



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

---

This document is provided by the BRYCS Clearinghouse.

---

## How Can I Make My Family Even Stronger? Family Strengths Toolkit

Family and Children's Service

Reproduced with permission of Family and Children's Service

Minneapolis, MN

© 2003



BRYCS is a project of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS)

1-888-572-6500/ [info@brycs.org](mailto:info@brycs.org)/ [www.brycs.org](http://www.brycs.org)

# How Can I Make My Family Even Stronger?



## FAMILY STRENGTHS TOOLKIT

**Family & Children's Service**

414 South Eighth Street

Minneapolis, MN 55404-1081

612-339-9101





# Family & Children's Service

## Building Strong Families, Vital Communities and Capable Children

This Family Strengths Toolkit is based on the experience, wisdom and values of Minnesota families. Two thousand people participated in the Minnesota Family Strength Project, sharing what their families do to be strong. Using what we learned from the project, Family & Children's Service has helped thousands of families acknowledge and celebrate their strengths, and has partnered with them in creating more supportive environments for families and children.

You can use this toolkit with your family to:

- **Talk about and celebrate your family's strengths;**
- **Learn what other families do to be strong;**
- **Make a commitment as a family to become even stronger;**
- **Set specific family goals;**
- **Find resources for your family;**
- **Have fun together!**

We're interested in hearing how your family uses this toolkit. To share your ideas or feedback, call 612-728-2084, or write to:

Family Strengths Toolkit  
c/o Family & Children's Service  
4123 East Lake Street  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55406-2028

Printing donated by **THOMSON**  
  
**WEST**

Graphic Design by Roberta Weber of RWeber Design

© 2003 Family & Children's Service

## Good News About Families

More than three-fourths of Minnesotans say their families are “very strong” or “exceptionally strong.” In fact, most Minnesotans believe their current families are stronger than the families they grew up in, according to 2,000 families of all sizes, shapes and cultures who participated in the Minnesota Family Strength Project.\* At the same time, most families report that there are plenty of things they’d like to do better.

**This toolkit can help you build on the strengths in your own family.**

## Many Roads to Family Strength

There are as many roads to family strength as there are families, but Minnesota families consistently point to nine important landmarks along the way.

- **Communication**
- **Health (physical, mental, economic)**
- **Time together**
- **Spirituality**
- **Support**
- **Respect**
- **Unity**
- **Cultural traditions**
- **Extended sense of family**

\*The Minnesota Family Strength Project was a partnership of the Allina Foundation, Family & Children’s Service, Minnesota Public Radio and the Minnesota Historical Society. For a copy of the complete report, call 612-728-2084.



# Communication



While Minnesotans differ in the ways their families stay in touch—and on what they consider good communication—they are unwavering in their belief in its importance to family strength.

- Set a regular time for everyone to talk about the day’s activities – at the dinner table, bedtime, rides to and from school.
- Create a communications center—Post-it® notes on a refrigerator or a notebook on the counter.
- Turn off technology. Turn off the radio in the car and the TV at breakfast. Ignore telephone calls during dinner.
- Create a “safe zone,” a time and place each week to discuss and peacefully resolve conflicts.

*Our family shares what's happening by:*

1: \_\_\_\_\_

2: \_\_\_\_\_

3: \_\_\_\_\_

*African American families talked about the importance of good communication inside the family, but also about the need for respectful communication on the streets and in neighborhoods — especially between youth and their elders. Many African American adults also remember times as children when neighbors corrected their behavior or “checked-in” about them with their parents.*

**Suggestions:** leaving notes, calling home, story time, posting schedules, making household lists, sharing success stories, discussing problems, no secrets, coming out, telling the truth

Post-it is a registered trademark of 3M.

## Family Characteristics

- Four times as many Minnesotans defined their family as large (22 members or more) than as “just myself.”
- On average, strong families mentioned almost twice as many members as less strong families.
- Pets were named as family members as often as friends.

# Time Together

While “quality time” has become an overused term, Minnesota families still agree that spending time together is vital for building family strength.

