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## MANY HAVE CLAIMED FAMILIES ARE PASSÉ. NOT SO, SAYS NEW SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH.

*The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada asks about family strengths for the first time in Canada*

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The IMFC is undertaking groundbreaking Canadian research and probing the nature of family strengths in Canada, starting with a small pilot study.

Using a modified version of the American Family Strengths Inventory, the IMFC initiated a pilot study late in the spring of 2008 to explore the presence of family assets through a questionnaire posed to a small sample. The American Family Strengths Inventory is a self-reporting instrument measuring family strengths according to six general qualities: commitment, appreciation and affection, positive communication, time together, spiritual well-being, and the ability to cope with stress and crisis.

The overwhelming majority of Canadian participants rated the presence of the strengths in their families. First, over four out of five respondents (82.4 per cent) indicated that their families embodied a global estimate of family strengths; this means that most of the individuals in this small sample see their family as loving, satisfying, happy, and strong. In addition, an even higher percentage (88.1 per cent) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statements that “all things considered” their family encompasses many of the critical elements related to the six categories of family strengths.

The more than 60 families represented in this sample rated the strength of making time for and sharing life with each other (96 per cent stated they “agreed” or “strongly agreed”) higher than the strengths of effective communication (92 per cent), looking at challenges as opportunities for growth (90.4 per cent), caring for each other (88 per cent), and valuing each other and demonstrating commitment (85.6 per cent). Greater still was the prominence of the final family strength – spirituality – with over 97 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing that spiritual connections enhanced their family’s wellbeing.

## INTRODUCTION

Upon recently opening the covers of a Canadian news magazine, there it was in black and white: “Why family no longer matters”.<sup>1</sup> Finally, someone was stating in no uncertain terms what has been proclaimed by academics, the media, or policymakers—or all three—for years. Although this particular article was about how television is presenting a very distorted view of the “wish-fulfillment” of media-portrayed childhood, others, both popular and academic have decried poverty, unemployment, dead-beat dads, domestic violence, the struggle of single-parent households and a litany of other social and economic stressors affecting and disabling the family.

It is in this environment that the IMFC is undertaking groundbreaking Canadian research and probing the nature of family strengths in Canada, starting with a small pilot study to overturn some of the beleaguered family’s negative image.<sup>2</sup> The pilot study was launched late in the spring of 2008 to explore the nature of family strengths. In this exploratory study, over 60 families responded to an online questionnaire asking about the relationships, resources, and activities that make their families strong. In keeping with the latest trends in family research, the IMFC is seeking to flesh out the research. The results are now coming in—results that should breathe new life into the importance and strength of Canadian families.



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## IS THE FAMILY “IN CRISIS”?

A negative discourse has been brewing in the hearts and minds of growing segments of the population for decades. With the Divorce Act of 1968, which introduced no-fault divorce nationwide, demographers, politicians, and social scientists began openly discussing and exploring a future where the biological or “traditional” family was preferable but not critical to Canada’s social system. Positive voices about the family, saying family structure and families in general did matter, were few. Among those defending the family, William Gairdner, author of *The War Against the Family*,<sup>3</sup> spoke to the calculated assault on the structure, necessity, and function of family by government, education, and even philosophical movements like feminism. Since then, however, public opinion of and support for families has remained mixed at best or openly hostile at worst, with several pejorative descriptors, including dysfunctional, outdated, and the ever-popular “in crisis” becoming part of the Canadian vernacular and psyche.

Fortunately, the same policy makers, mental health practitioners, and scientists who rang out the family death march, or claimed family didn't matter are slowly changing their tune. Gone is the struggle to answer the question "what's wrong with the family?" In its place, they ask a new question – "how can all families succeed?" – and for the first time in decades, we seem to have some answers.

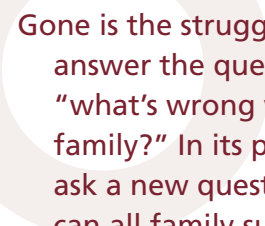
## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAMILY STRENGTHS**

A small but dedicated group of scholars and practitioners has been quietly but meaningfully exploring the nature and development of what is now known as the *family strengths* model of family-related social science research. Even in Canada, our own capital city hosted the first Canadian Conference on the Family in June of 1964,<sup>4</sup> the stated purpose of which was "to allow Canadians to focus attention on family life in contemporary society; its role and meaning, the conditions under which it exists, its strengths and weaknesses, its problems, and its probable future."<sup>5</sup>

An early scholar, Kay King has said such work is valuable because family strengths are based on several critical assumptions that are associated with optimal development for all families.<sup>6</sup> At the basic level, family strengths create a sense of positive family identity, promote satisfying and fulfilling interaction among family members, and encourage development of the potential of the family as a whole and its individual members in particular.

