

Family Strengths: Often Overlooked, But Real

By Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D., Rosemary Chalk, Juliet Scarpa, and Sharon Vandivere, M.P.P. August 2002

Overview When it comes to the American family, public attention tends to focus far more on what's wrong than on what's right. The multiple problems that affect some American families have been well chronicled: divorce, poverty, troubled youth, substance abuse, violence, and so forth. Obscured behind this seemingly endless litany of troubles is the compelling evidence that many families – including those living in difficult circumstances – have inner strengths that enable them to do a good job of raising their children and supporting one another. Because family strengths don't lend themselves to a statistic that can be captured easily or dramatically in daily headlines, they tend to be overlooked or dismissed. The result is a significant gap in our knowledge base.

This Research Brief seeks to address this gap by, first, defining the concept of family strengths; second, considering what we know from research about what makes for strong families; and third, examining several measures of family strengths in two recent national surveys. Our review of these survey data suggests that levels of important family strengths are quite high in contemporary families. We find levels of closeness, concern, caring, and interaction that might surprise some commentators. For example, on a national youth survey, four out of five young adolescent respondents report that they enjoy spending time with their parents. More than half report that they turn first to a parent for help in solving problems. And almost three-quarters report that they eat dinner with their families five or more days each week. Moreover, despite the stresses and uncertainties of daily life, most children have parents who report that they feel happy all or most of the time.

The data that we present suggest a link between family strengths and child well-being, although further research is needed to determine precisely how they are linked. For this reason, this brief also suggests some next steps that could be taken to expand our understanding of family strengths and what they mean for the well-being and development of family members.

We caution that our emphasis here on family strengths should not be construed as an attempt to dismiss or minimize the problems confronting some American families and children today. Rather, our goal is to balance the common emphasis on problems with a perspective that recognizes the high levels of positive attributes in many families.

DEFINING FAMILY STRENGTHS

What are *family strengths*? While no official or formal definition exists, we think of family strengths as the set of relationships and processes that support and protect families and family members, especially during times of adversity and change. Family strengths help to maintain family cohesion while also supporting the development and well-being of individual family members. Some researchers focus on the strengths of exceptionally successful families. Others study the characteristics of

healthy families that differentiate them from their dysfunctional counterparts. Both components are important.¹

IDENTIFYING STRONG FAMILIES

What characteristics distinguish healthy or successful families? Clearly no single attribute makes a family strong. Indeed, a cluster of characteristics may be crucial. To date, researchers have considered a variety of approaches for defining strong or

successful families, focusing on the social, economic, and psychological functions that families need to perform.

Early studies focused on the characteristics of “strong families.” For example, one study identified these characteristics as a high degree of marital happiness, satisfying parent-child relationships, and interactions among family members who succeed in meeting each other’s needs,² while another emphasizes warm and caring parents who discuss and reason with their children.³

More recent studies have gone beyond the consideration of *family relationships*, that is how family members interact with and treat each other, to consider a broader range of *family processes*, that is, what families actually *do* as a group and as individuals to offer support to adults and children.⁴ Examples of family processes include communication patterns, parenting styles and strategies, household routines, time use, and adaptation to crisis and change. Research on problem families suggests that the *absence* of positive family processes can be as problematic for children as the *presence* of negative ones.⁵

Some researchers have pointed out that on a very basic level, successful families are ones that can reproduce themselves by raising children who establish stable and harmonious families themselves.⁶ Other researchers have emphasized the importance of satisfaction with family life itself, in addition to the achievement of positive outcomes.⁷ Still others have focused on family strengths in the context of a family’s ability to adjust to change or crisis. For example, one researcher⁸ has reported that strong families not only cope with stress but also end up being more cohesive and more satisfied in overcoming problems.⁹

This finding echoes the results of other studies of stressful life events suggesting that when individuals are able to control or deal with such events satisfactorily, they can emerge as more competent and resilient than those who have either been overwhelmed by traumatic experiences or who have encountered little stress in the course of their development.

Despite their differences in approach and emphasis, studies of family strengths, taken together, reinforce the notion that both *family relationships* and *family behaviors* are important in the consideration of family strengths.

