**CHAPTER 11**  **Stress and Success in Family Life**



*In this chapter you’ll discover …*

♦ The characteristics of a successful family

♦ The stories of six families and the stresses they face

♦ Why stress is sometimes good for us

♦ Some factors that are common to resilient children

♦ How “protective factors” can counteract the effects of stress

So far in this book we have looked at how to work with families around issues related to children’s development, education, and socialization. This chapter puts the spotlight on the families themselves—their lives outside the times you see them. Obviously children are influenced by much more than the time spent in early care and education programs. They live their lives 7 days a week, round the clock, whereas they are in the early education environment only a limited number of hours. Although some children spend 8 to 10 hours a day, 5 days a week, in out-of-home programs, many children are in their educational setting as few as 15 hours a week. But even the children who spend long hours away from their families are more affected by being part of their families than anything else. Early educators need to take the family setting into consideration if they are truly to understand the child and support the family in a collaborative kind of way. So this chapter looks closely at various families and their stresses and successes.

What is meant by the word *family*? Close your eyes and imagine a family. Does this family fit your *concept* of a family? Look around at symbols of families. Think of the logos of agencies that serve families. What is the image conveyed by most? The images I usually see are a male, a female, and one or two children. Perhaps the balance and symmetry cause this type of family to be chosen as a logo—it’s visually attractive. Or perhaps we’re still living in the aftermath of the *Leave It to Beaver* tradition. Whatever the reason, many of us carry in our heads an image that doesn’t apply to a large number of families in the United States today.

What are some of the many different ways a family can vary from the mother-father-child model? Each family can have more children or fewer. It can involve a marriage or not. The members can be all the same gender. Its members can vary greatly in age—by more than just two generations. It can include a number of people who are not related but are living under the same roof. It can include people who are related by blood or marriage along with those who are not related and who do not live under the same roof. (This kind of family is called a *kinship network*.) Its members can share the same bloodlines or name, or both, or neither. Its members can share the same history or not. The family can be *blended*—that is, composed of individuals coming together as a couple who each have children of their own. The blended family can live all together or not. The family can be composed of people who have traditional relationships to each other but were not born into them. Children may come into the family from outside—through adoption, fostering, or less formal arrangements.

There are numerous traditional names for these varying kinds of families. They include nuclear, insular, extended, embedded, single-parent, step, blended, adoptive, foster, communal, kinship networks, gay, and lesbian.

Families can vary infinitely in their makeup. Each variation has an effect on the socialization of any children in them. Families may originate through interracial or interreligious unions. Families may have members who are differently abled. Families may come about through marriages or affiliations that cross generational lines.

Though the forms of families may vary greatly, virtually all families experience stress—and always have. Stress is nothing new to family life, though it may seem now with the times changing so rapidly that we are under more stress than in the past. Certainly family structure is changing, and that alone can create stress in those who think back with longing to what they consider the good old days. This chapter looks at the kinds of stresses that affect families today. It also looks at what makes for successful families. The overarching question is: what can early educators do to support families so they have less stress and more success?

It’s important to take into account the strengths of families in stress who manage to socialize their children successfully. What enables these families to function effectively under difficult or demanding circumstances? Why do some families remain organized and supportive of each other under extreme pressures? Early childhood educators need to learn how to promote that same kind of togetherness in families that lack it. They need to understand more about the effects of classism, racism, and sexism, as well as cultural and ethnic biases.

You can’t take families out of their cultural context. The early childhood profession needs to focus less on universals and more on understanding a variety of cultural patterns of child rearing as they relate to care, education, and socialization. It’s important to recognize that the cultural imperatives of families determine which competencies it is appropriate to foster in children. It is important to understand how educational and socialization techniques, plus child-rearing practices work to promote the survival of any given culture, even though to a critical eye outside the culture some techniques may look undesirable. Early childhood professionals must avoid equating cultural survival with what may seem to be harmful practices and family breakdown.

There’s a lot of talk today about the family breaking down. When a family is not functioning well, raising children is difficult and there’s cause to be concerned. However, the definition of *functional family* varies from culture to culture. It’s tempting to see a family as dysfunctional when its patterns or structure are different from your image of what they should be, but family structure alone doesn’t tell you how well the family functions. It only tells you that it’s different from what has been regarded as a traditional family.

For too long society, researchers, and the media have been thinking of the two-parent, middle-class family and their birth children as the standard by which all other families are to be judged. For too long those families that differed were thought not to measure up and were labeled as lacking or deprived. It’s time to give legitimacy to cultural differences and alternative lifestyles.

A good start is to get rid of the term *broken family*, which sounds as if something is wrong, when in reality the so-called broken family may be quite functional. You can’t tell by family structure whether a family functions in healthy ways. The single-parent family in apartment A may be quite functional compared with the two-parent, *intact*, but highly dysfunctional family in apartment B next door.

You have to be very careful about making generalizations about family structures. For example, some African American family structures have been portrayed as deficient. Stereotypes of domineering mothers, absent fathers, disorganized families plagued with abuse and neglect sometimes overshadow the reality of families that don’t fit what is sometimes thought of as the ideal structure.

