

Hawai‘i’s Strong Families

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HAWAI‘I FAMILY TOUCHSTONES

The Center on the Family developed Hawai‘i Family Touchstones to monitor the well-being of families in our state. Relevant and measurable indicators are tracked over time to provide an overview of Hawai‘i’s families at a given point and in relation to the past.

The data for Family Touchstones are gathered from a variety of public and private sources. In addition, the Center on the Family conducts periodic surveys on a representative sample of Hawai‘i’s families to collect data unavailable from other sources. In 2002, the sample consisted of 1,051 families. These data often focus on the quality of family interactions and relationships.

The inaugural Hawai‘i Family Touchstones report, published in 1999, presented baseline indicator data. These data are regularly updated and reported on the Center on the Family’s Web-based Data Center on Children and Families (www.uhfamily.hawaii.edu), which the reader is encouraged to visit for a presentation of all project indicators and trend data.

America’s families are more diverse today than they were in the past. Today’s families come in many different forms and sizes. There are more single-parent families, blended and step families, interracial families, and multigenerational families—each with their own strengths, weaknesses, and challenges. Despite the changes in form and composition, the family remains the foundation upon which we nurture children (teaching them values, skills, and behaviors), foster the well-being of individuals, and build strong communities.

Hawai‘i’s families are unique in several ways. Our families are slightly larger than the national average, we have a greater percentage of multigenerational households, and we have a larger proportion of interethnic marriages.¹ Consequently, more of our families have multiethnic members who live with a blend of cultures in their daily lives. Hawai‘i’s families value the *‘ohana* and their community, as evidenced by the great majority of parents who rate *having a strong and happy family life* and *contributing to society* as important goals for their children.² Although many families struggle economically, they still express great optimism, believing that the quality of their lives will continue to improve with time.³

Many of the families in our State face greater challenges than others, placing them at risk for poor outcomes. For example, since 1990 there have been increases in the:

- percentage of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment
- percentage of families with children headed by a single parent
- number of families in poverty.⁴

While some families clearly face greater adversity than others, *all* families face challenges, problems, crisis, and suffering. What helps some families move through the everyday challenges, as well as the larger life transitions, with greater ease than



others? Why do some families fall apart when faced with crisis, while others grow from such experiences? What are the qualities of strong families? And how do families acquire these strengths? For several decades now, family researchers have worked to answer these questions. Their studies have ranged from identifying the qualities of healthy and strong families to identifying factors that help families from various backgrounds and risk groups face and recover from adversity and crisis.⁵ In the next section, we focus on the broader end of this research continuum, that is, the qualities found in strong families from all walks of life.

Qualities of Strong Families

Strong, healthy families are found in all cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. These families offer positive support, teach their members problem-solving skills, and provide a sense of unity which, in turn, develops resilience to stress and crisis. A well-developed body of research has identified six characteristics that strong families across the world have in common.⁶ These qualities are:

- *Commitment.* Members of strong families promote each other's well-being and happiness and value family unity. They are loyal to each other and, when faced with adversity and crisis, rally to work together. Strong families express commitment in many ways, such as by

rearranging schedules to spend time with family, keeping promises and being dependable, setting goals together, and building family memories.

- *Appreciation.* Members of strong families show appreciation for one another. They express love, whether verbally or through physical affection, and accentuate the positive in each member.
- *Communication.* Communication is the key tool through which families create a shared perception of their experiences, develop coping strategies, and maintain harmony. Members of strong families develop their communication skills and make time to talk to each other, whether about everyday matters or special problems. They share disappointments and difficulties as well as triumphs. When problem-solving or tackling issues, they give all family members a chance to speak, listen attentively, try to understand each other, and avoid criticism and put-downs.
- *Time together.* Strong families spend quality time together. They cultivate practices such as having meals together, hanging out doing fun things together, and spending holidays and special occasions together. Making time for each other and creating routines centered on the family provide opportunities for learning and communi-

cation, strengthen family ties, and promote a sense of stability and harmony.

