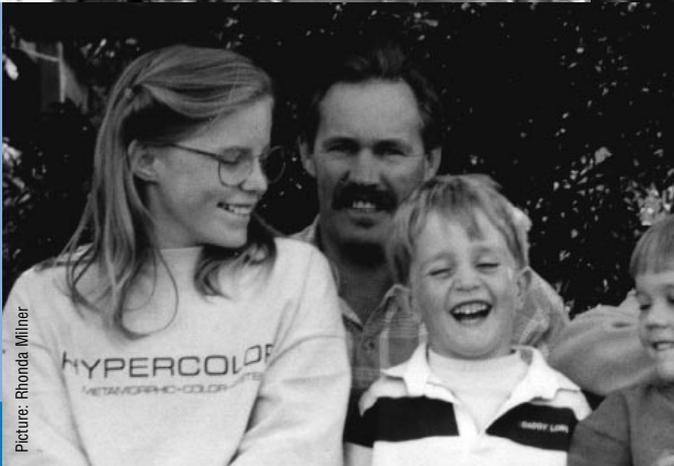




If researchers *study* only family problems, they are likely to *find* only family problems. Similarly, if educators, community organisers, therapists and researchers are interested in family strengths, they look for them. When these strengths are identified, they can become the foundation for continued growth and positive change in a family and a society.

John DeFrain



Picture: Rhonda Milner

Strong families

Those who study families do so for many different reasons, but perhaps the most important reason is to help us learn how to get along better with each other in our most intimate environment. Much of the research on families in the 20th Century focused on families in trouble in an effort to answer the question, ‘Why do families fail?’ An alternative approach, focusing on families who are doing well, helps us find answers to the question, ‘How do families succeed?’

The late David Mace was one of the founders of the marriage enrichment movement in Great Britain and the United States. He believed that the study of successful families could yield important knowledge in our quest to help make human life happier by increasing the number of strong families in the world, and he was an enthusiastic supporter of research in this vein.

The terms that researchers, clinicians, and laypersons have used over the years to describe families who are doing well together in life vary a good deal: strong families, emotionally healthy families, balanced families, happy families, successful families, optimal families, and many others can be found in the literature. But whatever term one

uses, the underlying theme being described is remarkably consistent from one observer of families to the next: in essence, these families believe they are functioning well together in life, and are satisfied with their relationships with each other.

Perhaps this is all quite simple. Professors, I would be the first to admit, do have the capacity to over-complicate matters and shed light on the obvious. I had to chuckle recently as David Olson and I finished working on the third edition of our 700-page textbook on family life, *Marriage and the Family: Diversity and Strengths*. ‘Seven hundred pages!’ I found myself thinking. ‘It took us 700 pages to say what probably could be said in three words: “Love one another”.’

But the fact of the matter is that loving one another has proven difficult for human beings throughout the millennia. Family problems are extraordinarily common in American society today, and the divorce rate has been at epidemic proportions for more than a quarter century. If it were all so very simple, people would have figured out how to live together happily a long time ago and our lives would be perfect. Since this is not the case, there is room for more research on



Picture: Rhonda Milner

Nothing in the world could make human life happier than to greatly increase the number of strong families.

– David R. Mace (1985)



Picture: Howard Birnstihl



around the world

strong families, and these families can be role models for everyone who aspires to create healthy relationships with loved ones.

Ideas about how to make families work well can be used by teachers in the classroom who hope to help their students improve the quality of their lives; by policy makers who work to build a society conducive to the development of strong families; by the media in efforts to increase public awareness of family strengths; by counsellors, social workers, ministers, and volunteers who work with families; and by family members themselves who are seeking answers to the difficult questions about improving relationships with which we struggle continuously.

Strong families in Australia

My family and I are living in Australia for six months this year. We are happily involved with many other researchers in studies of Australian family strengths, a joint venture of the Family Action Centre and the Department of Social Work at the University of Newcastle, the Australian Institute of Family Studies in Melbourne, the Centre for Indigenous Development, Education, and Research (CIDER) at the

University of Wollongong, and the Commonwealth Government Ministry of Family Services in Canberra.