MEASURING FAMILY STRENGTHS

The families that were the focus of the early research on strong families tended to be white and middle class and were often identified by nominations from community representatives, such as local clergy members.¹⁰ Over the past decade, additional efforts have been made to study family strengths within broader, more representative samples that included minority groups.

Still, few family strengths constructs – broad concepts – have been tested in national studies with families that represent the complex mix of American households, particularly households that are vulnerable to social and economic stress. The limited data that do exist come from studies that were not designed to examine family strengths per se, but included a few family process or family relationship measures as part of some other research effort. For example, studies designed to monitor welfare reform, to study schooling, and to examine the labor and educational experiences of youth in their transition to adulthood have each included scattered measures of behaviors and relationships that represent family strengths.

In this brief, we focus on a sampling of family strengths indicators that are measured in two surveys:

- The initial round of the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97) – an in-person survey of more than 9,000 U.S. adolescents 12-16 years of age in 1997, who continue to be surveyed annually.
- The National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF) – a telephone survey of U.S. parents (usually the child’s mother) or parent-figures conducted in 1997, 1999, and 2002 by the Urban Institute and Child Trends as one component of the “Assessing the New Federalism” project. We concentrate on data from 1999, which yielded information for almost 36,000 randomly selected children under age 18.

Five of the measures analyzed relate to positive family processes: (1) parental positive mental health; (2) household routines; (3) time use; (4) communication and praise; and (5) monitoring, supervision, and involvement. The sixth – parent-child warmth and supportiveness – relates to positive family relationships. For each, we provide some findings

about these measures from one or both surveys and note the prevalence of the family strength based on our analysis of the survey data. We also describe how each measure is associated with positive outcomes for child or adolescent development. We underscore, however, that these are *correlational* associations only, and they cannot demonstrate conclusively that a particular family strength *caused* a particular positive outcome.

Parental Positive Mental Health

Perspectives: Numerous research studies find an association between poor parental mental health – particularly that of mothers who suffer from depression – and poorer child adjustment.¹¹ This is not surprising. Parents’ mental health affects the home environment. A parent in poor mental health may be limited in her ability to provide the kind of nurturing, love, care, and attention that will enable her children to thrive.¹² Research also has found that parents with symptoms of poor mental health tend to provide their children with less emotional support and to discipline them more harshly.¹³

Findings: Most of the research on parental mental health, perhaps understandably, has focused on *poor* mental health. The relationship between *good* mental health in parents is not as richly documented as comparable negative measures. Still, two questions directed at parents in the National Survey of America’s Families do address this issue. The survey asks how much time during the past month the parent felt calm and peaceful and how much time during the past month the parent had been a happy person. The answers provided indicate that:

- The majority of children live with a parent who reported that he or she felt calm or peaceful all or most of the past month (58 percent).
- The majority of parents described themselves as having been a happy person all or most of the past month (71 percent).

Analyses suggest that both of these positive characteristics are associated with child well-being. Children whose parents report that they feel calm or peaceful, or who report that they are happy, are more likely than other children to be positively engaged in school and are less likely than other children to have

a high level of behavioral and emotional problems, to have health problems, or to have been suspended or expelled from school.

Household Routines

Perspectives: The regular performance of family routines (such as meals, chores, and errands) is linked to multiple child outcomes, including academic achievement, self-esteem, and both behavioral and emotional adjustment.¹⁴ Families that are well-organized and in which members adhere to regular roles tend to produce children who achieve at school and have greater self-control than do other families.¹⁵ In addition, self-control and other positive outcomes are associated with home environments in which family members’ behavior is repetitive and predictable.¹⁶

Findings: According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997, the majority of children live in families that do adhere to regular routines. For example, data from the survey show that:

- 72 percent of adolescents eat dinner with their families at least five days a week.
- 81 percent of adolescents live in households where routine household tasks are performed at least five days a week.

Maintaining these everyday routines is associated with positive outcomes for adolescents. Families that eat meals together regularly and that do household tasks routinely have adolescents who are more likely to avoid delinquent behaviors (such as running away, damaging property, carrying a handgun, or being arrested) than other youth. They are also less likely to use alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco; to be suspended from school; and to have a high level of problem behaviors.

