



Strong Family Functioning

Research Brief

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Introduction

Research has documented numerous factors that are related to strong family functioning. This literature review begins with a description of common family structures, both in the civilian and military sectors. Next, numerous components of healthy family functioning are described, including descriptions of how the components manifest in various family relationships (e.g., couple, parent-child, and sibling dyads). In the final section, key findings on recognizing, building, maintaining, and enhancing strong families are summarized. Implications for organizational planning; program development, implementation, assessment, and evaluation, and resource allocation are also discussed.

Across cultures and history, families are the most enduring institutions in the world. Strong families are identified by their ability to maintain a family equilibrium, drawing upon individual and joint strengths to cope effectively. The concept of family equilibrium does not imply a static pattern of family functioning. Rather, strong families are dynamic and responsive to changing needs, developmental tasks, and challenges. Strong families celebrate their successes and learn from their failures. These families have clearly defined roles, especially with regard to the parent-child relationship (Guilfoyle, Goebel, & Pai, 2011).

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Families are also complex, and must be understood within numerous interdependent layers, including each individual family member, dyadic relationships, broader family functioning, and the culture in which they live (Rasbash, Jenkins, O'Connor, Tackett, & Reiss, 2011). Providers working with families must assess and build upon the strengths at each level of the family system, recognizing that the family structures and relationships are dynamic and often shift over time. Understanding the key components of strong family functioning can guide efforts to support and fortify families in ever-changing environments.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The concept of a strong family can be conceptualized through numerous theoretical frameworks, such as positive psychology, family systems theory, and theories of inter- and intrapersonal intelligences. Positive psychology theory explains how strong families incorporate optimism, hope, and existing assets into how they face challenges and solve problems. Family systems theory addresses the interconnectedness of individuals within the family structure, recognizing that strong families consist of positive relationships at multiple levels. Finally, theories of inter- and intrapersonal intelligence target the individual family member's ability to promote positive group dynamics, as well as, personal self-reflection about family roles, attitudes, behaviors, and cultural values. Strong families consist of individual members who develop their interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences.

Historically, family research utilized a deficit model, where the family identified problem areas and sought to correct them. However, more recent empirical research has found that using a positive framework can better promote overall family well-being and have more effective results when treating psychological conditions such as depression (Duckworth, Steen & Seligman, 2005). To that end, positive psychology is the scientific study of positive and negative aspects of the human condition (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Constantine, 2006). Rather than focusing on pathology and negative

qualities, this model takes a strength-based approach by focusing on identifying and expanding upon an individual's positive components, states, and outcomes. In doing so, individuals are empowered to draw upon their character strengths to foster well-being and manage negative situations effectively (Ackerman, Kashy, Donnellan, & Conger, 2011).

Extending this theoretical framework from the individual unit of analysis to the whole family is the focus of the sub-field called family-centered positive psychology. It specifically targets issues related to families and approaches that will result in the betterment of the overall family system. This theory encourages parents, teachers, and an individual to work collaboratively to address a child's behavioral issue across both a home and school setting. By changing the focus from an individual to a family, members are empowered to leverage both individual and relational strengths to access resources, meet needs, and accomplish family goals (Sheridan, Warnes, Cowan, Schemm, & Clarke, 2004). In this way, all members of the family are included and work together from a strengths-based approach.

In contrast to positive psychology's approach of empowering all family members to function in a positive fashion, family systems theory focuses on strengthening a single family member, with the expectation of positive ripple effects for the rest of the family unit. Family systems theory views family relationships as inextricably connected. For example, one should not consider a child without simultaneously considering the parent-child context and the sibling relationship. From a systems perspective, positive changes in the child can improve functioning in the broader parent-child relationship, sibling relationships, and throughout the entire family unit (Riggs & Riggs, 2011).

In connection to family systems theory, Gardner's (1985) theory of inter- and intrapersonal intelligence describes the ability to relate to others, and the capacity for self-reflection, respectively. Gardner (1985) found that people with high interpersonal intelligence are able to easily sense others' moods, empathize with them, cooperate, and work effectively as a team. Strong families consist of members who have well-developed interpersonal intelligence.

In addition, individuals with good intrapersonal skills are in-tune with their inner thoughts and feelings, have a keen ability to gauge their strengths and weaknesses, and can accurately predict their reactions and emotions to various situations. Possessing intrapersonal intelligence is helpful in understanding one's role and navigating successfully within the complex, ever-changing family system. Besides being competent in the domain of interpersonal intelligence, strong families espouse members that also have a degree of competence in intrapersonal intelligence.