A number of interrelated projects are being developed: in-depth interviews with 50 strong families in the Hunter Valley Region of New South Wales; a questionnaire study of several hundred strong families who volunteered their participation in response to news stories appearing in the media; and telephone surveys of a random sample of Australian families which will assess the overall strength of families in this country.

To my knowledge, this will be the first time any nation in the world will be tracking the health of family relationships for a whole country over an extended period of time. Australia will be able to see very clearly how ups and downs in the economy, in the political world, and other broad changes in society affect the strengths of individual families. Many governments today chart a wide variety of family-related phenomena – births, deaths, marriages, divorces, income, the rate of unemployment, and so forth. But no nation that I know of measures family strengths in its regular studies of a random group of families. Australia will be a world leader in this regard.

Since much research in the field of family studies historically has focused on families in the dominant social group, this study also will make a special effort to include a representative proportion of families from each of the many cultures contributing to the fabric of life in Australia. As in earlier family strengths research, a wide variety of families will be included: single-parent families, stepfamilies, nuclear families, extended families, couples without children, and so forth.

A number of research journal articles and magazine articles for a broader audience are planned as a result of these efforts, along with a book and perhaps a series of documentary videotapes introducing the viewers to a representative group of strong families across Australia.

The qualities of strong families

In 1990 a dozen researchers who have figured prominently in research on successful families in the United States met in Washington DC under the auspices of the Department of Health and Human Services. One of the remarkable observations I made during that meeting was how much agreement there was among these researchers on the qualities which

Let me speak, briefly, about two models of strong families I know very well: the work of David H. Olson and his many colleagues, who began their studies of families at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul in the mid-1970s; and the work of Nick Stinnett, myself, and a host of colleagues, which also began in the mid-1970s and continues today at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The Family Circumplex Model, or Family Map, a conceptual framework of healthy families developed by Olson and his colleagues, focuses on three important dimensions: cohesion – a sense of togetherness or closeness in the family; flexibility – the ability to change with changing life circumstances; and communication – a facilitating dimension which helps families increase their feelings of closeness, and successfully work out problems (Olson, McCubbin, et al. 1989; Olson, Russell and Sprenkle 1989).

The Family Strengths Model, proposed by Stinnett, myself, and our colleagues, has six general qualities: commitment; appreciation and affection; positive communication; time together; spiritual wellbeing; and the ability to cope with stress and crisis (Stinnett and DeFrain 1985).



Picture: Don Whyte

One important reason a family is happy is because they do things together that are enjoyable for everyone involved. Strong families have quality time in large quantities. They enjoy 'hanging out' as a family.

contribute to the strength of families in the US, and how these qualities are strikingly similar from culture to culture in America, whether one is talking about European American families, African American families, Native American families, Latino American families, Asian American families, or many other prominent ethnic and cultural groups.

Each research team attending the 1990 meeting had created a model which they felt described the healthy families they had studied. Although the models differed in their details, there was remarkable overlap from model to model.

Although these two models of health were developed independently of each other over a long period of time, it does not take much examination of the dimensions on each to realise that the two models are very similar. Olson's cohesion dimension is related to Stinnett and DeFrain's dimensions of commitment, appreciation and affection, and time together. Olson's flexibility dimension is related to DeFrain and Stinnett's dimensions of the ability to cope with stress and crisis, and spiritual wellbeing. And Olson's communication dimension is related to

Stinnett and DeFrain's positive communication dimension.

Family Strengths model

Let us go through each of the six qualities in the Family Strengths Model in more detail.

Commitment

Members of strong families make it very clear to each other and the world that their life with each other is of utmost importance. 'My wife and kids are the most important part of my life,' one father said in describing commitment. A mother wrote,

these feelings are communicated more indirectly. The key is that family members are aware of the positive emotions others feel. People in unhappy families often focus on negative interchanges, but we believe that positive strokes outnumber negative broadsides in strong families by a wide margin.

