

Families - what makes them happy

Our definition of 'family' has changed over the past few decades to include single parent, same-sex and blended families as well as the traditional family structure of two parents and their children living together. The Family Strengths Research Project identified eight strengths of strong families in Australia. This study shows that happy families, whatever their makeup, have certain traits in common. It might be valuable to occasionally evaluate the dynamics of your family to ensure that everyone is as happy as they could be.

Communication

Families benefit from open two-way communication that is loving, understanding and patient. Suggestions include:

- Being honest with each other
- Listening to each other with full attention
- Staying in contact with each other
- Reassuring each other of your love with words, cuddles and making time for each other
- Sharing thoughts and feelings without censoring or criticising each other
- Encouraging positive behaviour
- Allowing the expression of negative emotions as well as positive ones
- Working together to solve problems and conflicts
- Laughing together.

Sharing activities

Happy families share activities together. Suggestions include:

- Share time together.
- Make dinnertime an opportunity for round table family discussions.
- Play together.
- Go on regular family outings.
- Decide as a group on important family 'traditions', such as how to celebrate birthdays and festive occasions.
- Plan holidays that cater for the whole family.

Togetherness

Children need to be involved in some of the decision making if they are to feel like a worthwhile family member. Happy families share a feeling of togetherness. This includes:

- Sharing a common sense of belonging
- Sharing beliefs that really matter
- Enjoying the place we call home
- Celebrating together
- Sharing our memories.

Support

Happy families support and encourage each other by:

- Looking out for each other

- Sharing the load
- Being there for each other
- Encouraging each other to try new things
- Taking an active interest in each other's hobbies.

Affection

Happy families show their affection for each other in a variety of ways, including:

- Telling family members how they feel about them
- Showing their love for each other
- Considering each other, including each other's feelings
- Caring about each other
- Doing things for each other.

Acceptance

Families are made up of different individuals with different needs and, sometimes, different values and beliefs. Happy families are able to show acceptance of these individual differences by:

- Accepting the differences
- Giving each other space
- Respecting each other's points of view
- Being able to forgive each other
- Each taking on their own responsibilities.

Commitment

Happy families have a genuine commitment to each other, which is shown through:

- Feeling safe and secure with each other
- Trusting each other
- Keeping promises
- Doing things for the community
- Having rules.

Resilience

Happy families show their resilience through:

- Talking things through
- Changing plans when they need to
- Learning from the tough times
- Keeping each other hopeful
- Pulling together in a crisis
- Discussing problems.

Unhappy families

Families that don't function as well as they could have certain traits in common, including:

- Unfair power distribution, such as one parent ruling the household
- Problems with maintaining peaceful conflict negotiation
- Lack of respect for each other as individuals
- Not talking or listening to each other
- Refusing to acknowledge or accept anyone else's point of view
- A tendency to rely on negative forms of communication such as yelling, criticising or sulking

- The use of physical punishment, such as smacking or hitting, as the main form of discipline.

Overcoming problems with professional help

There are services available that help family members work through difficult issues. Seek professional advice if you think you need some assistance.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Parentline Tel. 132 289
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321 Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm, Saturday, 10am to 4pm
- Family counsellor

Things to remember

- Families that function well have certain traits in common.
- It is useful to look at your family dynamics and identify areas that need a little work.

- Unhappy families can benefit from professional help.

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