

## *Creating a Strong Family* Positive Communication: Smoothing Out the Bumps in Family Life

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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.

Communication is on everyone’s list of the qualities of strong families: open, honest, straightforward, and clear communication. But *positive* communication is the key to success.

One family therapist recalled a family she had worked with. “When I asked them if they felt their communication with each other was open, honest, and straightforward and clear, they all agreed it was. Yelling at each other all the time may have all of the above qualities, but it still doesn’t work,” she said.

Nick Stinnett, professor of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, likes to say that, “In the world of words, there is a way to say precisely what we would like to say but in a positive manner that ensures we will make progress in our relationships with each other.” In short, stop and think for a few seconds how to restate your feelings in a way that is not hurtful to the other family member and will help build your love for each other, rather than tear it down.

Of course the most important talk in families often tends to be spontaneous talk. This is communication when no one is really working at communication, but simply enjoying talking and listening for talking and listening’s sake. How does a young person in your family feel about sex? Or grades? Or her future? If parents and children are comfortable around each other and genuinely enjoy each other’s company, then all kinds of interesting and important issues will come up in the conversation.

Communication in strong families does not always produce agreement on important issues. Family members are each individuals and have unique ways of looking at the world. Communication works best if they all can speak directly with each other without blaming or condemning. Even in strong families, some disagreements simply don’t get resolved. People can still love each other and remain friends and loyal family members while agreeing to disagree on various issues. Religion and politics are two perennially hot topics, and the strongest of families can have members diametrically opposed in their world views. Is this type of situation a terrible battle that just has to be fought and won or is it an opportunity for personal growth and interesting discussions? Take your pick.

Troubled families tend to be overly critical and hostile when communicating with each other or else they deny problems and avoid verbal conflict. Either extreme gets families into trouble. A middle-ground approach, in which family members speak openly about their differences but have the grace to agree to disagree in some areas, generally works better. Parents, of course, are in charge of the family. In some cases they will find it necessary to pull rank on the children or young adults in the family, making the final decision on important issues. This has to be done with skill and care, because no one — no matter how young or inexperienced they may be — likes to feel that their thoughts and feelings do not count.

Perhaps the best way to prevent communication difficulties in a family is for everyone to learn to be extremely good listeners. Communication, first and foremost, is about listening. Remember, we have two ears, but only one mouth. We should listen twice as much as we talk. Family members in strong families are adept at asking questions and do not try to read each other’s minds. They also know that people’s views change over time, and the only way to avoid mind reading is to check out positions regularly by asking questions.

Ground rules for family communication:

- Set aside time for family discussions.
- Spend time in family discussions often, not just when there is a crisis.
- Respect the thoughts and feelings of each person, regardless of age.
- Invite participation from all family members.
- No ideas are bad ideas — no put-downs.

- Ask questions instead of jumping to conclusions.
- Listen carefully to what is being said.
- Focus on positive thoughts and statements instead of the negative ones.
- Don't expect 100 percent agreement on every issue.

Positive communication in strong families is about sharing feelings, giving compliments, not blaming each other, being able to compromise, and agreeing to disagree. We always need to remember that it's not about winning or losing arguments. It's about working together in the family so we all can feel loving toward each other and want the best for everyone.

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