

KAVL'NOAR

WHY SUPPORTIVE FAMILIES ARE IMPORTANT

Rina Berkus, Clinical Supervisor

Families come in many configurations with a mix of different personalities for both parents and children. What are some of the features and characteristics that allow us to lump these groups of people under the heading of "family"? Firstly, they represent a unit that provides its members with an emotional bond, a sense of belonging, and hopefully a safe environment in which to grow and develop as individuals. It's within the family that a child first starts to develop a sense of self in relation to others. It's within the family that the child then develops a view of himself as competent, loveable, and valuable ... or not. This sense of self, whether positive or negative, impacts greatly on how the child will function in the world outside.

What can we, as parents, do to insure that our children grow up with a positive self- image that will provide them the confidence they need to take on challenges they meet outside the home? One of the key components of a healthy family environment is safety. Members need to feel that there is safety to express themselves, to make mistakes and to be vulnerable. A child who is always on edge expecting a verbal or physical attack necessarily withdraws emotionally and uses his energy to protect himself. Learning and growing

requires that we are able to make an effort, to fail and then, to try again. This process requires support from others, especially those who are close to us and on whom we depend.

Another key element in supportive families is responsiveness. In addition to knowing that we will not be attacked, we also need to feel that our families will respond to our needs and requests. We all know that infants whose cries are not met eventually stop reaching out. So too with older children and adults. In order to be confident and hopeful, we need to feel that we can impact our environment with some level of predictability. If not, we stop trying.

In today's times, when family members are often more in tune with their electronic gadgets than with those around them, how can we improve the positive bonds in our families that are so vital for individual growth? First, we can make a conscious effort to attend to each other and thereby create an atmosphere in which members feel valued and loved. Second, we can tune into and hear each individual member and respond to their unique sensitivities and desires. We can accept each member "as is" while also celebrating their efforts to grow.