

Single Parenting

Building a Strong Family

by [Dick Wulf](#)

How do you build a strong family? By paying attention not only to individual family members but to the family as a group. This is rarely done in the American home. But your success as a parent may depend upon it.

A cooperative and interdependent family will not usually come into being if a parent centers most of his or her attention on individual kids when part or all of the family is together. A collection of people being herded in the same direction will not prosper and grow into the powerful family it could be.

You may get surprising results if you apply the following professional group work approach to your family life. It often yields parents and children who help one another and look out for one another throughout the rest of life. This kind of family enables individual members to function and grow far stronger than in the usual home setting.

Leading Your Family as a Group

Leading the family as a group is completely different from merely raising kids one-by-one, ignoring the family as a unit.

Think of the coach of a football team. He must focus on how the various members of the team relate to one another, work together, carry out the plays, etc. Whereas the quarterback coach is concerned with very different things: an individual's performance and morale.

Parents must be both kinds of coaches. What usually happens is that they just operate like the quarterback coaches, helping one individual at a time and leaving out teaching their families to work together and help one another.

Think of an orchestra conductor who must be concerned that each musician is playing his or her part and that the whole orchestra is in harmony. The flute instructor, on the other hand, is focused on the individual. Parents must be both the conductor and the instructor — the conductor when the family is together (which happens too rarely) and an instructor with individual children.

Therefore, the successful parent has the family in mind, talks to the family as a whole, analyzes how the family is developing and what it needs to do together to go further, gives the family work to do, and helps with a host of other family-centered concerns.

Suppose a child needs to do better in school. Let's look at three different ways of handling the situation.

In the usual approach, a parent talks to the child who needs to do better. All the other children in the family probably know that their brother or sister is doing poorly, but they are not brought into the process. Often the reason is to prevent embarrassment. But the other kids know — and they might not be acting kind to their sibling behind the parents' backs.

In this approach, almost all communication occurs between the parent(s) and the child, with occasional parental "side comments" to other children. This approach rarely protects the poor student from sibling cruelty. What it does is prevent the other children from offering help and support to their struggling brother or sister. Many other things might be being hindered as well, such as getting to the root of the problem. The other children might know some reasons for their brother's poor academic performance, such as teasing he's getting at school.

A second approach has the parent carrying on a helpful discussion with the child while the other kids are listening. This might seem like an approach that involves the family, but really it does not. This method asks for no true commitment from the other family members to help rather than hinder the troubled brother or sister.

A third approach, the empowering model of family leadership, has many advantages you might not have considered. In this model the parent focuses on the family as the entity he or she is helping. The reason is that the family as a whole can do the best job of helping a member of the family overcome a problem. (I know. We tried this when one of our older daughters was doing poorly in school.)

In the empowerment model, the parent talks to the family as a whole. Everyone agrees together to help the brother or sister who is doing poorly. Then the parent focuses on helping the family do all the things necessary. Children and parents working together can pool their ideas and efforts. The family decides how each family member can help, what actions and attitudes will be truly helpful, what consequences should follow if any family member knowingly does something harmful to the process, which family members should spend extra time with the person, and a host of other things that would not occur in either of the first two approaches.

Besides helping the troubled family member, this approach builds the family up and causes all its members to grow. Everyone makes decisions together, works together to accomplish the family purpose and overcomes barriers that block progress. Both the individuals and the family grow and become stronger.

This empowering model of family leadership expects a lot of a family and is very affirming. It is not the typical "let's see how comfortable we can make the family." Instead, it is more like saying, "Let's show the family members how much the family can accomplish by working together."

Copyright 2005, Dick Wulf. Used by Permission.