Time Use

Perspectives: Shared parent-child activities are important both because they are intrinsically satisfying and because they can help educate and socialize children. For example, research has found that children whose homes emphasize learning opportunities and cognitively stimulating activities are more academically motivated than other children.¹⁷ In addition, a positive and enriching family environment can help prevent behavior problems in youth, including

delinquent behavior.¹⁸ Moreover, sufficient quality time together may be a prerequisite for well-being in family relationships.¹⁹

Findings: Data on very young children from the National Survey of America's Families and data about older children from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997 show that:

- About a quarter of all children under age 5 (26 percent) go on outings (such as to the park, a grocery store, or a playground) with family members about once a day, while another 58 percent are taken out several times a week. In other words, 84 percent of preschoolers go on outings frequently.
- About half of 12- to 14-year-olds (48 percent) report that they “do something fun” with their families (such as playing a game or going to a sporting event) three or more days a week.

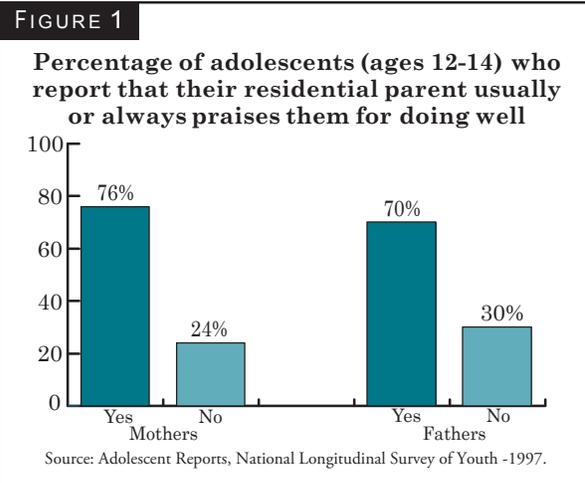
Tabulations of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997 data also provide some evidence that reports of having fun with one's family are associated with better outcomes for adolescents. These adolescents are more likely than others to avoid delinquent behaviors, substance use, suspension from school, and high levels of behavior and emotional problems.

Communication and Praise

Perspectives: Positive communication includes being warm, respectful, and interested in the child's opinion, while still maintaining reasonable control over the child.²⁰ Not only is such communication generally enjoyable and satisfying to both the parent and child, but it also is associated with well-being among children. For example, two-way communication in a trusting atmosphere can reduce myths and misinformation about health and can encourage healthy behavior among adolescents.²¹

Findings: The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997 asks adolescents about both their parents. The survey results indicate that:

- The majority of adolescents have mothers (76 percent) and fathers (70 percent) who usually or always praise them for doing well (see Figure 1).
- More than half of adolescents (54 percent) report that they turn to one of their parents, rather than to a friend, another relative, or to no one, when they have problems.



Adolescents with parents who are generous with praise, as well as adolescents who rely on parents for advice when they have problems, are less likely than others to be suspended from school; to be delinquent; and to use marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco. They are also less likely to have a high level of behavior and emotional problems or to have a limiting learning or emotional problem.

Monitoring, Supervision, and Involvement

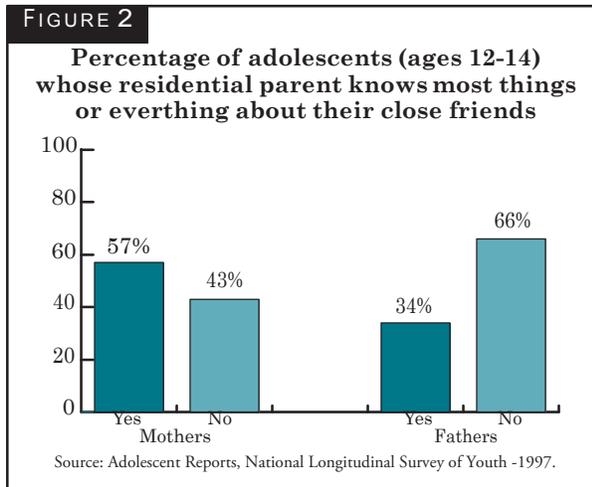
Perspectives: Supervision by parents that is perceived as too strict may make youth feel that they are not trusted.²² But when combined with encouragement and praise, parents' awareness and monitoring of adolescents' schoolwork and social life can promote better grades, socially acceptable behaviors, and socially positive actions.²³ Children whose parents encourage their school performance tend to be more highly motivated toward their schoolwork.²⁴ And consistently high parental involvement during high school increases the odds that adolescents will attend college, vote, and volunteer.²⁵ Adolescents who are closely supervised are also less likely to engage in risky behaviors, including early or frequent sexual intercourse.²⁶