Summary of Theoretical Context

In sum, families must be understood in context, including each individual, their relationships, the broader family unit, and the societal context (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The family theories reviewed here provide a foundation from which to understand what constitutes a strong family. Positive psychology offers the importance of positive emotions and approaches to any given situation (Linley et al., 2006; Constantine, 2006). Systems theory highlights how each family member is interconnected (Sheridan et al., 2004). Finally, multiple intelligence theories of inter- and intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1985) highlight how healthy families are comprised of individuals who both relate well to others and are in-tune with their own strengths and weaknesses. Families exist in a complex environment with the members of the family each contributing to the overall well-being of the family. As each family unit is unique, careful and continuous assessment of family functioning is important to best meet the needs of all members.

American Families

Historically, the traditional American family structure consisted of a husband, wife, and children (Golding, 2006). The structures today are much more diverse. Current American family structures can include spouses or partners of either heterosexual or homosexual orientation, with or without children. Modern family structures can also include single-parent, extended, or blended families that include stepparents and stepchildren (Golding, 2006). Family members may or may not be biologically related as adoption has become more common.

Key Finding:

The structures of today's American Family are much more diverse than the historically traditional family consisting of a husband, wife, and children.

Due to an aging population, households are becoming increasingly multigenerational. In the 2012 Census, approximately 5% of the population lived in a multigenerational household (usually a child and a parent living with a grandparent; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2012). Helping to strengthen families will require mindfulness of the diversity that American families represent, including unique strengths and challenges sometimes faced by specific family constellations.

Significant variability exists across American families on a variety of key indicators, including financial stability. In 2012, the median American family household income was \$51,017. However, household income varies greatly by race (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2012). In this 2012 report, Asian-American households had the highest median household income (\$68,636), followed by European-American households (\$51,017), Hispanic households (\$39,005), and African American households (\$33,321) (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2012).

In this 2012 Census report, approximately one-third (28%) of American children were reported to live in single parent homes. Fathers had more frequently become single parents as a result of divorce; in contrast, many single mothers were never married (Vespa et al., 2012). Again, this characteristic varies by race. African American and Hispanic children were more likely to be raised in single parent homes than children from European American or Asian American families (Vespa et al., 2012). This disparity mirrors the variability described above in household income, as single-parent homes are usually reliant on one income.

Married couples with children under the age of 18 constitute 63% of American families; while rates of marriage have been declining, rates of cohabitation have been steadily increasing, creating yet another non-traditional family structures (Vespa et al., 2012).

Similar to their civilian counterparts, military families are composed of a range of family constellations, including servicemen and women plus their spouses/partners and any dependents. According to the 2012 report, *Profile of the Military Community*, there are more military family members (57.9%) than military personnel (42.1%). A majority, 56.1%, of active duty Service members were married, 3.9% divorced, and 41.7% never married. Also, 43.9% of active duty Service members were parents, with 5.2% being single parents. Among Guard and Reserve members, 47.0% were married,

Military Families: Any family unit taking place within a military context. Family is the basic unit in society that can consist of two partners and dependent children, or any variance that is regarded equivalent to a traditional family structure.

7.2% divorced, and 45.6% never married. A significant number, 43.0% of Guard and Reserve members had children with 9.4% being single parents. Both active duty and Guard/Reserve parents had an average of two children.

Burland and Lundquist (2013) reported that military families differ in significant ways from civilian families. Military Service members tend to marry younger and have children earlier. While male Service members are likely to marry civilian women, female Service members are more likely to marry another Service member. Dual military couples have been found to be less likely to divorce than their civilian counterparts. However, after leaving the military, veterans may be at higher risk of divorcing than their non-serving peers. Two things are required in order for professionals, institutions, and organizations that work with families to recognize and assist in the development of strong families: (1) an awareness of the diversity of family constellations; and (2) the key skills and competencies exhibited in healthy and well-functioning families.

Components of Strong Families

This review reveals ten key components of strong families that collectively leverage individual and relational strengths for healthy family development and the maintenance of the family equilibrium, while minimizing strife, pathology, and distress. The ten key components were identified through a review of the literature regarding family protective factors. The foundational basis for the components was initially created by combining the work of Benzies & Mychasiuk (2009), Black & Lobo (2008), and the *Family Readiness System Logic Model* (DOD, 2012) into a comprehensive list of possible factors that support strong families. From there, a thorough review of the literature supported the inclusion and adaptation of some factors that became the ten key components of strong families. Other factors were eliminated based on a lack of sufficient inclusion in the literature due to frequency or strength.

