



BUILDING STRONGER FAMILIES

Dan R. Engle

CHAPTER ONE

The Building Blocks

What makes a strong family? Is it something like winning the lottery that is elusive and only a few can find? Perhaps it is an inborn quality that some have and others do not. There are those who subscribe to the myth of "naturalness", believing that marriage, child rearing, and family are simply natural. There is no trick to it. Anyone can do it.

Building a strong family is not a mystery, but it does take work and knowledge. For most, it is not a natural process. In many instances, one must go against what seems natural in order to succeed.

In analyzing families that are happy, whole, and strong researchers have found six things that are common to them all. These are the six building blocks to a strong family. Before examining the building blocks, however, two questions should be answered. What is a family? Why should I care if mine is strong?

What Is a Family?

A generation ago no one would have had any trouble defining a family. It was a mom, dad, and kids. Usually there were two or three children. It was odd for a child not to have both a father and a mother. A child, who had lost a parent through death or the rare divorce, might find himself the object of wonder or ridicule. Surprisingly 98% of Americans still believe that a married couple with children is a family. About 10% less believe that a mother with her children is a family, and about 10% less than that feel that a father and his children are a family.

The face of the American family has changed over the past generation. There are more people living alone, more single adults still living with their parents, more blended families, more single women with children, and more unmarried couples living together. The latter seldom has positive outcomes.

For the purpose of this study, a "family" is defined by the reader. If you are a single parent, you may consider that you and your child are a family. If you are married, but have no children, you may consider that you and your spouse are a family. If you are single, never been married and have no children, you may consider that you and a parent or a sibling are a family. In any event, you will find that the building blocks are still effective.

Why Is a Strong Family Important?

The family is the foundation and building unit of a well functioning planet and nation. Some sociologists think this is a naive and dated view

of society, but history tends to prove it so. Your interest is probably more immediate. Those who have a strong family weather stress and crisis better than those who do not. There is less loneliness and depression among those with a strong family. In short, those with strong families are happier.

In our culture, we have replaced family members with co-workers and friends. Often, family members are far away. While friends, community, and colleagues are important, they are not a suitable replacement for family. Even though your family relationships may be broken and soar, progress can and should be made. Don't leave it up to the other family members. Take the responsibility for strengthening your family. It will be a lot of work, but it will be worth it.

The Six Building Blocks

These are the things that make families strong:

- Commitment
- Communication
- Appreciation
- Spending time together
- Strong values
- Handling crisis

In the next chapters each of the blocks will be discussed.

CHAPTER TWO

Commitment

Doing what one says is not a highly practiced value these days. A person may agree to something, but if a better offer comes along, there is no hesitation in taking it. Unfortunately, this trend is true in relationships as well. For many of the past 30 years the divorce rate rose until half of all marriages ended in dissolution. States are now beginning to realize that divorce laws are too permissive, and they are enacting new laws to make it more difficult to end a marriage.

The situation, sadly, is no different with children. Parents can be heard to say to their children during a divorce, "Just because we don't love each other anymore, doesn't mean we don't love you." Most of the time, this is not true. At least one of the parents is attempting to distance themselves from the children. A divorce for parents is a divorce for children simultaneously. In the clinical setting, I have had a mom or dad say that they didn't want to be a parent any longer.

Commitment to aging parents is likewise absent in certain instances. Families once felt that taking care of an older member was a responsibility. The idea of having a government agency or nursing home care for that member would have been a last resort. People, now live long distances from other family members and are not as aware or motivated concerning the health of an aging person.

When a person does demonstrate an abiding commitment in our society, it is noticeable. Such a commitment is defined by faithfulness, perseverance, and continual caring. It might be characterized by the statement "I'll never leave you". When this kind of commitment is present, a person never gives up on family. A family member may be hard to deal with, ornery, and simply difficult, but the committed person keeps on. In the Charles Dickens classic, Scrooge's nephew was such a person. In spite of his uncle's humbugging and indifference toward him, he continued to care about the miserly family member.

You may not have a Scrooge in your family, but perhaps you have a member who is difficult to get along with. You may have tried countless times to establish or refurbish a relationship and have failed. The natural inclination is to wash your hands of the situation and move on. Giving in to such urges will rob you of the chance to produce healing and of the joy of being reconciled in your family.

