

## Empowering At-risk Families through Effective Parenting and Family Learning Process

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**ABSTRACT** The excessive demands in recent years have accompanied new hopes in technology, industry and education that have created a dissonance between social norms and what the family can achieve. Factors like an increase in educational expectations and mobility of people from rural to urban areas; influence of mass media and communication links, globalisation; women's education and employment, all together have affected the kind of stress families are experiencing today. While some families are able to absorb and even capitalize on the changes in their environment, most families are "at-risk" to these stressors. These families are constantly responding to chronic stress, and have little energy for creating a proactive and nurturing family ecology. The present paper examines the various constructs of families at-risk and dysfunction; and discusses various strategies for empowering at-risk families to their journey in a safe and healthy manner, in the areas such as: maternal and child health; family literacy and education; quality child care; and economic security. However, among all these aspects, effective parenting and family learning process may serve as appropriate ways of empowering at-risk families in Indian socio-cultural context. No amount of progress can be made in improving the stability of family life without the intimate and purposeful involvement of parents in child care and rearing the human capital. While this challenge may be seen as obvious and simple on the surface, it involves a fuller understanding of the cultural and social dynamics in which parenting is enacted.

### INTRODUCTION

*"Success in family life comes not from avoiding difficulties or problems, but rather facing them squarely and coping with them effectively".*

"Family has always been at the foundation of Indian society, and contemporary Indian people continue to take pride in the centrality of marriage and family life" stated Mullati (1995). It is well known that the course of family life is not always smooth. In fact, everyone can count on experiencing the inevitable stresses, strains and tough times that are a part of the journey. With these changes comes the potential for possibility that the family may be overwhelmed and lack the supportive resources needed to deal effectively with the stressful life changes. According to Pedro-Carroll (2001), opportunity is embedded in the potential for the growth and positive changes that promote resilience and healthy outcomes for the family members. Family structure, functions and values are experiencing unprecedented changes throughout the world. The impact of globalization, urbanization, migration and social transformation are among the contributing factors for these changes. The increasing educational attainment and growing labour market participation of women has resulted in delayed

marriages, declining fertility and the diminishing of traditional care-giving functions of the family. The extended family support system has sustained further decline due to such diverse factors such as the rise of the nuclear family norm and increasing divorce rates. Asia-Pacific Population and Social Studies (2008) indicated that the appearance of new and diverse forms of living arrangements, such as single parent families, women headed families, have enlarged the societal burden for the provision of welfare services.

All these changes, shifts and transformations present formidable challenges to families and to their individual members, communities, civil societies and all levels of government, as well as society at large. Thus, improvement of family well-being requires long range integration of social and economic issues and other problems affecting families. The need to strengthen family has never been more urgent, as families of today, which are affected by stress and uncertainties of economic, political and social upheaval. One of the most important challenges facing Indian society today is to ensure that its children and adolescents grow into healthy, happy, and responsible adults capable of achieving and contributing to the common goals of the nation—*India Rising* and *The Incredible India* as has been commented by

Chowdhury and Rath (2007). Indian families need to become better informed on how they can be more effective in handling internal problems and confronting external demands or changes. Hence, families need to have a “*New deal*” that ensures their economic and social security, general health and well-being (Carson and Chowdhury 2000). By strengthening the lives of families and individual family members, we can strengthen our economy, our human potential, social and political system, and our natural security. All of these will depend on the continued commitment and productivity of the people, whose health and well-being begins in the families.

### **CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FAMILIES AND CHALLENGES AHEAD**

During the last few decades numerous factors are affecting the Indian families in many ways, leading to varied types of problems with challenging tasks ahead. A critical problem in India is the discrepancy between the haves and have-nots and its widespread effect. The economic burden on the have-nots have increased to a point that many couples or parents have little time and energy to attend to family life. The limited availability of educational, cultural and economic resources and the accumulation of the acute and chronic stressors, which wear people down over time, make low socio-economic status a major risk factor for family dysfunction and lack of optimal parenting (Carson et al. 2007). Further, Indian family scenario has changed dramatically since the last century, with the mushrooming growth of dual earner couples, single parent families (mostly women headed) and migrant families with increase rate of divorce unlike before. There seems a “*toxicity*” of social environment (within family) similar to the toxicity of the physical environments. Family toxic matters include violence in all forms, poverty, unemployment, poor housing and under resourced education system. Thus, management of socially toxic environment is highly recommended.

