

Daily Union Article

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Title: Strengthening Families - Part 1 of 2

In the face of adversity or extreme crisis, what makes one family strong while another family seems to crumble under the stress and emotional strain? That is a complex question that likely has a more complex answer than I can provide here, but research has proven that “strong families” tend to have some common characteristics.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) has done extensive research in the area of protective and promotive factors and use that research to work toward building up children, families, and communities to improve their well-being.

As part of their Strengthening Families Framework, CSSP describes protective factors as those conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or larger society that mitigate or eliminate risk. There are five protective factors the organization identifies as inherent to strong families – parental resilience; social connections; knowledge of parenting and child development; concrete support in times of need; and social-emotional competence of children. In this article, we will take a look at the first two of those five factors:

Parental Resilience: Anyone who has raised children – their own, their extended family, or their foster children – knows it is not a very easy task. Although it can be very rewarding and fulfilling, it comes with plenty of challenges and stress.

Some of these stressors can be managed easily. Everyday challenges – a lost shoe, missing homework, messy bedrooms, or mealtime “drama” get resolved relatively quickly and with minimal long-term effect. What demonstrates resilience is the ability a parent has when they are able to handle the more difficult stressors. Parents call on their inner strength to be proactive in meeting these challenges. Resilient parents are able to manage adversity, work through and heal the effects of trauma and thrive in the face of the circumstances in their family.

Parental resilience has a positive impact on the parent, the child(ren) and the family unit as a whole. When parents are able to demonstrate resilience, they feel better about themselves and transfer those positive feels through the parent-child relationship. Children will develop a secure emotional attachment to their parent which, in turn, builds their own capacity to become resilient.

How do parents become resilient? It must be an intentional decision that requires daily effort. No doubt, some parents will need more guidance and support in learning to become resilient because they may not have had resilient parents themselves. Research shows that parents, even those with a family history of toxic stress, can be

helped to overcome their past and create a resilience in themselves. CPSS explains that parental resilience is a process that all parents need if they desire to “manage stressful situations and help ensure they and their families are on a trajectory of healthy, positive, outcomes.”

Social Connections: It is human nature that people need to be around other people. We are social creatures albeit, some more than others! Parents need people around them who care about them and their children, who can be there to listen on those really hard seasons of parenting, who can provide positive and well-informed advice, and who can lend help in problem-solving as needed. Being socially connected in constructive and positive ways serves as a means for providing these multiple levels and layers of support to parents.

At the very core of those layers is the parent. However, it is both overwhelming and unrealistic to expect that a parent can fulfill their role without close family and friends to support them in making positive decisions and be there to listen as the parent struggles with the more challenging stressors. Even beyond that close inner circle of family and friends, resilient parents need to work and/or live in an environment where their neighbors and co-workers demonstrate support, understanding and compassion regarding the challenges of parenting. On a broader scale, the school environment is an extension of the family support system and needs to be considered a partner in providing for the well-being of the child.

As noted in the CSSP Strengthening Families Framework, unproductive or negative social connections can increase parenting stress and contribute to a negative parent-child relationship. At the extreme end is social isolation (the lack of available and quality relationships) and loneliness. Social isolation is associated with disengaged parenting, maternal depression and increased likelihood of child maltreatment. Additionally, loneliness can be a major stressor that inhibits the ability to be a consistent, nurturing, and responsive parent.

So, what does this all mean? It means that parenting is a learning process. It doesn't come naturally but rather is modeled by how you were parented and how you make daily decisions in your own parenting role. It's tough work. It takes a lot of energy. It's a unique experience for each of us because we have unique children and personalities. And – it can be the most rewarding job you'll ever have!

Finding time to positively build your family unit through time spent together, communicating openly, respectfully, and honestly, and supporting each other through life's many challenges will ensure that future generations have a better chance of being the strong family that you set out to create as a parent.

Next week, we will take a look at the remaining 3 protective factors for strengthening family. If you have questions about family and child development or parenting, feel

free to call me at the Geary County Extension office at 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!