- *Shared values and beliefs.* Strong families have a sense of a greater good or power in life, a *spirituality* or set of values and beliefs that gives strength, perspective, purpose, and guidelines for living. Family members express their shared values and beliefs by practicing religious and cultural rituals, extending themselves to others, and volunteering and caring for their community.
- *Coping with stress.* Members of strong families are better able to confront stress and crisis, often viewing such experiences as opportunities to grow together and become stronger. They pull together, communicate and problem-solve, call on necessary resources and the help of others, plan for the future, and work to maintain their mental and physical health even when times are tough.

Hawai'i Family Touchstones utilized the framework and qualities of strong families to assess the status of Hawai'i's families. It is important to remember that the qualities and measures of strong families discussed here represent a specific framework and only a portion of the family-strengths construct. These measures, however, are general and are often represented in various models within the research on family strengths and resiliency.⁷

A representative sample of 1,051 families throughout our

state was surveyed by Market Trends Pacific, Inc. for the Center on the Family. Some of the survey items replicated questions from the first Touchstones survey in 1999 to allow us to monitor changes over time (see Hawai'i Family Touchstones summary). We also added a new set of survey items that related to the six qualities of strong families, namely:

- **Commitment:** *Our family makes time for each other and tries to do things as a family.* (Responses ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree.)
- **Appreciation:** *Our family shows appreciation by doing helpful things for one another.* (Responses ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree.)
- **Communication:** *Members of my family talk and listen to each other and allow each person to express themselves without criticizing or putting each other down.* (Responses ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree.)
- **Time together:** *How many nights a week out of seven does your family eat dinner together?* (Responses ranged from 0 to 7.)
- **Shared values and beliefs:** *In the last year or so, have you done any volunteer work for any church, charity, or community group?* (Responses were yes or no.)
- **Coping with stress:** *In our family, while we don't always agree, we can count on each other to stand by us*

in time of need. (Responses ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree.)

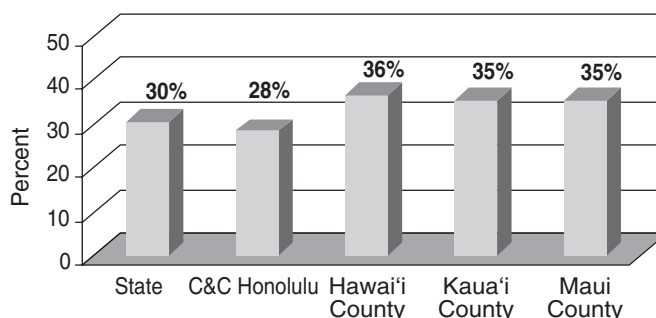
We analyzed the results from our survey to ascertain how many of Hawai'i's families emulated the qualities of strong families. The responses that qualified were those indicating "yes" (instead of no), "agree" or "strongly agree" (rather than neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree), and "five" or more times a week (instead of responses from 0-4) to the questions above. We recognized that the data were from self reports that may or may not correspond to actual behaviors, that scoring highly on the index did not guarantee that a family was strong or vice versa, and that most families do not practice *all*

of the habits of strong families *all* of the time. Despite these caveats, we believe it is helpful for people to know about the practices that contribute to family strengthening and to know how we are doing collectively on these measures. The results from our survey of Hawai'i's families are presented below.

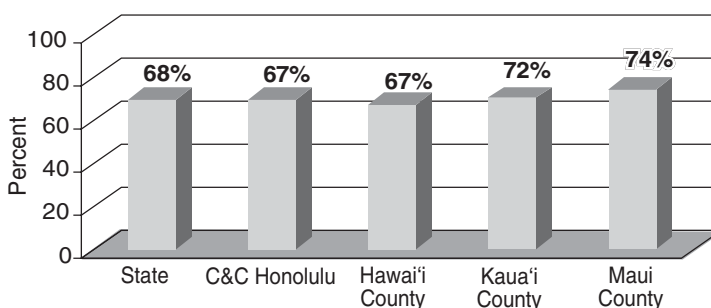
Nearly a third of the families surveyed indicated that they practice the six behaviors of strong families, while slightly more than two-thirds of the families reported practicing five of the six behaviors. As the charts indicate, neighbor island families tend to score higher than their Honolulu counterparts on the scale of strong families.