The first nine components apply to a wide range of cultural contexts and family structures, and include: (1) communication; (2) emotional regulation; (3) family cohesion; (4) family recreation/leisure time; (5) financial management; (6) prosocial family values; (7) resilience; (8) religiosity/spirituality; and (9) routines/rituals. The tenth component, military readiness, is specific to the context of American military nuclear families consisting of both parental figures and dependent children or any variance that is regarded as an equivalent structure (Black & Lobo, 2008; DOD, 2012; Gardner, Huber, Steiner, Vazquez, & Savage, 2008; Saltzman, Lester, Beardslee, Layne, & Nash, 2011).

Communication

Communication involves family members sharing meaningful information amongst themselves. Family members communicate with one another in a variety of methods including: verbal, non-verbal, written and electronic messages (Lewis, Haviland-Jones, & Barrett, 2008). This component interacts with all others on the list, but is particularly important as a mechanisms for promoting family cohesion and resiliency (Schrodt, 2005). Effective communication has the potential to increase intimacy and connections among family members; while hurtful, angry communication can damage relationships.

Key Finding:

Supportive communication has the potential to increase intimacy and connections among family members; while hurtful, angry communication can damage relationships.

Each family member has their own individual communication style that must be considered in the context of other family members and family cultural norms. Strong families have parents who teach and model effective communication, demonstrating open and honest sharing of feelings, and engaging in responsive listening. Children learn both by their parents' specific instructions and by observing parental interactions (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating 2006; Black & Lobo, 2008; DiClemente et al., 2001; Saltzman, 2011). Moreover, it is important to consider the role of positive communication as a strength in the couple's and in the parent-child relationship.

Couple. Open, honest communication between the couple is a cornerstone of strong family functioning, as it creates the foundation for how information is shared and provides a model for children. Good communication is marked by mutual, open sharing of thoughts and feelings as well as responsive listening and emotional support (Gottman, 2011). Couples can foster intimacy and strength in their relationship by showing respect, engaging in frequent conversations, listening to and responding empathically, making important decisions together, and resolving the inevitable conflicts that arise as part of everyday family life (Harris, Skogrand, & Hatch, 2008).

Parent-Child. Strong families demonstrate positive interpartner communication, and effective communication skills with their children. Open and respectful communication benefits the child, parent, and the parent-child relationship (Lochman & Van-den-Steenhoven, 2002). Good communication within the family offers children a safe place to bring their joys, worries, and hurts to their parents; such intimate sharing strengthens the attachment bond and teaches the child that he/she can count on a parent being available and responsive. Effective communication can provide a buffer against the development of negative or antisocial behaviors (Griffin, 2011). Positive parent-child communication contributes to improvement in children's social competence, particularly in the areas of social problem-solving skills and social self-efficacy (Leidy & Guerra, 2012). Thus, the literature clearly documents the importance of open, honest, and genuine communication in strong families (Lochman & Van-den-Steenhoven, 2002; Griffin, 2011; Leidy & Guerra, 2012).

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation refers to the ability to modulate emotional reactions to other people and stressful situations (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson; 1998). People who can regulate their emotions can cope effectively with significant challenges, and don't become easily overwhelmed or paralyzed by emotional distress. When they encounter difficulties, they can identify and cope with strong feelings in a healthy manner. Family members with this skill can discern when it is appropriate to express emotions immediately versus when it may be more appropriate to wait until the intensity of the situation is attenuated to address strong feelings. For example, strong feelings of anger can be expressed in an attacking style, causing damage to both the recipient and the relationship. When the angry person takes the time to calm down and prepare how to present his/her feelings in a respectful manner, the conversation can be much more effective (Chartier, Negroni, & Hesselbrock, 2010; Gottman et al., 1998). Emotional regulation is

Key Finding:

Family members who regulate their emotions well can discern when it is appropriate to express emotions immediately, versus when it may be more appropriate to wait until the intensity of the situation is attenuated to address strong feelings.

closely related to communication, and family members with strong skills in this area may have high levels of both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1985).

Gottman (1998; 2011) reported that one key predictor of divorce is emotional flooding (i.e., when one partner feels threatened and thus becomes physiologically aroused with increased heart rate, sweating, elevated blood pressure, etc.). In this flooded state, the individual who feels threatened cannot modulate his/her affect effectively, which often leads him/her to say and do things that harm the relationships. Couples in strong families have the ability to modulate their emotions, thus preventing the state of being flooded. Thus, these couples are able to disengage from conflicts before they escalate. When children are involved, the couple that is able to take a time out effectively, and return later to resolve the issue, are modeling healthy emotional regulation and thus conflict resolution skills for children.

Parent-Child. Within the parent-child relationship, emotional regulation most often manifests itself through the parents' management of his/her own emotions, and how he/she responds to the child's feelings. Strong families have parents that are able to understand both how and when to express emotions. This results in a parent-child relationship that is often closer and marked by less tension. In addition, this model provides children the opportunity to learn how to regulate their own emotions.

