

CONNECTIONS

HELPING OUR CHILDREN
FEEL CONNECTED



DEVELOPED THROUGH THE
CHRYSLIS PARTNERSHIP



Connections do make a difference

Young people feeling connected is essential for good emotional health and well being. Research tells us when children and young people feel connected to their family and school they are more likely to choose healthy behaviour.

Feeling connected protects against many kinds of health risks including;

- Alcohol and cannabis misuse
- Emotional distress
- Early sexual behaviour (1)

Feeling connected is one of the protective factors the Chrysalis Programme and other preventative work builds on. We know that when young people have fewer risk factors and stronger protective factors, they are less likely to develop problems with a wide range of risky behaviour.

- Risk factors build on each other and increase the possibility that our young people will develop problems with risky behaviour.
- Protective factors are strengths or assets that make a difference.

These risk and protective factors are discussed in the leaflet *The Power of Parents in a Child's World* which can be downloaded at

www.edact.org (Local publications section)



Connections are like a tree's roots. They are its foundation; steadying it in stormy times.



How to use this leaflet

How you use this leaflet is up to you. Its purpose is to present ideas that parents and carers can use to build and strengthen connections with their children. It is not a replacement for professional help if families need it. Use it positively and avoid only looking at the things you are not doing. As you read through the leaflet, note things you are already doing. You can also identify things you would want to do more of.

What do we mean by “family”?

Families are not just defined by the people who live under the same roof. A family is that group of people with a strong connection with each other, whether they live together or not. Families can be made up of married couples, grandparents, single parents etc. Simply knowing who lives together, does not really tell anything about the strength of the family. What is important is how we relate and care for each other.

All families have strengths

Parents and carers can put themselves under a lot of pressure trying to do the right things with their children. There is no manual on how to parent and no such thing as a “perfect family”. We all have challenges in our family at some point. We can only do our best.

In Northern Ireland in particular, we often look at our weaknesses and ignore our strengths. If we only look for problems in our family, we will see only problems. If we also look for strengths, we will find strengths.

Crisis can tear families apart

They can also make family relationships stronger. Families in crisis sometimes forget about the strengths they have and may need to be reminded of them.

Family strengths

Family strengths are those processes that help people feel connected and bonded to each other.

If family strengths could be reduced to one single thing, it would be their sense of belonging and commitment to each other. When this emotional bond is present, most families can endure almost anything. It will help to examine what else builds family strengths.

Characteristics of good relationships that strengthen families

Strong families have characteristics that have been identified that contribute to a strong sense of connection and feelings of satisfaction in their relationships with each other. [2]