Because this is the first

Percentage of Families Practicing the 6 Behaviors Associated with Strong Families*



Percentage of Families Practicing 5 of 6 Behaviors Associated with Strong Families*

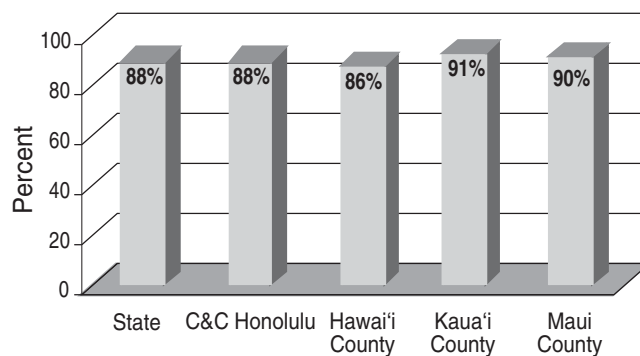


Hawai'i Family Touchstones Survey, Market Trends Pacific, Inc.

*Percentage of families responding "yes" (instead of no), "agree" or "strongly agree" (rather than neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree), and "five" or more times a week to the survey items.

initiative to assess the status of families through direct reports from families themselves using a statewide sample, there are no comparative state or national data available. However, the Center on the Family will be conducting periodic surveys in the future on Hawai'i's families and will be comparing those results with the baseline data reported in this document.

Percentage of Families Prioritizing Time Together*



Hawai'i Family Touchstones Survey, Market Trends Pacific, Inc.

*Percentage of families responding "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement: *Our family makes time for each other and tries to do things as a family.*

Indicators of Strong Families

A discussion of each of the indicators that was used in our survey questions to measure family strength, as well as related findings, are presented in this section.

Commitment: Families prioritizing time together.

Practicing commitment to one's family is perhaps the foundation upon which the other behaviors of strong families are built. One of the ways in which families nurture a sense of commitment is by prioritizing family time. Families that make time to be together promote health, learning, and a sense of identity in family members. Engaging in enjoyable activities together, for example, reduces stress and supports emotional and physical well-being. Shared leisure time also provides opportunities to learn and develop cultural, artistic, or athletic skills, depending on the activities the family prefers, and can produce better outcomes for children. Research indicates that children whose families commit to providing learning opportunities

and activities are academically motivated and exhibit fewer delinquent behaviors and emotional problems.⁸ Families that share leisure activities further nurture their members, foster communication, and reinforce family ties.

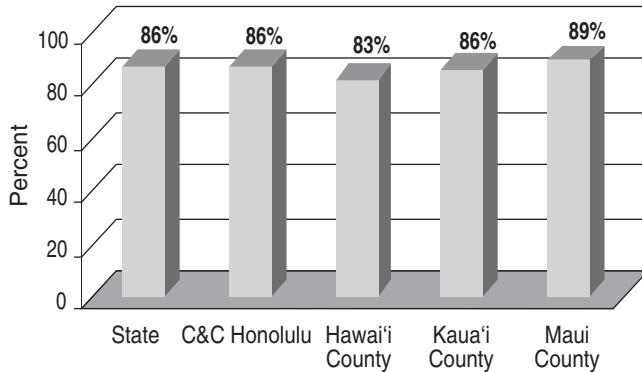
Eighty-eight percent (88%) of families surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that their family prioritizes time together and tries to do things as a family. County results were similar, with a slightly higher proportion of families from Kauai and Maui indicating they prioritize time together. Families were asked a related question regarding spending time together. When asked *How often does your family do fun things together, like recreational activities, sports, go to the movies, or go to cultural events?*, 76% of families indicated they do so at least weekly.⁹ Though a different measure, nearly half of the adolescents interviewed in a national survey reported doing fun things with their family at

least three times per week.¹⁰

Appreciation: Families helping one another.

Giving and receiving appreciation help family members grow and develop confidence. When we are appreciated by others, our self-esteem is enhanced. Expressing appreciation helps to build positive relationships among family members, which is important to the well-being of all members and is particularly important to the development of children. In a national survey, roughly three-quarters of adolescents interviewed reported having parents who regularly praise them for doing well and more than half reported that they turn to their parents for help, rather than friends or others, when they have problems.¹¹ This is good news because research shows that youth who have positive and strong relationships with parents and siblings tend to develop good social skills such as conflict resolution and intimacy, develop positive mental and emotional health, and avoid delinquent behavior.¹²

Percentage of Families Helping Their Members*



Hawai'i Family Touchstones Survey, Market Trends Pacific, Inc.