Careful analysis by researchers brings forth the changes that are taking place in the Indian family in terms of role patterns, ethos and values. The invasion of television, video, computer, mobile phones, internet culture and growing consumerism in the family system

has further helped this process of value erosion. Sinha (1988) has pointed out some of the implications of the changing family scene for the socialization process and mental health of the individuals. He maintains that socio-economic changes in society have induced certain changes in family experiences that serve as antecedents to various behavioral and psychological consequences in the individuals. Sinha (1991) further expressed that in the changing family patterns there are unstable and contradictory patterns of child rearing, which generate anxiety and conflict in the growing child. Moreover, young children and adolescents of present day Indian society lack clear-cut and consistent role models to follow and have motivation and aspirations for future developments. Nucleation of the family has further deleted the emotional surrounding of the individuals and made them more vulnerable. Thus, Indian family is in a fluid, transitional state, which is presenting ambiguities in roles, responsibilities, relationships, values and models of emulation. The family emotional support structure is weakening and external agencies are taking over part of the socializing roles. Such a scenario spells far-reaching implications for the psychological well-being of the individual within and outside the family.

The range and variety of problems that Indian families face are widespread and developmental in nature, faced by almost all families at one time or another; because they are linked to the natural stages in the life cycle and daily living experiences (Choudhury 2006). In general, family harmony is affected resulting in abuse and violence against individual family members (especially children and women). In extreme situations the family pathology may lead to family disintegration and destitution of individual members.

### **VARIOUS CONSTRUCTS OF FAMILIES AT-RISK AND DYSFUNCTION**

There are many factors that have the potential to create a context of risk in families such as - poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, inadequate health care, weak support system (both intra and extra family), high-risk living conditions, intra-family stress, and multiple combinations of these and other factors (Thompson and Hupp 1992). Desai (1991) was of view that

the Indian families with problems considered to be “At-Risk” or “High-Risk” that are with following features:

- Family structural problems.
- Mentally ill or disabled individuals.
- Affected by crisis such as terrorism, communal riots, industrial strikes, natural calamities and suicide, rape victim, unwed motherhood.
- Marital problems.
- Abuse and violence of any forms within family.
- Women-headed families with multiple roles.

Some context indicators of at-risk families are more powerful than others, especially at particular points in the life span. Further, in case of young families under heavy stress, there is the short-circuiting or destruction of the social learning system. When the young families are constantly faced with chronic stress they have little energy or faith for creating a proactive and nurturing environment. In such a context, families that are at risk develop behavior patterns that may be destructive of their integrity and are often dysfunctional within the larger environments (society). Moreover there problems, in turn, affect the family interaction and individual members to a greater extent (Desai 1991).

Research has noted several behavioral indicators of at-risk family situations such as severe developmental delays, poor self-image, cognitive dysfunction, socio-emotional distortion, and related anti-social behavior syndromes (Rutter 1999). Family context and behavioral indicators interact in multiple ways, creating an environment, which may promote a continuing spiral of risk-ness (Swick 1991). In a spiraling ecology of risk, anti-social behaviors becomes the norm and continually erodes healthy behaviours that exist, thus further promoting additional anti-social behaviours within and outside the family. The realities of at-risk families are that when family control skills and corresponding support systems disappear, the potential for pathological behaviour increases greatly. Poverty, persistent unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse, chronic physical and mental health problems and marital stress and strains have all related to family pathologies. The indicators of family pathology may include: child abuse or spouse abuse, persistent and

intense family conflicts, continuous and pervasive levels of aggression, community isolation, a history of prior family pathologies, and major anti-social behaviours (Gelles and Cornell 1990).

