
“The informality of family life...allows us to become our best while looking our worst”. ~Marge Kennedy

The people who most impact our lives and shape who we become are our *family*. Healthy families provide security, support, love, and positive life experiences that play a vital role in how we learn, grow and respond to challenges. We learn about relationships and the skills to cope with life from our families.

A family can be ‘traditional’ with a mom, dad, and children. Families can include children who are biological, adopted or of different ethnicity. Primary care providers in a family might also include grandparents and other relatives, single-parents, same-sex parents, step-and foster-parents or close friends. Families have their own unique patterns, rituals, culture and rules.

Ideally a family is any group or individual who provides a safe and trusting environment that fosters learning and healthy development. However, no family is immune to conflict, challenge, or stress, and unfortunately, not all families foster a safe and healthy environment. Most people don’t grow up in ‘ideal’ families, but the bonds formed in families are important. Even families with conflict and adversity can learn to foster and promote mental health and well-being as individuals and within the family system.

How well families cope and adapt during stressful or difficult times is called *family resilience*. Family resilience enables success, flourishing, cohesion and support even in times of trouble and crisis and can be developed and fostered at any time in the family life cycle. In general, family resilience can be described as characteristics, dimensions, and properties of families which help them to rebound from disruption and/or change and to adapt in the face of crisis situations.

Positive relationships within the family are the most important factor that leads to resilience. Families who are resilient are able together to view challenges and crises with confidence and to view challenges as opportunities to grow, heal and strengthen their relationships. Research has found that resilient, healthy families have 10 common traits that help them flourish. They are:

- a positive outlook
- spirituality
- family member accord
- flexibility
- communication
- financial management
- time together
- mutual recreational interests
- routines and rituals
- social support

Positive Outlook: At the heart of resilience is an optimistic, confident approach to life's challenges. Affection and humor help to deal with many situations. Families who offer each other positive solutions, and are willing to accept suggestions are likely to be more resilient. Families who cope well are also able to affirm their strengths and possibilities, maintain courage, and sustain hope for the future.

Spirituality: Spirituality may or may not be religion based. Spirituality is a sense that life has meaning and purpose. It can come from shared beliefs and values within families. Spirituality provides connection not only to family, but to the community and the universe. Spirituality is beneficial to fostering an optimistic attitude, contributes to seeking purpose, and provides families with the ability to unite, understand, and overcome life's challenges.

Family Member Accord: Families function best when they feel good about each other, their needs are met, and their relationships are positive. A family's ability to pull together and support each other in times of crisis is vital to resilience. Strong family cohesion enhances a family's confidence in dealing with problems because problems are more often seen as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. This sense of cohesion contributes to a family's ability to regroup and adjust after a crisis has passed. Strong family accord helps family members deal with each other in respectful, loving ways.

Flexibility: A flexible family is one that can maintain their sense of continuity while rebounding from a crisis and/or sorting out issues that are challenging. That is, they get back to routines and familiarity and have a sense that 'life will go on'.

Families do well when they have a healthy balance between structure and flexibility. For example, a family might have routine structured time together at their evening meal, and have the flexibility to include their children's playmates on occasion, or go out together for a meal. Families with a healthy balance:

- are democratic (for example, all family members have a say in important family decisions);
- share leadership (for example, each member of the family can take turns picking the movie the family will watch together);
- have stable roles and shared roles (for example, Dad usually makes supper, and children set the table); and,
- have strong family rules, and can negotiate with each other.

Flexible families deal with change optimistically, and when faced with challenge and/or adversity, they reorganize their roles in order to build a new balance. For example, when the eldest child moves away from home, some responsibilities of the remaining family members may increase, and decisions might be made about who gets to sleep in the eldest child's empty bedroom.

Family Communication: A shared sense of meaning, coping strategies, and the ability to maintain family balance is created through open, harmonious communication. Strong family communication has three elements:

- Clarity (clear and consistent messaging)
- Open emotional expression (behavior, tone, words, availability, and communication style)
- Shared problem solving (the ability to solve and share problems as a family)

Communication is most effective when family differences are accepted and dealt with using compassion and understanding. Well functioning families tend to avoid withdrawal, criticism and blame, and are able to reconcile and reconnect, maintaining comfort, security and balance.