*Percentage of families responding “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement: *Our family shows appreciation by doing helpful things for one another.*

One of the ways family members show appreciation is by doing helpful things for one another. Of families surveyed, 86% agreed or strongly agreed that they show appreciation by doing helpful things for each other. Neighbor island responses were very similar to the state average. Though not a direct comparison, in a national survey, 79% of adolescents reported that their mother usually or always helps with what is important to them and 67% reported that their

father helps regularly.¹³

Communication: Families practicing positive communication skills.

Good communication skills are often at the core of healthy families. While even the strongest of families argue, healthy families tend to attack the problem at hand and not each other, to deal with one issue at a time and as problems arise, and to remain open to understanding each other’s viewpoint.¹⁴

Families with communication

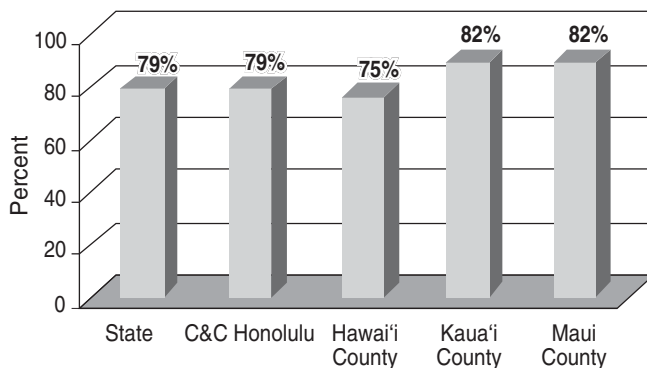
patterns that convey support and caring often find solutions to meet everyday challenges and prevent or recover from adversity, building their resiliency along the way.¹⁵ By listening carefully and not criticizing each other, family members express respect, increase their understanding of each other, and strengthen their relationships.

Over three-quarters of families surveyed indicated that they practice positive communication skills by talking and listening to each other and allowing for expression without criticism. County results were similar on this measure, with only a slightly higher proportion of Kauai and Maui families reporting practicing such communication skills.

Time together: Families eating together regularly.

Eating together on a regular basis provides time for family communication, as well as opportunities to spend quality time together. While around the dinner table, family members can talk about their day at the office, school, or home; discuss concerns or develop strategies to tackle issues they are facing; coordinate plans for upcoming events; or share and celebrate good news. By listening and contributing to family discussions, young children also gain and practice new language and communication skills. Regular family meal times also provide a sense of routine that is particularly comforting to children. Maintaining such family routines is associated with positive outcomes for children and youth, such as high school achievement and reduced risk for substance use and delinquent

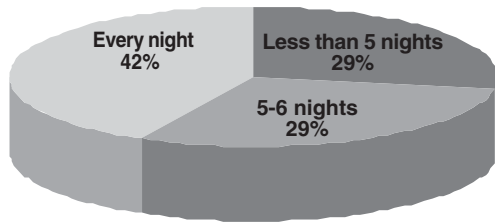
Percentage of Families Practicing Positive Communication Skills*



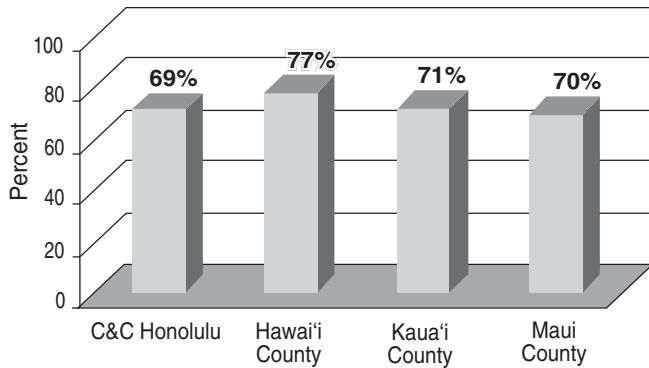
Hawai'i Family Touchstones Survey, Market Trends Pacific, Inc.