It’s time to quit looking at differences as deficits and view them instead as legitimate forms in themselves. Families of all types and sizes are fully capable of producing healthy children and providing a support system for all of the people who comprise the family. You can’t judge a family’s degree of functionality by its structure, patterns, or makeup.

Instead of automatically labeling some family structures as deficient and looking at them as social problems, it’s time that we started to see their strengths. We should be supporting diversity in family structure. When we, as a society, come from a point of view that the family is breaking down, rather than changing in form, we put all of our resources into looking at the causes of the breakdown. We already know something about what causes stress in families. We know that you can’t separate the way families function from the social, economic, and political realities that influence their lives.

**SUCCESSFUL FAMILIES**

A successful family is one that functions in healthy ways; it supports and nurtures its members so that everyone’s needs are met. Although happiness and satisfaction may come periodically to members of successful families, those aren’t the only emotions they experience; they feel a wide range of emotions and are free and able to express them when appropriate. A successful family isn’t a perennial sunshine family. It has its ups and downs, just as its individual members do.

There is much talk about dysfunctional families these days. Many people have discovered that some of the ways they were reared weren’t good for them—their families were abusive, created codependencies, and taught family members to ignore their own needs. The statistics vary, but it has been said that up to 98 percent of us grew up in dysfunctional families. Yet if 98 percent of us are raised in a particular way, that way must be *normal*—a word often equated with *right* and *good*. So where does that leave us as far as dysfunctional families are concerned?

Because the family prepares its members for society, we’d better look beyond the family to see what this high rate of dysfunction is about. A quick look will show that the so-called dysfunctional family is not so out of tune with the present society, which nurtures a system in which some have power over others and not everyone’s needs are met. Power, both in the society and in the family, is often wielded like a sword rather than radiated like light. Privilege and hierarchy, sanctioned by the societal system, often squelch our ability to be who we really are; they take our personal power from us. The dysfunctional family reflects the dysfunctional parts of society.

The theme of the strong dominating the weak is pervasive both in the family and in the society. If we take that theme to extreme, we see that world peace in the past has depended on the strongest nations stockpiling enough weapons to stop each other from making war. That’s the ultimate in the power approach to getting along with others. No wonder families have been hard-pressed to help their members grow in healthy, sane ways to become who they really are as unique people—each able to radiate the power inside.

We’re beginning to change our approach—but change doesn’t happen in an easy, linear way. It is often accompanied by periods of uncomfortable chaos, when things seem to get worse instead of better.

Many who desire this change are beginning to create their own scripts instead of living by the old myths of power in which the strong overcome the weak, one race dominates another, and men control the lives of women. Many are altering the themes that have been handed down for generations.

Families are starting to rear their children for the emerging society—one in which it will be possible to raise children without abusing them and to be both connected and autonomous, one in which the dominator model gives way to a true equity model. Parents are learning how to use their power *for* or *with* their children instead of overpowering and dominating them. They are learning to *empower* their children—that is, to allow them to experience personal power, which gives them the feeling of being able to be themselves and of having some effect on the world or the people in it. People who are empowered don’t need to overpower or manipulate others. They are free to experience being who they really are—to fulfill their unique potential; they will resist being cast into some preset mold.

No matter how much things change, all family systems will continue to have some degree of dysfunction, or they wouldn’t be of human origin. We’ll never live in a perfect world, but we can improve it by focusing on what kinds of traits make for successful families—the traits that will allow each member to function effectively within the family and in the society beyond. What are these traits?

When you focus more on families’ successes than on their stresses, you can then work with them from a strength-based perspective. Strategies related to a strength-based approaches can be found in Strategy Box 11.1.

**TRAITS OF SUCCESSFUL FAMILIES**

Healthy involvement with each other is one trait of a successful family. Its members feel attachment to each other. They care. They don’t just fulfill a social role; they have a deep sense of commitment. They give time and attention to the family. They don’t get overinvolved in activities that exclude the family.

People in successful families recognize the signs of unhealthy *codependence*, in which one person encourages and enables another to lean too heavily on him or her, creating bonds that trap both of them. People in successful families understand the importance of independence and healthy *interdependence*. They know how to get their needs met in a relationship that allows the other person to get his or her needs met as well. They know how to take care of others without making them overly dependent on that care. They understand mutual nurturing. One way to look at this trait of successful families is using what Christian (2006), writing about family systems theory, calls boundaries, which relate to togetherness and separateness. A family that values individual decision-making, openness to new ideas, and separate identities for each member over close connections and conformity has a different set of boundaries in their system from the one that emphasizes togetherness and sees each member’s identity as closely tied to the family. The problem is if you’re from the first family you may see the members of the other family as enmeshed. If you from the second family you may see the first family as disengaged. It’s very hard to determine which families are dysfunctional without understanding how their systems serve them.

 **Strategy Box 11.1**

**Working with Families from a Strength-Based Perspective**

♦ The first goal in working with any family is to form a relationship with that family. That means building the relationship is a top priority any time that you communicate with them.

♦ Look for every family’s strengths and focus on those. When you communicate with the family, remember their strengths, which will help you have faith that they can answer many of their own questions and solve a number of their own problems. Don’t be the “expert,” instead be a supporter and facilitator who helps put them in touch with their own expertise.