- Designate a set “family time” each week. Let family members participate in planning activities.
- Set aside specific days for family meals. Prepare meals together.
- Do volunteer work together—through your place of worship, a neighborhood school, or a local community agency. For volunteer opportunities in the metro area, call the Volunteer Resource Center at 612-379-4900; in greater Minnesota, contact your local United Way office.
- Set a good example by canceling your own plans when necessary to preserve family time.
- Read to each other. Read to kids, even through their teen years. Have your children read to you.
- Escape together. Try one- or two-day vacations first. A camping trip. A nearby resort. A day trip to the zoo, a museum or hiking at a nature center.

*Our family spends time together doing these things:*

1: \_\_\_\_\_

2: \_\_\_\_\_

3: \_\_\_\_\_

*For many Minnesotans, outdoor cultural events are important times when families come together and celebrate. Whether it's the Minnesota State Fair, pow wows, or a neighborhood festival, families plan ahead and set aside time to be together at these events.*

**Suggestions:** Cooking a meal, taking a family walk, going for a drive, family game night, sharing a meal, homework, quiet time, trip with the family, sharing chores



# Health



For many families in the Minnesota Family Strength Project, the theme of health suggested physical AND emotional AND economic health. All are interconnected, and each contributes to the others.

## For physical health:

- Make regular medical check-ups for all family members and follow the doctors' advice.
- Get physical. Go for walks, play catch, play tag, ride bikes, rake the yard together.
- Plan meals as a family. Get everyone involved in planning and shopping for nutritious meals for the week.

## For emotional health:

- Be mindful of mood changes. Even young children get depressed. If someone seems down longer than usual, talk to a professional.
- Avoid morning rush. Take care of some tasks the night before, like laying out clothes, setting the breakfast table, packing school bags, etc.
- Don't berate or "chew out" a child about practicing for a music lesson, doing homework or completing a household chore. Set a specific time for the task each day, with consequences if it isn't done (e.g. no TV).

## For economic health:

- Don't wait for a crisis to bring up money topics. It's easier to discuss priorities and values when you're not trying to solve an immediate problem.
- Get the whole family involved in developing and sticking to a family budget.

*Our family stays healthy by:*

1: \_\_\_\_\_

2: \_\_\_\_\_

3: \_\_\_\_\_

*Families today describe themselves as being more focused on health than in prior generations. People frequently talked about not drinking, especially in front of children, and of paying greater attention to exercising and eating right.*

**Suggestions:** employment, budget, education, exercise, no drug use, healthy diet, support system, expressing feelings, forgiveness

## What Do Families Find Most Stressful?

Families tend to rally to cope with major events. It's the daily hassles that cause the most wear and tear.

1. Lack of time to relax and unwind
2. Children not completing chores
3. Arguments between parents and children
4. Lack of time to complete household tasks

# Spirituality

Spirituality means many things to many people. Many families talked about the importance of faith in a higher power, a sense of what came before and what will live on when they're gone.

- Talk about spirituality and what it means to you in daily life.
- Participate in classes and programs together at your place of worship.
- Attend religious services together.
- Learn about religious rituals – your own and those from other faiths. Talk as a family about what they mean to you.
- Talk about your faith and values as opportunities arise in conversation or while watching a movie or a favorite TV show together.

*Our family practices our spirituality when we:*

1: \_\_\_\_\_

2: \_\_\_\_\_

3: \_\_\_\_\_

*A family's spirituality may involve more than one tradition. For example, Native American families often participate in both church activities and Native American spiritual practices.*

**Suggestions:** belief, tradition, faith, hope, love, charity, solidarity, pilgrimage or journey, purpose, plan, offering up, humility, signs, candles, prayer, testimony, myth, parable, sacred words or books, nature, covenant, ritual, solace, refuge, sanctuary, retreat, meditation, sacrifice, creativity, wisdom





# Support



Minnesotans believe that in strong families, members can call on each other for help, for a sympathetic ear, or just to know someone cares.

- Listen. Understand. Ask questions.
- Express appreciation and affection.
- Establish a nurturing bedtime ritual. Tell each other, “What I liked best about you today was...”
- Attend each other’s sporting events, performances, etc.
- Look for opportunities to help out. Put up storm windows, help with child care, run an errand or fold the laundry—instead of looking for reasons why you can’t.
- Encourage positive gestures. Write a friendly note. Give a compliment to a family member every day.
- Make sure expressions of support stand alone. Don’t use a compliment to lead to a complaint.
- Hug a lot. Smile a lot.