Findings: Data reported by young adolescents in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997 indicate that the residential parents of adolescents typically do know their adolescent's friends, their friends' parents, their teachers and school activities, and where adolescents spend their time. Mothers of adolescents seem more likely to know these things than fathers. Specifically:

- 57 percent of mothers and 34 percent of fathers know almost everything or everything

about their adolescent's close friends, according to the young adolescent (see Figure 2).

- 41 percent of mothers and 29 percent of fathers know the parents of their adolescent's close friends.
- 70 percent of mothers and 49 percent fathers know their adolescent's teachers and school activities.
- 73 percent of mothers and 55 percent of fathers know whom their adolescent is with when he or she is not at home.



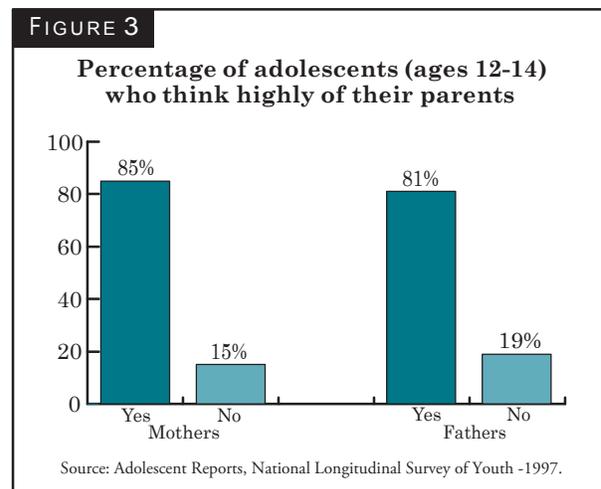
Analyses show that these measures of parental monitoring are also related to the adolescent outcomes cited above, namely, a decreased likelihood of suspension from school, delinquent behaviors, substance use, and a high level of behavioral and emotional problems.

Parent-Child Warmth and Supportiveness

Perspectives: Parent-child interactions can affect children's behavior over and above the influence of socioeconomic and demographic factors, such as income, family structure, and parent education.²⁷ High parental warmth and supportiveness contribute to healthy development, particularly when they are combined with high expectations for maturity. Research has demonstrated that parents who are warm and place high demands on their children for appropriate behavior have children who tend to be content, self-reliant, self-controlled, and open to learning in school.²⁸ In addition, warm and positive mother-child reciprocal relationships can buffer children from stress, and maternal sensitivity to children's needs is a strong predictor of positive cognitive and social outcomes.²⁹

Findings: Results from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997 indicate that adolescents in general have warm and supportive relationships with their residential parents. Again, these data are provided by the adolescents, not the parents. The survey finds that:

- The majority of adolescents think highly of their parents (85 percent for mothers and 81 percent for fathers; see Figure 3).
- Most agree that their parents are people they want to be like (59 percent for mothers and 58 percent for fathers.)
- Most enjoy spending time with their parents (81 percent for mothers and 77 percent for fathers).
- Moreover, 79 percent of adolescents report that their mother usually or always helps with what is important to them, and 67 percent report that their fathers help them.



Such warm and supportive relationships with parents are consistently associated with good adolescent outcomes in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997. Each of the indicators of warmth in the survey is related to a decreased likelihood of suspension from school, behavioral and emotional problems, delinquent behavior, and substance use.

Summary

Our analyses of data from two important nationally representative surveys suggest that most children in America live in families that possess important strengths. Further, these family strengths are related to good outcomes across a range of child well-being measures.