♦ When you have problems finding strengths, examine your own attitudes and look at the stereotypes you hold. Self-awareness on your part is essential if you are to move beyond your biases and stereotypes so you can get to know this particular family and discover their strengths.

♦ Acknowledge the family’s strengths to its members. Notice the skills they use with their children and mention those. Affirmations work with adults just like they do with children by emphasizing positives.

Successful families tend to build and maintain self-esteem in their members instead of continually tearing it down. They know how to discipline children and to guide and control behavior in ways that leave self-esteem intact. Virginia Satir, who wrote *Peoplemaking*, found in her practice as a family therapist that developing a feeling of self-worth is one of the primary traits of successful family systems. In Chapter 9, we discussed self-esteem, which is another word for self-worth, and we explored issues relating to cross-cultural perspectives on self-esteem. What looks like parental behaviors that tear down self-esteem from one family’s perspective may not look the same at all from another family’s perspective. It’s very hard to judge across cultures. That’s why the early care and education workforce needs to reflect the diversity of the society!

Successful families know how to communicate effectively. Communication is another of Virginia Satir’s family systems. Effective communication means that family members can both give and receive feedback. They have some skill at resolving conflicts in ways that do not neglect anyone’s needs. They use problem-solving methods to deal with even small issues when they arise. They know how to cope with problems that can’t be solved. They know how to express feelings in healthy ways as is appropriate to their culture. They know how to give and get culturally appropriate strokes or recognition. Communication styles are greatly influenced by culture. Some cultures put much more emphasis on words than others. The ones who use the most words are called *low context* cultures. They are a contrast to ones that use fewer words; they are called *high context cultures.* The mainstream culture of the United States is a low context culture, while the Chinese culture is a high context culture, because the meaning of communication comes from the context rather than words. Learning the traditions is a task of childhood—so children grow up to share the context and don’t need words to communicate (Hall,1981).

Successful families know how to protect their members, providing a secure environment within the home. Though a safe home is a haven from the outside world, it is also important that family members connect to the greater society. Therefore, two important family functions—protection and connection—seem to be opposites, but in reality they balance one another. Virginia Satir says one way of looking at family systems is to understand how every person in the family links to society. The degree of function is determined by how they link and what the results are.

The early care and education program can provide a helpful link to the society—and for some families it’s their first experience with societial institutions related to schooling and education. That’s another benefit of family-centered early care and education. The link can be more than a very loose one, and parents can become vitally involved in their children’s education.

Successful families have rules that work for each member and for the family as a whole. “Rules are sets of standards, laws, or traditions that tell us how to live in relation to each other” (Christian, p 16). Some families are clear about their rules and put them into words. Other families’ rules are buried in the cultural context. When a couple gets married they sometimes discover rules they didn’t know they had. They have to work to figure out what to do about contrasting rules. Rules can be about very large things, like how do adults and children talk to elders and who gets served first. When I grew up I wasn’t aware of any family rules about who got served first. There may have been some rules, but apparently I never broke them. My husband’s family though, had very strict rules, which I discovered one night after a party. I remember that a decision was made in the kitchen to serve all the children first and get them out of the way before the adults sat down to eat. One elderly grandmother was upset to watch the children eat when the older people should have been served first. She didn’t say anything at the time, but the look on her face showed her disapproval. Afterwards she complained about the children being fed before the adults. She had a strong rule in her family about that.

Rules that seem big to some can seem small to others—like taking off shoes when entering a house. If you don’t have the rule, it may seem like a foolish and even annoying rule. If you do have the rule, it may be a very important one to you.

Parents and elders in successful families know how to pass on values to the next generation, through modeling, discussion, teaching, and problem solving. They also know how to accept differences when value conflicts arise.

So what does a successful family look like? Do they all have fulfilling jobs, live in nice houses, drive “newish” cars, and live stress-free lives? Of course not. Successful families come in all sizes, shapes, configurations, and financial conditions. Circumstances contribute to success, of course, but they aren’t the sole determiners. If they were, rich people in good physical health would automatically be better at creating successful families than sick poor people, but that just isn’t the way it works, is it?

No family is 100 percent successful. All families are in process. Think of success as a path—a path where no one gets to the final destination (just as no one reaches human perfection). Some start out on this path farther behind than others.

Compare two families. The first is made up of a couple who both came from stable families where their needs were fairly well met. When they had children, they tended to create the kind of home life they both experienced as children. They have their problems, of course, but they seem to take things in stride. They work at their marriage, at their individual development, and at their parenting. They had good models in their parents for this work. They are on the path of success.

The second family is composed of a couple who came from less stable homes. They are also working at their marriage, at their individual development, and at their parenting, but they have to work harder because they haven’t had the firsthand experience that the first couple had. They’ve had to come to the realization that their own upbringing was lacking—which means that they’ve had to *learn* healthy ways of dealing with their children. It didn’t just come to them naturally. They are also on the path to success, but it’s a rockier road for them, with numerous barricades to climb over and potholes to fall into.

What the two families have in common is that they have a vision of success. They are both on the path, moving toward their vision—and they are determined to make progress.

Let’s take a look now at six families who, in spite of a number of pressures in their lives, are also struggling along the path to become successful families. Some are much farther along than others, but stress is a theme in all of their lives. Let’s see what kind of stresses they are coping with. One thing that these six families have in common is that all are enrolled in the same early care and education program.