Emotional regulation is an important component when considering parenting styles. A classic model (Baumrind, 2005) outlines four styles of parenting including authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and the rejecting-neglecting style. Authoritarian parents tend to be very demanding and rigid, but typically not very responsive to the child's needs and feelings. Permissive parents (sometimes referred to as indulgent) are very responsive, but may be too lenient and cater to their child's wishes; these parents place few demands or expectations on their children. Rejecting-neglecting parents (also known as disengaged) neither place demands on their children nor respond to children's needs and feelings. Finally, authoritative parents set appropriate expectations for their children; being both demanding and emotionally available to support their children. Literature with Western cultures has found a range of positive outcomes for children raised by authoritative parents (Luyckz & Tildesley, 2011).

Emotional regulation is a key component of strong families. The ability to discern when and how to express emotions can assist individual family members in building and maintaining positive familial relationships. It requires an acute understanding of group dynamics and family culture, as well as the ability to self-reflect about family situations and circumstances. Emotional regulation is enhanced by individuals' interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence and this knowledge is important to the family relationship. Families benefit from each member understanding how to emote in positive ways and at appropriate times. Thus, strong families take the time to develop a shared cultural understanding about both the when and how of emotional expression and, through role modeling, teach new family members throughout the generations (DeFrain & Asay, 2007).

Family Cohesion

Family cohesion is the level of support and commitment family members have towards one another (Annunziata, Hogue, Faw, & Liddle, 2006; Black & Lobo, 2008; Gonzales et al., 2012). This component is often reflected in supportive family involvement, family bonding, and family climate (Lochman & Vanden-Steenhoven, 2002; O'Brien, Gorden, Bearden, Lopez, Kopelowicz, & Cannon, 2006; Rasbash et al.,

2011). Current research supports the importance of family cohesion in couples, parent-child dyads, and sibling relationships (Christensen & Ehlers, 2002; Houltberg, Houltberg, & Henry, 2012; Juang & Alvarez, 2010; Marsiglia, Parsai, & Kulis, 2009; Shaw, Criss, Schonberg, & Beck, 2004).

Couple. A key component of intimate relationships is intimacy, or the level of connection and closeness partners feel towards each other. Relational intimacy has numerous domains, such as feeling connected via spiritual activities, physical/sexual intimacy, co-parenting, and shared leisure activities. Couples that have a strong positive relationship support one another, regularly express appreciation, communicate openly, have high levels of trust, know they can depend upon each other, and continually work at enhancing the closeness in the relationship (Asoodeh, Khalili, Daneshpour & Lavasani, 2010; Harris et al., 2008; Wolcott, 1999). The level of cohesion fluctuates across time and situation; committed couples strive to stay connected and share in life's joys and challenges as a team (Johnson & Greenman, 2006).

Key Finding:

Family cohesion (the emotional glue that holds a family together) is enhanced by supportive family involvement.

Parent-Child. A strong bond between the parent and child is important for family cohesiveness. Children are well-served when they feel a strong bond with the adults most responsible for their physical and psychological development (Lewis, Jones, & Barrett, 2008). The bond between parent and child starts early and for this reason research on infants and newborns has proliferated. Journals such as the *Journal for Neonatal Nursing* and *Neonatology* are just some of the scientific publications available. DeFrain and Asay (2007) note that family bonding manifests differently across cultural contexts. Thus, professionals who work with and on behalf of families should note how cultural factors influence the family's interactions. For example, in some African cultures, a child is held constantly for the first 30 days and never allowed to sleep in a crib or bassinet. If the mother needs rest, other female members will hold the baby for her (Karp, 2002). Although such manifestations of parent-child bonding are uncommon in Western cultures, the importance of respecting culturally-specific forms of parent-child bonding are essential to effective family supportive services.

For example, Leidy and Guerra (2012) found that within immigrant Latino families, the level of cohesion was related to four distinct factors. The four factors include: 1) acculturation differences between parents and children that result in a power imbalance; 2) parental involvement in their child's education; 3) the presence of extended family; and 4) discrimination against immigrants and legal status. Acculturation differences were apparent, because while almost all the parents (99%) in the study (n=282) were born outside the United States, two-thirds of the children (67%, n=144) were born inside the United States. In situations where children were more acculturated, the parents were more dependent on the children for everyday life. Parents who are actively engaged in matters related to their child's education, changes to the extended family structures, and other cultural experiences associated with their new home country are more likely to promote family cohesion (Leidy & Guerra, 2012).