Perhaps you and your spouse have fallen into a passive relationship without much fun or spontaneity. Don't give up on that

relationship. This is the time to repeat those vows you made and determine to invigorate this most central of all relationships. If you do, you will find a New World waiting – one that will be better than you would have imagined.

Whatever the condition of your family, if you want it to be strong, you must have commitment. This is the block upon which all the others rest. It is the capstone.

COMMITMENT---

CHAPTER THREE

Communication

If you were to put a microphone on a husband and wife in order to record everything they said to each other in a week, how much time do you imagine they would spend communicating? If you guessed about 17 minutes per week, you would have been correct. That is not very much time. Surely there is more than that to say.

It is true that issues should be selected with some care. There are families who fall into a pattern of conflict about any of everything. On the other extreme there are families who discuss nothing, no matter how important it is. Disclosure to family concerning issues of importance is vital. Otherwise, family members will change and evolve until one day they wake up and realize they don't know each other.

Surrounding every issue are many elements, any of which can be used as a starting place for communications. There are the facts of the issue, the feelings of the individuals, sensory data, thoughts, a desire for some type of action, a want or a need. The more important the issue is, the more each of these should be communicated. In communicating, however, such things as exaggeration, blaming others, sarcasm, and insults should be avoided. These will inflame, but will serve no positive purpose in resolving an issue.

Two ingredients are essential for good communication, care and skill. In the absence of these, poor communication will exist. There will be manipulation, abuse, misunderstanding, and further conflict. The "care" will be assumed. As there is little the printed word can do to help you care about family if you don't. The importance of this has been addressed in the previous chapters. It is possible to develop skill in communication.

Communication has two sides, the listener and the speaker. Both sides bear the responsibility for understanding what a communication is about.

As a listener, one must demonstrate attentiveness. Looking away from the speaker, making random moves or sounds, fidgeting, or any such sign of distraction should be avoided. The listener will demonstrate attentiveness by asking open-ended questions, acknowledging feelings, and reviewing what has been said. In short, the listener will show that they care about what is being said. A listener goes beyond the words and tries to understand the intent of the speaker.

The speaker can begin from his point of view, stating "I feel that..." or "I am concerned about..." In this way the speaker avoids starting with an accusation. The speaker can use feelings, facts, wants, needs, or senses in discussing the issue. Humans avoid pain above all else. Sometimes a speaker may expect that a certain communication may be painful. It is having the courage and caring to initiate the communication in spite of this, that will help family gain strength. Things can be worked out, even when it involves some pain.

COMMITTMENT---COMMUNICATION

CHAPTER FOUR

Appreciation

For many individuals, expressions of appreciation are the highest reward. A tough or thankless job goes so much easier when the worker knows that the work is esteemed. This idea is understood in the world of work, but often forgotten in the family. Making sure family members know they are cherished is a vital building block of strong families.

Parents need to be appreciated by children, children need to be appreciated by parents and a husband or wife must be appreciated by the spouse. Demonstrating appreciation is difficult for some. It is another construct that does not come naturally. The natural thing is to take for granted what one already has. It is when something is lost that we learn the extent of our appreciation for it. In the matter of family it is too dangerous to risk losing a member. Loss is a potential outcome, however, when a member goes unappreciated.

Appreciating a family member is more like a state of mind than a series or disparate actions. You want to constantly take note of the things a family member does and what they mean to you. You want to think of how life would be diminished without those things in it. You want to be confident in your heart that family members know, without doubt, that you appreciate them. They will know this because you will communicate it and demonstrate it daily.

The communication part is simple. Just say, "I appreciate you", or "I love you", or "Thanks for doing that". If the member is not near, call, write, and email these sentiments.

Demonstrating appreciation is not particularly difficult either, if you have learned to make it a mind-set. Ideas will come to you of simple and meaningful ways to show your devotion. Demonstrations of appreciation are more effective when they do not always correlate to "occasions". Do something thoughtful, for no particular reason. You can mentally take note of things that make a member happy, and then at an unexpected time, do it.