Research on family strengths is also contributing to a growing literature on resilience, and to the family's ability to deal with stress and crisis; also to function as a support network for other families who are either at-risk or in the midst of change and/or crisis.

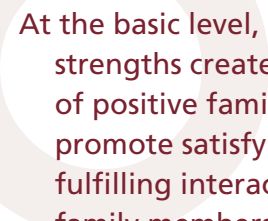
Exploration into the concrete qualities of family strengths has been a long time coming. Work on family strengths might be reasonably traced to Diana Baumrind and colleagues at University of California, Berkeley.<sup>7</sup> Her work introduced us to a discussion about parenting styles, the most positive and prominent of which she described as authoritative. Authoritative parents had high expectations of their children, but this was balanced by equally high and consistent attention to the developmental and social needs and capacities of children. The outcomes for children associated with this parenting style were—and are—very encouraging; children were lively, happy, self-confident, and self-controlled.



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The research of another social scientist, David Olson, (known for his Prepare/Enrich marriage courses for couples) may have been the catalyst for attempts at identifying other family processes that contribute to family strength. Olson and colleagues at the University of Minnesota proposed a balance of flexibility and cohesion that were evident in healthy, functioning families.<sup>8</sup> Other social scientists have focused efforts on behavioural strategies used to meet family goals or sustain family ideologies<sup>9</sup> via such processes as communication and effective time use.<sup>10</sup> Still others have focused on the family's ability to adjust to change or crisis with an emphasis on the changes across the family life cycle.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the diversity of approaches, studies on family strengths have reached a broad range of agreement. Recent research by Moore and colleagues has indicated several unifying principles in the study of family strengths.<sup>12</sup> First, both the quality of family relationships and the nature of family behaviours are important. Second, multiple measures are necessary to provide a complete picture of the status of a particular family. Third, measures of the quality of family relationships need to incorporate the different developmental periods of family life. Fourth, the nature of family strengths is influenced by the social and economic context of the family's community. And finally, the role of culture affects family processes and relationships.



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## FROM THEORY TO EXPERIENCE OF FAMILY STRENGTHS

Building on the premise that the similarities among models of family strengths are more apparent than the difference, John DeFrain and colleagues at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln began to explore the relationship qualities that contribute to the emotional health and well-being of family. Used for almost 30 years of research with thousands of families in over 27 countries, the American Family Strengths Inventory is a self-reporting instrument measuring family strengths according to six general qualities: commitment, appreciation and affection, positive communication, time together, spiritual well-being, and the ability to cope with stress and crisis.<sup>13</sup> Each of the qualities are described here in more detail.<sup>14</sup>

- **Commitment:** Members of strong families make it very clear to each other and the world that their lives with each other are of utmost importance. Commitment does not mean that members stifle each other's individual development, but rather allow for both separation from and connectedness to family to flourish.

- ***Appreciation and affection:*** People in strong families care deeply for each other, and they let each other know this regularly. The key is that family members are aware of the positive emotions others feel, the result of which is a snowballing of positive interchanges. For example, if Mom feels good about herself, she will be more likely to say kind things to Dad who then is likely to be especially considerate of the children as a result.
- ***Positive communication:*** No list of qualities of strong families would be complete without positive communication. Family members speak directly and honestly about issues and disagreements, and they do so without blaming or condemning each other. Strong families have members that are good listeners, are adept at asking questions and do not try to read each other's minds. Humour is not only welcome, but essential to good communication.
- ***Time together:*** Strong families enjoy time together and create space for shared activities that involve everyone. As simple as regular meals together or simply hanging out as a family, strong families have quality time in large quantities. The power of our presence in each other's lives speaks volumes about a family member's value and contribution.
- ***Spiritual well-being:*** A controversial item makes up the fifth quality of DeFrain's scale. While some see this as an enduring faith in God, others describe feelings of hope, peace and optimism in their lives. In all cases, family is seen and talked about as something sacred and worthy of both protecting and sharing with others. The core of this quality is a deep sense of connectedness to each other in a way that promotes sharing, love, and compassion.
- ***Ability to cope with stress and crisis:*** The final quality of strong families is an ability to cope effectively with stress and crises that are an inevitable part of all family experience. But strong families not only cope better, they are also creative at preventing troubles before they occur. When problems do happen, strong families minimize damage and look for growth opportunities in the process.

