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## Creating a Strong Family Why Are Families So Important?

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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.

The late David R. Mace, a pioneer in the field of marriage and family enrichment, was fond of saying, "Nothing in the world could make human life happier than to greatly increase the number of strong families."

We agree with him, and for that reason applaud the work being done in many communities to strengthen and support families. Families, in all the diverse patterns, sizes, creeds, and colors they come in, are, indeed, the heart and soul of human society.

Marriage and family are perhaps society's oldest and most resilient institutions. From the beginning of human life, people have grouped themselves into families to find emotional, physical, and communal support. Although social commentators often have predicted the demise of both marriage and the family, families not only survive but continue to change and evolve. Family structures may vary around the world, and yet, the value of our *family* endures.

Families are the basic, foundational social units in all human communities around the world, and healthy individuals within healthy families are at the core of a healthy society. It's in everyone's best interest, then, to help create a positive environment for all families. This can be a labor of love for all of our social institutions: educational institutions, businesses, human and family service agencies, religious institutions, health organizations — literally everyone involved in the daily life of a community.

Families are our most intimate social environment. They are the places where we begin the vital processes of socializing our children, and teaching them — in partnership with countless others in the community — how to survive and thrive in the world.

Many marriages are experiencing difficulties, and part of the challenge in building family-friendly communities is to also build marriage-friendly communities. A good way to do this is to develop couples enrichment courses and activities. This can be done through teamwork among various institutions, including schools and colleges, religious institutions, volunteer groups, and family service organizations such as extension.

Involving fathers in the day-to-day life of families is crucial. Moms shouldn't have to carry all the burdens of childrearing alone. And dads should not have to miss all the wonderful feelings a parent experiences watching one's children grow and learn.

Of course, countless single-parent families are strong and emotionally healthy. Besides, in many cases involving violence, sexual abuse, alcohol, or other drug abuse, it may be best that a parent with any of those problems or behaviors be out of the picture for the rest of the family's personal well-being and safety. But in most cases, it is important for communities to find creative ways to strengthen and support two-parent families and make it possible for fathers to enjoy the benefits of increased time and involvement with their children.

Sometimes marriages get lost in all the hubbub surrounding modern life. We attend to our children's needs. We make the boss happy at work. But we often let our own personal health and well-being slide, and we borrow time and energy from our marriage to satisfy other demands in our world. The problem with this is that a healthy marriage is at the heart of a healthy two-parent family. We are reminded of the saying, "The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother." And vice versa. Since the marriage is the foundation for the family, the needs of the relationship have to be carefully nurtured. This doesn't always come easily in a family. Sometimes it takes thought, planning, and effort on the part of both adults to keep the marriage in the forefront.

Life in families can bring us great joy or excruciating pain, depending upon how well family relationships are going. A healthy marriage and family can be a valuable resource for helping us endure the difficulties that life inevitably brings. Unhealthy or dysfunctional relationships can create terrible problems that may persist from one generation to the next.

Individuals and families successful in marriage and relationships will strengthen community vitality and future generations. By working together in our communities, we demonstrate the importance of families to the well-being of the total community, and we contribute to the happiness of all.

How can communities support families?

- Respect family time.
- Youth should be allowed, not expected, to participate in sports and other activities.
- Encourage caring adults within the community to take an interest in a child's life.
- Provide flex-time at work so parents can participate in their children's activities.
- Offer a wide range of learning opportunities to assist individuals and families in facing issues throughout the life cycle.
- Create a community atmosphere in which attending enrichment classes for individuals, couples, and parents is considered an acceptable and valued norm.

Strong families alone can't do it; it really does take a community to raise a child.

Don't allow organized or school sports, or any other activity, to dictate your family's life. The family needs to be respected and honored.

## Reference

Doherty, W.J., (2000). *Take backyour kids: Confident parenting in turbulent times*. Notre Dame, IN; Sorin Books.

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