



Family Resiliency

Problem child. Deadbeat dad. Welfare mother. Dysfunctional family. Negative labels like these are common, and the disillusionment implied by such labels does little to promote family well-being. Seeing a good side, something an individual, family, or community is doing right, encourages people to learn, care, and contribute what they can.

More than 30 years ago, a family relations professor at Oklahoma State University, Dr. Nick Stinnett, pioneered a movement that focused on family strengths rather than on family weaknesses. He proposed that families could be better served if they learned what characteristics contribute to strong relationships and if people were taught how to develop those characteristics. Today's emphasis on family resiliency is an extension of those earlier efforts.

The term *resiliency* means literally "to jump (or bounce) back." Resilience is the family's ability to cultivate strengths that will allow them to meet the challenges of life, according to the National Network for Family Resiliency (1995). This allows the family to return to previous levels of functioning following a challenge or crisis.

Resiliency is composed of two parts, protective factors and recovery factors (McCubbin, *et al.*, 1997):

- **Protective factors** are the ongoing development of family strengths so that members are ready when change, challenge, or conflict arises. Protective factors help a family develop flexibility and adaptability. Important family protective

factors include family celebrations like birthdays and holidays, family hardiness and health, family time and routines, and family traditions.

- **Recovery factors** are especially beneficial in events like coping with a serious illness, an untimely death, the loss of a primary job, or a natural disaster. Family togetherness and a sense that each member is equally important, family and community support, esteem building, participating in family recreation, optimism about life's situations, and a sense of control help families cope and recover.

What characterizes resilient families?

Insights from numerous studies suggest several characteristics:

- **Commitment** is a balance of dedication and accountability. It includes actions that demonstrate loyalty, determination to work things out together, and sacrifice for the benefit of all.
- **Cohesion** indicates the degree of family togetherness with emphasis on respect for each person's uniqueness, and emotional closeness and practical dependence on each other.

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- *Adaptability* involves balancing family stability with flexibility, and skills developed for coping with stress.
- *Communication* involves respectful listening and speaking skills, including openness, clarity, accuracy, honesty, and mutuality.
- *Spirituality* includes the capacity for going beyond self-interest, living with a positive purpose, and reverencing life. In families it may mean having shared purpose and values, often in the context of religious faith and practicing what you preach.
- *Connectedness* is the capacity for contributing to and receiving from the extended family, the community, or the nation. It is an attitude of service and belonging to a larger whole.
- *Resource management* involves the competent and coordinated use of time, money, and the handling of stress.

Developing resilience

Families can develop the needed resilience to meet the challenges of life by learning and using some very practical strategies:

Plan ahead

- Prioritize activities and give your greatest energies to the most important ones.
- Schedule time in order to accomplish your top priorities. Don't forget to schedule some family time.
- Maintain healthy nutrition, moderate physical activity or exercise, and consistent and adequate sleep habits. Physical wellness is a key to dealing with an overload of stress.
- Plan a family budget, and work together to stick with it.

Work together

- Encourage cooperation among family members and make sure each one makes a positive contribution to the overall family well-being.
- Promote self-reliance; it builds a sense of confidence and control.
- Communicate openly and honestly about issues within the family, including conflicts and concerns. Also, communicate genuine affection and love to each other.
- Forgive one another in order to avoid the building of resentments and emotional

garbage. As much as possible, let go of the past and focus on the present and the future.

Learn from experience

- Provide safety and support so that family members can avoid repeating unnecessary hurts and emotional pain.
- Describe your feelings rather than judging someone else's feelings.
- Plan for realistic improvement in one or more areas of your life. Work on family goals that require teamwork.
- Try again following a failure or disappointment, and use the support of other family members to become successful.

Enjoy time together

- Learn to relax, and develop a healthy sense of humor in your family. Laughter is a great stress reliever.
- Engage your brain before operating your mouth. It is next to impossible to undo the damage of ill-spoken words.
- Plan family fun times. This need not be expensive; a walk around the lake or a swing in a public park may provide quality experiences.
- Celebrate special occasions beyond birthdays and holidays. Celebrate any significant moment in a family member's life, such as a job promotion or an outstanding report card.

Few social institutions have as great an impact on society as the family. Family functions, such as childbearing, providing for members' basic needs, providing emotional support, socializing members, establishing family traditions, and delegating responsibility, are basic to the formation and maintenance of any culture. In our country, families are far different than they were just a few generations ago.

According to information from the National Network on Family Resiliency (1995), today's diverse families are challenged and at risk.

- Approximately 31 percent of U.S. children live in single parent families.
- Almost 31 percent of the U.S. population is comprised of non-white minorities (U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000).
- More than 12 percent of the population is age 65 or over.

Because of the increasing diversity, a more comprehensive definition of the term "family" is in order. According to the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences:

A family is defined as two or more persons who share resources, share responsibility for decisions, share values and goals, and have commitment to one another over time.

This definition includes many different family structures, such as:

- Nuclear families.
- Joint-custody families and cohabiting families.
- Single-parent families.
- Voluntary child-free families.
- Infertile couples.
- Blended and step-families.
- Grandparent-led families.
- Families in which the adults are the same sex.
- Commuter families.
- Foster families and institutional-setting families.
- Communal families.

Families face many challenges:

- Approximately one-half of all new marriages end in divorce.
- Fewer jobs provide earnings sufficient to meet basic needs.
- More than 32 million Americans are without health insurance.
- More than 32 percent of children living in two-parent families have both parents working full-time year around.

Children and youth are at-risk:

- Sixteen percent of U.S. children live in poverty.
- Half a million teenage girls give birth each year.
- More U.S. teenage boys die from gunshot wounds than all natural causes combined.
- Half a million young people drop out of school each year.

In face of so much family change, social change, and changes in the global community, it is increasingly important

that individuals and families prepare for and adapt to the stress that comes with change. This is what family resiliency is all about.

Conclusion

Family life in our country has changed dramatically in the past few decades, and it is likely to continue. While change always brings a challenge, families can meet this challenge by using the strategies discussed here to build greater resiliency. All families have some strengths. By building on those strengths, families can minimize the stress they will experience. A stronger family requires the commitment, cooperation, and hard work of all its members. The payoff is a close, more vibrant family that functions well during normal times and during times of extreme stress.

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