Thompson and Hupp (1992) indicate eight risk areas that have a profound impact on the lives of young children and families such as - ineffective parenting, inadequate home learning environments, illiteracy, poor health care, unemployment, child / family abuse, malnutrition, and chemical abuse syndromes. Among all, ineffective parenting is the most serious and damaging risk that families of all stages can experience. Parenting is the key mediator by which families carry out problem solving, relationship formation, and affective and instrumental processes integral to their development. Swick (2008) describes four elements that comprise parenting (parent integrity) necessary for normal growth and development of the family. They are: self-image; locus of control; relationship with others; and social support.

Weakness in these integrity sustaining elements can impede parental competence. In turn, these elements can affect the family’s learning environment as well. For example, low self-esteem in parents has been observed as highly related to various family dysfunctions such as abuse and usually interrelated with other factors in their context like low support, illiteracy, and personal experiences with abuse and neglect (Edelman 1987). A cycle of interactional (potentially intergenerational) experiences (neglect / insecurity / ineffective parenting, and other risk indicators) appears to create a “*culture of risk ness*”. Low resource family environments and abusive family situations are proving to generate more family abuse and dysfunction (Schorr and Schorr 1988). Moreover, dysfunctional parents focus their energy on “defining themselves”; trying to sort out the underlying sources of their insecurity and chaos. Such self-absorption leaves little room for responding to the needs of others in an effective manner. Further, lacking in proactive social and cognitive skills, inefficient parents tend to respond to stress in irrational and inappropriate ways.

Inadequate and poor home learning environment is another key risk factor, which is often present during the early year of family life

(Bronfenbrenner 2005). While there are discrepancies in every home environment, families at-risk often have serious problems due to major discrepancies in areas such as: literacy resources, rituals for nurturing healthy family relationships, family attitudes towards learning, social linkages for pursuing learning, resources needed for promoting wellness, and strategies for sustaining a positive social and emotional family system (Thomson and Hupp 1992).

Important addictive type risk behaviour is child and family abuse. Parents who themselves have experienced abuse or who are a part of a cycle of intergenerational violence often replay this syndrome in their parenting and marital lives (Brandshaw 1988). Attributes such as rigid behaviour patterns, physical aggression, psychological abuse, severe neglect, and sexual abuse are symbolic of deeply ingrained insecurities, low self-esteem and poor mental health. For example, it has been observed that mothers who themselves experienced abuse or are currently experiencing it, have serious problem in developing healthy relationships with their children. Lack of parental image of how to nurture as well as an absence of a sense of being nurtured apparently block the essential relationship patterns that are necessary for forming basic attachments (Fraiberg 1987).

Abusive parents (and abusing families) generate an ecology in which family pathologies serve developmental dialogs and / or impairments in children, child and adult anti-social behaviours, and extensive, continuing abuse syndromes are likely to emerge (Thompson and Hupp 1992). Abusive parent / family contexts appear to create a closed system in which recursive abuse patterns are modeled, practiced, internalized, and then extended to internal and external family relationships (Choler 1984; Gelles and Cornell 1990). Various studies have explained the dynamics of abuse as it influences their family interactions in multiple ways. The pervasiveness of abuse family syndromes is such, that it is often observed within intergenerational patterns. It becomes an accepted way of life and even acquires a status among many of the adult perpetrators and victims (Kagan and Schlosberg 1989).

At-risk families have specific needs, and requirements, which need to develop coping skills to manage them effectively (Desai 1991).

Studies on women-headed families show that these women face twin problems of being the major earners and of being the sole carefulness of children. The financial burden of running the home worries regarding childcare and rearing result in emotional problems for them. Further, families with disabled, mentally ill and handicapped member, experience the burden of having to care lifelong for the member. These families require special coping skills as well as counseling for effective family functioning (Desai 1991). Families experiencing multiple stresses of risk factors thus confront the possibility of dysfunction. The most alarming attribute of high-risk or at-risk families is the ecology of despair that is very often prevalent in their lives. When risk factors become chronic and embedded in a human relationship system that is characterized by despair, powerlessness, isolation and extreme insecurity, the potential for creating a "culture of dysfunction" is very high (Choler 1984).

#### STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING AT-RISK FAMILIES

By empowering it is meant that a "family's ability to meet needs and achieve aspirations in away that promotes a clear sense of intra-family mastery and control over important aspects of family functioning". According to Dunst et al. (1988), family empowerment means – "the ability of families to manage life events effectively as well as gain mastery over their affairs requires that we empower families to become competent and capable rather than dependent upon professional helpers. This is accomplished by creating opportunities for families to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to be come stronger and better able to manage and negotiate the many demands and forces that impinge upon the family unit in a way that promotes individual and family well-being....."

Preventing family "risk factors" from becoming prevalent must be a priority of every citizen of our country. There are very many ways to empower families at-risk, such as: improved physical and mental health facilities; providing quality child, adolescent and old age security; educational and economic security; adequate recreational facilities for all ages an so on. Recent reports on strategies for em-

powering families during early family years focuses on health, literacy, quality childcare, education, and economic security (Swick 1991; Thomson and Hupp 1992). These can be elaborated as follows:

**Maternal and Child Health** – It is the cornerstone of the foundation for strong families (Boyer 1991). The combination of health education, medical, and social resources directed towards universal mother and child health care can be an initial and revolutionary point of family and community empowerment. India's families are poor and sick, because the mother and the children's health (both physical and psychological) are not given proper attention and care. Thus, maternal and child mortality and morbidity rate is very high in our country. Beginning with the education of future parents and extending the process through exemplary parental and perinatal care, the tragedy of the low birth-weight syndrome and other birth-related risks can be prevented (Boyer 1991; Thompson and Hupp 1992). Further, immunization of all children against killer diseases must be actualized as a universal human right and responsibility. Moreover, the recent onset of HIV/AIDS needs to be given urgent attention, while providing care for mothers and children. A healthy start in life is the foundation for family wellness and community stability. In India "health for all" has been the agenda of our Government, but there are millions of mothers and children far from the basic health care services.

**Family Literacy**- Family literacy is a tool that has proven very effective in partially buffering the negative influences of poverty (Rutter 1999). Thus, in India "Sarva Sikhsayya Abhiyan" (Total Literacy Programme) by the Government is going to play the role of a catalyst in improving the standard of the family. True literacy is represented where people are engaged in setting the direction for their lives. Thus, family participation is vital to promoting the desired success attributes, such as: parental competence, high self-esteem in parents and children, assertive social skills, high job competence, positive adult role models, and a life long enjoyment of learning (Swick 1991). To certain extent, family literacy reduces the problems and difficulties the families face in day-to-day life.

**Quality Childcare** – According to Pence (1988), quality child care programs provide

children and parents with arena for learning, support and long term stability. Moreover, considerable evidence suggests that high-quality child care, early learning and support programs influence an increase in the health, literacy, economic and educational fabric of young families (Swick 1991). Various motivational strategies need to be implemented among poor, scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and other high risk communities to promote the creation of early learning and family support services within the community.

**Family Life Education** - Education is a long-term method for total family and community empowerment. Schools and other educational institutions provide the most logical area for extending healthy beginnings to the community's developing system. Hence, several changes are required to provide at-risk families with more meaningful setting or environment in which to pursue family life education and achieve empowerment to face the to present day challenges and march ahead, both within and out side the family. According to Chowdhury (2006), family life education has to do with "education for healthy and happy family living". It prepares individuals and families for the roles and responsibilities of family living within the existing socio-cultural context of the society.

**Financial Security** - Through financial security family's long term goal of achieving growth and development is possible. Poverty kills the physical and psychological growth of a family. Thus, a national economic plan of action to provide economic security for all is essential to family wellness. Employment for all and "job security" potential must be advanced for the family growth and development and at the same time be successful in achieving its goal. Present day employment situation is not at all family friendly, rather creating maximum problems within and out side the family. The "hire and fire" concept in job market is certainly a very bad indication for healthy family living.