The primary relationship in a family is the spousal dyad. If this relationship is not secure and functioning properly, there is little hope that other sectors will be satisfactory. An exceptional amount of appreciation, over the course of the life span, must be spent between spouses. This is not a duty, but a privilege and an opportunity. It is an ingredient that will keep a marriage fresh and spontaneous.

While singing that children are our future, as a society, we have failed completely to appreciate them. One reason for this, is that too many families are child centered and child controlled. The paradox is that the children cannot be appreciated properly by parents, when it is the child who calls the shots. Since there are few boundaries for the child, it is difficult to extend a privilege as an act of appreciation. Material goods are lavished in such profusion; it is an arduous task to think of anything new to get for the child. The situation, then, is that the child expects and demands everything a parent can possibly do. There is no headroom for an acknowledgement of devotion. Parents in this scenario stay a little ticked off at their kids, as though it were the children's fault for the situation.

The best way to appreciate children is to draw boundaries for them. Keep them secondary to the marital dyad, and prohibit a child-controlled family.

COMMITTMENT---COMMUNICATION---APPRECIATION

CHAPTER FIVE

Spending Time Together

It seems that families are determined to spend time with almost anyone except each other. For adults the big time consumer is work. It is true that people must work, but we have not fought very hard to limit the intrusion of work into the family. Even when an adult is home, he may be on the computer, the fax, or the phone dealing with work issues. The saddest part is when one had rather be working than with family.

For children, the time gobbler is extracurricular activities. Sports, scouts, clubs, band, chorus, doing things with friends, and school related events all relegate the family to second fiddle. With good intention we rob ourselves of the most important commodity one can have in life – time with family.

The home has simply become the hotel where one stops to change socks and go to the next activity. This lifestyle does not produce strong families. Before entering into any agreement that intrudes on one's time, the first question should be "How will this effect my family?'

There are a few who still say things like "Well, I can't spend a lot of time with my family, but I spend quality time with them." There is no way to guarantee that time will be quality, but you can be sure that if you spend enough time, some of it will be.

A key to spending time with family is creativity. It is difficult to compete against the technologic society, once a family is immersed in it. Television, cable, videos, video games, and Internet entertainment blitz the senses. All of this is a surrogate for real entertainment. Playing games, going for walks, going to the park, cycling, roller blading, and creating activities are better. It just takes a little getting used to when a family has become accustomed to electronic entertainment.

As we have evolved from an agrarian society, to an industrial one, to a service economy, and to an information based society we have moved away from family being the center of activity. It has not served us well. The other building blocks in this discussion will be strengthened from the very fact that we spend more time together.



Spend time talking about the little things

**SPENDING TIME
COMMITMENT---COMMUNICATION---APPRECIATION**

CHAPTER SIX

Strong Values

Much was said in the political arena, a few years back, concerning family values. The sentiment was that the government could not address family values, because no one could say what they were. Not true. There is no mystery at all about what Americans view as family values, even though the country has become more and more diverse.

Family values include these:

- Respect for parents
- Respect for children
- Belief in God
- Respect for the property and rights of others
- Being married to the same person for life
- Being physically fit
- Living up to one's potential

There is much the government could do to support families in these values, but the direction of legislation for the past three decades has been to undermine them. For example, families value being married to one person for life, but most states have had "no fault" divorce laws which make it easy to end a marriage. Families value a belief in God, but government has moved to remove religious activity and symbolism from public life.

Regardless of the direction of government, families can encourage strong values for themselves. This is done through such conventions as rules. A family should have rules. It is fashionable to have a loosely knit family that is permissive and tolerant of poor behavior. Family members are more comfortable when they know there are rules. Such a rule might be "A Smith always works hard at anything he does". "If you are a Jones, you never use illegal drugs".

Values are also strengthened through the retelling of stories. Stories are about things family members have done in the past. A story is told, retold, and handed down through the generations. Stories reinforce that which the family values.

Strength of values is also obtained through roles. A family member models values through the life he leads. My grandfather was a generous man. He gave freely of the little he had to whoever had a need and

asked. He modeled this value so strongly to me that I do it, even when I don't want to.

