

what's *right* with the family?

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we love strong things!!!

N America is preoccupied with strength . . .

Economy and business

Politics

Environment

Military

Sports/Entertainment

Except when it comes to family!

Agents of *social capital* - especially family - are regularly being characterized by an identity of risk, crisis, dysfunction, threat, and even obsolescence

Why family no longer matters

Kids' TV is now about young people in wild situations—with few adults BY JAIME J. WEINMAN

tv A bunch of kids have gathered in a school on a Friday evening; they're not here to learn, but to see the first and only live taping of their favourite Canadian kids' sitcom, *The Latest Buzz*, about a magazine that hires five high school kids to write its articles. "How many kids here have jobs?" asks writer/actor Darrin Rows, who's doing the warm-up. One kid puts up his hand; he works at Pizza Pizza. Another kid proclaims: "I work for the Buzz," the magazine on the Family Channel show. He doesn't really. But he wishes he did. So do a lot of the kids who watch TV these days. This isn't the ancient time—five years ago—when kids' comedy shows were about wholesome nuclear families. Today, a successful youth-oriented sitcom needs to be about a girl who's secretly a rock star (*Hannah Montana*) or kids who have magical powers (*Wizards of Waverly Place*). The modern-day kids' show starts with a premise that, in the words of Family Channel executive Kevin Wright, "is aspirational, meaning that kids would want to be in that situation." Forget family values; today, kid comedy is about wish-fulfillment.

Like most entertainment trends, this one started in the U.S., where producers for the Disney Channel or Nickelodeon have been busy pushing kids' fantasy lives as far as a TV budget will take them. Your kids can see *Hannah Montana*, or *Wizards of Waverly Place*, or *Zoey 101*, starring a pre-pregnancy Jamie Lynn Spears as a student at a luxurious boarding school where everyone lives like a Hollywood superstar. When you come across a traditional kids' comedy—like *Life With Derek*, a one-camera show with no laugh track about growing up in a mixed family—it looks like it came from another generation. Suzanne

ZACK AND CODY (left, in colour) have gone from metropolitan hotel to cruise ship; cast of Canada's *The Latest Buzz* (right)

French, a producer on *Derek* (whose first season, like the first season of *Buzz*, recently came out on DVD), says that on both Family and the Disney channel "it holds its own against the laugh-tracked lineup," but adds that this kind of show is becoming harder to sell: "It feels like the world has gone into a higher-concept mode. I don't know what it would be like pitching the show now."

The Latest Buzz, which premiered last year,



On 'The Latest Buzz' and other shows, it's all about wish-fulfillment

was the first Canadian show in the *Hannah Montana* vein: on videotape rather than film, with a laugh track and broad jokes, and above all, a premise that puts kids into situations that real kids drool over. In the live-audience episode, just about everything is escapism in one way or another except a brief moral message near the end: the kids form a band and sing pop songs, *Hannah Montana*-style, doofus gaming expert Wilder (Munro Chambers) does slapstick comedy while trapped in a magician's box, and the kids never go anywhere near their actual homes or school. Brent Piaskoski, creator and showrunner of

Buzz, says that it features "five teenagers who, after school, go to work on the coolest job ever. I hoped that would get the audience." And it did: a third season started production even before the second season began airing, and Family Channel is making plans for other shows in the same vein, like *Overrated*, about a kid who gets to be a lawyer.

You didn't always need that approach to make a family-friendly show. Network executives used to feel that the best shows for kids were the ones that captured what it felt like to be a kid. This goes as far back as *Leave It To Beaver*, where Jerry Mathers lived a burn-drum suburban life and faced realistic problems, just with happier endings than in real life. *Full House* was another show that became popular with children by presenting sappier versions of normal family concerns. Even *Lizzie McGuire*, the Disney Channel's biggest hit before *Hannah Montana*, starred Hilary Duff as a girl with a conventional family, school, and social circle.

There were occasional hits that took a more fantastic approach, but they were flukes: after ABC had a hit with *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*, the network commissioned several other kids' sitcoms about genies and angels, and they all bombed. It was assumed that kids wanted to

see their own lives reflected back at them, albeit in an idealized way, like in the acclaimed '90s series *The Adventures of Pete & Pete*, which introduced a few surreal elements into what was basically a realistic story of small-town childhood. But today, Wright says, kids' shows can't just start with the simple premise of kids living ordinary lives: "We tend to like shows that are high-concept, because they set themselves apart from other shows."

