

Fact Sheet



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Strong Families ... Strong Futures

Why Happy Families are Different

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Leo Tolstoy said: “All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” What did he mean? Certainly, there are many causes for unhappiness in families, but in what way are happy families different in their ability to successfully handle adversity?

Define Your Flight Plan

In his bestselling book, *7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*, Stephen Covey compares a successful family to an airplane pilot with a flight plan. For the pilot, the flight plan identifies the destination and outlines the path to getting there. But during the course of the flight, wind, rain, turbulence, air traffic, human error and other factors act upon that plane. Throughout the trip, there are slight deviations from the flight plan. But barring anything too major, the plane will arrive at its destination. Likewise, happy families have unique “flight plans” that reflect values and principles that enable them to successfully handle problems and reach the desired “destination.”

The Seven Habits Reviewed

The first habit, **being proactive**, can be defined as being responsible for our own choices and having the freedom to choose based on values rather than moods or circumstances. Covey uses the analogy of the Emotional Bank Account to describe the concept of proactivity. The Emotional Bank Account represents the quality of the relationship a person has with family members. It’s like a financial bank account in that “deposits and withdrawals” are made

that impact the trust levels between family members. Successful families strive to maintain high balances in the Emotional Bank Accounts. Even when mistakes are made in a relationship, the “emotional reserves” will compensate for it. Every problem encountered is seen as an opportunity to make another deposit.

Habit 2—**begin with the end in mind**—involves creating a clear vision of what you and your family are all about. Habit 2 is about “destination.” Covey suggests that families develop a family mission statement that describes what kind of family you really want to be and identifies the principles that will help you get there. Here’s one example:

Our Family Mission

To always be kind, respectful and supportive
 of each other,
 To be honest and open with each other,
 To keep a spiritual feeling in the home,
 To love each other unconditionally,
 To be responsible to live a happy, healthy,
 and fulfilling life,
 To make this house a place we want to come
 home to.

Put first things first is the third habit. This habit involves focusing on priorities—namely the importance of family. Covey cautions that, “Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least.”

Habit 4—**think “win-win”**—encourages family mem-

bers to think in terms of mutual benefit. Happy families foster support and mutual respect. They think in terms of “we” not “me” in order to make agreements.

Seek first to understand . . . then to be understood is the fifth habit. Family members seek first to listen with the intent to understand the thoughts and feelings of others, then seek to effectively communicate their own thoughts and feelings. Successful families build deep relationships of trust and love by providing helpful feedback.

Habit 6—**synergize**—is about two or more people working together to produce more than the sum of what they could produce separately. In other words, one plus one equals three or more. The family builds a mutual problem-solving atmosphere based on the dynamics of loving, learning, contributing, and creative cooperation.

The final habit—**sharpen the saw**—recognizes that a family increases its effectiveness through personal and family renewal in four basic areas of life: physical, social/emotional, spiritual and mental. Traditions play a key role in nurturing the renewal of family spirit.

Concurring Insights

Much of what Covey has written about building a happy family life is supported by the work of researchers in the field of family life studies. In her book *Traits of a Healthy Family*, Dolores Curran identifies numerous positive characteristics of “healthy” families. These include: good communication skills, support and affirmation of family members, respect, trust, family interaction, sense of shared responsibility, abundance of rituals and traditions, and a shared religious core.

H. Wallace Goddard, former Extension Family and Child Development Specialist from Auburn University,

outlines the following six fundamental characteristics of strong families:

- 1) caring and appreciation
- 2) commitment
- 3) communication
- 4) community and family ties
- 5) working together
- 6) flexibility and openness to change

The Challenge

Happy families are our greatest national resource. It is in them that we find our meaning, our strength, and our future. Spend some time identifying your family’s strengths. From that foundation, choose additional qualities that you can add to your family dynamics. Become involved in activities that will help your family build those strengths.

Bibliography

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