carers from non-western cultural backgrounds frequently give more emphasis to joint family responsibilities and togetherness. In some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, for example, family members may be jointly responsible for caring for children and the elderly, as well as sharing food, clothing and housing and acting as a support network for each other.



Differences in the make-up of families with children may also lead to diverse relationship and support needs:

1. Two-parent families

Family relationships are first influenced by the main couple relationship; this partnership has a major impact on interactions among all family members. While parents and carers may sometimes find it a challenge to meet children's needs as well as their own and their partner's needs, it is still important to set aside some time to attend to the couple relationship.

It is important that parents try to resolve conflict between them. Unresolved conflict between parents may impact directly on children and/or on the effectiveness of their parenting (e.g., by giving inconsistent messages to children). Maintaining effective communication and support for each other as parents enhances the couple relationship and supports positive relationships in the family as a whole.

2. Sole parents

Sole parents may miss the support provided by another parent or carer and feel over-stretched by the responsibility of caring for children alone. Having a support network of friends and relatives can make a big difference. Where possible, separated sole parents can support their children by sharing positive co-parenting arrangements 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.

3. Blended and step-families

When separate families come together and form a new family, they are referred to as blended or step-families. Family members may or may not be biologically related to each other. Blended families may have more complex relationship needs to take into account when trying to build healthy family relationships. Children may feel their prior relationships with parents or carers have changed because of the new couple relationship and parents' and carers' relationships with step-children. Family members, especially children, may still be grieving the loss of their original family.

Families may have to discuss how new and existing relationships between children and parents or carers are going to work. Children may spend time with two families who have different expectations of them. These changes can cause a lot of stress to children as well as parents and new partners. Having realistic expectations and making house rules clear and predictable to all family members is very important.

It is helpful to reassure children that they will still have the love and support of both parents. It is also useful to take as much time as needed for everyone to adjust to the new family. Help all family members recognise the importance of treating everyone with respect.



4. Foster families

For various reasons, children sometimes live in out-of-home care or foster care with people they may or may not be related to. The adults who take on this caring role are known as foster parents and they provide a safe and caring place for children.

The children being cared for may have complex needs and this can be challenging for foster parents. In many cases, the end goal is to reunite children with their families of origin. Hence, foster parents have the difficult task of opening their hearts and homes to their foster children and one day having to say goodbye. Still, foster parents play an important role as they can help children to feel safe, secure and cared for and also show children what positive relationships can look like.

5. Grandparents as carers

Depending on family circumstances, grandparents may either care for children for some, most or all of the time. Whatever their time involvement, grandparents play a significant role in building healthy family relationships. Grandparents can model what healthy family relationships look like but their involvement also helps children see family relationships in the wider, extended family context.

When grandparents take on the main caregiving role, they become responsible for providing safety, security and care for children so they feel a sense of belonging within the family. If grandparents share this role with the child's main caregivers, other grandparents, members of the family or caregivers outside the family, it is helpful to discuss how all the different family relationships may work so that the child knows what to expect when they are with their various caregivers and continue to feel safe and secure in all their relationships.



Dealing with conflict

Conflict is a normal and healthy part of family life. For example, families often disagree over things like house rules, what TV show to watch or bedtime. Families are made up of individuals who will sometimes have different ideas, wants or needs. Conflict can occur at any time so it is important for families to have effective ways of managing it. Conflict itself is not a problem—but the way it is handled might be. When conflict is managed in positive ways, family relationships are strengthened. For example, agreeing that everyone gets to choose their favourite TV show that week and to take turns watching something they enjoy. When not dealt with effectively, conflict can be stressful and damaging to relationships.

Many parents and carers find that conflict between siblings happens again and again. Children in the same family often argue, tease and complain about each other, even though they may provide good company for one another during other times. When children fight, it is important for parents and carers to help children identify the problem behind the conflict and guide them through a process of problem solving. Children often look to a parent or carer to judge who is right and who is wrong in a conflict; however, taking this approach can lead to more frequent conflicts. Assisting children to work through the steps of problem solving helps them manage conflict fairly and become more cooperative (the problem-solving process is discussed later in this information sheet).

The following sections provide some suggestions about how to strengthen family relationships so positive experiences outweigh difficult ones. When relationships are strong and healthy, they are better able to withstand the stress of challenging times and celebrate the positive experiences.

Building positive family relationships is about dealing with conflicts as well as making time to relax and do fun things together.

Ways to build healthy family relationships

Building and maintaining positive relationships with children and with all family members is not always easy. It can be hard work trying to ensure everyone's most important needs are met. All families have times when tempers flare, feelings get hurt and misunderstandings occur. It takes good communication, flexibility and creativity to manage these situations and maintain positive connections.

Some factors that help build strong and caring family relationships include:

- ▶ making relationships a priority
- ▶ communicating effectively
- ▶ working together as a family
- ▶ providing support for each other.