*Our family shows support for each other in these ways:*

1: \_\_\_\_\_

2: \_\_\_\_\_

3: \_\_\_\_\_

*Men’s role in the family is changing. One man shared that “I’ve had to do more of the things that my mother did that my father didn’t. I play a different role than my father did. I’ve had to think of myself as not so much the ‘decision-maker’ who is ‘in charge’ of the family, but as more of an equal, who shares in the housework and cooking.”*

**Suggestions:** giving a hug, asking how the day went, negotiating roles and responsibilities, going to games and recitals, meeting teachers, meeting friends, doing extra chores, anticipating things that need to be done, making dinner, listening, being open and honest

## Where Do People Turn for Help?

When asked where they turn for help, the most common resource cited by families in the study was prayer. Other resources were physical exercise, counselors, and medical doctors.

# Respect

Minnesotans agree that respect is both an attitude and an action. They know the importance of appreciating the unique contributions of every person as well as behaving considerately toward people both inside and outside your family.

- When someone is talking to you, practice “active listening” by focusing your attention on what a family member is saying. React with words and actions that show you are listening. Don’t interrupt him or her, but give your full attention and listen with an open mind and heart.
- Talk about what gestures or words are used to show respect in different cultures. Brainstorm actions that show disrespect, and talk about alternatives to these behaviors.
- Share what you appreciate about other family members on a regular basis (at birthdays, holidays, weekly family nights). Be specific, and make sure everyone is told what others appreciate about him or her.
- Understand family rules and act within them to show respect for family members. When making rules or decisions, come together as a family to make plans, set rules for behavior, or clarify roles within the family.
- Within your family, recognize each person’s intelligence and experience. Acknowledge that each child has his or her own personality, strengths, and challenges. Treat parenting each child as a new learning opportunity for you.

*Our family shows respect and appreciation by:*

1:

---

2:

---

3:

---

*In some cultures, respect for elders is shown by a person looking at the ground, instead of looking at their elder’s face. In other cultures, it is most respectful to look at a person when he or she is talking to you.*

**Suggestions:** elders, youth, adults, dignity, wisdom, recognition, paying attention, patience, gentle tone of voice, quiet, serenity, equity, taking turns, accepting, believing, setting boundaries, following rules, polite, responsive, appreciating and rewarding honesty, helpful, involved



# Unity and "Pulling Together"



Minnesotans agree that a strong family pulls together, not apart. Whether facing good or bad times, people can take steps to build unity in their families.

- Take pictures that include all members of your family. Display them where everyone can see, and talk about the circumstances or event that led to the picture-taking.
- Plan a family reunion or family events, inviting family members from beyond your household. With your family, prepare activities that involve everyone, from children to elders.
- Take turns letting family members be leaders. When someone feels strong, encourage them to take leadership and action on an idea.
- Offer food or childcare to family members who are facing challenges, to show your support and concern.

*Our family builds unity by:*

1: \_\_\_\_\_

2: \_\_\_\_\_

3: \_\_\_\_\_

*Immigrant families identified unity as an important aspect of strong families, especially as traditional cultures clash with U.S. values. Vietnamese elders emphasized the importance of listening to and compromising with younger generations in order to maintain family unity.*

**Suggestions:** team, togetherness, love, appreciation, connection, circle, forgiveness, bonding, loans, pulling together, sharing food, staying with relatives, network, rally around each other in a time of need, being in your corner, work together, eat together

In her report "Somali Family Strength: Working in the Communities," Dr. D. Lynn Heitritter found the strength of unity to be of central importance to Somali families. Specifically, families said that unity in the four areas of the physical, the social, the psychological, and the spiritual help strengthen their families and community. The Somali proverb "Together the Teeth Can Cut" demonstrates the power associated with unity. For a copy of this report, call 612-728-2084.

# Cultural Traditions

Every family has unique traditions related to their heritage and history, and Minnesota families agree that preserving these cultural traditions brings strength to their family. Many families today create their own traditions or rituals that become a bridge to the future.