One family, for example, developed an excellent technique for keeping the home a positive place. If a family member feels the need to criticise another member, the criticiser must maintain a ratio of ten positive strokes to one critical statement. 'We criticise each other on occasion in our family,' the father explained, 'but we try to criticise with kindness. And we try to make sure that we express



Picture: Andrew Chapman

Strong families like to laugh. The stronger the family, the more likely they are to use humour to maintain a positive outlook on life, for entertainment, to reduce tension, to express warmth, to put others at ease, to facilitate conversations, to lessen anxiety, and to help cope with difficult situations.

'What we have as a family is a treasure.' Because they feel this way, they make sure that they do not let work or other priorities take too much time away from family interaction. Commitment to the group does not mean, however, that family members stifle each other. 'We give each other the freedom and encouragement to pursue individual goals,' a wife noted, 'yet either of us would cut out activities or goals that threatened our time together.'

An important part of this commitment is sexual fidelity. Some of the people in our research admitted to having an extramarital affair earlier in the marriage. Some believed the affair precipitated a crisis that in the final analysis led to a stronger marriage. But marriages can become strong without a major crisis. 'Being faithful to each other sexually is just a part of being honest with each other,' one young woman told us.

Appreciation and affection

People in strong families care deeply for each other, and they let each other know this regularly. In some cultures it is relatively uncommon to express appreciation and affection in an open way, and

appreciation for something positive the person does at least ten times for each negative thing we say.' Positive interchanges tend to snowball. If Mom feels good about herself, she will be more likely to say kind things to Dad. And when Dad feels good, he is likely to be especially nice to the children in return.

Sexual behaviour is one powerful way couples express appreciation and affection for each other, and many people in our research have noted that warm sexual feelings for each other stem naturally from feelings of emotional closeness developed throughout the day: 'Foreplay does not begin at 10:30 p.m. on Saturday night,' one husband explained. 'It begins when I take out the garbage on Wednesday morning, when I cook dinner on Friday night, and when I help Jeannie solve a problem at her work on Saturday afternoon.'

Positive communication

No list of the qualities of strong families would be complete without positive communication. Some of the most important talk occurs when no one is working at communication. How does your

teenager feel about sex? Or grades? Or her future? When parents and children get comfortable with each other, important issues arise.

Communication does not always produce agreement, even in strong families. Family members have differences and conflicts, but they speak directly and honestly about them without blaming or condemning each other. They try to resolve their differences, but sometimes end up agreeing to disagree. Troubled families, on the other hand, are either overly critical and hostile in their communication with each other, or deny problems and avoid verbal conflict. Although verbal hostilities are not productive, neither is avoidance of problems.

Time together

One important reason a family is happy is because they do things together that are enjoyable for everyone involved. In American society pleasant time together as a family is at a premium. Many Americans are so plagued by activities that they cannot find time to eat meals together or simply enjoy 'hanging out' as a family. Judi Dye, a minister in Nebraska, talks about 'the violence of busy-ness' in American culture. I think what she means is that we get so over-involved in activities that we do grave harm to our physical health, our family relationships, and our spiritual dimension.



Picture: Howard Birnstihl

The elusive concept called spiritual wellbeing, deep down, is about connection. Connection to each other and connection to that which is sacred to us in life. This helps create a caring centre within each individual.

Studies of communication in strong families have found it to have several important aspects. First and foremost, members of strong families are extremely good listeners. As one father is fond of saying, 'God gave us two ears and one mouth so we would listen twice as much as we talk. I sometimes think God should have given us ten ears for every mouth. We would get along better as human beings.' Family members in strong families are also adept at asking questions and do not try to read each other's minds. They also know that people's views change over time, and the only way to avoid mind-reading is to check out positions regularly by asking questions.

Humour is one important part of healthy family functioning, and in one of our studies we found that strong families like to laugh. The stronger the family, the more likely they were to use humour to maintain a positive outlook on life, for entertainment, to reduce tension, to express warmth, to put others at ease, to facilitate conversations, to lessen anxiety, and to help cope with difficult situations. Strong families are not likely to use humour negatively, thus sarcasm and putdowns are not commonly practiced (Wuerffel, DeFrain and Stinnett, 1990).