1. Making relationships a priority

Our responsibilities outside the home are important. Likewise, putting aside some time to look after our relationships at home is important. By making family relationships a priority, we are highlighting that they are important to us.

Here are a few ways to show your family that they are important:

- ▶ **Spend time with children and other family members:** Many of us lead very busy lives with lots of responsibilities. When you are together, it may be helpful to set aside a few minutes each day to spend with your family and children doing simple things like talking to them, singing songs, playing a game, reading a story or the newspapers, or even making dinner together. Make the activity fun or do something that your child wants to do. Let your child show you how to do something so that they feel special. Seizing opportunities to spend time with family members as they arise can be helpful as well.
- ▶ **Be affectionate:** Everyone has different ways of showing love and care. Some people give lots of hugs and kisses, others give a high-five, pat on the back, nod, wink or show a thumbs-up. Some others may say 'I love you' or 'You're special'. Any positive sign of affection shows that you care and may help develop trust and closeness in the relationship. Being warm and caring also means giving your family and children attention both when they are happy and engaged in their activities and when they are upset and need some comforting.
- ▶ **Celebrate little achievements:** While it is fun to celebrate birthdays and important milestones like walking, using a spoon or riding a tricycle, we can also make happy occasions out of everyday positive things that your child does. Some examples are: a child sharing a toy, siblings playing together with their toys, speaking courteously, following routines independently, asking for help politely and children showing you a game they have completed.
- ▶ **Separate work and family life:** Work can take many forms, including household chores, working in the garden, working in an office or organisation, caring for family members or running errands. This can take up a large part of the day. Sometimes we may forget to switch off from work and end up thinking about it even when we are not working. It may be helpful to remind ourselves to try to give our full attention to our family and children when we are with them. If we do remember something work-related, it may be helpful to write it down for later. This can help with being fully present with our family.

When children see you making relationships a priority in the ways described above, they learn that they are important to you and feel loved. Children will then understand these are important things to do to build strong relationships.



2. Communicating effectively

Effective communication means that everyone has a say and is listened to. Good communication is essential for healthy relationships. The way people talk and listen to each other builds emotional ties and helps make our wants and needs clear. Effective communication helps family members feel understood and supported.

However, communicating effectively can be challenging when there is pressure to get things done. When families become busy, there may be little 'quality time' for talking and listening to each other. Ineffective styles of communication can also damage relationships. This occurs, for example, when family members speak to each other disrespectfully or use put-downs.

The adults within a family can communicate values to children, such as respect and caring. This can be done by taking some time every day to talk and share information with children. Children also learn how to communicate respectfully when they see the adults around them speak respectfully to each other. As a result, children may begin to copy these respectful ways of communicating.



Families can set the tone for positive communication:

- ▶ **Listen:** Focus on what children are saying to show that you are genuinely interested. Give your full attention and treat what family members say as important. While really listening can take a little extra time, it can also help you and your child to come up with joint solutions for problems when needed (rather than offering your own solutions).
- ▶ **Tune in:** Paying attention to emotions is important for supporting positive family relationships. As well as listening to words, it helps to pay attention to body language and expressions as this will assist in noticing and responding to feelings. Tuning into your own feelings and expressing them in ways that allow others to understand them promotes caring relationships. Tuning into children's behaviours and feelings to understand the way they are behaving allows you to guide them as they learn to express their feelings in words.
- ▶ **Acknowledge feelings:** Listen for meaning and feeling and actively check that you understand your child's feelings. By helping children to explain their feelings you can help them understand their emotions. For example, 'It sounds like you're feeling sad because you wanted to have a turn like everyone else and you missed out'. Acknowledging feelings might in itself be a solution for your child. This also stops a problem from getting worse as the child's feelings are heard and respected by the family.
- ▶ **Show respect:** It is easier for people to listen and accept your view when you communicate in a respectful and caring way. This allows children to sense your calmness and warmth even when setting boundaries. For example, his dad Robert could say to Luke, 'I know you enjoy watching your cartoon but I still want you to say "hello" when I come home'. This shows that Robert understands Luke's position, and wants Luke to understand his.
- ▶ **Set an example:** The way you communicate is important as children are learning what to do by watching you. Focusing and providing caring responses may not always be easy, especially when you are tired, busy or dealing with conflict. However, by showing children that what they say is important and providing them with respectful responses, they can learn to do the same when they communicate with you, other family members, and their peers. For example, say 'sorry' when you make a mistake or hurt your child's feelings or ask 'How was your day?' and really listen to the answer.

