

Family Assets ... Building Blocks for Life



Instructional Guide



Family Life Month Packet
Family and Consumer Sciences

Build Caring Neighborhoods on the Porch

Barbara A. Brahm, Extension Agent, Family and Consumer Sciences and Community Development, and
Chester J. Bowling, Ph.D., State Specialist, Community Leadership and Management

“Out on the porch...” The very words bring to mind a mood, a feeling, an image of a place to relax and enjoy a cool breeze on a warm afternoon or evening, a place for reading, rocking, storytelling and sharing with family neighbors and friends.

The porches in our lives hold vivid memories for families. Greetings and partings of family and friends take place there. For some, the porch becomes (at least in the “old-fashioned days”) an outdoor living room—a place to spend hours sitting and talking with family and friends.

Nobody thought much about the front porch when most Americans had them and used them. The great American front porch was just there, open and sociable, an unassigned part of the house that belonged to everyone and no one, a place for family and friends to pass the time.

David Rocklin

“Perhaps more things were resolved on America’s front porches than in any other place, and yet so few are being used today,” comments writer Gary Smalley. Today, televisions, computers, air conditioners, privacy fences, endless activities, and busyness seem to keep people off their porches. Or due to architectural design, maybe all a home has is a stoop or step and a door.

Does Your Porch Say Welcome?

Do you have a cheerful porch? Porches can give a glimpse of the personality of a home and its owner. The entrance to the place you call home speaks volumes about

who lives beyond the door. No matter how big or small your porch, it can call out a warm welcome to guests with a little creativity and planning. Dress it up for holidays and the changing seasons with a colorful doormat, a little paint, some pretty flowers, or furniture. Remember, it is your front porch, the place where you welcome others into your life.

Porches Are Important for Neighborhoods and Communities

Porches promote togetherness and build family strengths.

The relaxing atmosphere of the porch encourages the sharing of traditions and family stories. Intergenerational bonds can take bud and grow. Families can take a break and get to better know each other. Warm memories are created from the feeling of togetherness and just spending time together. Parents can teach and pass on many values and principles through the conversations and stories shared. Family resiliency can be enhanced.

Porches promote social interaction and build relationships.

Relationships are important in developing youth into healthy, caring individuals. Search Institute research shows that youth need support from three or more non-parent adults—and chats on the porch can begin to fill that need. Studies by Ornish (1990) and Ornstein and Sobel (1978) show the importance of relationships on health, healing and prolonged life. In this hectic world, we need to seek out those who need people in their lives who care.

Porches contribute to caring neighborhoods and community cohesiveness.

In a study of the town of Roset, Pennsylvania, by Dr. Stewart Wolf, strong personal relationships attributed to “a remarkable cohesiveness and sense of unconditional support within the community. These relationships can have their start on the porch as neighbors talk and get to know each other. As neighbors form friendships they begin to appreciate and care about each other. These bonds then help to strengthen and build communities.

Coming Back to the Porch

With many things pulling us away, it may take some special effort to get back to the porch. One way to bring back the “good ol’ days” of passing the time sitting on the front porch is to invite neighbors over for some old-fashioned cookies and cold lemonade. You can create some rich, wonderful memories by sipping, sharing, and supporting! Share old family stories or just talk. Stimulate a child’s learning by reading to them or having them read. Here are some ideas to start the conversation and reminiscing:

- Did you have a front porch at home? What did you do there? Did you have a porch swing?
- What are some of your best childhood memories?
- What was (is) your favorite book? Why?
- Who is your hero (heroine)?
- What’s the best gift you ever received?

If you don’t have a porch, sit on your deck or under an old shady tree. If you don’t have cookies and lemonade, share another favorite snack. The important thing is to get together, start talking, and build relationships! Planning a fancy gathering isn’t necessary. Often, last minute get togethers are the most memorable.

Start a Porch Cookie Campaign!

If several families in a community truly believe in the benefits of porch sitting, they might want to work with local family agencies or Ohio State University Extension to start a Porch Cookie Campaign. Families are encouraged to have porch gatherings and send a picture of their event into a designated office. Weekly cookie prizes are awarded through a drawing of those sending in pictures. Libraries can develop Porch Cookie Kits with books, cookie recipes, and cookie cutters. Pictures are displayed at the county fair or a local mall.

The results—Neighbors start talking. Relationships take bud. Families are strengthened. Youth feel encouragement and support. Neighborhoods and communities become more cohesive. Everyone creates long-lasting memories and has fun!

References

- Benson, P. (1996). *40 Developmental Assets*. Search Institute.
- Bruhn, J.G. and Wolf, S. (1979). *The Roseto Story: An Anatomy of Health*. Harper and Row.
- Dowell, C. (1992). *Out on the Porch*. Alonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
- Ellis, A. (1999). *My Front Porch*. Harvest House Publishers.
- Gulley, P. (1997). *Front Porch Tales*. Multnomah Books.
- Ornish, D. (1990). *Dr. Dean Ornish’s Program for Reversing Heart Disease*. Random House.
- Ornstein, R. and Sobel, D. (1978). *The Healing Brain: Breakthrough Discoveries about How the Brain Keeps Us Healthy*. Simon and Schuster.
- Pilisuk, M. and Hillier, S.P. (1986). *The Healing Web: Social Networks and Human Survival*. University Press of New England.

Family and Consumer Sciences, 1787 Neil Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210

For more information, visit the Human Development and Family Life web site at:
<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/index.htm>