- As a family, make a calendar of all the days that are special to your family’s cultural heritage (and remember to think about all the cultures in your family background). On the calendar, decorate each special day with drawings or stickers, and make plans to celebrate these holidays.
- Bring your family together to talk about creating new traditions. Take turns sharing what each person would like to do together as a family. Some ideas include hosting an annual neighborhood picnic, volunteering as a family, or reading a book together.
- Talk with your elders about the traditions they participated in as a child and as an adult. Write down their words or draw pictures of the customs they describe.
- Sponsor a storytelling event, in which people of all ages can come together to share stories from their culture and to learn about different traditions and customs. Look for similarities and differences between your heritage and the traditions of other cultures.
- As a family, look through family photos together. Use the photos to start discussions about the important events and customs within your family.
- Some family members may not be aware of the fact that some of the good things that happen in your family on a regular basis are a result of another family member’s conscious effort. Ask each family member to name the traditions that your family has created, as a way to build awareness about them.

Our family’s traditions are:

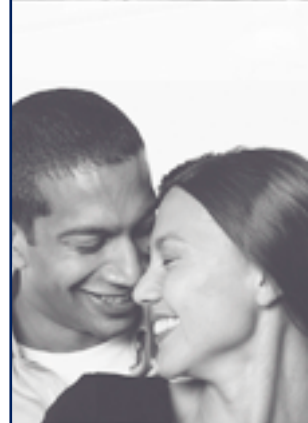
1: \_\_\_\_\_

2: \_\_\_\_\_

3: \_\_\_\_\_

*In Somali culture, Muslim holidays like Ramadan and Eid ul-Fitr are significant times of ritual and celebration. Some women shared that these holidays bring joy and delight to their families; one woman said the festivities are like “going to heaven.”*

**Suggestions:** sensitivity, identity, caring, teaching, continuity, sharing, handing down, passing on, storytelling, celebrating, rituals, rites of passage, commitment or marriage ceremonies, holidays, pow-wows, neighborhood events, dances



# Extended Sense of Family



For many, the definition of “family” extends beyond those who live in one house. A family’s kinship network can include blood and non-blood relatives, such as cousins, clan or tribe members, close friends, neighbors, aunts, uncles, and grandparents—anybody who helps support and nurture the family.

- As a family, draw a family tree, including “branches” for blood and non-blood relatives. Draw pictures or add photos of every member of your family, and talk about how each person is important to you.
- Send appreciation cards to extended family members who have helped and encouraged you. Mail cards to those who have stepped into a parental or mentor role in your life.
- To deal with a challenge, seek advice from trusted elders, friends or youth in the community. Build a circle of support around family members who are struggling, and include family, friends, neighbors, mentors, and elders in that circle. Make a plan for how each person can support and aid the person in trouble.
- Come up with a plan to keep family and friends informed of sporting events, performances, etc. in which your family is involved. Invite neighbors to your family’s get-togethers and celebrations.

These people are members of our extended family:

1: \_\_\_\_\_

2: \_\_\_\_\_

3: \_\_\_\_\_

*In some indigenous cultures, ancestors play important roles as extended family members who support, guide, and inspire people today. For example, some Native American cultures can identify role models in their grandmothers/grandfathers many generations ago.*

**Your extended family may be:** neighbors, mentors, friends, aunts, uncles, teachers, elders, grandparents, nieces, nephews, in-laws, comadre, big mama, baubie, zadie, nana, papa

Grassroots leaders build networks of support in our communities.  
If you would like to underwrite the work of a grassroots leader, call 612-341-1612.

# Be Creative:

Flexible and creative families are better able to deal with new challenges as they arise. Here are some tips on being creative as a family, courtesy of Sandy Agustin, Associate Director at Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis and curator of the Thicker Than Water: Art as a Family Value program.



- Create something together. Whether it is a picture, a meal, or a bird house made from a shoe box, use your creative talents and let everyone pitch in.
- Tell stories to each other. Pretend each of you is that character and try on a different voice.
- Let your family see you practice or work on a project. Many times these practices become good habits in the future and build creative respect for one another.
- Use the refrigerator door as a place to “hang” your family's artwork. Take turns being the one who decides on what the theme is.
- Sing directions to each other, for instance, “it's time to go to bed” could become a playful song and fun time for everyone.
- Make creative tools available for everyone. Set up a box of old shoes and clothes or a box of art supplies, and make sure everyone knows where it is and that they can be creative whenever they can.
- Encourage yourself and your children to be creative. Turn off the TV and spend time creating new names for things or a play language. This will help your child to think “outside the box” and will create a fun bond between you.