Siblings. Sibling relationships can be complex, composed of multiple dyadic and triadic relationships when present in larger families. Regardless of family size, sibling relationships function according to a different set of rules and power dynamics than can be observed in other dyadic relationships within the family (Kozłowska & Hanney, 2011). For example, a sibling dyad may have a more equal power dynamic within the family than the parent-child dyad.

Brody (2004) found that the extent of conflict between siblings is affected by the amount of family cohesion and the parent-child relationship. Families exhibiting a strong parent-child bond tend to experience less sibling conflict among the children. This parent-child bond can impact how siblings respond to differential treatment by their parents. Specifically, parents may treat siblings differently, and siblings often observe and feel the effects of such differential treatment. Brody (2004) noted, that children who experienced a sufficient amount of family cohesion and had a positive relationship with their parent tended to rationalize the differential treatment. They deemed the differential treatment necessary due to age, personality, or special needs. In this way, children did not cause conflict with each other and continued to have strong sibling-sibling bonds. However, when a child rationalized the preferential treatment of a sibling due to a problem in the parent-child relationship, it can cause conflict between siblings. This, sibling cohesion appears to be greater when they are able to see a logical reason for preferential or differential treatment received from parents. Families that have strong cohesion at other levels (e.g., parent-child) thus appear to foster bonds between siblings.

Understanding the emotional connections and power dynamics between siblings, as well as the complex interactions with other family relationships, is crucial to improving our understanding of family functioning and building strong families.

Family Recreation and Leisure Time

Strong families spend time together doing activities that do not involve work or household chores. These activities can take a variety of forms and may support other family components described herein (e.g., routines, rituals, and religiosity/spirituality). Family leisure research has been conducted across several countries and cultural groups and in each case, its importance to strengthening families was affirmed (Ward and Zabriskie, 2011).

Key Finding:

Family recreation and leisure time is one way to enhance family cohesion.

Family leisure time can be divided into two different categories—core and balance (Ward & Zabriskie, 2011). Core family leisure is defined as those activities that are “common, everyday, low-cost, relatively accessible, often home-based activities that many families do frequently” (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003, p. 168). These activities are used by families to maintain stability and include things like playing board games, playing outside, and watching a movie together. In contrast, balance family leisure consists of “activities that are generally less common, less frequent, more out of the ordinary, and usually not home-based thus providing novel experiences” (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003, p. 169). These activities are used by families to provide outlets for new and unique experiences and include things like family vacations, attending sporting events, and camping.

While the literature has found that leisure time is important for positive couple relationships (Asoodeh et al., 2010; Harris, Skogrand, & Hatch, 2008; Wolcott, 1999), it is the parent-child relationship that

research has found to be most impacted by recreation and leisure time. Overall family functioning is strengthened by spending both core and balance leisure time together; however, these types are distinct. In fact, parents and youth view the two types of leisure differently in terms of how they contribute to strong family functioning (Ward & Zabriskie, 2011). Parents tend to regard both core and balance time as vitally important to family cohesion and adaptability; however, youth tend to view core family leisure as the most important type of shared leisure time, appreciating the everyday occurrences more than the less frequent special occasions. Ward and Zabriskie (2011) note that the difference could be due to the fact that parents understand that families must encounter change in order to adapt and grow, while children crave stability in their family patterns.

Research has found that family leisure time is positively associated with more family interactions and increased satisfaction with family life (Agate, Zabriskie, Agate, & Poff, 2009; Aslan, 2009; Driver, Brown & Peterson, 1991). Also, families that spend recreation time together tend to communicate more effectively and have greater conflict resolution skills (Huff, Widmer, McCoy & Hill, 2003; Wells, Widmer & McCoy, 2004).

Financial Management

Strong families work hard to minimize negative stress and to cope effectively (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005). In this way, they strive to create a family culture that operates from a healthy, mutually supportive standpoint. Stress in family relationships often revolves around finances (Bodenmann, Ledermann, & Bradbury, 2007; Dew, 2007). More specifically, financial matters related to the level of family debt can be a primary source of conflict within a family.

Strong families use healthy communication and coping skills related to financial issues and work together to avoid accruing large amounts of debt (Black & Lobo, 2008; Orthner, Jones-Sanpei & Williamson, 2004). Strong couples also work together to build up family assets (Dew, 2011). The larger the amount of financial assets available to a family, the less likely they are to divorce (Dew, 2011). Thus, avoiding debt and building financial stability within the family can lead to greater relationship stability.

Key Finding:

Finances can be a source of stress in families, and differences in decision-making about money can create conflict in couples. Strong families talk openly and work together to manage finances, striving to maintain some reserves for potential unexpected crises.