***Sara’s Family***

Meet Sara. She was a teen parent when she had Ty four years ago; now she is 20. Ty and his 2-year-old brother, Kyle, are both in the center because Sara is in nursing school at the local community college.

Sara has had a hard time of it since she became a mother at 16. She lived with her mother for the first couple of years, but they argued over how she was raising Ty, and Sara left to join the homeless population of her city. She and Ty lived for awhile in her car until the poor old auto quit running, sat in one place too long, and got towed. Then she lived under a bridge between the highway and the river. Pregnant again (as the result of being raped), hungry, and desperate, she finally found a social worker in an agency that hooked her up to some of the services available in her community (more about this in the next chapter).

Now Sara is in nursing school, and life is better, but it still isn’t easy. She has financial aid and a place to live, but she’s going crazy trying to go to school all day, study all night, and raise her boys at the same time. They reflect her stress and they have stresses of their own. Ty seems to have an attention deficit problem; although the teachers in the center are working with him, he moves from one activity to another so fast that it’s hard to keep track of him. He never seems to settle on any one thing and becomes frustrated very easily when he tries to do something. The result is that he throws regular tantrums.

Then there’s Kyle. He appears to be a very sweet child, cuddling up to the teachers whenever he gets a chance. But his brother beats on him, which is starting to make him aggressive toward other children. He has to be watched all the time because he bites. The staff is thinking of putting him in one of the satellite family child care homes available to the center because the stimulation of the center seems to be too much for him to handle.

Sara is learning about communication, discipline, and family relations from a parenting class and from her therapist. She doesn’t feel very successful as a family head, but she is moving in the right direction. When she looks at her past, she sees that she has come a long way. She has hopes for the future.

***Roberto’s Family***

The second family is Roberto’s. His 4-year-old daughter, Lupe, is in the local Head Start program in the morning, and she comes to the center in the afternoon. Roberto transports her from one program to the other when his old pickup is running and he’s not working. Otherwise, his wife, Maria Elena, who takes classes in English as a second language at the adult school, uses the bus to pick up Lupe and deliver her to the center. Maria Elena takes their baby, Paco, with her in the morning to class, where they have child care, but she brings Paco to the center in the afternoon while she cleans houses to support the family. Roberto does odd jobs when he can get them and has been looking for steady work for some time.

Lupe has a hearing loss, and the teachers in the center keep telling Maria Elena and Roberto that they must take her to see a specialist. But they went once and there were so many papers to fill out, none of which they understood, and no one was there to translate for them—so they walked out and haven’t gone back. The center staff is working to find them a translator so they can get the help that Lupe needs, but so far they haven’t found one. Maria Elena is very worried about Lupe, and so is Roberto, but he is hesitant to put his name on any kind of papers that might bring him to the attention of the government. He just doesn’t trust what might happen once the government becomes aware of him and his family. It was bad enough signing up for Head Start and for child care, but at least those papers were in Spanish and he knew what he was signing. He didn’t have to depend on someone with limited Spanish trying to explain them to him. His neighbor tells him he’s being paranoid about this, but Roberto’s family has had some bad experiences with government officials, and he doesn’t want to repeat them. Roberto is wary!

Roberto has never even thought of whether his is a “successful” family or not. He’s too involved in the daily struggle for survival.

He is anxious that his family live according to the traditions he grew up with, but he sees all of them being changed as the different cultures rub up against each other. He resists that change, but at the same time he appreciates what he and Maria Elena are learning about child rearing from their involvement with Head Start and the child care center. They are beginning to examine some of the “givens” of their own upbringing and thinking about whether they contribute to the goals they have for their children. They are most anxious to retain their culture and be the best parents they can be!

***Junior’s Family***

The most vocal member of the third family is 12-month-old Junior. He cries all the time. The staff at the child care center tries hard to comfort him, but what works with other children doesn’t work with Junior. The whole family—refugees from their homeland—are obviously suffering from having had to flee, but the loudest sufferer is Junior. The center staff has never had a baby in the program who has been so unhappy for so long. He cries all day, every day, except for the periods when he sleeps.

The staff doesn’t know too much about Junior’s family, except that they live with a number of relatives in a small house that they’re pooling their money to buy. Although the house is crowded in the evenings and on weekends, there’s no one home during the day to care for little Junior. Everyone’s out working. Great-Grandma used to take care of him, but she’s sick now and can barely care for herself. Perhaps he misses her, and that’s why he cries so much.

Language must be a problem for Junior, too. No one in the center knows more than a word or two of his language, and that must be very scary for him. And he doesn’t stop crying long enough to listen to English.

The staff has tried to find out about Junior’s diet, but his mother is very vague. She doesn’t speak English too well, so she leaves things like food decisions up to them. The center provides the food for the children, but the staff is anxious to respond to any special cultural or family food preferences. They just can’t find out from Junior’s family what those might be.

Like Roberto’s family, Junior’s family is also rubbing up against other cultures, but they are so busy surviving in the new country, with its different cultures and different languages, that they are in culture shock. They are still reacting to what is new and strange to them, and they are not yet able to take in any benefits from the broadened experience.