“The Importance of Family Creativity” © 2002 Sandy Agustin.  
Used with permission by Family & Children's Service



# Resources for Family Strength

Getting professional help is NOT an indication of weakness or failure. In fact, it's a sign of strength. A strong family recognizes when it needs a checkup or a booster shot to get back on track.

**Family & Children's Service** helps change lives. Through counseling, family support services, violence intervention, community building, family life education and public policy advocacy, we strengthen families and communities in all their various forms. [www.famchildserv.org](http://www.famchildserv.org)

Downtown branch: 612-339-9101

Lake Street branch: 612-729-0340

Northwest Hennepin branch: 763-560-4412

South Hennepin branch: 952-884-7353

All of our branches provide counseling services. Family & Children's Service also works to improve family and community life through several family and community initiatives:

- **The Community Building Initiative** works within communities to strengthen individual families, reinforce support structures that already exist, and build new community resources. 612-728-2086
- **The Community Leadership Development Program** provides a six-month community action and training program for grassroots leaders who are low-income, persons of color, or new immigrants. 612-728-2079
- **The Family Project** supports families in coming together so they can share stories and experiences, learn from and help each other, and take action on behalf of their children. 612-728-2068
- **The Initiative for Violence-Free Families** mobilizes individuals to acknowledge and act to end violence in families and communities. 612-728-2094
- **Family Strength Workshops** provide activities to help families explore and celebrate their strengths and learn from each other. The workshops are held in community gathering places, and the workshops seek to engage children, teens and adults and educate them about family strengths. 612-728-2084
- **Community of Nations** builds bridges between local immigrant communities and the services and community institutions that help meet their needs. 952-884-0444

## United Way First Call for Help

Twin Cities area: dial 211

Greater Minnesota: 800-543-7709

**Hennepin County Crisis Intervention** 612-347-3161. Provides phone and walk-in service for people in crisis on a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week basis.

**Crisis Connection** 612-379-6363. Provides 24-hour crisis counseling by telephone for a variety of issues, including depression, suicide, abuse, family and relationship problems.

**Greater Minneapolis Crisis Nurseries** 763-591-0100. Serves families in crisis or under extreme stress whose children are at risk of abuse and neglect. Provides confidential, voluntary, parent-initiated short term shelter and emergency daycare for children newborn through age six in Hennepin County.

For more information from the Minnesota Family Strength Project, go to <http://www.famchildserv.org/FCI/FamilyStrengths.htm>

To request a copy of the research report, call 612-728-2084.

**CAP Agency Crisis Nurseries** 612-839-5101. Provides up to 72 hours of overnight care or up to 10 days day care to children from infancy through 12 years of age whose families are in crisis and who live in Scott and Carver Counties.

**OTHER RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES:**

**Center for Victims of Torture** 612-626-1400. Works locally, nationally, and internationally to heal the wounds of torture on individuals, their families and their communities and to stop torture worldwide. They provide service directly to torture survivors, train professionals who work with survivors and refugees, research the effects of torture and effective treatment methods, and advocate for public policy initiatives that will heal survivors and end the practice of torture.

**Hennepin County Office of Multicultural Services** 612-348-2193. Facilitates the delivery of Hennepin County services to diverse populations with limited English proficiency, in an efficient, effective and culturally sensitive manner.

**Intermedia Arts** 612-871-4444. Fosters dialogue between cultures through art and works with artists and audiences to use the arts to address human and social issues.

**International Institute of Minnesota** 651-647-0191. Provides a center for information and assembly for all nationalities and races; develops fellowship and understanding among such persons through group meetings and activities; promotes the welfare of our foreign-born population and their families; and preserves and stimulates intercultural values.

**Rainbow Families** 612-827-7731, [www.rainbowfamilies.org](http://www.rainbowfamilies.org). Works to organize and strengthen lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) parents and their children in the Upper Midwest. Rainbow Families provides LGBT parents, their children, and prospective parents with resources, education, and support so they can build strong families and openly confront society's injustices; they also provide public education and advocacy in the larger community to transform the institutions that affect our lives.

