Goal: To describe characteristics of strong families to grandparents who are raising grandchildren to help them establish a healthy family.

Different families value different things. For example, one family may value having dinner together. Another family may not think this time together is important.

However, several values are common in strong families. One of these values is commitment. Families who invest time and energy into creating and sustaining healthy relationships show commitment. They support each other and believe that family comes first.

They also know they can depend on and trust each other. Other beliefs and values common in strong families include the following:

- loyalty;
- honesty;
- time together;
- family traditions;
- respect for others;
- a positive outlook;
- spirituality/religion;
- following through on promises; and
- sticking together during rough times.

If you could add to this list of values, what would you add? Write them down and think about ways you can teach these values to your grandchildren. Don't expect your...
grandchildren to automatically know what you value and believe; they must be taught in a loving and caring way. Simply punishing a grandchild for violating a rule that reflects your values (such as not being home for dinner) does not teach them your values. Talk with your grandchildren, and let them know that you value them and want them to be a part of your family.

**Healthy Limits**

Rules are a reflection of your values and beliefs and play an important role in building and maintaining strong families. As a grandparent, you are the authority figure. Part of your role is to set clear, appropriate limits for your grandchildren.

Explicit and clear rules can help you better manage your grandchildren's behavior. Without clear rules, your grandchildren may overstep the limits you want to establish. With clear rules, each grandchild knows what is expected, and therefore feels secure. When your grandchildren feel secure, they are able to explore and take risks necessary to grow physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally.

Healthy rules need to be established for sharing feelings, setting expectations, and giving choices to your grandchildren.

**Sharing Feelings**

Why should there be a “rule” about sharing feelings? First of all, children need to learn how to manage their emotions, and you are their best teacher. However, it is inappropriate to treat them as your best friend by telling them adult details. For example, you might be angry with your spouse or the child's parent. If your grandchild asks you what is wrong, you could share that you had a disagreement and are upset. Do not give intimate details of your argument. Having such a rule (or boundary) helps to protect your grandchildren from believing they are “responsible” for your feelings.

**Setting Expectations**

Rules should be age appropriate. To set appropriate rules, you must understand each grandchild's stage of development (see the publication in this series, FY1112/PCS2186a *A Crash Course in Child Development* at [http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy1112](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy1112)). If you set a rule beyond their level of understanding, you will set them up for failure. For example, you might expect your grandchild, age 2, to sit quietly without causing disruptions while waiting at the local health center. It's not practical to expect a toddler to sit quietly for any length of time. They are curious by nature and have short attention spans. If you need to take your grandchild with you, bring along toys, activities, and snacks to make the time less frustrating.

**Giving Choices**

Part of healthy development is learning to make your own decisions, and as the adult in charge, you need to know when to let your grandchildren make their own decisions. You also need to know when to set limits for their decisions.

You can start teaching your grandchildren to make decisions early. For example, an age-appropriate choice would be asking your 6-year-old grandchild if he would like spaghetti or a sandwich for lunch. Another age-appropriate decision is letting your 13-year-old choose which school activities to be involved in. However, you will need to make some decisions. These decisions may include an acceptable bedtime, appropriate television programs, Internet and smart phone use, acceptable video games, or curfew times.

**Ability to Adapt to Change**

Change is bound to happen, and families need to be flexible and learn to adapt to new situations. The ability to adapt to change has to do with your attitude and how willing you are to accept change. For example, you may get a call from your grandchild's teacher saying that she or he is failing math. The solution may involve spending more time assisting with homework and arranging time for a math tutor. Remaining flexible and accepting the new routine will help your grandchild succeed and will also keep the relationships between family members close and supportive.

**Good Communication**

Communication involves the exchange of words, ideas, and feelings between two people. It is what we say (verbal) and how we say it (nonverbal). Healthy families strive for good communication. Yet, good communication can be difficult when each family member has a different idea of how to communicate well. For example, grandparents who constantly talk “at” their grandchildren by giving commands (e.g., “Clean your room”) and lecturing (e.g., “Don’t talk with your mouth full”) may believe this is good communication. However, it is best for grandparents to talk “with” their grandchildren. Talking with grandchildren means speaking to them and listening to what they have to say.

Families can learn specific skills to improve their communication, such as the following:
talking with and listening to each other;
• speaking directly without blaming;
• speaking one at a time;
• having empathy for one another;
• sharing feelings;
• using humor; and
• solving problems as a family.

Many changes will occur in your life as you take on your new parenting role. Having commitment, setting healthy limits, adapting to situations, and communicating are what distinguish healthy families from unhealthy families. In the next publication, Building Strong Families (http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy437), you will learn more about how to develop the skills to become a strong family.

References

