

UNL for Families

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Program of Distinction Category:

Leadership, Citizenship, and Life Skills Categories

- Caring Relationships

Healthy Lifestyles Categories

- Healthy Relationships, Good Decisions

Youth in Governance Categories

- Youth and Adult Partnerships

Sources of funding that support this program: Cooperative Extension Programming Dollars, Grants, and Registration Fees

Knowledge and Research Base

The Family Strengths Perspective is grounded in more than 30 years of research with more than 21,000 family members from all 50 states and in 27 countries around the world (DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002; Olson & DeFrain, 2003). This research identifies the qualities of couples and families of all types (two-parent, single-parent, step-families, etc.) that strengthen their well-being. The qualities identified by the research include: Appreciation and Affection, Time Together, Commitment, Positive Communication, Ability to Cope with Stress and Crisis, and Spiritual Well-Being (see Figure 1). Families that exhibit these six strengths are more likely to report satisfaction with their relationships and with their children (Stinnett & O'Donnell, 1996). The Family Strengths Perspective is easy for clients to grasp and lends itself to a variety of different family types that represent a variety of cultures. For these reasons, it serves as the program base for Cooperative Extension family-based programs in Nebraska.

Needs Assessment

In 1999, 48 listening sessions were conducted across the state to identify needs to be addressed by Cooperative Extension in Nebraska. These sessions were designed to involve individuals who, as a whole, represented the demographics of the state (based on age, gender, geographic location, income and education). One of the highest areas of concern, especially in rural areas, was for programming aimed at strengthening families and developing strong connections among youth and their families. In order to meet this need, three statewide Cooperative Extension Action Plan Teams (4-H Youth Development, Building Strong Families, and Health & Wellness Education) collaborated with partners across the state to implement UNL for Families. The design of UNL for Families allows for the ability to tailor family-based programming dependent upon local needs. These needs are identified by local-level informal stakeholder groups that serve in advisory roles for Cooperative Extension staff.

Goals and Objectives Goals and Objectives

The goal of UNL for Families is to strengthen families by increasing the six strengths identified in the Family Strengths model (see Figure 1). Specific objectives include:

Figure 1. Family Strengths Framework
Qualities found to make families strong:

Appreciation and Affection	Commitment
Caring for each other	Trust
Friendship	Honesty
Respect for individuality	Dependability
Playfulness	Faithfulness
Humor	Sharing
Positive Communication	Enjoyable Time Together
Sharing feelings	Quality time in great quantity
Giving compliments	Good things take time
Avoiding Blame	Enjoying each other's company
Being able to compromise	Simple good times
Agreeing to disagree	Sharing fun times
Spiritual Well-Being	The Ability to Manage Stress and Crisis Effectively
Hope	Adaptability
Faith	Seeing crises as challenges and opportunities
Compassion	Growing through crises together
Shared ethical values	Openness to change
Oneness with humankind	Resilience

Process Objectives

- Developing accessible resources that can be used to conduct research-based youth and family programs in communities across Nebraska, especially those in rural areas.
- Increasing awareness of University of Nebraska research and programs related to youth and families.
- Expanding linkages with other campus departments and community agencies working with youth and family programs.

Outcome Objectives

- Over half of Nebraska's 93 counties will partner with other family and youth serving organizations to develop UNL for Families Planning Teams. These teams will develop plans for local-level programs related to building strong families.
- Twenty-five percent of Nebraskan's will be reached through mass media outlets with research-based information on the importance of family time together and how to improve upon the strengths of their family.
- Educational programs on enhancing family communication will be offered in 45 counties and reach at least 1,000 families. Of those who participate, at least 50% will carry out at least one action to strengthen their family's communication patterns.

Target Audience

The target audience for UNL for Families is Nebraska families with at-home children. While this seems like an ambitious goal, the program is designed to reach families who may not have participated in family/youth focused programming in the past and to expand Cooperative Extension's traditional clientele base. For example, at the broadest level, families might hear or read public service announcements focusing on building family strengths. Those who are more interested might take part in the "Eat with Your Family Month" campaign. Families who have high interest might attend a program on handling stress in families or decide to participate in a couples' communication workshop. This multi-faceted approach is designed to include families on a variety of levels, hence the reason for the broad target audience. Special care was taken to insure that programs were inclusive for all family types (single-parent, two-parent, stepparents, grandparents as parents, couples, etc.).

If appropriate, local UNL for Families planning teams may determine a more specific target audience. For example, one county might choose single-parent families as demographic information shows that this is a high percentage of their population. Another might target families with adolescents if their community advisory group has identified this as a specific need.

