



Sustaining our families during difficult times

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There is a common belief that the family is the primary building block of society, but in our changing world, what does that mean? If we believe that “family structure and upbringing determines the social character and personality of any given society” (Maskanian, 2010), how will the actions we take today influence our future?

Viewed through a wide lens, family can be defined as “a network of mutual commitment” (National Institute of Mental Health, 2005). These networks may include “people related by marriage, biology, or adoption, as well as people related through affection, obligation, dependence, or cooperation” (Rothausen, 1999). Regardless of the type of family structure, certain key underpinnings are important to a family’s healthy functioning.

Adopting a strengths-based approach involving not only the nuclear family unit, but also extended family members, neighbors, teachers, medical professionals, and religious leaders helps build an important support system for a family. The benefits of a team approach, focused on strengthening the development of children and their families, should not be underestimated.

Available tools to help

“Child neglect is often a result of lack of knowledge of the four key needs – physical, mental, developmental, and social – necessary for an integrated family structure,” says Susan Elias, Director of Development for Samaritan Behavioral Health. “Preservation of the family starts with prevention, expanding access to necessary resources for healthy development and growth. Something as simple as how to play and engage with children will help to stimulate their brains,” adds Elias.

The Search Institute®, a nonprofit, nonsectarian organization in Minneapolis, Minnesota, has developed a tool called 40 Developmental Assets® that defines the building blocks for healthy development. Available in four versions – early childhood (ages 3 to 5), grades K – 3 (ages 5 to 9), middle childhood (ages 8 to 12) and adolescence (ages 12 to 18) – the tool identifies 40 key assets relevant to promoting “healthy children, youth, and communities”.

The growing need for help

“Challenges faced today have been expanded to include more families facing serious medical problems, parents caring for children with developmental delays or sensory motor problems, and families under crisis due to prolonged periods of unemployment,” says Beth Gerber, Associate Director of Jewish Family Services in Columbus, Ohio. These challenges stretch across all socioeconomic groups, recognizing no boundaries.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of preserving families in these situations is the initial recognition and acknowledgement of the need for help. “For many, reaching out to public / private resources takes a great deal of effort both in terms of learning how to navigate ‘the system’ of resources that may be available to them, as well as allowing unknown professionals to work with them,” says Verna Foust, Chief Operating Officer of Red Rock Behavioral Health.

Innovative programs making a difference

In Oklahoma, the Red Rock Behavioral Health group offers both care coordination and family support providers to families with children facing multiple challenges. With families and professionals working together, care plans are created to help build a family team using a strengths-based approach.

Samaritan Behavioral Health in Dayton, Ohio champions a community program for violence prevention. Coordinating the efforts of more than 90 community organizations, they have targeted seven key areas to minimize violence in their neighborhoods.

Jewish Family Services in Columbus, Ohio has developed a variety of programs to help adults during challenging times. Their Strategic Utilization of Career Centered Employment Support Services for Dislocated Workers, or the S.U.C.C.E.S.S. program, is designed to help professionals who have been downsized from positions with annual salaries of \$35,000 or more. Making Opportunities through Resources and Employment, the M.O.R.E. program, is provided for individuals seeking employment with annual salaries of less than \$35,000. Jewish Family Services also features a program called Leah's List, comprised of a group of professional and skilled workers providing their time and knowledge pro bono, offering legal, financial and educational support.

Working together to develop solutions

In the case of families facing issues of unemployment, the sooner they reach out for help, the better. "We have found the magnitude of problems grow as resources become depleted," says Gerber. "The crisis can gain speed over time, creating a multitude of challenges to be overcome."

"You shouldn't feel that you need to have all the answers when working with available social service agencies," Gerber advises. "You can start by reviewing the agencies supported by United Way and the Mental Health Board in the city where you live. Asking questions such as 'What can you do for me?' and 'If it were you, who would you go to for help?' are great places to start to find someone who might best represent you."

As Foust further explains, "With bullying amongst youth, safety issues at school, and demanding schedules for employed parents it is no longer realistic to say that 'those kinds of problems don't happen to us.' The challenges today are neither trivial nor limited to individual socioeconomic groups. Building a system of natural supports for your family within the community is important to enjoy long-term success."

Elias adds, "Learning how to deal with stress is an important place to start. Taking even ten minutes each day for family members to share with each other how their day went relieves personal stress and helps others in the family recognize when someone might need help."

Finally, Elias reminds us that family preservation involves the whole family: "We often forget that children have a lot to contribute to our society. If we are able to slow down and notice them, while inviting them to participate in the process, we can really help them shine!"

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