Strong Latino Couple Relationships

Activity Book for Couples
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INTRODUCTION

This activity book was prepared using findings from a research study about strong Latino marriages. Twenty-five Latino couples (50 individuals) were interviewed who felt they had strong marriages and we asked them what made their marriages work. The couples who were interviewed lived in the northern part of Utah and the husband and wife were interviewed separately. Although we interviewed married couples, we feel that the information these couples provided would be useful for anyone in a couple relationship.

According to the Latino couples with strong marriages, there were four things which made their relationships strong. They included:

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This activity book describes these four strengths and provides tools to help couples think about their own relationships. Activities are also provided which are designed to help couples strengthen these qualities with their partner.

Sometimes talking through the issues discussed in this booklet can bring up things that cause stress for couples. Sometimes these issues cannot be resolved without help from an outside person or agency. If that happens, couples are encouraged to contact someone who can be of help. That person may be a clergy person, a counselor, or some other trusted person.

The information in this booklet, including the tools and activities, was developed directly from the 25 couples who participated in this study—and we thank them for their wisdom. These couples knew when we interviewed them that their thoughts would be shared with other Latino couples who wanted to improve their relationships.
“Children unite the family and bring the couple closer together.”
FAMILY UNITY
Introduction

Of the individuals interviewed, 47 of the 50 participants indicated that children were an essential component of a strong couple relationship. We are aware that many couples are not able to have children but even among such couples children were viewed as essential to the nature of family. One individual who was unable to have children said, “The worst thing about us is not having children. The hardest thing for us is that we don’t have a family here in the home.” One option for such couples is to be involved in the lives of nieces and nephews or other children. This can help to fill that need and provide excellent practice for the possibility of being parents in the future.

Children made the couple relationship strong by:

- Being the glue of the marriage,
- Being a source of happiness,
- Providing support to the parent,
- Being a reflection of the couple’s love.

Children Can Be the Glue of the Marriage

Children were very often the reason for getting together as a couple and the reason for staying together. Several individuals stated that there had been times when the children were the reason they had stayed together during difficult times. One participant said, “If it wasn’t for them [the children] we wouldn’t be together at all.”

Individuals in this study also described children as being what held the relationship together over time. The participants talked about children “uniting the family,” and “bringing the couple closer together.” Other couples, however, may feel that the couple relationship is most important and the couple relationship must remain strong independent of the family relationships—and that a strong couple relationship will contribute to having a strong, stable family. Family relationships are important to Latinos and, for some, the couple relationship contributes to a happy family and for others the children contribute to happy couple relationships.

Children as a Source of Happiness

The majority of the participants described the fun times they had with their children:

“Something very nice has been the many trips that we have had. We have visited some beaches, and the truth is that it has been fun being with the children and enjoying them. I feel like the most fun is enjoying our children, when they were small and even now we enjoy them.”

Children strengthened the couple relationship and even the most menial tasks were turned into meaningful times that strengthened their couple relationship and the family. One person said, “We try to spend time with the family. It makes our marriage stronger.” Many said they wanted to do things as a family and they did not want to be away from their children.
**Children Provide Support**

Children make couple relationships strong because they provide a kind of reciprocal support; the couple supports the children and the children support the couple. This support happens in a number of subtle and obvious ways. A couple’s children contribute to building the love between the individuals, which in turn builds love in the family:

“They [children] make you feel good. They have made our marriage better because the love that you have with the woman and the children, now that is coming back. They love you. When they love you they make your marriage stronger; they bring the couple closer together.”

Many of these couples saw their children as critical components in the family unit who could provide them with support. The children’s love rejuvenated the love the couple felt for each other. There was a reciprocal benefit in that children benefited from the unity of the couple and the couple benefited from the love the children gave back to them.

**Children Are a Reflection of a Couple’s Love**

Several couples talked about children as a reflection of the love the husband and wife felt for each other. As one person described it, “. . .[as a couple] we are two things with one purpose.” Another participant viewed it in this manner: “The home will be good. Our children, even if they are poor and whatever happens to them, they are always going to be a part of us.” The knowledge that their children were a reflection of the couple’s love and were always going to be a part of them became a unifying factor that strengthened their relationship.
Developing Family Unity

Couples who are married, or who are planning to be married, are encouraged to lead the way in maintaining a strong sense of family unity. Use the questions below to discover the strengths in your relationship. Two copies are provided so that you can individually answer these questions.

Instructions:

• Mark an “S” (Strength) after each statement that indicates a strength that already exists in your relationship.
• Mark an “I” (Improve) after each statement that indicates an area you would like to strengthen in your relationship.
• Mark a “NA” (Not Applicable) if a statement does not apply to you.