Program Design and Content

Type of Program

UNL for Families is the implementing of programs that are family-based programming dependent upon local needs. These needs are identified by local-level informal stakeholder groups that serve in advisory roles for Cooperative Extension staff. UNL for Families was created to strengthen families by increasing the six strengths identified in the Family Strengths model.

Methods used to deliver the program

UNL for Families is designed to be a grass-roots program that best meets local-level needs. To carry out the program, local Cooperative Extension staff partner with other family-and youth-focused agencies in their communities to develop a UNL for Families planning teams. These teams work together to develop a training plan that best fits their targeted clientele. Specific emphasis is given to those families who are in highest need. While each team has a plan and carries out a program that is unique to their community, all involve at least three levels of programming: broad-based mass media focusing on each of the six family strengths, family education opportunities that involve both youth and adults, and focused training on specific subject matter related to the six family strengths.

Examples of specific programming include:

- media events designed to support community-wide, family-focused events such as "Eat with your Family" month
- monthly family fun nights where adults and youth spend the evening together (usually beginning with a meal) in fun activities (often taken from 4-H curriculum) designed to enhance family communication and increase time together
- workshops focusing on couples' communication skills, stress management, or parenting (often these workshops begin with an evening session and are continued for several months based on participant demand)
- Web-based activities where families can follow-up what they have been doing in workshops with "Learn at Home" modules (for those families who do not have Web access, "Learn at Home" modules are completed at the Extension Office or community centers that have Web access)

Curricula and/or educational materials

One of the objectives of UNL for Families is to provide research-based, high quality educational materials that are easy to use and can be used locally to conduct programs for youth and families. To fulfill this need, the UNL for Families Toolkit was developed. The Kit includes: parenting curriculum and activities, video and audio tapes (with accompanying user guides) developed to strengthen communication and help families deal with stress, curriculum on step-parenting, methods for conducting family fun nights, Learn-At-Homes for families to learn better communication and management skills, techniques for reaching high-risk families, news releases, informational handouts on the six family strengths, resource lists for staff, family-related Fact Sheets, methods for strengthening families through 4-H programming, etc. These Kits include samples of "best practices", many of which have been developed by Cooperative Extension, others

that have been adapted from national resources. Kits are expanded and modified to meet local community needs.

The UNL for Families website (www.unlforfamilies.unl.edu) serves as an educational portal for educators and families. This site provides a composite place for educational materials related to families to be posted so they can be easily accessed. Examples of educational materials on the site include: research based information about strengthening youth/family relationships, needs assessments for families to analyze their strengths, "learn on the web" activities for families, age appropriate activities for children, sample cover letters and outlines for family fun nights, news releases, etc. Staff and partnering agencies use the information to best meet their needs. For example, they may use program outlines and PowerPoint presentations to teach; news releases may be distributed to local papers, or they may refer program participants to the site for additional information.

FAMILY TREASURES: Creating Strong Marriages and Families, is a book being written by the UNL for Families Team based on the six family strengths. This piece, designed for the popular press, gives families the opportunity to assess their family strengths and have real hands-on opportunities for families to improve upon their targeted goals. In its final stages of production, *Family Treasures* is expected to go to print this fall. The book will be used as a take-home tool for families who have already expressed an interest in strengthening their family. Some groups may choose to work through the book together, addressing one of the six strengths each month. A satellite training on using the book as a teaching tool is scheduled for spring of 2006.

One of the strengths of UNL for Families is the ability for each community to focus on their particular needs. The curriculum and website are designed so that the community can select which pieces work best. For example, in one county the UNL for Families Planning Team began its work by hosting monthly family fun nights. These nights began with a potluck supper and a hands-on activity for young people and their parents. This was followed by educational sessions for parents and fun activities for kids. Based on the success of these Family Fun Nights, parents asked for in-depth training on grandparents raising children.

Partnerships or collaborations

UNL for Families is a collaborative effort among local-level and statewide agencies working together to plan and carry out educational programs to best meet community needs. Those partners involved in UNL for Families coalitions share curricula and educational materials, write joint funding proposals, co-teach workshops, and co-sponsor media events. While each community planning team is slightly different, partnering organizations include: Nebraska Family Resource Center Coalition, Alcohol Drug Council, Teen Pregnancy Coalition, Family Services, YMCA, Early Childhood Coalition, Head Start/Even Start, Juvenile Diversion Groups, Community Action Teams, schools, churches, libraries, etc.

Each of these partnering individuals brings expertise related to their specific discipline. For example, experts from the Nebraska Family Resource Center provide education and resources related to crisis management for families. YMCA program staff train fathers to be more involved in their families and focus on time together. School counselors assist with programs related to strengthening communication in families with adolescents.

