

Daily Union Article

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Title: Strengthening Families – Part 2 of 2

Having a strong family unit is not happenstance. Anyone who has raised a child, whether biologically their own or through foster or respite care, can tell you that the job takes a lot of energy, problem-solving, and decision-making. Yet, some families make it look like they have their act together all the time. Research shows us that the latter is simply not true. Rather, strong families possess similar characteristics that contribute to their ability to endure and overcome challenges in their family life journey.

Last week I shared information from the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) about two of the five protective factors that research has found strong families possess: Parental Resiliency and Social Connections. Before we dive in to the last three, here's a recap of the first two:

**Parental Resiliency** means that parents are able to manage adversity by calling on their inner strength to overcome obstacles. Resiliency is the product of a parent's intentional decision to face challenges and handle stress in a positive way. Even parents who themselves were raised in families who had a limited ability to show resiliency can be helped to overcome their past and develop resiliency in themselves.

**Social Connections** underscores that parents need a circle of positive and appropriate supporters that they can turn to when faced with parenting challenges. Parenting is not intuitive. Parenting is a learned process. We learn from our own parents and the parents we connect with who show us their own style of interacting and engaging with their children.

This week, I will focus on the remaining three: Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development, Concrete Support in Times of Need, and Social-Emotional Competence of Children.

**Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development** is rooted in the idea that no parent knows everything about parenting and that there is no such thing as a "perfect parent." Being a parent is a learning process that is unique to each individual engaged in the parent-child experience. Just about the time you think you have it figured out, life changes occur and you all but start over in developing a new approach. Additionally, what works for one child rarely works in exactly the same way for another. Being a lifelong learner as it relates to parenting is essential. Increasing your awareness of parenting strategies and the developmental milestones children evolve through add to your parenting toolbox.

Learning more about child development helps the parent know what is realistic for the child based on:

- ✓ Physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and language development

- ✓ Indications that a child may have a developmental delay and needs specialized assistance or care
- ✓ Cultural factors that impact the parenting approach
- ✓ Awareness of the barriers that may exist to a child overall growth
- ✓ Awareness of factors that promote a child's overall growth
- ✓ Disciplinary approaches that promote positive child behavior

For example, in recent decades there has been a growing body of research that supports the importance that nutrition, regular sleep schedules, physical activity, and stimulation has on brain development of a child.

**Concrete Support in Times of Need** refers to the support parents need to help with the day-to-day care of children. Perhaps they have a fussy baby that is teething, or an adolescent struggling with the offhanded negative comments of peers, or even a trip to the emergency room due to a bad accident. The old saying "It takes a village to raise a child" does not give credit to the need parents have for the "village" support approach to parenting!

As noted in last week's article, it is a known fact that parents are faced with stress and stressful situations. When those situations become overwhelming, they need to seek help from their support system. For some parents, pride prevents them from reaching out for help. Perhaps they are embarrassed, humiliated, or feeling incompetent. The truth is ALL parents have these feelings at some time (or at multiple times.) Feelings like these come with the territory. Other parents may not know where to get the help they need or how to ask the right questions that will lead them to helpful answers.

The CSSP research shows that "parents need experiences that enable them to understand their rights in accessing services, gain knowledge of relevant services and learn how to navigate through service systems." As parents reach out for these resources, it will help them recognize that they are not weak nor incompetent but rather persistent and committed to their children.

**Social-Emotional Competence of Children** begins in early childhood. During these formative years, a young child is like a vulnerable sponge. The experiences they have during this critical time set the stage for their health, well-being and learning throughout their life. Additionally, recent research has demonstrated "the strong link between young children's social-emotional competence and their cognitive, language skills, mental health and school success. There are many dimensions to social-emotional competence including self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, to name a few.

These dimensions do not evolve automatically. Children need an environment where these dimensions are developed, supported, and promoted. These dimensions are more prone to develop when a consistent, caring and engaged adult (such as a parent or parent figure), promotes the development of these dimensions.

Acknowledging that great parenting is the result of intentional and motivated hard work is key to developing strong families. Providing support to families is an important part of being a "village" where individuals and families can thrive. For more information about families and parenting, call me at the Geary County Extension office at 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!