However, in order to achieve the full fledged empowerment for families in India, two main approaches such as - effective parenting and family learning system can be proposed considering the present day social and economic situation. It is more so appropriate especially among middle class and higher-class families in India, where family resources are available, but not uniformly distributed among all and even

unable to be utilized for the general welfare of the families. Middle and higher-class families in India are facing difficulties of such nature constantly and are becoming “at-risk” in few years. It is not because of any lack/limited resources, rather mainly due to the improper use of these resources and blind follow up of western ideas and culture, which seems to have no relevance and suitability on our environmental social, economic and cultural context.

Thus, families can be strengthened through effective parenting and understanding family learning system in our socio-cultural and economic context of family ecology. The center of family wellness is the healthy and growing parents. Little progress can be made in improving the stability of family life without the intimate and seasoned involvement of parents. Hence, understanding the cultural and social dynamics in which parenting is enacted needs to be done in order to empower the families at-risk. Further, family learning system uses the continuing “feed back” provided through human interaction to construct meaningful responses to various situations and experiences generated in family living. It is a growth process where every family member, be the father/husband or any other relatives staying in the family needs to be sensitive to the needs of others. In order to have detail understanding of these two approaches to empower families (especially at-risk families), it needs to be elaborate further as follows:

#### **PARENTING: AS A MEANS TO EMPOWER FAMILIES**

One of the major relationships to have undergone a sea change during past few decades in India is the parent-child relationship. From being a straightforward relationship where the parents had a complete hold over their child's activities, the relationship has evolved into one marked by power struggles, arguments and conflicts (Gupta 2003). The wisdom of grandmothers and elders seems to have lost its magic; strategies that worked for our parents and grandparents now sound irrelevant; even solutions to parenting problems from friends are like ill-fitting clothes, too light in some places and too airy in others. Indeed, parenting is becoming one of the most complicated challenges faced by the individuals of today's

society. The need then is for new age parenting skills: where conservatism and liberalism go hand in hand, where both freedom and control are exercised, thereby creating a balance, a harmony and a feeling of trust within the family. As per Gupta (2003), PARENTING is all about:

*P - Patience and Perseverance.*

*A - Affection and Attunement.*

*R - Reasonableness and Resourcefulness.*

*E - Effective Communication.*

*N - Nurturing.*

*T - Tactful.*

*I - Insight.*

*N - Naturalness.*

*G - Guidance.*

In today's environment, bringing up children is not that easy a task as before. Greater challenges, external influences, changing family structure as well as functions, excessive peer pressure and above all impact of television media, internet, mobile phone and video culture have imparted a totally new dimensions to the concept of parenting, where both parents expected to participate in child-rearing with equal responsibilities. In India since, more and more women are joining in full time work outside the family; the father's role is expected to be more in case of child care and household activities for maintaining family stability and cohesion.

In contrast to the homogeneous parental context of the past, today's parents find themselves in a system that requires multiple roles, skills, and perspectives. Further, present day parents sense that, they have less support than parents did in previous generations. School failure, delinquency, and adult anti-social behaviour have been linked to pathological beginnings in ineffective family environments (Swick 1993). Studies have focused on the roles parents perform, how those roles are nurtured or constrained within the larger society, and how parents can be better supported in their efforts to be family leaders (Cowen and Cowen 1992). Through our understanding of parental roles, hopefully we can develop skills for effective parenting to empower families in general and “at-risk” families in particular. The many roles that parents perform as described by Swick (1993) are:

- 1) *The Parent as a Growing Individual* – The most critical role a parent performs is that

of being a growing individual. In all their capacities, parents ultimately depend on their skills, values and belief system. For example, the research on child abuse indicates that parents who abuse their children are often personally insecure and socially incompetent. The static or dysfunctional parent is a poor guide for the child (Bigner 1985). Whereas, growing parents take time to nurture themselves, relate their needs to the total family, and pursue educational and social experiences that strengthen their identity (White 2007). Efficient parents use the past experiences to learn from, and build on in their search for meaning. They have a sense of purpose that is based on trust, a continuing effort to be positive role models, and on their sense of family and community.