***Michael’s Family***

The fourth family has one child enrolled in the child care center. Three-year-old Michael is a quiet boy with long dark eyelashes that sweep down on his cheeks when he lowers his eyes, which he does a good deal of the time. He is cautious and slow to warm up to people, but his slightly withdrawn manner has captured the hearts of the staff.

Michael’s parents, Margaret and Beth, are a lesbian couple. Although the child comes every day, the staff has barely talked to his parents. They seem to move in and out of the center like shadows. Margaret usually brings Michael. She is friendly to staff but always in a hurry. Because the staff members have mixed feelings about this couple, several are rather glad the two women are so unobtrusive and seemingly unwilling to engage in conversation. However, one staff member has strong feelings about the bias this family may be experiencing in the center. She wants to change the atmosphere and be sure that the parents and the child feel comfortable and accepted. She has begun to introduce the subject of antibias regularly at staff meetings, and this has brought forth some discomfort among the staff. At the last meeting she pointed out that although the program is committed to “celebrating diversity,” there is no physical evidence in the center that lesbian and gay couples are considered normal families. Pictures abound (on the walls and in books) that show all kinds of family configurations, except same-sex parents. No books in the center show gay or lesbian families.

“What can we do to make school more comfortable for and accepting of Michael and his family?” was the teacher’s question to the rest of the staff.

“Good question,” responded one teacher. “This is something we should talk about. I’m concerned about Michael,” she added emphatically.

“*I’m* concerned about his parents as well!” said the first teacher, equally emphatically. “What can we do to raise their comfort level?”

The staff is still working on this question, because they are in conflict with each other about what should be done. They can’t even agree about the idea of bringing in books and pictures of families like Michael’s. Some feel strongly that it’s an equity issue they are discussing; others are taking a moral or religious stance. In the meantime, it’s easy to see the discomfort level rise in Michael and his parents as they pick up unspoken messages from various staff members.

Although Michael’s parents have many traits of the successful family, they are unable to benefit from what the staff might have to offer them to increase their knowledge of child development and family relations because of limited communication.

***Courtney’s Family***

Courtney’s family commands a good deal of staff attention for all sorts of reasons. Courtney, the mother, has been married before, and two of her four children are in the program. Roland, her 4-year-old, was abused by his father, and the family lives in fear that one day the father will arrive at school, claim his son, and take off with him. The staff has been warned of the situation and is aware of the restraining order that gives them the authority to refuse to let the father take Roland. Roland, after all his bad experiences, is fearful of men—and he doesn’t get along with the other children, either.

Courtney, Roland’s mother, a European American, is married to Richard, who is Native American. They have their own child, a 2½ year old named Soleil. Roland’s half-sister looks more like her father than her mother, and her beauty is remarkable—literally. Adults passing through the center stop to discuss what a lovely child she is.

Soleil is remarkable in other ways too. She is intellectually mature far beyond her years, but socially she’s still a baby. She confuses adults, who don’t know what to think of her. They marvel at the way she is teaching herself to read but become distressed by the fact that she kicks, screams, and even bites when a child refuses to give her a toy that she wants to play with.

Courtney is in a drug recovery program and has just decided to continue her education. She wants to become a lawyer. Richard works in construction and is going to college part-time to become a history teacher. He has very strong feelings about his heritage, which the teachers found out about last Thanksgiving when they put up pictures of Pilgrims and Indians on the walls.

One of the teachers was just stapling the last picture up when Richard arrived with Roland and Soleil. He stopped, stared intensely at the picture, then turned abruptly to the teacher and said, “I’m sorry, but it’s offensive to me that you’re using caricatures of my people as decorations. It feels as if you’re making fun of my culture.”

The teacher stopped, stapler in hand, shocked by his words. “I don’t understand. Thanksgiving stands for friendship and love. That’s what these pictures are about—brotherhood—people helping people.”

“Maybe that’s the way you see it,” explained Richard, “but what I see is that you’re celebrating a day that marks the beginning of the genocide of my people. I don’t want my children to have any part of such a celebration.” He left the room abruptly, taking the children with him.

Later, during nap time, the other teachers were shocked to hear such a different version of the happy holiday they had always celebrated. But they took the pictures down and agreed to stress the harvest aspects of Thanksgiving rather than give it a “historical slant.”

Richard heard about this through Courtney, who brought the children back later in the day. When he arrived the next morning, children in hand, he remarked about the missing pictures to Roland’s teacher and expressed his gratitude about the staff’s willingness to see his point of view and make some changes in their celebration. As a cross-cultural family, Courtney and Richard are exploring where their concepts of a successful family coincide and where they collide.

***The Jackson Family***

Holidays are a big issue for the sixth family—the Jacksons—as well. They have three children in the program and are pleased with everything but the celebration of what they consider Christian holidays. At a recent parent meeting, they got caught in the middle of an argument between two groups of parents. It started when Mrs. Jackson asked the staff to downplay religious celebrations. “I don’t want my children to learn someone else’s religion,” she remarked. “We’ll teach our religion at home, so please leave religious observances out of the program.”

One parent answered her by insisting that Christmas had nothing to do with religion. Two other parents rose to their feet, arguing loudly that it was a terrible shame that Christ had been removed from Christmas and that there ought to be more religion in the center rather than less.

