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Developing Strengths in Stepfamilies

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Over time, most families develop strengths that help them face and successfully manage difficult times. The same is true of stepfamilies. The family strengths framework, developed as a general model for success in families, is based upon research with strong families in the United States and throughout the world (DeFrain, 2006; DeFrain & Asay, 2007; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002). Some researchers have used the family strengths framework to focus on strengths in stepfamilies (Knaub, Hanna, & Stinnett, 1984). The family strengths framework provides simple, practical guidance for building strong healthy families.

It has been said, “If one only looks for problems in a family, one will see only problems” (DeFrain, 2006, p. 5). The family strengths framework can help stepfamilies focus on the positive aspects of family life and build a more cohesive family unit. In light of the framework, stepfamilies can develop strengths around the following six key characteristics: 1) appreciation and affection, 2) commitment to each other, 3) positive communication, 4) successful management of stress and crisis, 5) spiritual well-being, and 6) enjoyable time spent together (DeFrain).

Appreciation and Affection for Each Other

Stepfamily relationships are strengthened each time a family member feels appreciated and needed. Positive interactions help foster positive feelings

among family members—simply being nice can make a difference (DeFrain, 2006). Expressing one’s appreciation is a good way to help family members feel good about each other and, in turn, have positive feelings toward those providing the praise. A stepmother may find that expressing her appreciation to a stepchild for a job well done helps establish a positive bond between them. On the other hand, if she only criticizes and complains that the child does not do his or her chores, the interactions will foster resentment and anger. Showing affection with a hug or a pat on the back reinforces the words that are used to show appreciation. Suggestions for expressing appreciation and affection include:

- ***Discuss appreciation in a family meeting.*** A family meeting may be helpful to discuss different ways of expressing appreciation for each other. These meetings can also be used to learn what makes each person feel appreciated.
- ***Show appreciation and affection by words and actions.*** It is important to show appreciation for positive behaviors. Responses might include: “Thanks for helping me. It made my work so much easier,” “I really appreciate your thoughtfulness in sharing with your sister,” or “Thank you for having such a positive attitude about doing something you did not enjoy.” The response may also include showing affection, such as giving a hug or a pat on the back.

- **Children learn from parents.** Children will learn to show appreciation and affection when parents model these qualities.

Commitment to Each Other

Having a committed stepfamily means that each person is viewed as an important part of the family and family members are there for each other (DeFrain, 2006). Stepfamilies, who share no previous family bond, may find it difficult to feel committed to each other. This may be particularly true when a child spends time in two different households. He or she may feel guilty or confused about having positive feelings and interactions with members of more than one family. Commitment can be fostered by treating each other with respect and spending meaningful time together. Some suggestions to help develop commitment to the stepfamily include:

- **Support children in their commitment to multiple families.** Parents and stepparents can help children by reassuring them that it is good for them to love their parents and siblings in both families, and to be committed to both families. Children should not be made to pick favorites or be made to feel guilty for loving and wanting to spend time with family members who live elsewhere.
- **Support family members.** Show commitment to other family members by attending important school and social events.
- **Take time for each other.** Take time to do things with each other when asked. Taking time out to play a game or just to talk shows commitment.

Positive Communication

Even strong families have differences but they are able to communicate with each other with respect. Rather than becoming hostile or angry, family members can discuss differences openly and listen to other points of view (DeFrain, 2006). Suggestions for developing positive communication in stepfamilies include:

- **Be open and calm when expressing feelings.** A remarried couple may disagree on how to discipline children, but instead of fighting they will find more success when they sit down and discuss the issue calmly. Keeping in mind that research supports the biological parents disciplining their own children, couples will want to discuss an approach upon which both can agree (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).
- **Keep communication positive.** Arguing, blaming, and criticizing will not promote healthy relationships in a stepfamily, but praise and kindness will. One researcher explains, “Love and friendship occur among family members when they invest time talking with each other, and when they make each other feel safe and valued as they express feelings” (DeFrain, 2006, p. 60).
- **Listen to one another.** An important part of communicating is listening to what the other person has to say. This lets that person know that what he or she has to say is important and meaningful.
- **Have a sense of humor.** Developing a sense of humor is a healthy part of communication (Wuerffel, DeFrain, & Stinnett, 1990). It can help to lighten the mood when difficult subjects are discussed and relieve tension among family members.

Successful Management of Stress and Crisis

When faced with stress, strong families look for the positive side of the situation. They keep their communication open, are flexible, create purpose in life, learn to laugh and cry, and take the challenges one day at a time (DeFrain, 2006). The stepfamily that makes the effort to support each other during times of crisis will grow closer as they respond to the stress together. If they find they cannot overcome the problem on their own, they can seek help, such as counseling, to assist them through the crisis. Specific things stepfamilies can do to respond to crises include the following:

- **Share feelings.** Be especially mindful of how other family members are feeling

during a stressful event and take time to talk to each other about those feelings.

- **Encourage family participation in responding to stress.** Allow each family member to contribute when responding to family stress. For example, if a parent loses his or her job, allow each family member an opportunity to contribute to making life easier for the entire family.

Spiritual Well-being

Religion or spirituality in the family comes in many forms, such as a faith in a higher being or oneness with the world. Families who agree on spiritual beliefs have more successful marriages and family lives (Larson & Olson, 2004). However, some stepfamilies may be blending different beliefs or religious backgrounds, and agreement may not be possible. In that case it may be beneficial for stepfamilies to openly acknowledge that they have different beliefs and agree to respect those differences. Family ties are made stronger through acceptance and tolerance. Spiritual well-being for stepfamilies can be enhanced by doing the following:

- **Share views about religion and spirituality.** Encourage family members to share their ideas about God, a Supreme Being, or what is sacred. Acceptance of multiple forms of spirituality can enhance the spiritual well-being of the family, even if the views are different.
- **Allow time for spiritual expression.** Set aside time each week for family members as a group or individually to think about or act upon spiritual beliefs.

Enjoyable Time Together

Spending time together can be one-on-one time with one other family member or spending time together as an entire family. In either case it is important to create a relaxed environment where each member can communicate openly (DeFrain, 2006). Time together one-on-one or as a family can include recreational activities, working together, or having meals together.

Meaningful family rituals can also help families grow closer (Leon & Jacobvitz, 2003). If a stepfamily creates a ritual of spending time together, for example playing games together on Sunday nights, it gives the family the opportunity to become closer. As they build memories together members of the stepfamily will begin to feel a sense of oneness that will strengthen family relationships. Making the effort to work on these goals together will provide the stepfamily with a sense of common purpose and direction. Spending time together may not happen unless the time is planned. The following suggestions will contribute to having enjoyable experiences as a family:

- **Plan mealtimes together.** Make a plan for all family members to be together for meals a couple times per week. Use that time to share each family member's important positive events of the week. Avoid focusing on negative issues or disciplinary actions.
- **Plan fun activities.** Plan an outing each month that includes all family members. Have family members take turns deciding what the event will be.

Conclusion

Creating strong stepfamily relationships can be challenging; however, there are specific steps families can take to strengthen family relationships. Each of the suggestions described above can help families develop stronger bonds of love and affection for one another. It may be useful to talk as a family about which of these characteristics are already in place and which characteristics could be improved. Begin trying one or two suggestions, which can be decided upon by the entire family. As family members experience success with these one or two suggestions, additional areas of focus can be added to strengthen stepfamily relationships.

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