

Families that work well

Families have changed a great deal in recent years and there are now many different forms of family, as well as different styles of parenting. One thing is certain - whatever 'family' means to you it is the most important part of children's lives. The family in which your child grows up will have a big influence on how well your child will cope with situations, relationships and living.

Just as a loving, caring family can help a child develop good self-esteem, so an unhappy, fearful family can lead to low self-esteem and a range of problems for a child. Sometimes unhelpful ways of doing things, habits and patterns form in our families without us realising that this has happened. We often just know that life seems harder and not enjoyable anymore as a parent. You may find it useful to think about how your family works.

Studies show that healthy families make time for talking and listening, show affection and encouragement, accept differences, share chores and decisions, keep in touch and make family time.

Make time for talking and listening

- Families where a wide range of feelings are expressed seem to be healthier: feelings such as joy, excitement, anger and fear.
- Often parents forget that talking with children can be difficult and that they think in different ways from grown-ups. Try to remember how it was for you. The people you liked were probably those who listened to what you had to say.
- Listening means not only hearing the words but working out what your child is feeling behind the words.
- Listen without jumping in with answers or lecturing or criticising. Remember what it feels like when you want to talk and have someone just listen.
- Check that you're hearing your child correctly by repeating what you have heard but in different words. Show you are interested with brief fill-ins like "Mmm, go on" or "Really!"
- 'Put down' messages, threatening and blaming are likely to make your child feel bad or hopeless.

Show affection, encouragement and appreciation

- Children and adults feel good when they are encouraged and appreciated. Let your child know what you love and like about him.
- Show affection, give hugs, be thoughtful and kind.
- Teenagers who remember being praised, kissed or hugged during the previous week are likely to do better at school than those who don't have this experience.
- Take time to ask what each family member has done each day and show interest in each other's lives.
- Most people find it easier to criticise than praise, so make an effort to think about the positives and tell your child what you have noticed.

Accept the differences in each person

- No one should be left out or made to feel the odd one out in a family.
- Appreciate, encourage and value the differences in each family member, knowing that everyone is special in her own way.
- Allow each person to be excited about her personal interests, and show respect and tolerance.
- Don't put pressure on members to be the same or to hide their differences. Let them feel proud to be themselves.

Share the chores and the power

- Help children to take on responsibilities so that as they get older you allow them to have more say over their own lives.

- The younger the child the more you should be in control, but begin early, giving them chances to do things for themselves with careful watching.
- Use adult power wisely. Keep control through humour and encouragement, not with punishment or threats. In less healthy families there is a never-ending fight for control which is unhelpful to children.
- When children have a real say in what happens and where everyone feels their views are listened to, a very special relationship with trust and intimacy helps build a healthy family.

Keep in touch with friends and relatives

- The more a family is isolated from others the more chance there is of having problems.
- Knowing that there are people outside to turn to when things get tough or in a crisis will make a difference to your child's happiness and chances of having friends.
- Apart from family and neighbours, share day to day problems with the parents of your child's friends, (but don't do it in front of children).

Make family time

- Plan so there is time to discuss things that affect the whole family.
- Create a sense of belonging - sharing ideas, values and beliefs.
- Find some way to spend time together as a family group. Make fun times together.
- Shared mealtimes (without television or phone calls) allow everyone to share information, and to know what is happening to each other.
- Do things together – play cards or games, take holidays, go on outings or walks, go camping, play sport, share hobbies.

Commitment

- Put the well-being of your family as a first priority.
- Show loyalty to your family. Stick up for each other so that each person feels confident in the family's support.
- Pull together to form a united front and to find solutions.

Family rituals and traditions

The little special things (daily rituals) that you do everyday and on special occasions help build a sense of belonging, inner security and contentedness. Daily rituals can be how you say goodbye, what you do at mealtimes and bedtime. Families benefit from coming together to celebrate special occasions (eg birthdays, Christmas and Name Days) and of having traditions about what happens at these times.

Spiritual values and beliefs

Many families have spiritual beliefs which give a sense of meaning and direction to the ordinary events of the day. They can also add strength and hope in times of crisis and difficulty.

Resilience

Strong families are able to withstand setbacks and crises with a positive attitude and shared values and beliefs that help them cope with challenges.

Reminders

- Create a healthy climate for talking, listening and expressing feelings.
- Value the differences in each family member.
- Be quick with praise and slow with criticism.
- Sharing power promotes trust and caring.
- Develop friendships for support.
- Make time to be together.
- Hold on to your beliefs.

Source: www.cyh.com

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