When the director finally got the parents calmed down, Mrs. Jackson spoke up once again, this time about dietary differences. She was concerned that her children were being fed food that violated the dietary restrictions of her religion.

She spoke politely and with great concern. The director asked her to make an appointment for another time to discuss the problem.

Mrs. Jackson arrived the next day at the agreed-on time and found the director in her office waiting for her. The two had met here earlier: Before the family came into the program, they had several discussions about whether the oldest Jackson child, who has spina bifida, could be accommodated in his wheelchair. Several modifications to the environment were required, which Mr. Jackson worked on with the help of Sara and Richard, who both have carpentry skills.

Mrs. Jackson and the director expected to have a good talk this time, because they had gotten along well in the past. Mrs. Jackson expressed her feelings that the teachers were not watching what her children ate, and the director promised to do all she could to make sure that the Jackson children were carefully monitored at meal and snack times. She also asked Mrs. Jackson if she would be willing to do a cooking activity with the 4-year-old group and teach them how to make one of the special dishes of her culture. She agreed, and that was the beginning of her involvement in the program.

At present Mrs. Jackson is working night and day on a big fund-raiser for a climbing structure for the play yard. She’s finding it very satisfying to use her talent, skills, and connections in the community to benefit the program and the children, some of whom, she realizes, are severely financially deprived. She has involved a number of other parents, and they are getting to know and appreciate each other in ways that only come from working together toward a common cause—something they could never have done by just attending parent meetings.

The Jacksons have a lot going for them as a successful family. But, like the rest of the families, they still have a way to go.

***Comparing the Six Families***

These six families have varying concepts, images, and dreams of what a successful family is. They all have many stresses in their lives. Their successes include varying degrees of the following:

♦ Commitment

♦ Attachment to each other

♦ Individual independence and group interdependence

♦ Ability to give and receive nurturing

♦ Ability to get needs met

♦ Coping skills

♦ Methods of building self-esteem

♦ Effective communication

♦ Ability to pass on culture, goals, and values

Their stresses include the following:

♦ Poverty

♦ Special needs of their children

♦ Problems with substance abuse

♦ Divorce and custody issues

♦ Stepfamilies and blended families

♦ Lack of support

♦ Communication difficulties

♦ Inaccessible resources

♦ Bias issues

Besides being in the process of building toward success and experiencing stress, what else do all of these families have in common? They’re in the same child care program. They love their children and want the best for them, although they have different ways of showing their love and different ideas about what “the best” is and how to achieve it.

How are they different? They represent different cultures and traditions, different family structures (with different degrees of outside acceptance of those family structures), and different degrees of being part of the mainstream culture of the center. They also differ in their ability to handle the stress in their lives.

 **Real-Life Families: Some Statistics**

According to the Children’s Defense Fund (2004), the teen birth rates are going down. In 1990, 59.9 out of 1,000 females aged 15 to 19 gave birth to babies, while in 2002 the rate was 43. That’s good news; however, the number of children raised in poverty is growing. In 2002, one in six children lived in a poverty-level family, as defined by an annual income below the government poverty level (Children’s Defense Fund, 2004). In 2005 it was reported that the number of children living in extreme poverty increased 20 percent from 2000 to 2004. Extreme poverty means that families have to get by on $29 a day (Children’s Defense Fund, 2005). Poverty makes meeting needs difficult, if not impossible. The Children’s Defense Fund keeps track of the statistics affecting children. Here are some more from the Children’s Defense Fund, (2005):

♦ 37 million people in the United States are poor. Of these 13 million are children.

♦ Poverty in the United States is more prevalent now than in the 1960s and 1970s and has escalated rapidly since 2000.

♦ There are 1.8 million poor children living in female-headed families with no income from either work or welfare.

And more information about poverty and children from the Children’s Defense Fund, (2004):

♦ A child from France, Canada, Germany, Britain, or Spain is less likely to be poor than an American child.

♦ An American child is 5 to 8 times as likely to be poor as a child in Sweden, Norway, or Finland.

♦ Many members of poor families work but don’t receive enough payment to rise above the poverty level.

♦ Many families above the poverty level don’t make enough to afford food and rent.

♦ Poverty affects children’s health, which affects education.

It is interesting that President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty began more than 40 years ago, yet children are still the largest group of poor people in the United States. We are the richest nation on earth—first in GDP (gross domestic product) among industrialized nations. We have the greatest number of millionaires and billionaires and are way ahead in health technology, yet we have so many children living in poverty.

It’s not that we don’t know what to do to keep poverty factors from affecting child outcomes. We have found antipoverty policies that work. Two different projects provide examples of ways to make a difference in outcomes for children. An antipoverty experiment called the New Hope Project in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, showed that a child’s outcome can be affected by society’s support. The project provided an above-poverty income, health insurance, and child care. As a result children’s literacy test scores improved, and children showed more positive social behavior five years later. Another study, the Minnesota Family Investment Program, also found that supplementing the income of poverty families resulted in a measurable difference in outcomes for their children. The results included improvements in children’s behavior and school performance (Children’s Defense Fund 2004).

Now think about the six families under stress in this chapter. Although poverty was a big factor in the majority of the six families, they had other stresses as well. All families have stress. Stress is part of life. When stress eats on people and overwhelms them, it has harmful effects, but stress doesn’t have to be bad.