And once networks get into the high-concept mode, they keep having to top themselves. *Cory in the House* is a spinoff of an earlier Disney Channel show, *That's So Raven*, about a

it's not this bad . . . yet!



**THERE'S PROBABLY NO SUCH THING AS FAMILY.
NOW STOP WORRYING AND ENJOY YOUR LIFE.**

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

!!!caution!!!

- The emphasis here on *family strengths* should not be construed as an attempt to dismiss or minimize the problems confronting some Canadian families and children today
- Rather, our goal is to *balance* the common emphasis on problems with a perspective that recognizes the high levels of positive attributes in many families
- Many families - some would say most - are both *strong and thriving*

k.i.s.s. (keep it simple schwartz!)

- What are *family strengths*?
- What do strong families *look like* and how do we identify them?
- What are the implications for *social policy* and best practice?

family strengths are . . .

- those *relationship qualities* that contribute to the emotional health and well-being of family (DeFrain & Stinnet, 2002)
- help to maintain *family cohesion* while also *supporting the development* of individual family members (Olson et al., 1989)
- the set of relationships and processes that *support and protect* families and family members, especially during times of adversity and change (Moore et al., 2002)

how are strong families identified?

- Strong family literature includes many *parent-child relationship styles* ala Diana Baumrind (1971) re authoritative families
- Others have focused on the family's ability to adjust to change or crisis with an emphasis on the changes across the family life cycle; called *resilience* (Hetherington, 1984)
- More recent studies consider broader range of *family processes*:
 - Behavioural strategies used to meet collective goals or sustain family ideologies (Day, 2000)
 - Family processes such as parenting, communication, and time use (Thornton, 2003)
 - Family cohesion and flexibility (Olson et al., 1989)

the family strengths model

- John DeFrain and colleagues have been studying family strengths for over 30 years (Stinnett & DeFrain, 1979; 1985; 2000)
- Developed the *American Family Strengths Inventory*
- Grounded in research with >21,000 family members in 27+ countries (except Canada!)
- Based on this research, DeFrain et al. propose six clusters of qualities or strengths

the family strengths model

The six clusters of qualities are:

Appreciation and affection

Commitment

Positive communication

Enjoyable time together

Spiritual well-being

Growing together

All the strengths are interconnected, united upon a sense of positive emotional connection; in essence, this is the *soul of a family*

the Canadian family strengths project: pilot study

Purpose:

- To explore the presence and prominence of family strengths and their association with healthy family indicators in a small sample of Canadian families

Primary Research Questions:

- What is the presence and prominence of family strengths in a small sample of Canadian families?
- Do self-reported family strengths relate to physical, emotional, and/or relational health of families?

method: pilot study

- Recruitment: Readers of a monthly family publication (Today's Family News e-newsletter)
- Procedure: web-based SurveyMonkey questionnaire posted on www.familywise.ca
- Sample: 55 participants
 - Mean age: 42.5 years
 - Gender: 40 females (36% homemaker)
- Family structure: 82% in 2-parent biological family
 - Ethnicity: 93% white
 - Education: 42% college grad

Not your typical Canadian family!

measures: pilot study

1. *Australian Inventory of Family Strengths: Brief Scale*

- 85 items (original) shortened to 28 items using highest loadings from Geggie, DeFrain et al. (2000); Likert-style items (1 - Strongly Disagree to 5 - Strongly Agree)
 - 4 Global Items e.g., We are happy as a family
 - 6 Global Category Items e.g., We enjoy the time we share together
 - 18 Category Items
 - 3 Time together items e.g., We feel comfortable with each other
 - 3 Communication items e.g., Talking through issues is important to us
 - 3 Commitment items e.g., We find it easy to trust each other
 - 3 Appreciation/affection items e.g., We are able to forgive each other
 - 3 Spiritual well-being items e.g., We have a strong sense of belonging
 - 3 Growing together items e.g., We like to support each other

measures: pilot study

2. *Family Stress and Problem Solving*

- 10 items measuring family stress and coping methods e.g., “When there is stress in our family . . . We become disorganized; the parents become more strict and controlling”

