

Bridging the Miles: Long Distance Families

Janet Fox
Leslie Crandall

Abstract

Today's families are on a fast track. One of the realities of our mobile society is that entire families from grandparents to brothers and sisters --- sometimes even husbands and wives --- don't live in close proximity to each other. While living apart can cause family stress, families can strengthen ties across the miles with just a little extra effort and thoughtful planning.

Program rationale

In the past two decades, emerging socioeconomic changes have shaped family dynamics. More mothers are in the full-time workforce than in previous decades, making up nearly 50 percent of the workforce (Kiger and Riley 2000). Men and women have made work a part of their self definition, striving to obtain status, be independent, experience success, and maintain a higher living standard (Lingren 1998). The business environment has been globalized with technology emerging into joint enterprise ventures, expanded international markets, and increased competition (Davis and Botkin 1994). In an effort to stay competitive, full-time workweeks in the United States are getting longer. U.S. workers now have the distinction of working longer hours than any other workers in any other industrialized nation (International Labour Organization September 1999).

In this highly competitive climate, family members leave where they grew up never to return as they strive to become better educated, get a higher paying job, or position themselves in the labor market (Cuozzo and Graham 1990). In addition to career advancement and educational attainment, other situations such as vocational changes, military assignments, and job-related travel often require families to remain at a distance. This has created a situation where families -- - parents, siblings and even spouses --- live apart from each other.

Being separated by distance can create major obstacles to building strong, resilient families because of the limitations on the time the family spends together. Family members must understand and accept the reason behind the time shortage. Research has shown that building nourishing relationships can be more difficult to accomplish when families live apart. Intimate relationships between husband and wife can be challenged, and couples need to have strong individual identities, accept their partner's absence, and devote time to building intimacy upon reunion (Zvonkovic 2000).

Despite the geographic spread, families are making efforts to stay connected. A recent Gallup poll indicated that most people enjoy being with extended family members and desire to spend more time with them. Married couples indicate they spend more time with the wife=s family than the husband=s. Parents feel more connected to their adult children, despite long distances between them. About 50 percent of grandparents phone their grandchildren at least once a week. Women serve as catalysts to connect extended family members. When examining connections among family members, the mother-daughter bond is often the closest. Female-to-female bonding within the extended family is much more likely to happen than male-to-male bonding (Jenson 1995).

Two models serve as a foundation for the Bridging the Miles: Long Distance Families Program.

The Family Strengths Model, developed by DeFrain, Stinnett, and colleagues, has six general qualities: appreciation and affection, commitment, positive communication, enjoyable time together, spiritual well-being, and successful management of stress and crisis. Members in strong families care deeply about one another and express their feelings. Members of strong families exhibit a strong commitment to one another, investing both time and energy into family activities and priorities. Families that exhibit compatibility genuinely enjoy the time they spend together. Communication is central to strong families as they stay connected by talking with and listening to one another. Strong families possess the ability to creatively and effectively deal with stress and crisis (DeFrain 1999).

The Family Circumplex Model developed by Olson and colleagues (1989) provides a conceptual framework of healthy families which includes three dimensions.

- Cohesion --- a sense of closeness.
- Flexibility --- the ability to adapt to the changing circumstances within a family.
- Communication --- a facilitating dimension which helps families form close bonds and address challenges.

Program description

While living apart can provide challenges, families can strengthen ties across the miles with just a little effort and thoughtful planning. The Bridging the Miles Program provides participants with strategies to assist families in strengthening family ties across long distance with support to create a plan to increase family connections. Part of a series of lessons designed for Extension Family and Community Education clubs, the Bridging the Miles: Long Distance Families Program includes a leader=s guide, four-page member guide, and evaluation. The leader guide includes goals of the lesson, objectives, leader resources, a before-meeting guide, and a lesson plan.

The lesson begins with roll call ideas that introduce and reinforce the lesson objectives by asking participants one of the following questions.

- AWhat ways have you found to communicate successfully with family members that are long distance?@
- AWhat new idea do you have to keep in touch with long distance family members?@
- AWhat is a favorite tradition in your family?@

Following an introduction, the participants discuss real life scenarios faced by families trying to stay in touch at a distance.

After discussing the challenges facing long distance families highlighted in the scenarios, family research information is shared to provide a research base for the program. Members are divided into four groups to discuss the four C's: Commitment, Compatibility, Communication, and Connectedness. With suggested family activities provided, each group shares their ideas to promote one of the four C's. Participants evaluate their personal family ties through a questionnaire provided in the lesson. Using the personal family ties evaluation, participants create a plan to strengthen family ties.

Impacts

At the conclusion of the Bridging the Miles program, participants completed and returned a mixed model evaluation instrument designed to measure the lesson=s impact. More than 250 program participants returned the impact evaluation. As a result of the Bridging the Miles program, 95 percent of the participants were more aware of research about family members staying in touch. Ninety-seven percent of the participants were motivated to strengthen family ties through commitment while 91 percent learned at least one idea on how to promote family

commitment. Ninety-four percent of the participants had a greater understanding of family compatibility, and 88 percent of the participants learned a new idea on how to promote family compatibility. Ninety-eight percent of the participants understood the importance of family communication. Ninety-six percent of the respondents were motivated to stay connected to family members who are at a distance. Ninety-three percent have evaluated their current family ties in bridging the distance between family members. Of the participants in the program, 75 percent created a plan for strengthening family ties. Seventy-nine percent of the participants were compelled to take action to bridge the miles between family members.