*Percentage of families responding “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement: *Members of my family talk and listen to each other and allow each person to express themselves without criticizing or putting each other down.*

Percentage of Families Eating Together Regularly - State Data



Percentage of Families Eating Together Regularly*- County Data



Hawai'i Family Touchstones Survey, Market Trends Pacific, Inc.

*Percentage of families responding "five" "six" or "seven nights per week" to the question: *How many nights a week out of seven does your family eat dinner together?*

behavior.¹⁶

When asked how many nights per week they ate together, 42% of the families surveyed indicated that they eat together every night, while another 29% said that they eat together five to six nights per week. County results were quite similar, with Hawai'i county having the highest percentage (77%) of families that reported eating together regularly (every day or most nights), and Honolulu having the lowest (69%). State results were similar to the 1999 Hawai'i Family Touchstones survey, when 74% of families indicated having meals together regularly (48% every night and 26% five to six nights per week).¹⁷ In a national survey, adults were asked *How often do you and the family you have living at home eat dinner together—a few times*

a year, a few times a month, about once a week, several times a week, or almost every night? Fifty percent (50%) of those surveyed indicated eating dinner with family members almost every night.¹⁸ A national survey of youth, however, found a higher

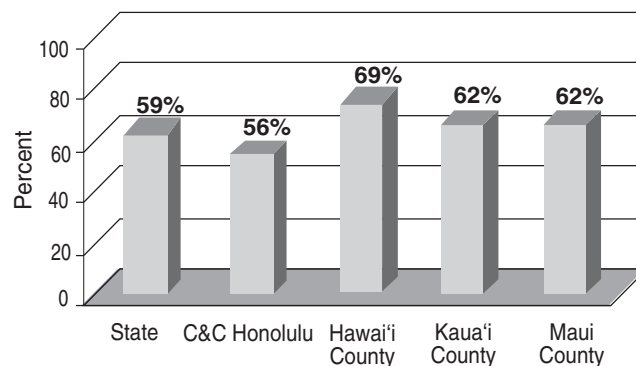
percentage of adolescents (72%) reporting that they eat dinner with their families at least five days a week.¹⁹

Shared values and beliefs: Families engaging in civic activities.

Volunteering is quite common among families with school-aged children.²⁰ When adult family members volunteer time for church, charity, or community groups, they communicate to children the importance of civic duty and of contributing to the well-being of the community. The act of volunteering extends family members outside of their system and expresses social responsibility. Including all family members in volunteer activities provides additional opportunities for shared quality time and family bonding, and fosters shared values and beliefs.

Fifty-nine percent (59%) of adults surveyed indicated they volunteer time for church, charity, or community groups. Volunteerism has not changed since 1999 when the same percentage of adults surveyed indicated that they volunteer their time for such activities.²¹

Percentage of Adults Who Volunteer*



Hawai'i Family Touchstones Survey, Market Trends Pacific, Inc.

*Percentage of adults responding "yes" to the question: *In the last year or so, have you done any volunteer work for any church, charity or community group?*

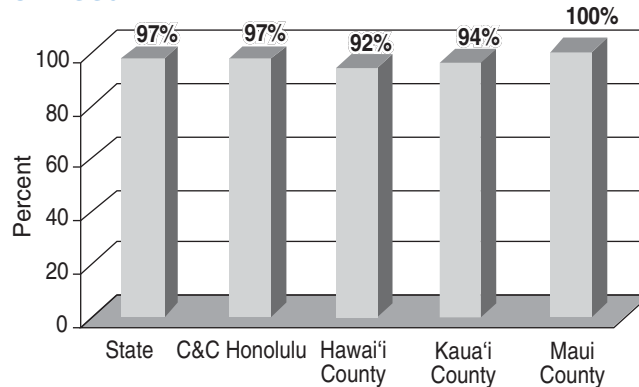
Volunteerism on the neighbor islands seems to be slightly higher, with 69% of adults on the Big Island, and 62% on Maui, and Kaua'i saying they volunteer time to church, charity, or community groups. Volunteerism in Hawai'i seems higher than in the rest of the country. According to a national survey, 44% of adults volunteered with a formal organization in the year 2000.²² A local study completed by the Hawai'i Community Foundation supports the notion that volunteerism is higher in Hawai'i. In that study, a higher proportion of people in Hawai'i than nationwide indicated that they volunteered for neighborhood/civic (26% vs. 21%), religious (33% vs. 28%), and youth/school causes (44% vs. 33%) or had worked on a community project in the past year (41% vs. 38%).²³

Coping with stress: Families "sticking together."