**STRESS AS A POSITIVE FORCE**

When the six families and the child care staff at the center to which they are all connected think about what to do to help their children, they can start by recognizing that stress isn’t necessarily bad. We all need some stress in our lives. Stress can be a growth factor. A physical example of how stress is useful can be seen in the way a baby’s bones form to enable the child to walk. The leg bones that connect to the hip socket have a different shape in the newborn than in the child about to walk. What makes the shape change to accommodate walking? Stress—the stress of weight being put on them. A similar example relates to old age. The older woman at risk for osteoporosis babies her bones by never exercising and creates the very condition she’s trying to avoid—her bones grow weak and brittle. Her bones need some stress to help keep them strong.



*Stress isn’t necessarily bad—we all need some stress in our lives. Stress can be a growth factor.*

Of course, too much stress isn’t any better than too little. Again an example from physiology: Look at the sports injuries of children who overuse their pitching arms, for example. Irreparable damage occurs from too much stress.

What is too much stress for one family, or for one person, may be optimum stress for another. Some people are knocked down by seemingly minor setbacks; others manage much harder situations. Still others seem to take on adversity as a challenge and grow from it.

When I was first learning about child development, I took a trip to the high country above the California desert. There I observed a natural phenomenon that I have never forgotten: the bristle-cone pine. I saw this gnarled, ancient tree, bowed by the wind and stunted by lack of water and the thin air and soil of its habitat, as the perfect symbol for the benefits of stress. Instead of weakening under adverse conditions, these trees grow stronger than other plant life in less stressful situations. Using their adversity to the maximum, these trees survive longer than any other living thing on earth. Somehow they take the hardships life has to offer and use them to their own advantage. Some children do that too.

We know that poverty, abuse, neglect, being shuffled around, lack of attachment, and not getting needs met can adversely affect children’s lives. Obviously it is better for children to get what they need, be raised by people who care for them, have a stable home life, and meet loving acceptance inside and outside the home rather than having to live with abuse, neglect, bias, and discrimination. Yet we all know about “resilient children”—those children who, in spite of much hardship, manage to turn out with healthy personalities and find success and happiness in life.

**WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM STUDIES OF RESILIENT CHILDREN**

Studies by Werner (1984, 1995; Werner & Smith, 1992) and others (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000) show that there are some protective factors and personality traits that are common to *resilient children*—children who have the psychological strength to recover from misfortune or who emerge intact from a history of severe distress. One vital factor that the children had in common was a sense of connectedness to someone in the early years. These children found attachment, usually in the first year (not necessarily to a parent). Many of the children whose parents were not able to meet their needs found or recruited surrogate parents, inside or outside the home. Werner uses the term *recruited* to indicate that attachment wasn’t just by chance, that the children had more than a passive role. From this recruited attachment, the resilient children received enough attention and nurturing early on to gain a sense of trust. Their lives may have been marked by abandonment, either physical or emotional or both, but at some period they found someone to believe in them and care about them. Even if they were shuffled from family to family, never belonging anywhere, they found sources of support. They made connections, and those connections seem to have provided enough to keep the children going in positive directions.



*Resilient children have experienced a sense of connectedness at some point in their lives.*

One reason these resilient children were able to make connections was that they had the ability to elicit positive responses from others. Even at a very young age, they were somehow able to gain other people’s positive attention.

These children were problem solvers, taking an active approach toward negotiating, communicating, and grappling with the obstacles that life presented to them. They had not only the willingness but also the skills to take an active rather than a passive role.

Another important commonality these resilient children had was that at some point during their lives they found themselves needed by someone else. They had responsibility thrust on them. They were required to help another person—a younger sibling, for example. Relating to someone else’s helplessness gave them a sense of their own power.

Most important of all, perhaps, these children had a tendency to perceive their experiences constructively and each held a positive vision of a meaningful life. In spite of their hardships, life made sense. In other words, their attitude made all the difference in the world.

Interestingly enough, it wasn’t just the resilient children identified by the study who were able to get over their unfortunate beginnings and move on to lead healthy, fulfilling lives. The other participants in the study—the ones who didn’t have the above factors going for them—also were able to work beyond their early childhood problems. It took them longer, but by their 30s and 40s, most were living meaningful lives.

What can adults who live or work with children and have responsibility for their education and socialization learn from this research? How can children from families in stress be helped to be less vulnerable and, indeed, resilient? How can children grow up in stressful conditions such as poverty, family strife, instability, disabilities, bias, abuse, and neglect and not be harmed in their development? How can we help them grow in positive ways?

The key is to balance the stressful life events with protective factors. The stress must be decreased or the number of protective factors increased or, when possible, both. The protective factors are those just mentioned—a sense of connection, sources of support, skills for solving problems and for eliciting positive responses from others, and, above all, a positive attitude toward life and a feeling that it will all work out somehow.

**HELPING ALL CHILDREN BECOME RESILIENT CHILDREN**

How does that information translate into adult behavior? What are some guidelines for parents, teachers, caregivers, family child care providers, and others who work with children and families in stress?