- 2) *The Parent as a Community Worker* – Work and community involvement stress can impede family life, when it exceeds the available resources (time, energy and money) of parents (Swick 1993). The situation is further complicated by the lack of community support for parents. Stress factors created by job-overload or intense community involvement does influence marital and parent–child relationships negatively. Beyond their job or career involvement, parents usually carry out many community development roles. In India, people take the pride of doing and getting involved in community activities, rather than feeling good and looking after their own family. In the process, what happened is family life gets lesser importance and community activities takes the front seat, leading to family disturbances and troubles for future family well-being.
- 3) *The Parents as Family Guides* – Parents are also considered as the guide of a family. Their guidance role is vital because children learn productive behaviour, only when they observe their parents through setting limits and by offering alternatives to negative behaviour. Further, parental guidance promotes proactive living, where children establish rituals of caring, self-discipline, and problem solving (Bigner 1985). Whether performing nurturance, instrumental, or guidance roles, parents model a way of life. The way they behave

towards other family members and people in the community sets the stage for their children and adolescents to internalize as models of living within social system and behave accordingly.

- 4) *Parents as Cultural Role Models*: Parents are children’s most powerful teachers of cultural transmission of values, beliefs and way of life. A child’s “environment” is created and filtered through the actions and behaviours of parents. It is usually through parents that children acquire their initial vision of how people function and what they value. Pro-social behaviours such as sharing, empathy, sensitivity to the needs of others, teamwork, and constructive problem solving are learned early in the humanization process (Swick 1993). Hence, through parental role model, children and adolescents in the family learn behaviours and actions.
- 5) *Parents as Nest Builders* – Parents are also considered as “nest builders” in a sense that they build bridge the gap with other family support systems in order to secure the family nest. Through the nest building role parents attempts to create both security and stimulation, thus allowing the family to thrive internally and begin to grow as individuals.

Becoming a parent, like growing individual, which is a relationship – building process that requires one to engage in experiences where they intentionally see themselves in caring roles. Parent education and family support have a distinct goal in responding to the needs of parents and children in at-risk family situations. This is mainly on helping parents and families to gain control over the forces that are eroding their power; engaging parents in experiences where they can gain a sense of self-worth and self-direction; and nurturing in parents, the proactive beliefs essential to being positive in family life. This can further be achieved through home visit programs and providing counseling and educational activities to position parents to gain the needed strength to resolve negative stressors. Further, parents can be empowered through acquisition of the “basics” for family well-being; this can be achieved by supporting parents in their efforts to acquire positive parenting skills in resolving specific family/ individual risk factors and assisting parents in

gaining an understanding of their development as persons and parents. Few attributes of effective parents as viewed by Swick (1993) are as follows:

- Listening to the children carefully.
- Offering reasonable answers to children's questions that stimulate children to think creatively.
- Taking active interest in children.
- Offering praise and encouragement for their children
- Maintaining warm and nurturing relationship.
- Creating enriching and stimulating family environment.

Throughout history parents have had a natural interest in learning about children's development. However, they need to be provided with basic child development information that include-child's physical, social, emotional, language, intellectual and spiritual development and various factors affecting it. Since, it is no more possible within nuclear family structure in India, these can well be communicated to the parents through group meetings, discussions, individual assistance and counseling as and when required and possible. Along with it, parents can be made aware of the significance of quality relationship with their children which include clear, consistent and close communication, proper understanding and positive interactions with their children. Parents also need to be informed about the various "risk-factors" that place the children and family in dangers such as: smoking, alcoholism, drug abuse, gambling, unemployment, chronic sickness, mental instability on the parts of the main bread winner of the family and / or environmental hazards.