**Sharing
Activities**

**Showing
Affection**

**Talk Openly
and Honestly**

**Commitment
and Loyalty**

**Resilience,
Coping with
Setbacks**

**Togetherness,
Shared Values,
Beliefs and
Morals**

**Support and
Encouragement**

**Acceptance,
Respect and
Understanding**

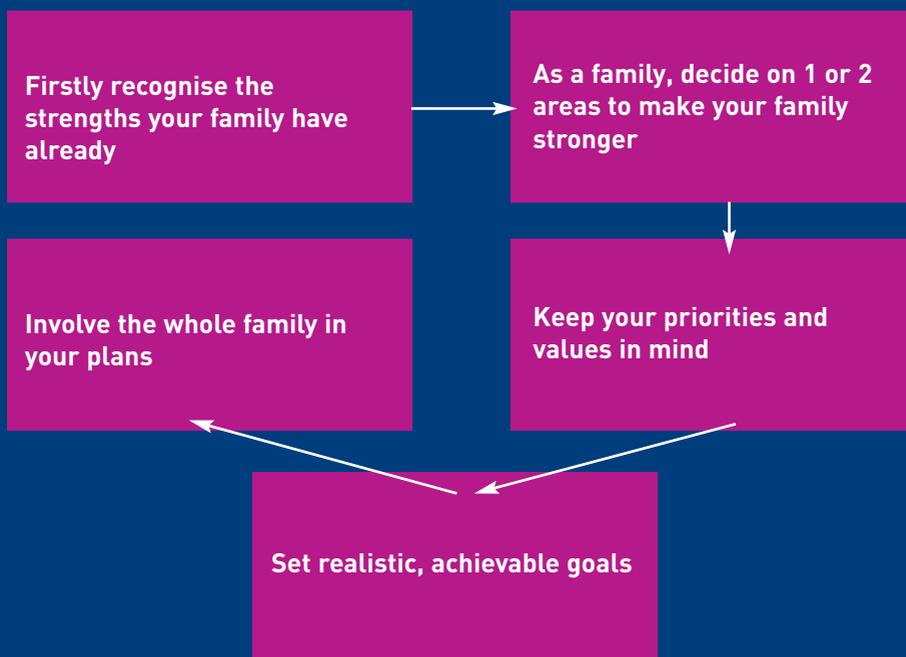


How Can You Strengthen Your Family?

Although each characteristic is important in itself, they all interact, overlap, connect, and reinforce each other. For example, a person who isn't committed to the family isn't likely to give much time to relationships and may not feel the need to pull together or to improve communication. Families who spend time together can build commitment and communication. Good communication is necessary in a crisis.

Most people value their families, but they get caught up with day to day stresses. It takes deliberate effort to strengthen your family. The work you put into making your family stronger, however, can be well worth the effort. Understanding the qualities of strong families is only the first step in making our family relationships work better. As a wise man once said, "A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step."

How can you begin?



Developing family strengths

There is no end to the creative ways families can work on building their strengths. This is by no means an exhaustive list. It is included to encourage ideas that will work for you. The important thing is the commitment people who care for each other make to strengthen their relationships within their family.

What are some of the things you are already doing?

What are one or two things you could do more of?

Strength

Ideas we can try

Sharing activities in our family:

- Plan to do things together regularly
- Share good memories
- Plan a special meal together
- Turn off the TV tonight and do something fun as a family

Affection:

- Have a ratio of 5 positive things to say to each other for every negative comment
- Remind each other we are there for them
- Laugh together
- Do something kind each day for each other

Communication:

- Enjoy family discussions
- Give each other a chance to explain things
- Make sure putdowns don't happen
- Have a "meeting" to decide things
- Work at listening

Commitment:

- Share responsibilities appropriately
- Work on building each other's self esteem
- Think how your decisions will effect others

Togetherhness:

- Keep promises to each other
- Talk openly about values
- Have a hopeful attitude towards life
- Talk about your family history
- Appreciate each other

Resilience:

- See a crisis as a way to work together
- Appreciate each other's ways of coping
- Think positive about things
- Be willing to ask for help
- Have good support systems
- Know you can turn to each other for support

Support:

- Pay attention to how each other is feeling
- Share each other's dreams and hopes
- Don't laugh at or criticize mistakes
- Use mistakes to learn from
- Appreciate efforts as well as successes

Acceptance:

- Allow each other to be themselves
- Respect each others point of view
- Be able to forgive each other
- Give each other space when needed
- Respect each other's privacy
- Praise as much for effort as success



A good place to start - Time together

When children were asked, 'What do you think makes a happy family?' they answered:

Doing things together
Showing an interest
Talking together (3)

Giving time is an important way of showing you care. The more time you spend together, the better chance you have of sharing quality experiences. Eating meals together, talking about the events of the day, sharing joys and difficulties, doing household chores together, spending some evenings watching films or playing games are examples of shared activities. Some families even schedule one evening every week to do something special together

While time spent together is what young people want, it can be a challenge being there both physically and emotionally for our children. Some research found that in an average day mothers are engaged in less than one hour in active communication with their children and fathers only 10 to 15 minutes. (4)

Positive Communication

Positive communication helps make time spent together a bonding experience. Some useful thoughts about communication:

- Perhaps the most important communication skill we have is listening.
- Listening to our children is as important as talking to them.
- When you open yourself to what your child has to say, you will get to know them better and deepen your relationship with them.
- Listening also boosts self esteem. It says you value what they have to say.
- Young people feeling their parents understand them is a powerful protective factor. Listening helps achieve that.