While financial matters generally are discussed and resolved between the adult members of the family, research shows that parents are children's primary source of financial education (Lucey & Giannangelo, 2006). Involving youth in financial discussions, in appropriate ways, can be an avenue for families to teach children the responsible attitudes and behaviors that can prepare them for long-term financial health. In this way, parents also benefit from role modeling the behaviors and attitudes they are teaching their children (Borden et al., 2013).

Borden and colleague's 2013 report on youth financial readiness highlighted nine topics that youth often learn about in their families including: (1) budgeting and saving; (2) investing; (3) credit knowledge; (4) financing and debt; (5) taxes; (6) insurance; (7) banking and financial services; (8) goal setting and decision-making; and (9) fraud and identity theft. In addition, parents can teach even very young children some foundational skills about finances, including an understanding of numbers, money, good

decision-making, and the fair exchange of money for labor. Strong families work to develop responsible habits in their children, which could empower them with effective tools to use in their future family units.

Most families have difficulty talking about financial matters and these discussions may increase stress, anxiety, and conflict between couples; however, couples who communicate openly and work together can manage stressful or unexpected financial matters as a team (e.g., the couple has some reserves to manage unanticipated expenses such as the car breaking down; Orthner et al., 2004). In addition, both parents and children benefit from a family culture that includes financial discussions and the development of healthy financial habits.

Prosocial Family Values

Parents are always teaching their children about family norms and values both verbally and nonverbally. How families spend their time, treat each other, help others, and work together when challenges arise all communicate individual and family values (Lewis et al., 2008). Strong families tend to communicate prosocial family values including positive behaviors and how to be a productive part of society (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Black & Lobo 2008). Every family's value system is shaped by the cultures in which they live and interact; thus, professionals working with families must appreciate the family's uniqueness, while simultaneously promoting prosocial values that research has found to be helpful to family functioning.

Key Finding:

Prosocial family values can help prevent children and especially adolescents from engaging in negative or antisocial behavior.

Research has found that prosocial family norms and values can act as a protective factor against children engaging in negative or antisocial behaviors (e.g., risky behavior, sexual activity, smoking, and substance use), particularly during adolescence and among minority youth (DiClemente et al., 2001; Gonzales et al., 2012; Kumpfer, 2003; Li et al., 2000). Moreover, parental communication about expectations and values are a powerful influence when children are making social decisions on whether to engage in risk-taking activities (Griffin, Samuolis, & Williams, 2011). In addition, parents who either abstain from alcohol, tobacco, or other drug use, or communicate that these behaviors are not acceptable for their children, tend to have children that are less likely to smoke, drink alcohol, or use other drugs (Griffin et al., 2011).

Prosocial family values provide the basis for many campaigns related to risky behaviors (Barr et al., 2012). For example, public awareness campaigns regarding distracted driving or sexual behavior explicitly request parental assistance in both communicating prosocial family norms and then creating appropriate consequences for children when they engage in risky behaviors (Griffin et al., 2011; Hawkin, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Adults who communicate prosocial family values are not only more likely to have children who do not engage in risky behaviors, but they are simultaneously strengthening two other factors - family cohesion and communication (Lochman & Van-den-Steenhoven, 2002).

Resilience

Resiliency relates to a families' ability to adapt to change. Some common changes that families face include parenting children from birth to adulthood, caring for an aging family member, or adjusting to parental deployment (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004). Strong families are able to maintain relative equilibrium as

they manage both the more common day-to-day challenges with those that are more unique to the typical family's experience (Black & Lobo, 2008; Juby & Rycraft, 2004; Kaplan, Goldstein, & Brooks, 2005; Landau, 2007; Rolland, 2006). Researchers have identified a number of family characteristics that promote resilience to change (Bermudez, 2013; Black & Lobo, 2008; Walsh, 2003). These characteristics overlap with other characteristics of strong families reviewed in this brief, including effective communication, problem solving skills, as well as valuing family time. Families that maintain the belief that strength is centered in relationships and that it is normal to feel distress in response to change and challenge also tend to weather change more readily. This is also true for families who maintain a positive outlook, despite distress. These families are able to accept things that cannot be changed, while maintaining routines and rituals that build continuity and stability in spite of change and challenge. Families that are resilient to change generally have adequate social and economic resources.

These resilience-promoting characteristics can be seen throughout the family system. Healthy couples are able to be flexible and adapt as a team to new circumstances in the event of transitions or change (Asoodeh et al., 2010; Gottman, 2011; Gottman et al., 1998). Within the parent-child relationship, healthy parents encourage children's adaptive responses to change, are responsive to children's distress, and access needed social and economic resources that enable the family to maintain equilibrium (Huebner et al., 2007; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Resilience is vital for individuals and families to be able to deal with inevitable changes that will happen. Strong families will strive to be resilient in adapting to everyday changes and not just when extreme situations or traumas occur.