#### **FAMILY LEARNING PROCESS TO ENHANCE FAMILY STRENGTH**

The development and normal functioning of families is the result of many useful choices that take place within the family's relationship system. The process of family learning is influenced by the behaviours individuals use in forming and refining their relationships. Healthy family's development requires the use of proactive and reflective skills that enable family members to achieve at a sense of importance within the group. Research indicates that chil-

dren and adults who are a part of healthy families perform better in their respective roles and appear to have more positive life views than people from dysfunctional family environments (Stinnett 1980; Swick 1993). On the other hand, disturbed and unstable families tend to exhibit such type of actions which lack planning among various relationships, reflect inadequate or non-existent communication, and even appear to lack social meaning. In some cases these actions are very much symbolic of major family problems and thus, the family functioning is impeded.

For progressive and growing family it is important for the emergence of productive human relationships that is positive, strong and meaningful in nature. In order to have enriching and constructive human relationship within families, a "*family learning system*" that is viable needs to be understood. The family's learning system uses the continuing "*feedback*" provided through family interaction to construct meaningful responses to events and experiences generated in family living (Klein 1985). It is through the uses of the "feedback process" that families can learn how to create healthy relationships among its members.

Every meaningful human endeavor is based on the effective use of feedback. Society's effective functioning depends on families which a learning system that includes a "process" by which feedback is integrated into their relationship system. Most people need help in dealing with feedback; family learning is indeed a growth process where everyone needs to be sensitive to the needs of others. Stinnett (1981) makes three observations regarding family learning they are: families use many different ways to learn, they all use feedback from the environment as a continuing way of adapting to life, and they are spiritually committed to each other. While healthy families may differ in their approach, they are all skilled in using the environment as a source of learning. There are several ways that families use feedback to strengthen their individual and group identity. Yet the common element in healthy families is their allegiance to a progressive, belief system. These families take a positive approach to life such as – sharing, using constructive problem solving, being sensitive to each other's needs, and viewing life optimistically and yet realistically too (Swick 1993).



The family's learning system is established within the dynamics of the relationship process. Healthy families develop open and get predictable patterns of relationships that nurture their individual development as well as their group identity. Parent-child attachment and family bonding are critical starters in the family's development of a learning system. While it is natural for family members to attempt to influence each other, strong families do so in a manner that is consistent with the individual and group needs. Schaefer (1983) noted that parents who had the most positive influence on children were those who guided their children's activities, rather than rigidly structuring it. In families where proper guidance exists, people tend to offer each other suggestion, listen to different viewpoints, and help others accommodate the changes and challenges that naturally occur with growth and development. Internal family feedback patterns can be clustered around parent-parent, parent-child, parent-other, and child-other relationships. These dyads are connected and stimulate the formation of triadic patterns as well as prompting many indirect influences on the behavior of family members.

Parents establish a role model for the family's learning style through their relationship patterns; particularly with regard to how they use and accept each other's feedback. Parent-parent feedback patterns are based on several influences: their beliefs about each other, individual self-esteem, style of communication, problem solving skills, and related socio-emotional and effective elements of their relationship (Curran 1985). Parental relationships that are characterized by intimacy, trust, shared responsibilities, effective problem solving, flexibility of roles, strong and enduring emotional bonds, and a teaming philosophy have a powerful influence on the development of healthy family living (Cowan and Cowan 1992). The communication process, as carried out in the parent-parent relationship, sets the framework for the family's feedback arrangement. Skills that comprise this relationship-building process include: listening, responding, anticipating, assessing, and planning.

Parent-child relationship patterns also influence the family learning process. This feedback patterns begins with parental expectations about the nature of their expected child.

A proactive family learning process that is supported by mutual trust can emerge from such positive beginnings (Erikson 1982). In parent-child relationship where distrust prevails, learning patterns are distorted and often lead to socio-emotional problems. The parent who never develops consistent, clear and positive relationships with the child is sure to have difficulty relating to the child's behavior. Viable parent-child feedback arrangements are based on a context where mutually supportive interactions have been established. When parents and children communicate with each other regularly in responsive ways, they perceive feedback as a valuable part of their growth and development.

