



# Happy Families ~ Happy Teachers ~ Happy New Year!

by JUDY BERANGER

Teachers often express how much comfort it gives them when their families are thriving. Do you have any New Year's resolutions for family this year? What kinds of fun things do you do as a family? If you were away from home for a period of time, what would you miss most? If you could do one thing to help your family be even stronger, what would it be? Research on family has burgeoned in the last century. In 1905 Leo Tolstoy noted findings on family that consistently demonstrated how happy families resembled one another, while unhappy families were unhappy in their own, unique ways.

There is no yardstick to judge how well a family is doing but members know when they feel part of a trusting, secure environment where people feel safe and valued, where communication is nurtured and difficult situations are addressed in a timely fashion. People feel understood, experience love and in turn feel free to give love. Individuals share responsibility for the family's effective functioning and in so doing develop a strong sense of right and wrong and fairness. Meanwhile, in families with secrets, the unspoken "don't tell" rule, the intolerance and "conditional love" prevent the strength and security experienced by strong families.

## How do you define a "family"?

There have been many efforts to define or describe families. Some have tried to capture it by describing its composition, but in the end the true essence of family is its "function" rather than its "form". Family serving organizations have rallied around definitions that are inclusive rather than limiting, recognizing that families come in all shapes and sizes. The definitions identify family as a living unit of individuals regardless of the form it takes. Consistent in the definitions is that a family consists of two or more people, whether living together or apart, related by blood, marriage, adoption or commitment to care for one another. Families have a lifetime hold over us as our lives are shaped both by those who love us and those who refuse to love us.

As a result of decades of research on families, the conviction that only the "traditional or nuclear family" can be functional and healthy no longer stands. Those who succumb to cultural or religious biases that support this distorted, exclusive attitude unwittingly promote the development of judgemental attitudes towards other non-traditional families. Such attitudes can spread like a virus affecting tolerance levels in schools and communities. Take for example families who restructure as a result of separation and divorce. Some refer to the "loss of their family" rather than identify that the "family", in the process of restructuring, are struggling to create new roots for happiness. It is not the structure of the family, but how the individuals within the family system interact with each other, that determines the level of health and well-being. Families are constantly developing and changing and thus the family system is constantly adapting and changing in order to maintain itself. Change affecting one member affects all members. Any change – positive or negative – such as health issues, moving, parenting, relationship issues, disagreements, separation/divorce, job change, adolescence, birth of child, empty nest, and caregiving put pressure upon the family system to adapt and change.

## What are the characteristics of strong families?

### *The Secrets of Strong Families*

In their book, *The Secrets of Strong Families*, co-authors Stinnett and DeFrain explore how people in strong families actively care for each other's well-being. They cite six major qualities families share:

1. Commitment – both in good times and stressful times. Strong families are dedicated to investing time and energy to enhance one another's well-being.
2. Appreciation and affection – Members are aware of what actions they take to demonstrate their care for one another, and are not shy to tell people how they feel and how they care. Our buckets of self-esteem are harder to fill than to empty. It is often said that it takes at least ten positives to repair one negative. Being appreciated is like good music – we can

listen to it over and over again.

3. Communication – Family members talk to each other, lots of conversation – funny, difficult, rambling and focused. Family members commit to participating in difficult conversations in a timely fashion and work hard to maintain balance in the conversation by including all voices. It is very important to check out what was heard and what assumptions may be attached.

4. Planned time together – One study of 1,500 school children asked, “What do you think makes a happy family?” Most children replied that a happy family is one that enjoys doing things together.

5. Spiritual well-being – Examples can include altruistic acts, faith in humanity, concern for others, unity with all living things, organized religion and faith in God. Spiritual well-being can be seen as a part of each family member where love, caring and compassion exist. It can be described as the other oriented part of people, the part that assists us in transcending ourselves where we are able to focus on what is sacred and precious to us, the part that is patient and forgiving.

6. Coping ability – Strong families are able to focus on the donut – not the hole. They are able to learn from stress and are conscious about not being crisis-prone. They give energy to what they can do to effectively manage and reduce daily stressors in their lives. Silent treatment and disrespect are not left to fester, and family members are not shy to seek help when life sends major upsets – they shoulder problems and pull together. The focus is on optimal health, prevention, balance and shared responsibility.

Is your home a place where people generally relate warmly to one another? Are you content with the level and quality of interaction that takes place within your home when things are tough, or would you like to improve in this area? If the answer is “no”, consider meeting as a family to explore how this might be improved. Be willing to discuss matters, giving consideration to the views of all involved. Sticking to the point and not injecting irrelevancies or recalling instances not relevant to the discussion at hand are real gifts. Your EAP can provide support if the task seems too onerous.

#### *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*

Stephen Covey in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families* applies his well-known seven habits paradigm to assist in keeping families strong. Even though he uses different language his message is very similar.

1. Being proactive rather than reactive;
2. Beginning with the end in mind – having goals and a family mission statement;
3. Putting first things first – planning family times that have teaching moments, fun times, problem

solving opportunities;

4. Thinking win-win – cultivating a family culture of mutual respect, understanding and cooperation;

5. Seeking first to understand and then to be understood – moving toward empathic listening;

6. Focusing on synergy – grows out of mutual respect and understanding;

7. Sharpening the saw – cultivating and creating opportunities to support present traditions and grow new ones that promote a sense of belonging and nurturing.

#### *Traits of a Healthy Family*

Family author and researcher, Dolores Curran in her book *Traits of a Healthy Family* espouses similar traits: healthy families communicate and listen, affirm and support one another, teach respect for each other, develop a sense of trust, have a sense of play and humor, exhibit a sense of shared responsibility, teach a sense of right and wrong, have a strong sense of family in which rituals and traditions abound, have a balance of power among members, have a shared spiritual core, respect the privacy of one another, value service to others, foster family time and conversation, share leisure time, and admit to and seek help with problems.

Family can be a plus for all of us no matter what form it takes – the main ingredients for success are the love and caring and a sense of belonging for other human beings in the family. The New Year is a great time to reflect on the importance of giving of ourselves in all human relationships. It is a time to commit to new goals that enhance quality of life and well-being for us – both as teachers and as members of a family. Teachers are directly affected by family health. Call your EAP for more information about an inventory tool that can help you in this journey.

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*A family is a place where minds come in contact with one another. If these minds love one another the home will be as beautiful as a flower garden. But if these minds get out of harmony with one another it is like a storm that plays havoc with the garden. ~ Buddha (B.C. 568-488).*

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