Program Evaluation

Process

- Thirty five percent of Nebraska counties have used the UNL for Families Took Kit to conduct educational programming for youth and families. Of these, 90% are rural.
- University of Nebraska family strengthening programs are being used by 46 agencies statewide.
- At least 25 new partnerships have been formed at the statewide level and locally. For example, Cooperative Extension is a part of Nebraska's Statewide Technical Assistance Team. This group, consisting of representatives from state agencies serving youth and families, collaborates on educational programming, staff development and technical assistance.

Outcome and Impacts

- Forty-two UNL for Families planning teams are working statewide to provide education focusing on building strong families.
- Over one-third of Nebraskans (560,000) were reached with research-based information on families through 12 television spots, 132 radio spots with an estimated coverage of 210,000 people, and 97 newspaper articles in 18 different newspapers.
- The UNL for Families website (unlforfamilies.unl.edu) serves as a public source of information including: learn-at-home modules, teaching materials, and program tools on each of the family strengths. This site had 54,681 hits in 2004.
- Over 18,000 have been reached through a newly developed series of newspaper columns: *TIPS to Improve Parenting Skills*. These news articles focus on topics related to strengthening youth and families, including questions for discussion and a family activity. The *TIPS to Improve Parenting Skills* columns are also posted on the UNL for Families website.
- Nearly 1,500 people participated in at least 3 hours of educational programs that focused on family strengths. End of program surveys indicated that 88% of participants increased their knowledge of how to strengthen their family. Sixty-nine percent responded "strongly agree" when asked whether they would use one of the techniques identified in the next three months.

UNL for Families programs are making a difference in the live of families as is shown by responses from those who have participated in UNL for Families programs. For example:

- 75% of those 1,500 families who participated in three hours of UNL for Families programming pledged to strengthen their families by: eating together as a family, going to church as a family, listening more attentively to their children and turning off the TV. To determine follow-through on pledges, Extension staff randomly called 25% of those who had pledged. Of those called, 75% indicated that they were carrying out their goals.
- The *TIPS to Improve Parenting Skills* section of the UNL for Families website received 3,255 hits in 2004. Readers report that as a result of using this site:
 - “Our family became aware of the danger of exposing their children to second-hand smoke and have quit smoking.”
 - Another reported how they changed how they communicate with their children.
 - Another had this to say: “My husband and I decided that family is very important to us. Our relationship and our relationship with our children will outlast jobs and cars and houses. We have a goal of making our family healthy and loving; we work at it.”

Communication to stakeholders

An annual report highlighting program successes is distributed to program partners. This report contains numbers reached, behaviors changed, commitment families have made toward increasing their strengths, and family success stories. The report also shares upcoming educational programs. Highlights of this report are shared with program participants. For example, it has been helpful for program participants to hear success stories from others who have participated in UNL for Families programming. News releases highlighting that the UNL for Families programs are making a difference have been shared with the media and the general public. At the beginning of educational programs, past participants share how their participation in UNL for Families programming has made a difference in their family.

Program Sustainability

UNL for Families is self-sustaining in that local coalition members bring resources to the program (curriculum, educational materials, subject matter expertise, etc.). In addition, fees continue to be generated through program registration. On-going needs assessments help to assure that programming being offered is on target. For example, the UNL for Families statewide planning team conducts listening sessions annually with stakeholders. During these listening sessions, current programs are evaluated and ideas for new program emphasis areas are developed. Findings from these discussions are shared with local level planning teams. Locally, UNL for Families planning teams conduct needs assessments to ensure that plans are on target and meeting program goals.

The intent is for UNL for Families to continue to offer fresh ways to approach youth and family issues so that program participants continue to see the benefits and continue to participate in programs. By continuing to add program partners and enhance the subject matter background of current partners, cutting-edge resources and programs can continue to be developed.

Replication

UNL for Families is designed to reach a broad array of families with research based programs at a variety of levels. This program design can easily be replicated in local communities by identifying local needs and bringing together tools (curriculum, educational programs, media releases, etc.) and partners (representatives from state agencies, schools, community organizations serving families, etc.) that can best meet those needs. The UNL for Families framework allows for educators to partner with other subject matter experts to access the best of resources and practices related to building strong families. Because many of the pieces of the Toolkit may already exist among the team partners, the curriculum cost is low. Marketing dollars can be spread among the partnering agencies and can be enhanced by leveraging dollars of entities that support strong families (schools, churches, businesses, civic organizations, etc.).

Rationale and Importance of Program

Strong families are vital to the successful development of youth and adults who live within them. By using a seamless approach to plan, implement, and evaluate educational programs, the best of research and education across disciplines merges to strengthen families and in turn societies. UNL for Families is one example of how this can be done effectively.

References

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