Assumed in this discussion is the notion that there is great diversity in families all around the world – and even across Canada – and continued research in this area is important for a number of reasons. For example, exploring family strengths also assists in identifying family processes to serve as positive resources regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, or national region.

Asking how, when, and why families have greater or lesser expressions of these qualities initiates public dialogue on what families “have” versus what they have not. Research on family strengths is also proactive and preventative in informing methods of service provision and the public policy that guides their development.

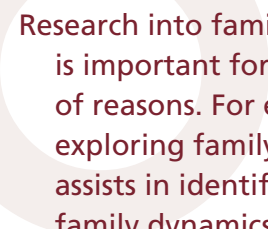
Finally, continued research in family strengths will help to set indicators for tracking family well-being and thus monitoring progress toward national and international health and wellness goals. This brief introduction to the six qualities of strong families should leave us feeling hopeful about both the present and future of families.

## **FAMILY STRENGTHS IN CANADA**

Using these theoretical principles and the body of previous research as a foundation, the IMFC initiated a pilot study late in the spring of 2008 to explore what family means through a questionnaire posed to a small sample. More specifically, with the permission of the original researchers (e.g., John DeFrain), the goal was to explore the utility of a shortened version of the American Family Strengths Inventory to use in future research.

In May and June, 2008, over 60 family members (43 female, 18 male; mean age = 39.7 years) completed a web-based survey related to various family demographic variables and the shortened 28-item Canadian Family Strengths Inventory. Not surprisingly, the convenience sample was not very ethnically diverse, with over ninety percent reporting their ethnicity as White. There was also an overrepresentation in other key demographic areas: homemakers (32 per cent), college graduates (37 per cent), children in private religious schools (19 per cent), non-income earners (19 per cent), and Protestant religious adherents (83 per cent). Fewer than 20 percent indicated they were other than two-parent families and just over a third (35 per cent) reported their relationship status was other than a first marriage. Still, though the sample was far from representative of the Canadian population as a whole, the findings do adequately serve the purpose as a valid attempt at assessing the reliability of the shortened version of the American Family Strengths Inventory.

The overwhelming majority of participants rated the presence of the strengths in their families. First, over four out of five respondents (82.4 per cent) indicated that their families embodied a global estimate of family strengths; this means that most of the individuals in this small sample see their family as loving, satisfying, happy, and strong. In addition, an even higher percentage (88.1 per cent) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statements that “all things considered” their family encompasses many of the critical elements related to the six categories of family strengths. This means that this sample of families rates their overall functioning as growing, spiritual, valued, caring, communicating well, and making time for each other.



**Research into family strengths is important for a number of reasons. For example, exploring family strengths assists in identifying the family dynamics that serve as positive resources regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, or national region**

What is of greater interest is that all six family strengths do not exist in our families with equal status or importance. For example, the more than 60 families represented in this sample rated the strength of making time for and sharing life with each other (96 per cent stated they “agreed” or “strongly agreed”) higher than the strengths of effective communication (92 per cent), looking at challenges as opportunities for growth (90.4 per cent), caring for each other (88 per cent), and valuing each other and demonstrating commitment (85.6 per cent). Greater still, and possibly even more indicative of the misrepresentative demographic of this pilot study sample, was the prominence of the final family strength – spirituality – with over 97 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing that spiritual connections enhance their family’s wellbeing. Even with this inter-strength variability, however, it is quite apparent that most individuals in our study considered their families overwhelmingly positive and strong.

The above theoretical overview and brief descriptive results from the pilot study indicate that Canadian families certainly have the capacity for demonstrating all measure of family strengths. This is certainly good news—indeed surprising—in the face of negative public opinion that the family is suffering in silence over its ineffectiveness as an important social and relational institution. This sample of families is indeed self-reporting that their view of themselves is positive, hopeful, and even growing in strength.

### **FAMILY STRENGTHS RESEARCH: WHERE WE’RE GOING**

Still, there is much work to be done in the area of family strengths. Future studies and a larger sample are needed to determine how family strengths are related to other measures of family functioning and how – both individually and in concert with other predictive measures – we might predict such important outcomes as the physical, emotional, and relational health of multiple family members. The continued efforts of the IMFC will focus on these ends in early 2009.

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**Endnotes**

- 1 Weinman, J. (2008, November 24). Why family no longer matters: Kids' TV is now about young people in wild situations – with few adults. *Maclean's*, 141-142.
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