Religiosity and Spirituality

Families that engage in religious or spiritual activities are promoting healthy development. Although, no universal definition exists for these two terms, Moberg and Brusek's (1978) research continues to be widely cited by scholars who study the impact of religion and spirituality on individuals. Moberg and Brusek (1978) considered that spiritual well-being was comprised of two dimensions. The first dimension is one's relationship with a higher power within a system of religious beliefs (i.e., religiosity). The second dimension is one's sense of meaning and purpose in life, apart from any specific religious framework (i.e., spirituality).

Couple. Religiosity and spirituality provide a context from which couples can view marriage and parenting as an important institution that deserves their attention. This can lead to better family interactions and cohesiveness, while decreasing the risk of divorce, marital conflict, infidelity, domestic violence, and child physical abuse. For some couples, it can increase marital satisfaction, and positive parenting practices by providing a common language and foundation for a shared family culture (Mahoney, 2010). Researchers have found that couples who have a shared sense of spirituality often use this component as a foundation for leisure time activities and communication (Agate, 2007; Asoodeh, et. al, 2010; Wolcott, 1999).

Parent-Child. Parental involvement in formal religious organizations is a predictor for positive parent-youth relationships. (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994). Parental involvement in a religious organization increases parental supervisory, affective, and disciplinary practices within the relationship (Mahoney, 2010). However, these positive effects between parent and child may be related to the framework that religion and spirituality provides that reinforces familial structures, providing a common understanding for the parents and the children (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). In addition, having an active religious or spiritual life decreases negative behaviors

in adolescents such as substance abuse, early sexual involvement, delinquent behavior, etc. decreasing negative interactions between parents and children (Mattis & Jagers, 2001).

Routines and Rituals

Families have both routines (regular, everyday activities such as mealtimes) and rituals (specialized activities that a family does for specific events, such as a Bar Mitzvah or family reunion). These routines and rituals play an important role in increasing predictability in family life, providing opportunities for regular communication, and strengthening the cohesion in relationships through the celebration of life events (Black & Lobo, 2008).

Routines are components of strong families that impact couples, parents and children, and siblings in a similar fashion. Irrespective of the specific dyad, routines can work towards a positive family culture (Black & Lobo, 2008). For example, couples may start a routine of reading the Sunday newspaper together or attending religious services every week. Parents and child may develop daily routines that provides a pathway for strengthening this bond (i.e., a bedtime routine). Finally, siblings may choose to develop routines together that can strengthen their relationship, such as joining a club or having a regular movie night). The overarching goal of routines is to provide family members structure and comfort and act as a buffer against time of stress (Black & Lobo, 2008).

Key Finding:

Family rituals and routines can support positive family interactions and protect against adversity.

Similarly, developing a set of family rituals can be a way to have specific times for the family to be positive and celebratory of its individual members. These rituals can be longtime honored traditions based on numerous context including cultural, religious or civic holidays. However, they can also be created specifically for the family in relation to particular events, such as when a child gets a driver's license, celebrates a special birthday, or graduates from high school.

While many families benefit from routines and rituals, they can serve as a very strong protective factor for disadvantaged immigrant families (Smokowski & Rose, 2008). Smokowski and Rose (2008) found in a sample of recent Latino immigrants to the United States that routines and rituals were a particularly important factor in counteracting the negative stresses associated with moving to a new country. Adolescents, whose families continued culture-of-origin routines and rituals, experienced positive development as measured by familism, adaptability, and parent-adolescent conflict, than their peers whose families did not maintain cultural routines and rituals.

Family routines and rituals serve an important role, as the routines and rituals provide structure and predictability, as well as protect against other negative life experiences. Strong families, have developed appropriate routines and rituals that serve as a means for strengthening family cohesion and encouraging open communication.

Military Readiness

This component of strong families is particular to the context of the American military. Saltzman (2011) used the term military readiness to refer to the abilities of military families to acclimate to the military life cycle, including notification of deployment, absence of the Service member(s), and reintegration of

the Service member(s) into the family unit. Military deployment is an important issue for families, both for active duty as well as Reserve and National Guard Service members whose experiences involve some distinct differences (Burland & Lundquist, 2013). Some Service members have been greatly impacted by a high operational tempo, repeated deployments to dangerous combat zones, high exposure to potentially traumatic events, and short time periods between deployments (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass; 2007). For some young families, the Service member may have been away for much of his/her children's lives. Research is beginning to document the ripple effects of these deployments on the entire family system (Creech, Hadley, & Borsari, 2014).