**Search Institute** 1-800-888-7828, [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org). As part of their mission to conduct practical research benefiting children and youth, Search Institute identified 40 developmental assets: positive experiences, relationships, opportunities, and personal qualities that young people need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. Find out more about their learnings and how they can benefit young people in your family and youth in your community.

Also try these resources within your neighborhood and community: (Need help finding these services? Dial 211 for the United Way's First Call for Help.)

- **Place of worship**
- **County social services office**
- **Cultural and neighborhood events**
- **Credit counseling services**
- **School counselors**
- **Community centers**
- **English language learning centers**
- **Community newspapers**





# We're a Strong Family

Every family has strengths...including your family! Answer these questions as a family and use them as a way to start sharing those things you value the most about your family members and the way your family works together. When you're finished, hang it on your refrigerator or some other noticeable place as a reminder that your family is strong.

What are your family's greatest strengths?

---

---

---

Write three things your family has already done or is already doing to become even stronger.

---

---

---

As a family, what goal would you like to work on to strengthen your family more?

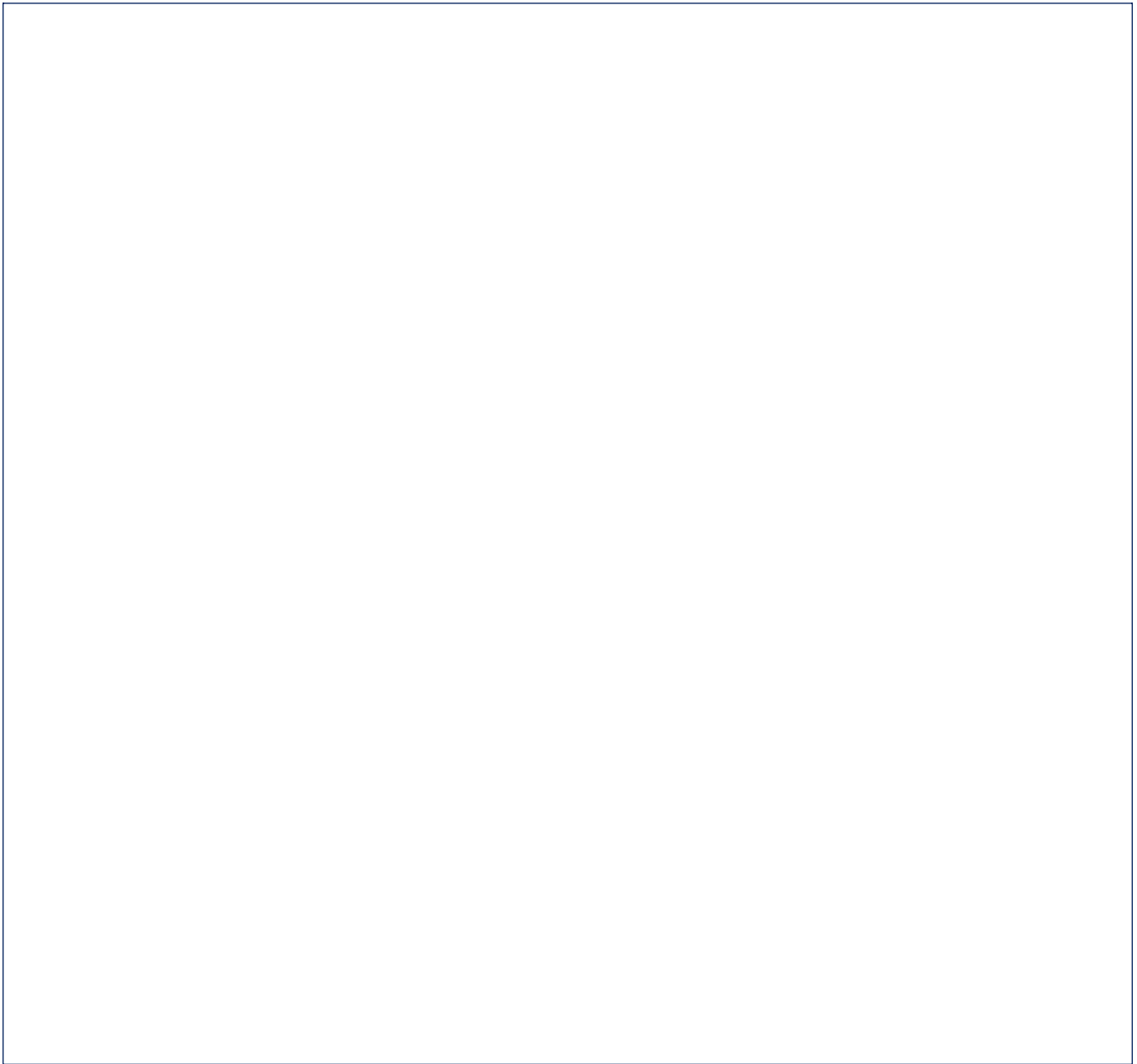
---

---

---

If you would like a presentation about family strengths in your workplace, place of worship, or community group, call 612-728-2084.

Draw a picture of a time when your family showed its strengths.



### **About the Research**

The Minnesota Family Strength Project research included telephone interviews with a random sample of 1,000 adults across the state, in-depth questionnaires, completed by 400 families, twelve “talking circles” with families of various ethnic groups and five Family Forums bringing together families from a given community in several sites throughout the state.

While most projects study problems or weaknesses, this project studied strengths—what families do well. A focus on learning from families of diverse cultural backgrounds also made this research distinctive.

The research was commissioned by Family & Children’s Service and was conducted by: Judy Watson Tiesel, Ph.D., a family psychologist and expert in family issues research; with special consultant David Olson, Ph.D., professor of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota, who has published numerous books and articles in the field of marriage and family.

### **About the Partners**

The Minnesota Family Strength Project was a collaboration of four non-profit organizations that consider the health and vitality of individuals, families and communities in Minnesota to be central to their missions.