3. *Typical Family Experiences Scale*

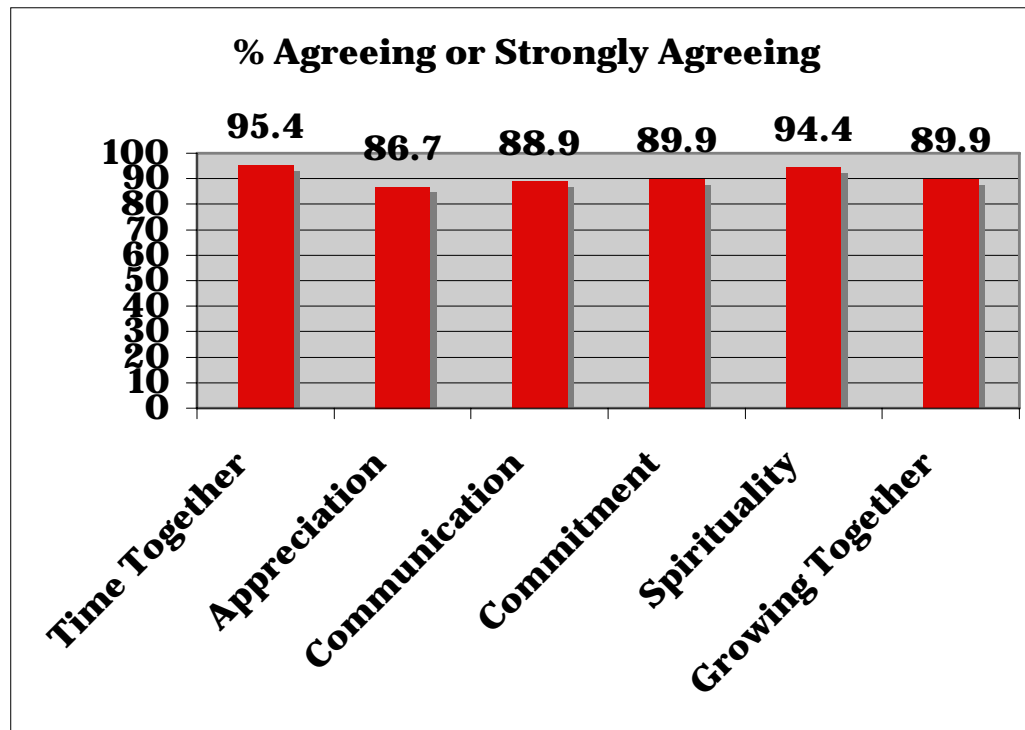
- 20 items measuring the prevalence of stressful family experiences e.g., “In the past year, how often have these issues created stress in the family . . . too much was charged on credit cards; difficulty with child care”

4. *Family Satisfaction Scale*

- 10 items measuring satisfaction with family functioning e.g., “How satisfied are you with . . . The degree of closeness between family members; Your family’s ability to be flexible”

results

- Reliability coefficients of all 6 family strength indicators $>.70$
- 85%+ participants rated their families as either Agree or Strongly Agree with all 6 family strength qualities