The amount of togetherness that is right for your family probably depends on its structure and the age of the children. You decide what meets your needs best.

- Families with young children usually spend the most time together because young children need a great deal of physical care and guidance.
- Families with teenagers may spend less time together because teens will naturally want to spend more time with their friends.
- Single parents need a break from their children and may need more opportunity to enjoy the company of other adults.
- Couples need time together too.

Being there for our children at crucial times of the day has been shown to be a powerful protective factor. These include

- Morning, before they go off to school
- When they come home from school
- Meal times
- When they come home from being out (5)

What if parents have to work or have other demands that makes being there at these important times difficult? It is recognising that our children do need us and making the best use of the time we have.



It is often the simple things that matter most

Working long hours, people coming in at different times, young people wanting to be with their friends are all barriers to families having meals together. It may sound like such a simple thing, but families who have regular meals together are less likely to have children who get into trouble with risky behaviour. (6)

Is it about simply sharing food together? No, it is the communication, the sharing, and the connections that happen on a regular basis.

Some families do have regular meals together. Others battle with favourite TV programmes or other demands.

Having regular meals together takes effort and in some cases planning. It is just one simple way to ensure the family gets together on a regular basis

Giving tasks or jobs to do is another way to help children and young people feel connected. Children as young as 3 can help with tidying up. Having jobs to do is another way to acknowledge your children's efforts and their contribution. This helps them feel they belong.



Helping our children and young people feel connected to school

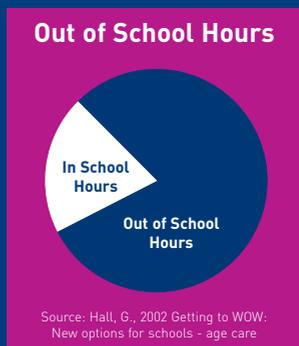
While family is important, young people spend considerable time at school. It is where they form friendships, learn both in the classroom and the playground.

Connections to school are also associated with positive emotional health and lower involvement in risky behaviours like alcohol and other drug misuse.

What seems to matter most to build these connections is that schools foster an atmosphere in which pupils feel fairly treated, feel safe both physically and emotionally, feel close to others and feel part of the school. (7)

Parents and carers can do a lot to foster the connections their young people have with school. These include:

- Have positive expectations of their work and behaviour
- Participate in school events
- Show an interest in their school work
- Know and maintain contact with their teachers
- Encourage homework completion and get involved with any “homework” that involves family participation
- Meet your child’s friends and their parents
- Volunteer at school or get involved in parent councils
- Ask the school what you can do to support them and your child’s learning
- Be present if things go wrong
- Act as a role model for the way you want your children to interact with the school and teachers



There is no “blueprint” we can follow to make sure our children develop safe, happy and healthy. There is research, however, that point towards what fosters positive healthy development for our children. It is our hope that this booklet presented ideas that you find useful. The home activities in the Chrysalis Programme and Workshops such as Talking to your Children about Tough Issues are additional resources to help.

References and suggested reading

(1, 4, 5,7) Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P., Blum, R. W., Bauman, K. E., Harris, K. M., Jones, J., et al. (1997). Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *JAMA*, 278(10), 823-832.

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, known as the Add Health Study is a comprehensive school based study of health related behaviours of adolescents in the United States. More that 90,0000 young people between 7th and 12th grades answered brief questionnaires about their lives including their health, friendships, self esteem, and expectations for the future.

(2) Geggie, J., Defrain, J., Hitchcock, S., & Silberberg, S. (2000), *The Family Strengths Research Report*, Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, NSW

(3)Defrain, J. & Stinnett, N. (1985). *Secrets of strong families*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.

(6) National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, *The Importance of Family Dinners II*, Sept.2005.



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