

Family Assets ... Building Blocks for Life



Fact Sheet



Family Life Month Packet
Family and Consumer Sciences

Building Resilient Families for Strong Communities

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“Resiliency is the family’s ability to cultivate strengths to positively meet the challenges of life.”

National Network for Family Resiliency (1995)

“Challenge is a fact of life. Making adjustments in each life stage, coping with unexpected setbacks, or handling the daily stresses of life can turn a crisis into an opportunity for growth.”

Ben Silliman, University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension (1995)

“Every single person has capabilities, abilities, and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capabilities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well-connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making.”

John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight. (1993). Building Communities From the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets

The Theory

“Resiliency is the ability to bounce back from stress and crisis. It is displayed in individuals as optimism, resourcefulness, and determination. Individuals, families, and communities demonstrate resiliency when they build caring support systems and solve problems creatively. While individuals, families, and communities each have unique coping capacities, together they form a dynamic support system.” (National Network for Family Resiliency, Children, Youth and Families Network CSREES-USDA, 1995).

Research in the area of family and individual resiliency has demonstrated that there are examples of perseverance and resourcefulness in the face of challenging conditions.

Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith’s (1992) longitudinal study of “the children of Kauai” revealed that in spite of early medical distress, poverty, school difficulties, teen pregnancy or arrest, children were able to persevere through difficulty. Psychologist Robert Coles (1986) noted the ego strength of African-American children who survived the first, hostile years of racial integration in New Orleans schools. More recently, resiliency has been seen in terms of coping capacities, influenced by factors associated with protection and availability of resources (Werner and Smith, 1992).

The value of understanding the resources that affect family resiliency can be understood through an examination of the risk factors and challenges facing families

today. Nineteen percent of American children are growing up in homes where the head of the household is not a high school graduate. The proportion of children living in poverty (21 percent) has changed little over the past decade. Nearly 28 percent of American children are growing up in households where no parent had a full-time, year-round job. Some 32 percent of children are not living with two parents (Kids Count Data Book, 1999).

Nick Stinnett and John DeFrain (1985) note that certain psychological and social characteristics are present in strong families that cope with change. These strong coping characteristics include: commitment, appreciation, time together, faith and values, and coping skills. Carl Dunst, Carol Trivette, and Angela Deal (1988) found that focusing on strengths significantly improves a family's self-help capacity and the impact of professional help.

How to Build Resilient Families

How can communities help to build resilient families? Research highlights some common elements in effective community programs that cultivate the strengths of families to meet life's challenges (National Network for Family Resiliency: Children, Youth and Families Network, CSREES-USDA, 1995):

- **Community based**—programs encourage neighborhood and school involvement and recognize that children are a part of a family and a community.
- **Comprehensive**—programs are not only crisis oriented, but provide continuous intense interaction with competent, caring adults and peers and address the educational, health, social and emotional needs of parents, children and individuals.
- **Empowering**—programs provide nurturing connections between community resources and link them to the world of work and family.
- **Complex**—programs focus on causes rather than only on symptoms and empower families to become part of the decision-making process.
- **Culturally relevant**—programs demonstrate respect for diversity and accommodate different learning styles of people.
- **Collaborative**—programs involve the resources of multiple agencies and services.

- **Respectful**—programs use mentors, volunteers that demonstrate respect for establishing a relationship with the family or individual needing support.
- **Intergenerational**—programs use an encouragement model that promotes interaction and support among age levels of diverse individuals.
- **Accountable**—programs are responsive to families and assess impact.

The Action

Lynda Fowler, Ohio State University Extension Agent, Family and Consumer Sciences, Crawford County, has provided programming that emphasizes building family strengths through intergenerational mentorship and family resiliency programming. Through the support of a 1996 Ohio State University Innovative Grant, family life education fact sheets and other resources and training programs were provided to community organizations and families. Topics included: "Characteristics of Successful Intergenerational Programs," "Encouraging Creativity in Children," "Challenges and Choices Facing Adults," and "Planning for Children in Self Care." Lynda collaborated with Crawford County organizations to develop brochures that described intergenerational programs in Crawford County that supported relationships between adults and youth and recruited volunteers for these programs. "Take a Break—Life Works Today" parenting and family life programs were presented at county libraries, businesses, GRADS, WIC, Children's Services, and Department of Human Services Programs. The Ohio State University Extension Family Life Fact Sheets, Senior Series Fact Sheets, and other resources are available in all 88 counties in Ohio through local Extension offices for the education and outreach to families.

What are some ways that communities and families can foster knowledge, skills, and resources that support family resiliency?

- Communication should include listening to others without distractions or pre-judgments that distort what we hear. Checking out or repeating what we think we heard and asking for clarification can help people to understand one another better. Family discussions can

be an opportunity to gain information, offer compliments as well as concerns and opinions.

- Resiliency is strengthened in families that plan time together. When parents spend positive time with their children they are saying “I value you. You are worth taking time for.”
- Community programs plan opportunities that encourage responsible one-to-one relationships between adults and youth. Youth and adults work together to provide service to the community through mutual activities and projects.
- Family members can show loyalty and appreciation by involving family members in decision-making responsibilities. Traditions and rituals can be established that build a sense of identity and belonging.
- Feelings of self-worth of family members can be fostered by telling others that you appreciate the time or effort or other special skills that they have contributed to a project.
- Children want adults to be available—to have time to show interest, to do things and talk with them.
- Children learn how to deal with change through examples of the adults in their lives. Demonstrations of positive ways of dealing with stress can include using humor, gathering information, practicing problem-solving techniques, and using quiet times for open sharing and communication.

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