- ▶ **Send clear messages:** Parents' and carers' actions send a message which can be interpreted differently by family members. Clear messages are less likely to be misinterpreted. Avoid giving mixed messages in which you say one thing and do another. Since people see actions more often than they hear the words you are saying, try to match what you do with what you say. When this is not possible (e.g., you are not available when you said you would be), provide an explanation and apologise.
- ▶ **Talk with children:** The way adults speak can encourage children to respond or to shut down. Listening and paying attention shows interest but it is also helpful to ask specific questions about topics of interest to children. This encourages them to talk more and share their knowledge. Follow children's lead and give them space to talk or be silent. Often they find it easier to talk spontaneously, for example, while doing an everyday activity, rather than sitting down to talk face to face.

3. Working together as a family

Discussing things as a family is often very helpful for dealing with concerns and finding solutions to problems that come up. It is also helpful to have family discussions when planning something fun for the whole family to do. Working together as a family helps everyone feel that they have something important to offer. This helps create a sense of belonging in the family and strengthens family bonds.

These strategies may help families work together:

- ▶ **Communicate clear expectations:** Talk together so there is an opportunity to explain roles and expectations. Clear boundaries for children's behaviour helps them understand what they need to do and what will happen if they do not follow these boundaries.
- ▶ **Talk about the good stuff:** It is helpful to talk about what is working well in family relationships.
- ▶ **Have family discussions:** This gives the family a chance to talk about both the little things and the big things. Discussions can be very short or long, spontaneous or planned, depending on what needs to be talked about and how long very young children can focus for. It can be used to decide on family chores, house rules or plan family activities and outings. Trust can be built during family discussions by respecting and listening to everyone's views without judging or putting them down. For children who are able to talk, let them also have a say. Encourage children as well as adults to hear and understand each other's views and needs.
- ▶ **Include children in decisions:** Even very young children can be included in decision making. Provide a couple of options and say 'Which one?', to help them pick. This decision making helps the children feel valued and important.

Working together as a family helps everyone feel they have something important to offer.

Some ideas on how to use family discussions:

- ▶ Setting up a chores roster.
- ▶ Saying things you would like to happen (e.g., Tina wants more time to play with mum or dad wants more hellos and hugs).
- ▶ Setting up the house rules.
- ▶ Planning a zoo outing and which exhibits to look at.
- ▶ Having everyday family fun (e.g., card games or making pizza together).
- ▶ Resolving a conflict that has occurred between all siblings.

Discussing things as a family can encourage children as well as adults to solve problems creatively. Addressing and solving problems supportively helps to strengthen family relationships. For example, once mum understands that Tina just wants to play with her and is not just resisting bedtime, they can talk together about planning special time each day. Having a chance to express needs in positive ways encourages healthy communication, support and cooperation.

Using a family problem-solving approach helps to avoid blaming, is supportive of family members and builds togetherness. It is also a very effective way of helping children learn skills for managing conflict, solving tricky situations and decision making that can be used in many different situations.

Problem solving

The problem-solving process involves:

- ▶ identifying the problem that needs to be solved, rather than judging the person
- ▶ making sure that everyone's concerns are listened to
- ▶ coming up with a range of options or alternatives and thinking them through together
- ▶ choosing and reaching a family agreement for a solution or action plan
- ▶ trying out the action plan and checking how it has gone.



4. Providing support for each other

While families can try to do all they can to work together and build positive relationships, there will still be times of stress. Different needs arising within the family may create stress between family members. Pressures that come from outside (e.g., work or financial pressures; caring for other relatives) may also affect families and children. Sometimes these pressures can make it more difficult to develop positive family relationships. At times like these, supporting members of the family can help reduce feelings of stress and help maintain strong family relationships.



Some ways to provide support are:

- ▶ **Being present:** It may help to let family members know that you are there to help, provide comfort, love and care. Everyone shows comfort in different ways. Some examples may be a hug or some kind words. Checking in with them to see how they are going may also be beneficial.
- ▶ **Sharing the load:** Sometimes people get overloaded with the tasks that need to be finished. At these times, being aware of a family member's needs and offering to help them can reduce stress. For example, if someone in your family has many chores to do, finding time to help out can help relieve some stress. In this way, children also learn that they can help out or receive help when needed.
- ▶ **Checking in with others:** There may be times when you notice some families around you having difficulties in their relationships. It helps to be sensitive and thoughtful about the relationships around you. Consider whether other families may benefit from additional support and resources to strengthen their relationships and check in if you are wondering if this is needed.
- ▶ **Asking for help:** Sometimes we may need to ask for help when we find that we have too many things to do. Taking care of ourselves and seeking help is important. When we feel calm and relaxed, we have the time and energy to build positive relationships. For example, if you feel you need a break, ask a family member or friend to help out so you can have some time away. Parents and carers may find asking for help tricky but it is an important way to build healthy family relationships. For more information on taking care of yourself, refer to *Component 3: Working with parents and carers 'Positive mental health for parents and carers'*.



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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