The Allina Foundation promotes innovation that engages citizens and changes systems to improve the health of our communities. This project goes beyond the traditional scope of health care to address health issues by building strengths, not just treating illness.

Family & Children’s Service has used the results of this project to help create new and improved programs and services to strengthen Minnesota’s families and communities in all their various forms. The agency shares the research with policy makers, community leaders and other family service agencies.

The Minnesota Public Radio Civic Journalism Initiative’s mission is to amplify citizens’ points of view on important issues—like family strength—as a catalyst for positive community change.

The Minnesota Historical Society is committed to preserving and sharing the stories of Minnesota families to help its citizens achieve a greater sense of community and add meaning to individual lives.

This edition of “How Can I Make My Family Even Stronger?” is ©2003 Family & Children’s Service.

### **A Vision for the Future**

The strength of individuals, families and communities is interconnected—and each of us can contribute to that strength.

There are many ways to strengthen families through communities—building strong relationships with people at our children’s school, our health care clinic or our place of worship. We can try harder to get to know neighbors and extend our “family” of support.

Strong families and strong communities find friends, support, and opportunities to make their way and thrive, even through difficult times. In these families, in such communities, lies hope for the future.

Terrence J. Steeno, President and CEO  
Family & Children’s Service

**Family & Children's Service** is a private, nonprofit agency, located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Since 1878 the agency has been working to strengthen families and communities in all their various forms. The work of Family & Children's service encompasses the areas of mental health counseling, family and community initiatives, domestic violence prevention and intervention, public policy advocacy, family life education, and other initiatives designed to strengthen family and community life.

**Downtown**

414 South Eighth Street  
Minneapolis, MN 55404-1081  
612-339-9101

**Lake Street Branch**

4123 East Lake Street  
Minneapolis, MN 55406-2028  
612-729-0340

**Northwest Hennepin Branch**

6900 78th Avenue North  
Brooklyn Park, MN 55445-2719  
763-560-4412

**South Hennepin Branch**

9201 East Bloomington Freeway, Suite Q  
Bloomington, MN 55420-3437  
952-884-7353

On the Web

[www.famchildserv.org](http://www.famchildserv.org)

*Building Strong Families, Vital Communities, and Capable Children*





**Family & Children's Service**

414 South Eighth Street  
Minneapolis, MN 55404-1081  
612-339-9101