Coping well often calls on family members to unite in the face of a challenge or crisis. Families that pull together and rally their group strength tend to maintain a sense of integrity and purpose, to reframe and redefine hardships encountered as "challenges" rather than insurmountable problems, and to gain a sense of control and influence over their outcomes.²⁴ While immediate family members can provide much of the help needed to get through a crisis, families do not have to do it alone. Extended family networks can also pull together as part of the team and serve as a resource during crisis.

Of families surveyed, 97% indicated they cope with stress by pulling together in time of need.

Percentage of Families "Sticking Together" in Time of Need*



Hawai'i Family Touchstones Survey, Market Trends Pacific, Inc.

*Percentage of families responding "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement: *In our family, while we don't always agree, we can count on each other to stand by us in time of need.*

Neighbor island results were somewhat similar. This finding is not too surprising given the value that local families place on the 'ohana.²⁵ In Hawai'i, the concept of 'ohana often includes extended family, which can also serve as a resource in time of need. Research indicates that families that are not isolated from others and can, for example, depend on extended relatives in time of need often do better during crisis and generally manage stress better.²⁶ We therefore also asked families

a related question about how often their children see or talk to grandparents and aunts/uncles on a weekly basis, as a measure of how much contact families have with extended relatives. Of those surveyed, 80% indicated that their children are in contact with grandparents at least weekly, and 73% are in contact with aunts and uncles regularly.²⁷ Although not a direct comparison, a recent national study found that 44% of grandparents see their grandchildren at least weekly.²⁸



Summary and Conclusion

Research indicates that many American families are doing quite well on measures of family strength, such as maintaining meal times and other household routines, spending time together, practicing positive communication, and expressing appreciation.²⁹ It is not surprising to similarly find the presence of family strengths in so many of Hawai‘i’s families given the value that our families place on

the *‘ohana*. Over three-quarters of the more than 1,000 families surveyed are spending quality time together, regularly eating meals together, and practicing good communication skills – behaviors indicated by research to be associated with strong families. When we combine these practices into an index, we see that well over two-thirds of the families in our state are practicing five of the six behaviors representative of the family strengths model used in this report.

The qualities of strong families do not exist in isolation but, instead, can interact to cultivate strong, resilient families.³⁰ For example, families that are committed to each other make time to be together. Spending time together allows for opportunities for communication, which can reinforce skills in that area. Healthy communication is a key to coping with stress and crisis, and families who have developed those skills stand on better ground when facing hardship. Successfully coping with stress and crisis can then

“Strong Families” Checklist

Does your family practice the behaviors of strong families?

Circle the number that best describes your family’s practice:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Our family makes time for each other and tries to do things as a family.	5	4	3	2	1
Our family shows appreciation by doing helpful things for one another.	5	4	3	2	1
Members of my family talk and listen to each other and allow each person to express themselves without criticizing or putting each other down.	5	4	3	2	1
In our family, while we don’t always agree, we can count on each other to stand by us in time of need.	5	4	3	2	1

How many nights a week out of seven does your family eat dinner together? _____

In the past year or so, have you done any volunteer work for any church, charity, or community group?

Yes

No

Compare your family to other families in Hawai‘i as described in this report.

serve to reinforce shared values and beliefs, which in turn promote commitment and allow for appreciation of family members to be expressed.

With an understanding of how the presence of these qualities and behaviors interact to strengthen overall family functioning, we can then begin to see how families can be *made* to be strong. Fostering one or several of these qualities can help develop others.³¹ Successful families have not always been successful, nor do they sail through life without challenges. It is through on-going effort and cooperation that families grow strong. As a society, we can enhance the potential of this foundational unit by supporting actions and policies that promote the qualities of strong families. Examples include supporting family-friendly employment policies (such as family leave for child birth, adoption, care of elderly parents, and time off for parents to attend school-related activities), greater childcare options, prevention programs (such as family strengthening and substance abuse prevention programs), economic policies that support full employment, assistance to families with disabled members, and assistance to low income families, to name a few. Investing in efforts that help families become stronger is an investment in our present and our future.

Endnotes

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