

About 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 strong and caring family relationships include making relationships a priority, communicating effectively and providing support for each other. However, building and maintaining positive 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.

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.

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 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:

1 Communicating warmth and care

2 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 study¹ 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.

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 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.

Communication skills for building relationships

Good communication is essential for healthy relationships. The way people talk and listen to each other builds emotional ties and helps make expectations clear. Effective communication helps family members feel understood and supported. The adults in the family in particular play a critical role in communicating to children values such as respect and caring. They do this by talking with children and especially by demonstrating their values in the way they communicate.

Listening

Listening attentively and actively is most important for creating a climate in which open and honest communication can take place. Focussing on what the other person is saying, rather than thinking of your own response while they are speaking, shows that you are genuinely interested. Listen for meaning and feeling and actively check that you understand the other person's point of view, for example: "It sounds like you're feeling sad because you wanted to have a turn like everyone else and you missed out." To listen actively to children, give them your full attention while they are talking and help to draw out their feelings and understandings. Taking a little extra time to listen also helps you and your child come up with better solutions for problems (rather than imposing your own solutions).

Tuning in

Paying attention to emotional connections is really important for supporting positive family relationships. As well as listening to words, effective communication requires paying attention to body language and expressions so as to notice and respond to feelings. Tuning into your own feelings and expressing them in ways that allow others to understand how you feel promotes caring relationships. Tuning into children's behaviours and the feelings they communicate is especially helpful for understanding children and guiding them as they learn to express their feelings in words.

What you do (or do not do) also sends a message which is interpreted 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 actions often speak louder than words, try to ensure that there is a match between what you do and what you say. When this is not possible (eg you are not available when you said you would be) be sure to provide an explanation and apology.

Talking with children

Parenting research has found that many parents or carers talk much more than they listen to children. While it is necessary for adults to communicate their expectations, children also need to be heard in order to feel connected and valued. The way that adults speak can encourage children to respond or to shut down. Listening well, paying attention to what children say and asking specific questions encourage children to talk more. Invite children to talk by giving them space. Often they find it easier to talk when they can be spontaneous, for example, while you are doing an everyday activity with them, rather than sitting down to talk face-to-face.

Problem-solving

Addressing and solving problems supportively helps to strengthen family relationships. This 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 a solution or action plan that everyone involved can agree with
- trying it out and checking how it goes.

Using a family problem-solving approach helps to avoid blaming, demonstrates support for family members, and helps to build togetherness.

It is also a very effective way of helping children learn skills for problem-solving and decision-making that they can use in many different situations.

When families experience conflict that is repeated or severe it is important to seek professional relationship counselling. Counselling can help to prevent problems worsening, so it is ideal to seek it early rather than waiting too long. Unresolved conflict can lead to aggression, intimidation, or violence. These are completely unacceptable behaviours that have particularly destructive effects on both individuals and family relationships.

Key points for building better family relationships

Emphasise positive communication

Remember that good communication starts with effective listening. Encourage talking by listening actively to other family members to better understand their perspective.

Make regular 'quality time' a priority

Families benefit from having time to unwind and relax with one another. Making sure you have un-pressured time to spend doing things you enjoy together makes for positive relationships.

Offer support

Appreciate more than criticise one another and be ready to offer help when needed.

Dealing with conflict

Conflict is a normal (and healthy) part of family life. Families are made up of individuals who will sometimes have different, ideas, wants or needs. Since conflict is inevitable, it is important for families to have effective ways of managing it. Remember that 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. When not dealt with effectively, conflict can be stressful and damaging to relationships.

Many parents and carers find that conflict between siblings is a recurring concern. Children in the same family often argue, tease and complain about each other, even though at other times they may provide good company for one another. When children fight it is important for parents and carers not to take sides, but to help children identify the problem behind the conflict and guide them through a process of peaceful conflict resolution. Though children may look to a parent or carer to judge who is right and who is wrong in a conflict, taking this approach can lead to more frequent conflicts. Assisting children to work through the steps of conflict resolution helps them learn how to manage conflict fairly and builds a basis for cooperation.

See the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on problem-solving and decision-making, social and emotional learning, effective discipline, and resolving conflict for ideas on building stronger family relationships.

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

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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