Americans often appear to want to settle for quality time at the expense of quantity. Strong families, however, have quality time in large quantities, and there is good reason for being this way. We would never tell our boss that we were going to give her only 'quality time' at the office. To be successful in the working world takes an investment of time and effort. Why should we expect to have a successful family if we don't want to invest our hearts in the family, also?

In our research in the South Pacific we found Fijian families especially adept at enjoying each other's company, and appeared to be an excellent model for other cultures. Our Fijian friends clearly demonstrated to us the importance of simply spending a great deal of time with each other in the home. They didn't have a particular agenda to talk about, or a goal to reach in the time they spent together with each other. They simply liked each other and demonstrated this with their presence (DeFrain, DeFrain and Lepard 1994).

And for years we have been listening to testimony from thousands of adults as they think back about their happiest childhood memories. 'What is the most wonderful memory you have from your childhood? Picture it in your mind's

eye, and describe it to me.' Two common threads quite regularly unite these positive childhood memories. First, happiness in childhood almost always centres on activities experienced together as a family. Our best memories of life as children most often are memories of family activities. Second, the most pleasurable times we remember from our childhood almost always centre on simple activities that don't cost a lot of money. Money cannot buy happiness, but loving family relationships can create it.

Spiritual wellbeing

Perhaps the most controversial finding in our research on strong families is the importance of religion or spirituality. Some families call this quality spiritual wellbeing. Some talk about faith in God while others see God in the eyes of their baby daughter. Some describe feelings of hope, peace, and optimism in their lives. Some say they feel a oneness with the world and all its creatures. Others talk about their families in almost religious terms, describing the love they feel for one another as sacred. Still others express these kinds of feelings in terms of ethical values and important causes in the world. 'I feel my family is part of all the families of the world,' said one respondent, 'and I express my beliefs by working in a variety of ways to make the world a better place to live in.'

The words people use to describe all this are extraordinarily diverse and no single term will work for everyone. In cultures which have very dominant institutionalised religious traditions, aspects of spiritual wellbeing are quite readily apparent. In cultures which are more officially secular in nature, such as communist China today, aspects of spiritual wellbeing still can be discerned as one listens to Chinese talk about the importance of the bonds maintained among family members, between the generations (filial piety), and between families and the society as a whole. In China, service to those in our families, and service to those in the greater community helps build harmony, and harmony is of utmost importance in Chinese culture, dating back thousands of years to the time of Confucius (Xie, DeFrain, Meredith and Combs 1996).

The elusive concept called spiritual wellbeing, deep down, is about connection. Connection to each other and connection to that which is sacred to us in life. I note with some pleasure that the goal of the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle is to contribute to the development of a truly civil society in Australia. This sounds remarkably like the Chinese concept of harmony.

It is clear from our discussions with people from many cultures and religious backgrounds that these beliefs help to create a caring centre within each individual that promotes sharing, love, and compassion.

Ability to cope with stress and crisis

Strong families are not immune to stress and crisis, but they are not as crisis-prone as troubled families tend to be. Rather, they possess the ability to cope with stress effectively. Strong families are often

creative at preventing troubles before they occur. Some stressors in life are inevitable, however. The best a family can do is to meet the challenge as effectively and efficiently as possible, minimising the damage and looking for any growth opportunities in the process.

In one study, we focused on how 81 strong families coped with crisis. We assumed that strong families would experience difficulties in life, but would differ in the way they handled these crises and in the level of success they achieved. The study made it clear that strong families are not immune to trouble. Thinking back over the past five years, 23 per cent of the strong family members in the study cited a serious illness or surgery as the most difficult crisis they had faced; 21 per cent said their most difficult crisis in the preceding five years was a death in the family. Marital problems ranked third. The majority of these marital crises involved adult children, in-laws, or brothers and sisters. A child's unwanted pregnancy, delinquency, or poor adjustment in school was also occasionally listed (Stinnett, Knorr, DeFrain and Rowe 1981).