ROUNDING OUT THE RESEARCH

The measures of family strengths presented in this brief represent only a small portion of the full set of potential family strengths concepts. Many concepts have not been measured at all, while others are included only in small, local surveys. And many studies lack outcome measures that would enable researchers to determine whether family strengths are associated with positive or negative measures of well-being either at the present time or in the future.

In addition, many samples have not been diverse, much less representative, precluding examination of how family strengths occur in various demographic groups and in various geographic regions. For example, we know that many children experiencing otherwise adverse situations (such as poverty or disability) succeed in life, and that positive family processes and relationships likely contribute to this success. Yet we do not have much empirical evidence identifying the pathways by which this success is achieved.

Clearly, then, we need to develop new and better measures to assess family strengths and to collect new data. Meanwhile, even though family strengths research is still in the building block stage, consensus has emerged in several key areas:

- *Both the qualities of family relationships and of family behaviors are important aspects of family strengths.*
- *Multiple measures are necessary to provide a more complete picture of the status of a family or groups of households.* No single measure (for example, just eating dinner together regularly or just monitoring kids' friends) can serve as a unilateral indicator to distinguish dysfunctional families from average families. Similarly, no single measure can distinguish the exceptionally successful families that can thrive, even under difficult circumstances, from more average families.
- *Measures of family strengths need to address different developmental periods of family life.* Some changes in family circumstances are natural parts of families' growth and development, while other changes may cause problems for children and adults.
- *The nature of family strengths is influenced by the social and economic context of families' social environments.* Families that are "on their own," isolated from their extended family, or that are

trying to survive in poverty-ridden, crime-plagued neighborhoods may have different relationships and processes than families that do not have to face such challenges.

- *The role of culture affects family processes and relationships in ways that we don't currently understand or assess well.* African-American or Hispanic families, for example, have had cultural experiences that may differ from those of other Americans. These experiences are shaped not only by adaptation to their American historical and contemporary social experiences, but also by the roots of their ethnic heritage.³⁰ Yet ethnic differences in family processes and relationships are often matters of degree rather than representing unique factors or categorical distinctions.³¹

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Documenting family strengths carries importance beyond the world of social science research. The ultimate goal of studies in this field is to identify family processes and relationships that serve as positive resources or assets for families regardless of their socio-economic status. This knowledge can guide policy makers, service providers, and community leaders in developing programs to help families deal with stressful circumstances. For example, family strengths research can point to characteristics of healthy families that clinicians and counselors should consider as they plan intervention programs to help troubled youth and struggling families.

Family strengths research can also provide benchmarks to assess the status of families over the course of time; evaluation tools for gauging the effectiveness of programs that aim to enhance family strengths; and a framework to help identify characteristics and social indicators that set national goals for public policy, such as *Healthy People 2010*. Finally, family strengths research could have a beneficial effect on the quality of public dialogue by introducing an evidence-based discussion of the strengths of American families and how to build upon them.

CONCLUSION

The persistent attention to indicators of doom and gloom within American families has led some observers to comment on the unbalanced depiction of troubled

families – especially families of color – in the media and in social science literature.³² While some American families are beset by problems, and while research suggests that these problems can lead to poor outcomes for kids,³³ that is only part of the story.

Research also suggests that many families are prospering and strong, and that many families facing challenges are doing an excellent job of raising their children and supporting each other.³⁴ By focusing solely on problem behaviors, research studies, government reports, and media coverage routinely overlook the successful coping strategies that families use to manage the multiple stresses in daily life.

The data that we have presented here from two important national surveys offer a glimpse into the processes and relationships within families that help children to thrive. Ours is only an initial analysis of family strengths concepts and data. Nevertheless, it suggests that many U.S. families do quite well on measures that capture positive dimensions of family life and that these measures are related to child outcomes. Given the frequent reporting of negative news about the American family, this is an important research result to share with the American public.

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This brief summarizes a longer report by the authors, *Family Strengths* (Child Trends, 2002, January) that was prepared specifically for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The full report, which can be purchased through our Web site, includes findings on additional family strength measures that were tested in three national surveys; some details on the methodology used in the data analysis; and a full set of graphs and references. Child Trends gratefully acknowledges the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its support of our research on family strengths, as well as for its support

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