During the lesson, participants identified plans to strengthen family ties. Examples of action plan steps were to write and phone each family member regularly, plan a summer get together, call more often, give family pictures to grandchildren, keep track of family tree and heritage information, have a conference call between family members during crisis, correspond more often, make photo albums for everyone, have family reunions at halfway points every other year, take my daughter and grandchildren out to eat, keep track of all family members, learn more about using e-mail, remember the words "thank you," send birthday cards to great grandchildren, plan times to spend a few days with each family, work out family problems, show greater interest, send special cards other than just birthday cards, and try a round robin letter.

As a result of the lesson, participants indicated the following changes.

- "Makes me more aware of the importance of good family relationships."
- "Should communicate with those away more often."
- "As my immediate family is all gone, I try to keep a strong bond with my grandchildren and other relatives through family reunions and visiting when possible."
- "My personal pleasure is writing letters -- to receive *answers* from grandchildren in college is a *special joy!* They are so busy. This was a *very* interesting beginning for our year."
- "Put ideas into practice -- good listening skills."
- "Even though our daughter lives in Indiana, she knows we are just a phone call away, and if she ever needs our help, we will come."

Phone interviews were conducted with a random sample of participants who participated in the program 1 to 3 years prior. The participants were asked if they applied the concepts from the lesson in their lives and if so, how. Participants incorporated a variety of actions into their lives

to strengthen ties among family distance family members. One participant remembered the birthdays of her sixteen grandchildren by sending them two five-dollar bills: one five-dollar bill to save and one five-dollar bill to spend. Many of the interviewees indicated that they planned annual family events to bring family members together. Others shared that they kept in touch with family members on a regular basis through phone and e-mail.

Participants provided feedback regarding lesson quality.

- "This is a good lesson at this time because some families are such movers, and it's easy to lose track of family."
- "A Club members participated freely and were really interested in the material."
- "A most interesting lesson! I hope that the ideas will be put to good use this year."
- "We are a global world now, and we have to prepare for it."
- "Great lesson -- will use in the future."
- "Interesting!@ A Excellent lesson leader and input from members."
- "Great program, and it was well presented."
- "This was a very friendly, open program. We all shared and benefited from it."
- "This was a very interesting study lesson."
- "Very intense lesson and given well."
- "Very informative lesson."
- "Had a lot of good discussion as most of our families live away."
- "It is wonderful to have encouragement to *keep family ties strong!*@

Conclusion

American families have always shown remarkable resiliency in adjusting to economic and social opportunities and challenges. One of the realities in our dynamically mobile society is that families are living at a distance. While living apart can create stress and disconnections among

family members, many strategies are available to strengthen the bonds that tie families together. Families can bridge the distance between them through keeping regular, meaningful communication, making a commitment to each other, focusing on areas of compatibility, and connecting through a variety of creative strategies.

To order the free Bridging the Miles: Long Distance Families Program materials, contact Janet E. Fox, 210 Mussehl Hall, Lincoln, NE 68583-0714; e-mail, jfox1@unl.edu, phone, 1-402-472-9582; fax, 1-402-472-3858.

References

Cuozzo, J., and S. Graham. 1990. *Side by side strategies: How two-career couples can thrive in the nineties*. New York, NY: Master Media Limited.

Davis, S., and J. Botkin. 1994. *The monster under the bed*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

DeFrain, J. 1999. Strong families around the world. *Australian institute of family studies: Family Matters*. 53, 6-13.

International Labour Organization. September 1999. On-line: <http://www.ilo.org>

Jenson, G.O. 1995. *How modern families stay in touch with each other*. Penn State, PA: PENpages, College of Agricultural Sciences.

Kiger, G., and P. Riley. *Helping dual-earner couples balance work and family responsibilities*. CYFERnet. Logan, UT: Utah State University. On-line: http://www.cyfernet.org/parent/workandfamily/utah_findings.html.

Lingren, H.G. 1998. *Work and family: Today's juggling act* (NebGuide G92-1078-A). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Olson, D. H., C. S. Russell, and D. H. Sprenkle. 1989. *Circumplex model: Systematic assessment of treatment of families*. New York, NY: Haworth Press.

Zvonkovic, A. 2000. *Patterns of involvement in work and family life among commercial fisherman and long-haul truckers*. CyferNET. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University. On-line: http://www.cyfernet.org/parent/workandfamily/oregon_findings.html

Authors

Janet Fox. Ph.D., Associate Professor, Extension 4-H Youth Development Specialist, University of Nebraska.

Leslie Crandall, Extension Educator, Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service, Phelps-Gosper Counties.

Cite this article:

Fox, Janet and Leslie Crandall. 2002. Bridging the miles: long distance families. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 7(2).

