

Getting Connected, Staying Connected

Staying Connected with Your Partner after the Advent of Children into the Family

John D. DeFraim, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development; Gail L. Brand, Extension Educator; Maureen H. Burson, Extension Educator; Ann M. Fenton, Extension Educator; Jeanette L. Friesen, Extension Educator; Janet S. Hanna, Extension Educator; Mary E. Nelson, Extension Educator; Cynthia R. Strasheim, Extension Educator; Dianne M. Swanson, Extension Educator; LaDonna A. Werth, Extension Educator

Couples who believe they have great marriages say children have deepened their marital bond. This is No. 14 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

Approximately 50 percent of all marriages today will end in divorce, according to recent statistics, and the majority of all divorces involve children. Our focus here is parenthood, and we will continue to take a positive, preventive, strengths-based approach. From our own personal experiences, we recognize that parenting can be a stressful job.

The combination of parental plus countless other responsibilities couples face, can sometimes stretch their relationship to the breaking point.

Because we do not see parenthood as a problem, but rather as a gift, we will focus in this chapter on ways of thinking about our roles as parents, and we will develop some general principles or guidelines for couples to keep in mind as their family grows in size. Your attitude and the strengths of your couple relationship will make the difference between looking at parenthood as a hassle or a joy.

Children are not problems to be dealt with, and they aren't pieces of clay to be molded into our idea of what they should be. The best way to be a parent is to look for the beauty in these little beings and enjoy growing with them as their lives unfold.

This is not to say that parenthood is easy. Parenting is hard work; but meaningful work in life is not a bad thing. We are saying that a more balanced view of the parental role is necessary, balancing responsibilities with the genuine fun of

watching children grow and learn. Happiness as a parent is a choice.

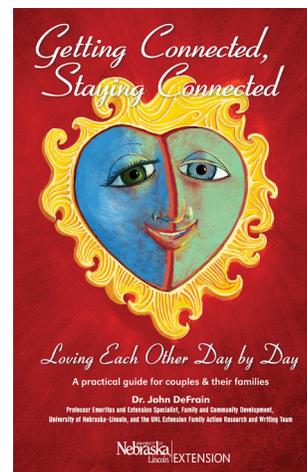
Great Marriages and Parenthood

A team of university researchers has chosen to raise the bar very high and is looking for couples who believe they have *great* marriages who are willing to be study subjects. The researchers, to date, have collected data from 85 couples who volunteered for the study. One consistency found by the researchers is that many couples talked at length about how children serve to deepen a couple's marital bond. Most Americans who talk about parenthood focus on the problems:

- How can I get my toddler to quit biting?
- Why does my teen stay out until dawn even though she knows how worried we get?
- I feel like I have all the parenting responsibilities and my spouse doesn't even worry about the kids.

The Strengths of Great Marriages

As we studied what the couples in our great marriage research were saying, it became very clear that they view



For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at amazon.com.

The International Couple and Family Strengths Model, developed by John DeFrain and others across the world, includes six major qualities of strength common in emotionally healthy marriages and families: appreciation and affection; positive communication; commitment; enjoyable time together; a sense of spiritual well-being and shared values; and the ability to effectively manage stress and crisis in the family.

How do you and your partner measure up? Review the list of characteristics for each of the six strengths and, with your partner, talk about each item and circle it if you think it is a strength in your relationship. What are the key couple strengths that you have agreed upon? Are there some strengths you would like to improve in your relationship?

Examples of Marital Strengths in the Words of Strong Couples:

Marital Strength	In The Couple's Own Words
Appreciation and Affection	Love Hugs Kisses Glances Smiles Compliments Affectionate words and actions Courtesy Gratitude Security Romance Valuing each other Talking Caring Sharing Improving life together Sexual lovemaking
Positive Communication	Deep conversations about feelings and thoughts Sharing thoughts and feelings Regular conversations Taking enough time to communicate Respectful communication Active listening Anticipating each other's needs Positive nonverbal communication Calmness while communicating Delaying discussions until each of us is rational Saying sorry Being sorry Forgiving Walking away (but coming back later to resolve matters) Sleeping on it Resolving things immediately Compromise Accommodating each other Honesty A sense of humor Open-minded Tactful Positive Encouraging each other Non-blaming Resolve the issue and move on
Commitment	Persistent loyalty Giving of self Marriage as God's gift Our relationship as a priority The center of our life Trust Being flexible with each other Support Desire to age together Honoring our vows A lifelong promise Devotion to each other Emotional intimacy with each other My spouse is my priority Shared goals Honesty Faithful Dependable We will be there for our kids
Enjoyable Time Together	Enjoy activities together and with the kids Having fun together Simple things Friendship Love being together Not much separate time needed
Spiritual Well-Being and Shared Values	Share same religion Similar beliefs, ethics, and values Active in our beliefs Prayer Meditation Our beliefs are a core strength of our marriage Marriage embedded with divinity Loving God together Loving life and the world together Sharing our beliefs with our children Similar views on key social issues Providing good examples for our children Responsible citizens in our community Respecting each other's differences Respecting our marriage vows
Effective Management of Stress and Crisis	Exercise Vent Pray Meditate Support each other Block stress out Don't give up Positive attitude Face difficulties together Luck Planning Balanced lifestyle A cohesive family Healthy relationships Take one day at a time Prioritize Trusting each other Protect and help each other A sense of humor Laughter

(Continued from page 1)

marriage from a strengths-based perspective. They portrayed their lives together as mixed with both joys and sorrows. They were not hopelessly optimistic, nor pessimistic, but generally realistic about marriage and family life together. Whether recalling the joys of parenthood, successes in education and careers, or the sorrows over the death of a child, loss of health, and separation during war, these couples recall shared memories as events that strengthened their marriage. These are couples that believe they have *great* marriages, not just good but of very high quality.

Enjoy Now!

The following story illustrates how you do control to a considerable extent your attitude toward the world and your attitude toward your children:

My friend Jerry is a recovering alcoholic. He's been sober for more than 20 years and attributes a great deal of his success to Alcoholics Anonymous. One beautiful fall day Jerry and I were walking through the woods. I was complaining about my job and my wife and my broken-down car and the house that needed painting and my teenage kids and everything else I could throw into the mix. Jerry got a bit tired of my whining and said somewhat abruptly:

"Joe, are you doing okay right now?"

"Huh?" I replied.

"Are you doing okay right now? Is life good right now?"

"Well, yeah ... it's a pretty day out. The leaves are golden and I'm enjoying walking with my old friend."

"Okay," Jerry concluded. "Then focus on the beautiful day right now and don't waste your time and energy complaining about tomorrow and all the worries you have that might come true or might not come true."

"Enjoy now!"

Jerry was right.

Discussion Questions

1. How did your relationship change when your children were born?
2. Do you see your children as a gift or a problem? Why? Are there ways you can change your attitude?
3. What have you done to meet the challenges of parenting?

For greater understanding of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFrain and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

This publication has been peer reviewed.

UNL Extension publications are available online at <http://extension.unl.edu/publications>.

**Index: Families
Family Life**

Issued September 2012

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educational programs abide with the nondiscrimination policies of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.

© 2012, The Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska on behalf of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension. All rights reserved.