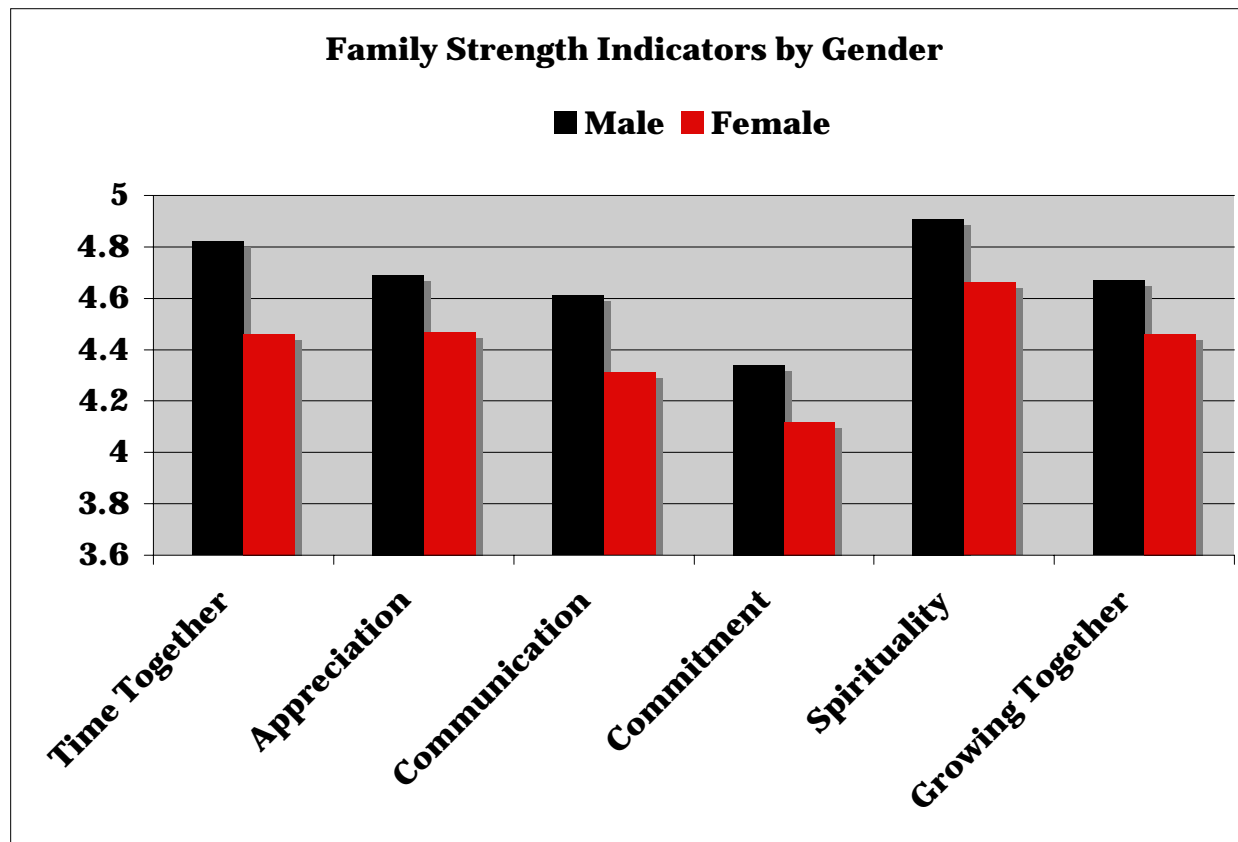
results

Correlations of family strength indicators and family outcomes are strong and in expected direction

| | Time Together | Affection and Appreciation | Positive Communication | Commitment and Valuing | Spirituality | Growing Together |
|----------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------|------------------|
| Typical Family Experiences | -.51 | -.40 | -.49 | -.43 | -.56 | -.57 |
| Family Coping and Health | -.60 | -.55 | -.60 | -.53 | -.58 | -.61 |
| Family Satisfaction | .70 | .61 | .61 | .64 | .64 | .70 |

results

But not all family strengths are valued equally . . .



QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.

results

Nor do all family strengths predict outcomes equally . . .

- In predicting whether or not families succumb to more negative family experiences, *growing together* accounted for the most change (39%) in that outcome
- In predicting whether or not families experience less ability to cope with stress and change, *growing together and positive communication* accounted for the most change (43%) in that outcome
- In predicting satisfaction with overall functioning of the family, *quality time together* accounted for the most change (46%) in that outcome

rounding out the preliminary data

- Both the *qualities* of family relationships and of family behaviours are important aspects of family strengths
- Measures of family strengths need to address the *different developmental periods* of family life e.g., children, emerging adults, seniors
- The nature of family strengths is influenced by the social and economic *context* of the family's social environments e.g., isolated families, low SES, rural families
- The role of *culture* affects family processes and relationships in ways that we don't currently understand or assess well e.g., First Nations, recently immigrated

implications for policy and practice

Family strength research helps to . . .

- Introduces *evidence-based* discussion of the strengths of Canadian families (rather than on deficits) and build upon them
- Identify family processes that serve as *positive resources* or assets for families regardless of SES, ethnicity, region
- Provide *benchmarks* to assess the status of families over the course of time
- Evaluation tools for gauging the *effectiveness* of program that aim to enhance family strengths
- Set *indicators* to track family well-being and monitor progress toward national goals
- Guide methods of service providers and development of approaches for *public policy*