**SPENDING TIME---STRONG VALUES
COMMITMENT---COMMUNICATION---APPRECIATION**

CHAPTER SEVEN

Handling Crisis

There are a few people who have Disneyland lives well into their middle years. These fortunate ones seem to escape death in the immediate family, serious illness, financial set backs, and natural catastrophe. Even for these lucky folks, however, crisis will come. Part of the definition of life is that it will contain struggle and pain. Most of us don't have to wait very long before we face it.

A crisis is something for which you are not prepared. Nothing in your previous experience has gotten you ready to face the event that is now challenging. As painful as crisis is, it is not of necessity a bad thing. Crisis can actually bring a family closer and make it stronger. There are occasions when a family needs a crisis in order to break up the status quo and move it to a higher plain. Families, who possess the building blocks discussed previously, always do better in crisis than those who do not have them. This is particularly true of families who have a strong faith in God.

We live in the average expected environment. We know there will be a certain amount of stress in that environment. We may not like the stress, but it doesn't catch us by surprise. A little stress is can be good, as it causes us to grow and explore our resources for coping. The effects of heavy stress, however, are well documented. Physical signs of stress are elevated heart rate and body temperature, shallow breathing, nervousness, being easily startled, sleeplessness, and a change in eating habits. Psychological effects include irritability, impaired attention, a mild change in appearance, a change in daily habits and functioning, and the presence of defense mechanisms such as denial. Stress can usually be abated through coping or removal of the stressor. It is largely under the control of the individual, though it may take some doing to control.

Crisis, on the other hand, is not so yielding to personal control. Crisis is outside the average expected environment. It is precipitated by an event, not a constant pressure. It is possible that a crisis is not recognized as such in the beginning. For example, when a hurricane hits a community, for the first several days people pull together and function well. Soon the reality of their situation becomes apparent and the initial coping ability is gone.

Signs of crisis in the individual are a dramatic change of appearance, loss of daily functioning, sense of emptiness or loss of being, thoughts of dying or going crazy, improper use of substances such as

alcohol or drugs, and family break down or dissembling. You have heard the expression "When one thing goes wrong, it seems like everything goes wrong". There is some validity to the statement. Theorists call it "pile up". When a crisis hits many things do go wrong at one time, and each problem compounds the overall situation.

There are determinants as to whether a family comes through a crisis stronger or fractures. These are the attitudes or perceptions of the family members, the resources they have to help them through, and the nature of the crisis itself. If a family has the attitude that they can make it, and all the building blocks are in place, they will be stronger for having handled the crisis. It is not a bad thing, however, to call on professional help and the support of friends in such times.

**HANDLING CRISIS
SPENDING TIME---STRONG VALUES
COMMITMENT---COMMUNICATION---APPRECIATION**

CHAPTER EIGHT

Intimacy (The mortar)

Building blocks are not very secure unless something holds them together. That is the role of intimacy. When speaking of this subject, some may assume that it applies only to spouses in a sexual sense. That is one narrow application of intimacy, but it is much broader than that. Intimacy is physical, emotional, and spiritual closeness, disclosure, differentiation, and handling crisis.

A family needs to be close in all of three different ways. They get close through sharing, communicating, and spending time together. Family members share appropriate touch. This can come through hugs, pats, play, holding hands, kisses, and other ways that are appropriate for specific family members. Humans need touch. It is a way to comfort, heal, and communicate.

Disclosure has been described earlier. Suffice it to say that family members must share what needs to be shared. Secrets are harmful to the family. If family members are not disclosing their thoughts and feelings, they are growing apart while not realizing it.

Families change over time. That is not bad, it is simply growth. Spouses are not going to remain the starry eyed youngsters that they were when they first met. Still, this is not a problem as long as each is disclosing along the way. This is called differentiation. It is healthy. When a family member grows and differentiates, he brings new and interesting input to the family. It keeps zing in relationships. It is dangerous, however, when a member is changing, but not communicating. In this case one morning a member wakes up and states "I don't know you".

A strong, happy family is no mystery. Here in these few pages are the things you need to know for your family to be strong. Assess where you are and take the first step. It will be work, but it is worth the trouble.