Financial Management: Family well-being is closely associated with how well finances are handled. In times of financial hardship, resilient families provide reciprocal high levels of warmth, affection, emotional support for each other, and a sense of promise for a brighter future. Financial pressures can lead to family tension and stress and can affect emotional well-being and interpersonal relationships at all levels in the family (e.g., individual emotional lives, marital interactions between adults, and the caretaking environment of the children).

The combination of psychological, social and economic burden can put families at higher risk for multiple problems and crises beyond their control (for example: unemployment, substandard housing, lack of health care, crime, violence, and substance abuse). Resilient families are likely to have a plan or a budget for balancing expenses with income.

Family Time: Spending time together is vital for a family and promotes continuity and a stable family life. Time spent together can range from having family meals, doing chores together, running errands, and having fun.

Sharing family time together has been shown to reduce the chances that children will get involved in substance abuse, smoking and early sexual activity that can put their mental and physical health at risk, particularly in adolescence. Unfortunately, family time appears to be dwindling due to increased parental demands, responsibilities and time strain (a phenomenon that includes the lack of spontaneity to respond to children's needs, fatigue, and inability to disconnect feelings from work).

Effective ways to reduce time strain and increase family time include: family housekeeping activities, utilizing commute time to have meaningful communication, discussing future plans, or participating in fun learning activities.

Shared Recreation: Good family health can be attributed to the multiple benefits of sharing recreation and leisure time together. Benefits of family recreation/leisure include: forming healthy attachments, internal satisfaction, happiness, learning, humor, and the pleasure of shared experiences.

Within the family, recreation can occur two ways and both types of activities are important in fostering family adaptability and cohesion: 1) core, or routine and common activities like board and card games; or 2) or novel activities like bowling or having a family picnic.

Routines and Rituals: Research has shown that families who have routines and rituals are more stable and have better child outcomes. Routines are momentary in time commitment and require little conscious thought and they provide a sense of comfort and stability, especially for children.

Routines are often dismissed during a family crisis like illness or marital separation, and this can be hard and unsettling for children. In the midst of crisis or challenge, maintaining routines as much as possible will provide a family with predictability, cohesion, and comfort. Rituals are symbolic in nature and endure, affect and cross family generations.

Rituals are ways to celebrate and maintain family values and traditions through the generations. For example, maybe your family goes to your Grandmother's house every Christmas Eve, or you take an annual family vacation to the same destination. Both routines and rituals are important to promoting family resilience in that they promote close family relationships, child socialization, and ease the effects of stressful events.

Social Support: Being connected to your family's community and social support system is important and provides a sense of belonging and cohesion. Community and social supports can include family play groups, community associations, volunteer organizations or recreational/sports leagues.

Community networks impact resilience. Resilient families not only receive social support from their communities, but tend to give back to their communities as well. Extended kin and community offer families: social networks, mutual interaction, and ways to provide information to each other on services/programs, respite, avenues to contribute to the welfare of the community, and companionship.

Developing Family Resilience

Developing family resilience can be done at any time in the family life cycle. So, no matter if you have a family with two young children or an extended family with mature children who are starting their own families, developing resilience is possible and worthwhile. The following strategies are useful in developing resilience in families:

Plan Ahead: Prioritizing life goals, activities and schedules is important. Effective planning needs to be time and priority conscious. Determine what things are most important to focus energy on and have weekly family meetings to discuss the week ahead and any challenges or conflicts that may arise. Planning ahead should take into account things like: creating family time, determining individual leisure time (e.g., play dates with other children/friends), maintaining proper nutrition and exercise levels, budgeting family expenses, and generally prioritizing weekly or monthly events and activities from most important to least important. Planning ahead takes input and commitment from the whole family.

Work together: Families must work together to function effectively. Encourage cooperation, positive contribution, self-reliance, open and honest communication and forgiveness within your family. Working together means each family member knows they have an important and feasible role within the family. Families that work together and support each other are more balanced and have better overall family well-being.

