

Creating a Strong Family **Commitment: The Importance of Fostering Community**

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This is one in a series of NebGuides by UNL Extension Family Life specialists and educators who explore the attributes and experiences of strong families.

Nancy in Tuscaloosa, Ala., e-mails to say that they are alive and well. Literally. The tornado didn't hit their part of the city, and Nick and the kids are fine. Nancy shares the news about friends, noting that everyone made it through the storm in one piece. "The newly-hired campus minister lost his home, but he and his family are OK." Eleven people died in the tornado, according to early reports.

"I have been proud of our community's response," Nancy adds. The news has reported how the community has pulled together in this emergency. The first night over 600 people were in emergency shelters. The next night there were two.

"Everyone else has been taken in by family, friends and people from churches or housed by insurance. Our church has set up a special fund to receive contributions from all over to be diverted to the people who lost homes and such. And I think every other church in town has done the same. Many sent out work crews to help with cleanup. We appreciate your continued good thoughts and prayers."

Nancy's description of the Tuscaloosa tornado shows again that strong families build strong communities, and strong communities, in turn, strengthen families in a continuous reciprocal process. The strong families in our research over the years have been committed to their own families and also demonstrated a commitment to the well-being of the greater community — the extended family, friends, neighbors, people at work, the greater good. Literally, in many cases, there is a commitment to the family of humankind.

This commitment is demonstrated through more formal efforts in religious organizations and social and family service agencies on local, state, national and international levels. And, this commitment is demonstrated countless more times

every day by simple "neighborliness" in the steady stream of positive daily encounters human beings have with each other that make life happier for all involved.

Our friend Dr. Busisiwe Nkosi, a researcher and community development specialist at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, has spent a good portion of her life living in small African villages. Dr. Nkosi often quotes a Zulu tribe folk saying, "*Ukwakha utho ezeni*." This translates roughly to mean "something from nothing."

Busi believes that in a small African village with few economic and material resources, people can still create a good life for themselves by *sharing and caring*. "Even though they may be very poor in a western sense," she explains, "they are very rich because of their love and support for each other." Busi received her doctorate from the University of Minnesota and has seen a good deal of the "something from nothing" principle in small-town America.

She also believes that many people in big cities have learned how to create a village-like environment for themselves in spite of the speed and impersonality that go with modern urban living. In the midst of millions of people many of us still find creative ways to connect closely with loved ones, friends, neighbors, colleagues at work and so forth. In this way the big-city dwellers also benefit from an attitude of sharing and caring, and find that something from nothing can, indeed, be created.

"Violence thrives in the shadows." This is an old saying among professionals who work to prevent abusive behavior. Interviews and observations in families where abuse has occurred often give a picture of a nuclear family with few friends, an isolated and insular family with no outsiders looking in out of genuine concern, no one dropping by to help, no one caring how things are going in the family.

Conversely, many researchers have found how important a network of loved ones and friends can be to our well-being. Carolyn Attneave, a family therapist and psychologist, cited a

classic University of Washington study that found individuals who had at least 15 people with whom they related in their social network survived and flourished on kidney dialysis. But, “those persons with the best physical prognosis in the world and who were apparently healthy specimens but did not have outside resources died within a year. They died despite the doctors saying, ‘This is a good risk.’” Patients actually lived longer if they had lots of loved ones and friends.

By reaching out, we are giving each other, literally, the gift of life. Our morale increases. We learn new ways of managing difficulties in life from each other. We invest enjoyable time with each other. We enhance our personal feelings of self-esteem and confidence. There is a law of distributive justice at work as we demonstrate our commitment to each other in the community:

You always get back what you give, and if you really think about it, you probably get back a lot more.

Ways that families can support communities:

- Take cookies to a new neighbor.
- Visit an older friend in a care home.
- Take pets to visit someone.
- Care for single parent’s child so the individual has a night out.
- Take flowers to someone who is ill.
- “Adopt” a family in need.
- Take food, gifts at special holidays to ones in need.
- Model the work of Neighborhood Watch and National Night Out groups to develop a sense of community in your neighborhood.

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