After you have answered the questions below, compare your answers as a couple and talk with each other about your answers. Celebrate the strengths in your couple relationship and family. You may also want to discuss ways to improve family unity.

Our Strengths and Areas in which to Improve

1. Our children’s needs are extremely important to us, and at times may even be more important than our own needs.

2. We include our children in making family decisions.

3. When we talk about the strengths in our marriage, we are also discussing the strengths of our family.

4. We spend time with our children and enjoy doing things as a family.

5. If we don’t have children, we rely on children in our extended family to help give our relationship meaning.

6. We feel like we can overcome greater challenges because of the commitment that we share in raising our children.

7. We have good memories of doing things that included the whole family.

8. We are happy to come home when we know we will be together there.

9. We use opportunities such as chores or mealtimes to be together.

10. We show our kids that we appreciate what they contribute to our family.
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Developing Family Unity

Below are some activities that you might do together to further develop and strengthen family unity. Even when we have good relationships, we regularly need to work on keeping them good. Try one or more of these suggested exercises to strengthen your relationship. Modify or expand these suggestions, or use these ideas in any way that works for you.

1. If possible, have meals together as a family. Find a time that works for your schedules and come together at least once a day at the dinner table. This is a great opportunity to talk as a family in a positive way and to spend time together. Try to limit complaining and criticism.

2. If you do not have children, plan ways that you can be more involved in the lives of other children. If you live near extended family it would be great to help in caring for your nieces and nephews. There may also be opportunities to care for children with church groups or friends at work. Being responsible for children (even if they are not your own) may help to give purpose to your relationship.

3. As a couple, plan a family outing with your children. You may want to include children in deciding where to go and what to do. It can be something as simple as a religious activity, a festival, or spending a weekend with extended family. Plans could be made for special occasions such as quinceañeras, birthday parties, or festival days.

4. Write a letter to each of your children describing how they have enriched your family. You may even write a letter to children who cannot read yet; they will be able to read it when they get older.

5. As a couple make a list of attributes that you see in your children (or children that you are around) that you also see in each other. Focus on positive things, but also be aware of bad habits that they may have picked up from you. Set goals and make plans on how you can act more like you want the children to behave.
“**Without communication . . . nothing will work.**”
Communication
**Communication**

**INTRODUCTION**

We found that 45 of the 50 individuals interviewed volunteered that communication was an essential component of a strong marriage. Individuals said things like, “Without communication . . . nothing is going to work,” “[Other couples] have a lot of communication, her to him, him to her, so that marriage is good,” or “When the marriage doesn’t work, it is because there isn’t communication.” One participant concluded, “Communication is everything. If there is not communication, everything breaks.”

To maintain effective communication, couples needed to:

- Spend time together and talk often,
- Understand the other person and build love,
- Talk together to solve problems and make decisions.

**SPEND TIME TOGETHER AND TALK OFTEN**

Participants would say things like: “We talk continuously,” “We talk and talk,” or “We talk a lot about everything.” One woman said, “We talk about things all the time. Very rarely do we have a formal sit-down to make a decision. Decisions are made slowly because we talk about it all the time.”

Several couples also indicated that they needed to spend time together in order to have the opportunity to talk and communicate effectively. One man said:

“It’s really important to talk. If you cannot do it every day, do it at least once a week. For me it’s important to have one day a week that you can go with your wife, you and her, and share time. You can play basketball. You can watch a movie. You can go to a restaurant. Those kinds of things help the communication. I think communication is the key.”

Spending time together allowed the participants the opportunity to communicate about issues that affected their marriage and family.

**UNDERSTAND THE OTHER PERSON: BUILD LOVE**

One of the outcomes of talking often was that individuals were able to better understand each other. This communication began as they were boyfriend and girlfriend and continued into marriage. For many participants, communicating and getting to know each other resulted in love.

One woman said, “You need to understand your partner. Try to understand what he believes, what he thinks.” One participant said that a person needed to understand how his or her spouse was feeling regarding how the children were
doing at school and other issues that involved the family. Participants talked about how they needed to understand their partner’s point of view about everything. One person said, “Misunderstanding can result because of lack of communication or lack of attention and lack of understanding. If you don’t clear something up, it can be really small but will become very big.” One person summarized this relationship between communication and love by saying, “If there isn’t communication there isn’t love either because the communication helps us build love.” Another person said:

“Because there is love there can be understanding with your partner, trying to understand what he believes, what he thinks, understand that he thinks differently than you do.”