Fully 96 per cent of the strong families in the study said they were successful in meeting these crises. Among the strategies strong families use for weathering crises is pulling together, rather than apart. Each person, even a very young child, has a part to play in easing the burdens of the others. Also, strong families know how to reframe the crisis in a more positive, manageable light.

Chinese culture is especially instructive in this regard. The Chinese pictographic writing system dates back several thousand years. And for all these years the Chinese symbol for the word crisis is a composite picture linking the symbol for danger with the symbol for opportunity. The Chinese have believed through the millennia that there are opportunities for growth even in the most difficult situations.

Finally, we found that strong families in crisis seek help if they cannot solve the problems

THE CHINESE SYMBOL FOR CRISIS



Danger

Opportunity

The Chinese pictographic system of writing dates back several thousand years. The ancient Chinese symbol for the word 'crisis', which is still in use today, is a composite of two other symbols – the symbol for 'danger' and the symbol for 'opportunity'. Thus, for thousands of years, the Chinese have known that a crisis is undoubtedly a difficult time in the life of an individual or a family. But a crisis in life, if viewed positively and with creative energy, can also be a catalyst for personal and family growth and a harbinger of better things to come in life.

Source: John DeFrain, Xie Xiaolin and Chen Yuh-Hsien (1993), Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, College of Human Resources and Family Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

FIGURE 1 Qualities of strong families

Commitment	Appreciation and affection
Trust	Caring for each other
Honesty	Friendship
Dependability	Respect for individuality
Faithfulness	Playfulness
Sharing	Humour
Positive communication	Time together
Sharing feelings	Quality time in great quantity
Giving compliments	Good things take time
Avoiding blame	Enjoying each other's company
Being able to compromise	Simple good times
Agreeing to disagree	Sharing fun times
Spiritual wellbeing	Ability to cope with stress and crisis
Hope	Adaptability
Faith	Seeing crises as challenges and opportunities
Compassion	Growing through crises together
Shared ethical values	Openness to change
Oneness with humankind	Resilience

Source: Adapted from Stinnett & DeFrain (1985, p. 14); Olson, McCubbin, et al. (1989, p. 52).



Picture: Don Whyte

Behind all the different rites, customs and religions, people in various cultures live in the same eternal, immutable human cycle, which is governed by the same laws.

themselves. Although this may surprise some people, members of strong families do get counselling in an attempt to learn better ways of coping with crisis. Truly troubled families are often unable to admit they have troubles and to seek advice (Stinnett, Knorr, DeFrain and Rowe 1981).

One of the most inspiring studies conducted by our research team focused on strong families in Soweto, a black township in Johannesburg, South Africa. Our colleague, Verna Weber, spent two years there, focusing on 11 strong families. She found these families to be especially creative at surviving and thriving as a family in a very poor, crowded, and violent environment. The qualities they demonstrated as strong families were remarkably similar to the qualities of strong families our research team has encountered in many other places across the globe. The commitment and caring they showed for each other deeply moved our colleague (Weber 1984) as she watched them struggle in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

The six general qualities of strong families and some common aspects of each of these are outlined in Figure 1.

Family strengths and universal values

Families around the world are wonderfully diverse. These differences add zest to living. We do not all have to be the same to get along well together. In fact, by having different interests and capabilities, we offer strength to each other as individuals, family members, and citizens of our communities.

There is an apparent paradox here. As individuals and as families, we are all unique and different. Yet, deep down, as human beings, we are all quite similar. This recognition of human commonalities has been voiced by countless people in countless walks of life – novelists, poets, sociologists, anthropologists, singers and songwriters, economists, psychologists, educators.

For example, the late James A. Michener, a novelist who described himself as a 'citizen of the world', dedicated his life to understanding people around the world. Michener lived in an area for months or years and wrote about what he saw and heard. He concluded that: 'We are all brothers [and sisters]. We all face the same problems and find the same satisfactions. We are united in one great band. I am one with all of them, in all lands, in all climates, in all conditions. Since we bothers [and sisters] occupy the entire earth, the world is our home' (Michener 1991: 249).