In families where other relatives like grandparents, uncles, aunts are present, additional feedback sources exist. Depending upon the situation, extended family may also strengthen or impede the family's development. Grandparents may take on many roles, such as - being a source of wisdom for parents, sharing household roles bringing real family history to the entire family members and many other dimensions. Regardless of family style, several elements influence the family's learning system: physical and socio-emotional factors; the role arrangements that prevail in the family (and how the family sees these arrangements); the developmental status of the family; and the human relationship skills family members use in their many interactions (Schwartzman 1985). As the family develops, its learning approach must be able to adapt to change; allowing for each member to differentiate within the relationship system. Parents' guidance, their flexibility, and responsiveness to the changing needs of the family establish a pattern that heavily influences the children.

Strong families use their skills and resources to develop a system for handling the equilibrium-disequilibrium process. They take feedback from all sources and attempt to integrate these responses into their family growth. No individual or family is able to reach an ideal level or synchrony. The process is dynamic and change is constant with families; both developmentally and ecologically. Yet, strong families reach for a proactive and sustaining relationship with each other and their environment, whereas weak families lack sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

No family is strong in every respect or free from certain weaknesses or lacunas. It is also not realistic to expect that all family members will be equally committed to better family living. Thus, every family possesses strengths and resources along with weaknesses and limitations. With increasing family diversity and problems in India, no single model or approach of keeping the family health (both physical as well as psychological) can for sure be proposed. However, the above discussion on empowering “at-risk” families through effective parenting and family learning process seems to be in the positive directions to achieve quality growth of the families in India. *Family strengths are “made” not “born”*. Learning new skills, adapting positive attitudes, accepting situations as and when it occurs, and trying again and again for the better make a difference in the lives of the individuals, families and communities. In general, families can be empowered or strengthened to face the present day challenges and move ahead successfully with the following practical considerations:

- Identifying family strengths and utilizing its resources.
- Adapting positive and family oriented goals.
- Inculcating family values and religious faith.
- Understanding family crisis situation and making sense of it.
- Parent education and family support.
- Applying humor in communication on and family activities.
- Developing social competencies among family members.
- Creating effective coping within individual family members.
- Developing creativity among family members.
- Dreaming for the well being of the entire family.

Families are so busy, engaged and active today that they hardly have time to think of the general well-being of the entire family. Maximum of their family time is being spent on all other activities, except what is required in strengthening families to face the adversities. In case of any problems or adversities, the

families are neither prepared nor equipped to face it. This marks the disintegration of the families, without developing the coping mechanism to sustain the adversities. There can be few simple activities through which families can be strengthened to cope with any kinds of adversities in their day-to-day life. They are as follows:

- Meetings – quality time together among family members.
- Vacations – going out.
- Organizing religious functions and celebrations.
- Family photo album.
- Open, constant and consistent communication.
- Spiritual activities and services.
- Supporting and encouraging talents within family (especially women and girl children).
- Accepting and adjusting with wrong doings and behavior of the family members positively.
- Inviting feedback from every family member.
- Proper space usages – physical, psychological and social.
- Respecting each individual’s rights and providing guidance for taking responsibilities as well.

Thus, it is not the family form; rather the family process that matters most is the healthy functioning and empowering of families to face the future challenges. Families of today need to be given more attention towards equipping its members (including children, adolescents and women) both physically and psychologically to face any kind of eventualities. It is from the family that the members learn to develop the attitude to fight against day-to-day difficulties both inside and out side the family and get stronger. Families are empowered not only by dwelling on what is wrong with them, but on what is strong already and can be built upon. Our nation is of sharp contrasts and unlimited diversity, and no two families are alike. Hence, developing parenting skills and understanding the family learning processes to strengthen families in respective family context is important, rather than taking as capsule solution for all families. Thus, Winter (2000) rightly said that “families are typically thought of as the wellspring of social capital”.

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