1. *Provide support for the child and for the family.* Encourage connections; help build networks. Children and families need all the support they can get—both formal and informal. The Parent Services Project (PSP), mentioned in Chapter 1, was started in California by Ethel Seiderman and is now nationwide. PSP specifically addresses this need for support for families by child care programs (Lee & Seiderman, 1998; Links, Beggs, & Seiderman, 1997). The idea behind PSP is that by supporting the family you make the family more able to support the child. One of PSP’s guiding principles is that support is important to all families and that social-support networks reduce isolation and promote the well-being of the child, the family, and the community.

2. *Teach the skills necessary for making connections and gaining support.* Teach children social skills. Teach them ways to initiate contact and maintain it. This means being there with them while they are playing with peers to guide them toward effective ways to enter play and resolve the issues that come up while playing. Reinforce contacts with peers and adults. They’ll learn better if they start early (even in infancy) and have a chance to practice with small numbers of people. Encourage families to focus on positive discipline techniques (see Chapter 7). Model prosocial behaviors, then pay attention to and reward such behaviors.

3. *Teach problem solving* (see Chapter 8). Crockenberg (1992) observed 95 mothers using negotiation with their 2-year-olds to get them to pick up toys. Crockenberg came up with some interesting conclusions. The effective strategies combined a directive with an explanation, persuasion, or accommodation. That way the mothers gave the message that their wishes were important but also the child’s wishes were important. By using this approach, the mothers conveyed information to their children about the way conflicts with others can be resolved. When parents adopt negotiation as an approach to resolving conflicts, they teach their children long-term relationship skills that they can apply to peers.



*Help all children become resilient by teaching them problem solving.*

4. *Give children responsibilities.* Require them to help out. Hook them up to someone who is less capable than they are and needs them. When chores are shared, children gain a sense of being important and belonging. In China, real work is brought into child care centers to be done by the children and then sent back to the factory where it originated. Making real contributions is important. In families with several children, often older children help care for younger ones. In child care centers where children are separated into groups by age, caring for each other can take the place of caring for someone younger. Also plants and animals require care, which can be done by children. In family child care and in other settings where there are mixed age groups, adults can give older children responsibilities for children younger than themselves.

5. *Most of all, provide role models.* Children and families need to see people they can identify with doing all the things just mentioned—finding support, demonstrating social skills and the ability to make connections, using problem-solving skills, and taking responsibility. For early childhood institutions, finding positive role models for children becomes part of the recruitment and hiring process. Training helps, too. In addition, children need role models who have faith that things will work out and that life has meaning. If adults don’t have it, they must be seeking it. No one can tell another person just how to do that seeking. Certainly spiritual traditions and religious institutions are a possible path. Therapy can help, too.

I don’t mean to downplay the effect that stressful conditions have on children’s education and socialization by painting too positive a picture. Neither do I mean to overemphasize resiliency. I just want to point out some obvious changes that could make a difference in some families’ lives so that unnecessary stress can be eliminated and children don’t need to be “superresilient.”

To end on a cheery note, here’s what Galinsky (1989) says: “Things can be hard, but they don’t have to do us in. It isn’t whether good or bad things happen to you; it’s how you handle them that matters” (pp. 2–3). She talks about how important it is to teach parents and their children to face problems, practice generating multiple solutions, figure out how to change what can be changed, and learn to cope with what can’t. It’s a matter of taking a can-do attitude and engaging in continuous problem solving. It’s also a matter of getting together as a society to face the conditions that create ever-growing poverty and changing them.

 **School Success Linked to What Goes on at Home**

It’s not social class, family structure, parent’s marital status, ethnic background, or the amount of money a family has that makes a difference in how well children eventually will do in school. What counts most is what goes on at home.

Parents can be poor, unmarried, and undereducated and still manage to groom their young children for a successful school career. It may be harder if one is poor, unmarried, and undereducated, but it is possible.

How do families manage to create early childhood experiences that result in future school success? They do it in a number of ways—including the way they relate to the children, the kind of home life they provide for them, and what they teach them.

First, children must be protected. Families who groom their children for future success in school know how to protect them, keeping them from physical and psychological harm. They set limits. They monitor whereabouts and behavior.

These families see their children as capable and hold a vision of the future that includes the child as an able student. They encourage learning of all sorts by the ways they relate to their children, how they talk to them, and the activities they provide.

They teach their children social skills, defining appropriate behavior for them. They give them feedback to increase their sensitivity to others. They do this in a warm and nurturing way, creating an emotionally supportive environment that emphasizes decision making.

They help their children learn to express themselves. They give them chances to develop a sense of responsibility and learn both leadership and follower skills. They encourage them to concentrate, focus, be attentive, and follow through. Most of all, they respect their children and themselves.

**LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD**

This chapter started by examining traits of successful families and went on to look at a lot of problems. It may seem that the situations of some of the families portrayed are fairly bad. Yet, they are not hopeless, and each is working on acquiring more and more of the traits of successful families outlined at the beginning. Some arrived at the center already knowing about these traits; others are learning them from each other and from the center staff. In addition, each of the families is connected to some of the many community resources that address the variety of difficulties they are having. The next chapter looks at the community resources available to help families meet challenges, to alleviate some of their stress, and to support them in their coping.

(*Child, Family, and Community: Family-Centered Early Care and Education, 5th Edition*. Pearson Learning Solutions pp. 246 - 267).