Learn from Experience: When a crisis or challenge arises, it is important to learn from those experiences. Provide each other with safety and support so that repeating unnecessary emotional hurt and pain can be avoided. Avoid a repeat of negative experiences by promoting open, honest and non-judgmental family communication, planning for realistic improvement (individually), developing family goals that require teamwork, and if failure or disappointment does occur, support each other to become successful.

Enjoy Time Together: Enjoy each other, find humor in your lives, and laugh to relieve stress! Family fun times are best when they are based on quality time and interaction. Family activities don't need to be expensive - go for a walk to the nearest park, play a game, or just sit around and talk! Finding joy and happiness in your family is a very important way to develop, increase and sustain resilience through a lifetime.

Tips and Activities for Building Family Resilience

Above all, family time that is positive, reflective, healthy, fun and constructive is vital to promoting and developing resilience. With today's economic uncertainty both in our own communities and globally, staying connected and focused on our families is important and positive for our mental, physical, emotional, spiritual health and well-being. The following tips and ideas can help you stay connected to your family, promote health and well-being and develop family resilience!

Get Active, Recreational, and Leisurely!

Being active as a family is not only healthy, but fun and enjoyable. To get active, recreational and leisurely try:

- Taking a family walk to the park in the summer. Throw a ball, play Frisbee, swing or just sit on the grass. Getting out and enjoying a day in the park will help clear your mind, burn some energy, and promote quality family time that is inexpensive!
- In the winter get out and enjoy the snow! Build a snow hut or snowman, make snow angels, go tobogganing or sledding or even just for a nice walk on a mild winter evening. Don't let the winter put a stop to family time outside. Be active in the winter weather then go inside and make some hot chocolate with marshmallows for the whole family to enjoy!
- Check out your local community centre or gym facility to see what types of programs or activities are offered for families. Family swim nights, open gym or craft and activity classes are great ways to enjoy some time together in a fun, relaxed environment. This type of outing also keeps you connected to your community!
- Plan a family picnic. Pick a destination, near or far, pack some food and drinks (especially water if it's hot!) and go for a family picnic. Picnics are a great way to be active and nutritionally conscious while enjoying the mental health benefits of spending time together with your loved ones.

Stay connected at home!

- Set aside 1 – 2 nights a week in which you cook as a family. It's great fun and gets the family together at the same time in the same location. Try different cuisines, or have a theme night for your meal (e.g., Greek food night, or weird pizza night) and have all members of the family play a role in the food and meal preparation.
- Eat together! Eating together is one of the best ways for families to stay connected to each other. Meals together allow for open family communication and the chance to share what has been going on with each other in a social, family centered environment.
- Have family meetings to plan your weeks together. It is important to know each others schedules and to offer support and help to each other if any conflicts or issues arise. Family meetings are a great way to promote family democracy, share leadership, and develop negotiation skills to resolve conflicts.
- Play together! Board games and card games are great fun for the whole family and can be easily tailored to the age and skill levels in the family. Games can be played in teams or as individuals and are great for promoting teamwork and honesty. Games also help to develop self-confidence, and important social skills such as following rules, and being able to win and lose well.

Stay Connected to Your Community!

- Give back to your community. It is a great way to increase both individual and family connection to the place in which you live. Volunteering to coach or manage your son or daughter's sports team is a great way to meet and interact with local families and is a way to build friendships and lasting connections to your local community.
- Enjoy the library together. Libraries are family friendly, educational, fun and inexpensive. Families with young children can participate in library story time; older children can join reading groups. Trips to the library can promote a love of reading, and help your children learn how to use the library for both homework and fun!
- Explore your local museums, art galleries, and science centres. They often have family rates that can make it more affordable as a family outing. If available, take advantage of discounts and educate your family about history, art, and culture!

Available Resources

For additional information on resources in your area, check out the links below.

Within Alberta:

- *Health Link Alberta* – 1.800.408.5465 or www.healthlinkalberta.ca
- *Alberta Health Services* www.albertahealthservices.ca
- *Canadian Mental Health Association Alberta Division* <http://www.alberta.cmha.ca/>

Nationally:

- *Public Health Agency of Canada* <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/index-eng.php>
- *Canadian Mental Health Association* <http://www.cmha.ca/bins/index.asp>

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