



Building Strong Families

Insights from Research

Number 5, March 2003

Social Support for Parents: An Important Resource for Families

Highlights:

The Building Strong Families poll found that parents often "go it alone." That is, they do not regularly seek support from family, friends, or community resources. However, research shows that having a network of support helps to strengthen families, and having support from others is associated with positive outcomes for both parents and children.

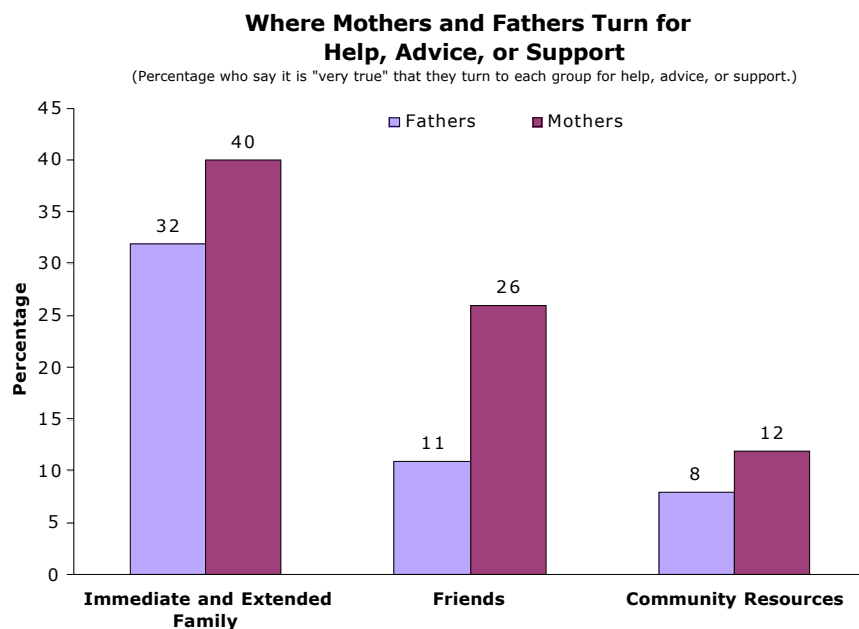
Seeking Support from Family, Friends, and Community Resources

Two first-time parents are worried because their infant has his first cold. They decide to call a close family member for reassurance. Or maybe they call a friend or a local community health hotline for advice. Did these parents do anything wrong by calling family or friends or by using a community resource? Most of us probably feel that these actions are perfectly acceptable—maybe even admirable—and there is nothing wrong with seeking the help and support of family, friends, and/or community resources in times of uncertainty. However, many parents often do not seek the support of these outside resources.

This newsletter addresses one of the key findings in the *Building Strong Families* study, a survey of 1,005 parents conducted by Search Institute and YMCA of the USA in 2002. (For more information, see www.abundantassets.org.)

The *Building Strong Families* poll results tell us that most of the parents surveyed are "going it alone." That is, they are often *not* seeking support from family, friends, or community resources. In fact, 53% of the parents surveyed say that they do not regularly reach out for parenting help, advice, or support from any of these sources. Only 4% say they

receive parenting support from all three sources. Mothers in this poll are more likely than fathers to report that they turn to any of the three sources of support. When parents do seek support, they are more likely to turn to family and friends than community resources. It is important to note, however, that these findings should not diminish the importance of having community resources available to families. Parents of low income, who may be more likely to need or use community resources, were underrepresented in this sample.



The Positive Effects of Support from Others

If most of us think it is acceptable for parents to seek the help and support of others, why don't most parents actively seek out this support? It is possible that parents feel that reaching out may imply that their family is "weak" or "needy." It is very important, however, for parents and the people around them to realize that *networks of support actually help to strengthen families*. While parents may not often turn to others for help or advice, there are many reasons why seeking this support is beneficial:

- * Parents who have access to and seek the support of others tend to be more warm and affectionate toward their children.¹
- * Parents with large social networks tend to be more involved in their children's education, which results in better school performance among the children.²
- * Parents who have large social networks tend to have children with larger social networks.³ Likewise, parents who report feeling lonely tend to have children who are also lonely.⁴
- * Results from the *Building Strong Families* poll indicate that parents who receive more support were more likely to be highly consistent asset builders. That is, they are more likely to report performing positive parenting behaviors known to promote positive child outcomes.

Ways to Support Parents

Returning to the example from the beginning of this newsletter, a friend of the family offered reassurance, or emotional support, to the parents. Having this emotional support has important consequences for parents, as it helps strengthen their ability to make good parenting decisions and perform more positive parenting behaviors. In addition, parents who have a strong network of emotional support are less likely to abuse their children, are better able to handle stressful situations, and feel more effective as parents.⁵

Parents can be supported in other ways beyond emotional support. For example, the friend could have offered to take the child to the doctor the next day while the parents were working. This task-oriented, or instrumental support, is also very important to parents. However, parents tend to receive more emotional support than instrumental support from friends and family.⁶ Parenting advice and other parenting information, such as what is often provided by community resources, also have direct positive effect on parents. Community resources are also beneficial to parents beyond the support they provide—parents are often able to meet other parents in those programs, which can help build the network of support for both families.⁷

What Do You Think?

- * If you are a parent, what sources of support do you turn to? How could your support network be strengthened?
- * Why do you think many parents go it alone, not seeking support from others? How might communities and organizations overcome those barriers so that more parents seek support?
- * How do you support the parents you know? What could you do to be even more supportive?
- * Do you believe one type of support is more important than others? Is any one source of support more important?

The YMCA of the USA and Search Institute are exploring these kinds of questions in their Building Strong Families initiative, which is made possible by a generous grant from the Kimberly-Clark Corporation. For more information, see Building Strong Families: A Preliminary Survey on What Parents Need to Succeed, and watch for future Building Strong Families: Insights from Research newsletters. All materials are available at www.search-institute.org/families or www.abundantassets.org.

This electronic newsletter, *Building Strong Families: Insights from Research*, is prepared by Stacey P. Rude, Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota for the Abundant Assets Alliance. The alliance seeks to strengthen the capacity of YMCAs and the communities they serve to provide young people with the support and experiences they need to become healthy, caring, and competent adults.

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¹ Cochran, M., & Niego, S. (1995). Parenting and social networks. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Volume 3: Status and social conditions of parenting* (pp. 393-418). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

² Sheldon, S. (2002). Parents' social networks and beliefs as predictors of parent involvement. *The Elementary School Journal*, *102*, 301-316.

³ Uhlenborff, H. (2000). Parents' and children's friendship networks. *Journal of Family Issues*, *21*, 191-204.

⁴ Henwood, P., & Solano, C. (1994). Loneliness in young children and their parents. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, *155*, 35-45.

⁵ Cochran & Neigo.

Marshall, N., Noonan, N., McCartney, K., Marx, F., & Keefe, N. (2001). It takes an urban village: Parenting networks of urban families. *Journal of Family Issues*, *22*, 163-182.

⁶ MacPhee, D., Fritz, J., & Miller-Heyl, J. (1996). Ethnic variations in personal social networks and parenting. *Child Development*, *67*, 3278-3295.

⁷ Cochran & Neigo.