Military families may face other unique situations attributable to military culture. For example, when families experience a military move. For these families, it is critical to consider how to build, maintain, and enhance strong family components within a military culture.

Key Finding:

Strong families are particularly relevant to military readiness, in which military families are regularly challenged to weather notifications of deployment, absence of one or more family members due to deployment, and reintegration into the family unit upon return from deployment.

Discussion

Family systems endure throughout history and across cultures. The interconnectedness of individuals and dyads expose the complexity of families. Despite this complexity, it is important to identify what components contribute to building and fortifying strong family systems, as these can serve as a protective factors for the individuals, dyads, as well as the entire family.

In order to strengthen families, professionals who work with and on behalf of families should draw upon the theories of positive psychology, family systems, and multiple intelligences.

- Positive psychology theory draws upon the benefits of incorporating optimism, hope, and the existing assets within the family.
- Family systems theory incorporates the idea that families consist of multiple relationships as well as the individual him or herself, and in order to make change, the various parts of the system have to be involved.
- Multiple intelligence theory reminds professionals that individual family members may need opportunities to develop either their interpersonal intelligence to be a productive member of the family unit or their intrapersonal intelligence to be able to reflect on how their personal needs, behaviors, and attitudes are affecting the whole system.

This research identified multiple factors that contribute to healthy family functioning. However, ten key components stood out as being part of strong families' core skills and competencies. They include: 1) communication; 2) emotional regulation; 3) family cohesion; 4) family recreation/leisure time; 5) financial management; 6) prosocial family values; 7) resilience; 8) religiosity/spirituality; and 9) routines/rituals. The tenth factor, Military readiness, is a characteristic specific to families where one or both spouses/partners are Service members. Professionals who work to strengthen families should

incorporate an understanding of the key factors throughout their planning, programmatic development and implementation, assessment and evaluation practices, policy development, and resource allocation.

In order to foster these important factors in families, professionals can follow these three strategic steps:

- 1. Engage** in a comprehensive planning process that gathers information about the current state of the families within their purview and the relevant programs, practices and policies that affect those families.
- 2. Implement** a strategic planning process to identify the strengths and the opportunities for development and growth within the particular environmental context.
- 3. Use** assessments, evaluations, policies and protocols, as well as resource allocations, to accomplish the prioritized goals and objectives.

Key Finding:

“Children who grow up in the context of a strong family grow up to contribute in positive ways to their community, helping to prepare the next generation” (Huntington, 2008).

In conclusion, individuals and organizations that work with, and on the behalf of families, must develop and implement structures, programs, and interventions that focus on building and fortifying strong families. The key components identified in this research brief serve as a framework for designing, implementing, and evaluating family programs.

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<p>Communication encourages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Empathetic style of interaction between family members ○ Positive interactions between couples ● Resilient attitudes in family members ● Positive experiences that build family cohesion ● Competence-building in children’s social skills 	<p>Emotional Regulation helps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Utilize an authoritative parenting style ● Reduce emotional flooding communication styles between family members ● Build interpersonal and intrapersonal skill sets
<p>Family Cohesion relates to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Supportive family environments ○ Strong bonds between family members ○ Positive emotional connections in parent-child relationships 	<p>Family Recreation/Leisure Time supports:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stability within the family unit ● Safe spaces to try unique and challenging experiences ● Experiences and activities that promote open communication and increase cohesion
<p>Financial Management helps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase marital satisfaction in couples ● Create children and youth who have healthy financial behaviors and attitudes 	<p>Prosocial Family Values promote:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Parenting styles that clearly communicate to children the family expectations with regard to behavior and family roles ○ Parenting styles that result in consistent discipline patterns for children ● Intergenerational culturally specific beliefs and practices
<p>Resilience encourages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interactions between couples that result in flexible and team-based thinking to adapt to change ○ Family units positively adapting to changing circumstances ● Family systems that respond to changes in such a way as to maintain a dynamic equilibrium 	<p>Religiosity and Spirituality help:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Parents and children have a common framework to discuss family expectations with regard to behavior and family roles ○ Parents develop a foundation from which to develop consistent and age-appropriate disciplinary practices ● Couples develop a unified vision of the institution of marriage
<p>Routines and Rituals promote:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Family cohesiveness ● Stability and predictability in daily family life ● Traditions to celebrate family member accomplishments ● Open communication among family members 	<p>Military Readiness acclimates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Family members to the military life cycle

- Hollow bullet points denote factors outlined in the Department of Defense Family Readiness Logic Model.
- Filled in bullets denote factors outlined in the Strong Family Functioning Research Report.