Anthropologist Colin Turnbull devoted his life to studying the nature of human culture around the world and challenged age-old Western assumptions about the differences between so-called primitive societies and modern societies. In his book *The Human Cycle*, Turnbull (1983) examined such disparate cultures as the Mbuti of Zaire, the Hindus of Banaras, and middle-class Western society. He described the human life cycle as it is experienced in each of these cultures and showed that from infancy to old age, the stages of life are identical in meaning in all these cultures. Turnbull believed that the problems of

love, work, loneliness, growing up, and growing old are universal; he also argued that these problems may be handled far better by the so-called primitive societies. He concluded that behind all the different rites, customs, and religions, people in various cultures live in the same eternal, immutable human cycle, which is governed by the same laws.

Kenneth Boulding, an economist, philosopher, and general systems theorist, believes that human betterment is the end toward which we individually and collectively should strive. Betterment is a change in some system that is evaluated as 'being for the better'. It is an increase in the 'ultimate good', that which is good in itself. Four great virtues make up this ultimate good: (1) economic adequacy – 'riches' in contrast to poverty, nourishment rather than starvation, adequate housing, clothing, health care and other essentials in life; (2) justice – in contrast to injustice, equality rather than inequality in access to work, education and health; (3) freedom – in contrast to coercion and confinement; and (4) peacefulness – in contrast to warfare and strife. Boulding (1985) believes these great virtues may be considered universal values.

In regard to the qualities of strong families, our training as sceptical social and behavioural scientists teaches us to be very cautious when talking about universals. And yet our studies of strong families in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, Oceania, and now Australia, lead us to the conclusion that there are remarkable similarities among families who feel good about their lives together and express satisfaction in their competence in dealing with the challenges that life brings. These similarities are much more apparent than the differences from culture to culture.

Figure 2 includes the Family Strengths model and Boulding's universal values.

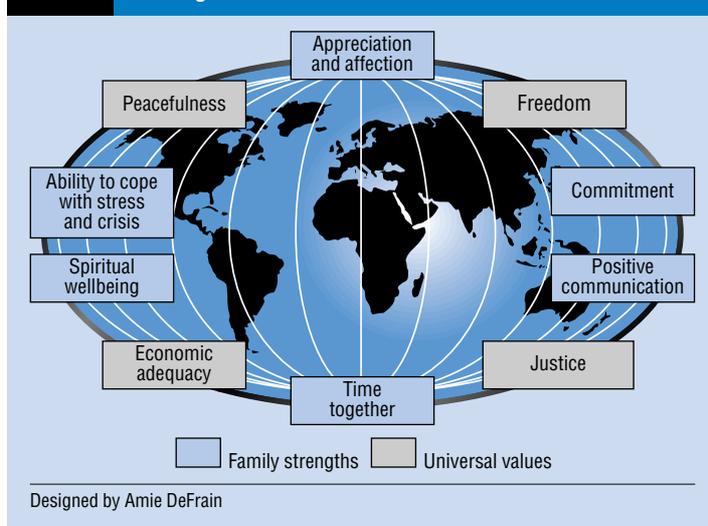
Conclusion

Operating from a family strengths perspective, we are reminded how important it is to focus on how families can succeed rather than get lost in endless discussions of why they fail. This perspective arose from the notion that strong families can serve as models for other families wanting to succeed.

One advantage of this type of perspective is that it tends to change the nature of what one finds in families. Simply stated, if one studies only family problems, one finds only family problems. Similarly, if educators, community organisers, therapists and researchers are interested in family strengths, they look for them. When these strengths are identified, they can become the foundation for continued growth and positive change in a family and a society.

We are not arguing that society look the other way and ignore family problems. Rather, we are arguing that society cannot afford to look the other way and ignore the very real family strengths that the vast majority of families rely on each day to bring comfort and joy to each other.

FIGURE 2 Strong families around the world



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