**Talk to Solve Problems and Make Decisions**

Communication was an important component in having strong couple relationships, because communication was necessary to solve problems and make decisions. Almost all of the couples, when trying to solve problems, preferred talking to each other before they discussed their problems with someone else. Participants said communication was important so that problems did not develop in the first place. Some participants concluded that, if they did not communicate to solve problems and make decisions, their relationships would probably end. One woman said that talking to solve problems brings the husband and wife closer: “Don’t give up; don’t give up. One has to help the other so this doesn’t end. So instead of ending it, you grow closer.”

These couples were talking about communication in their couple relationship. These ways of maintaining communication, however, can also be useful by including children.
Maintain Communication

Couples who are married, or who are planning to be married, are encouraged to maintain communication. Use the questions below to discover the strengths in your relationship. Two copies are provided so that you can individually answer these questions.

Instructions:

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• Mark an “I” (Improve) after each statement that indicates an area you would like to strengthen in your relationship.
• Mark a “NA” (Not Applicable) if a statement does not apply to you.

After you have answered the questions below, compare your answers as a couple and talk about your answers with each other. Celebrate the strengths in your couple relationship and your family. You may also want to discuss ways to improve communication.

Our Strengths and Areas in which to Improve

1. We understand each other and know what things are most important to the other.
2. We take time to really listen to each other and our children so that we understand what they are saying.
3. We talk about things that require time to both talk and listen to each other.
4. Even when we disagree, we try to communicate our love for each other.
5. We avoid most problems by maintaining good communication in the first place.
6. We try to communicate together, as a couple or as a family, about problems before seeking help from others.
7. As time goes on, we are continually making the effort to get to know each other better.
8. When we disagree or face major problems, we take the time needed to talk about it and work it out.
9. We can arrive at an agreement without conflict.
10. We are together often and talk frequently.
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9. We can arrive at an agreement without conflict.

10. We are together often and talk frequently.
Developing Communication Skills

Below are some activities that you might do together to further develop and strengthen your communication skills as a couple and as a family. Even when we have a good relationship, we regularly need to work on keeping it good. Try one or more of these suggested exercises to strengthen your relationship with your partner and your children. Modify or expand these suggestions, or use these ideas in any way that works for you.

1. As a couple or as a family, schedule time to share your thoughts and feelings with each other. Try to set aside 30 minutes twice a week. Find time where there will be no interruptions and you can really talk and listen to each other.

2. Develop a habit of showing affection. Let your partner know that he/she is cared about. If this is new to you, set a goal to do one or two gestures each day. This should be something that shows an understanding of your partner, such as giving a favorite flower or making a favorite food or perhaps singing a song that has significance. It can also mean you do a task for the other person that you know will be appreciated.

3. Do work around the house together as a couple or as a family. Decide together what chores have to be done in the following week and then decide which ones you can do together. Make sure you know when you will do these tasks. Activities such as gardening, running errands, shopping, or going to the Laundromat together can provide an excellent opportunity to talk. You do not need to put life on hold to communicate effectively.

4. When you talk, try to focus on understanding the other’s perspective. Make it a point to say things such as: “so what you’re saying is . . .” or “so why do you think that?” Understanding leads to more love between two people. Understanding why another person says things is just as important as what is being said.

5. As a couple, you may have a major stress or problem that you would like to solve. Set a specific time to talk about ways to reduce that stress or solve the problem and develop a plan to implement the solution. Talk once a week at a prescheduled time about progress and change the plan if needed.
NOTES
“[At church] we found all the support . . . we needed.”
SHARING VALUES
INTRODUCTION

Of the 50 participants, 37 stated that religion was a necessary component of their strong families. Although all the couples self-identified as having a religious affiliation, it is important to note that not all the couples indicated that religion was a necessary component of their strong families. For those who do not consider themselves to be religious, the following definition of religion may be of help as we discuss this topic: Something one believes in and follows devotedly or an understanding of correct behavior. Therefore, religion is one of several shared values.

The couples in this study stated that religion and shared values made their relationships strong by providing:

• Guidance for appropriate behavior,
• Spiritual and social support,
• Commitment to the relationship.

GUIDANCE FOR POSITIVE BEHAVIOR

Religion had a positive influence on the participants. It taught them virtues such as respect, healthy communication styles, empathy, and compassion—all of which helped to build a healthy relationship. They became aware that they needed to take care of each other as family members, which supported their interdependence. Religious teachings supported the view that one’s duties and responsibilities toward one another helped them build trust and intimacy in the relationship:

“I believe the gospel makes a difference because the gospel is talking about giving more than receiving. When they [couples] do not have some kind of faith they do not have those values.”

Religion not only provided couples with information about the right things to do in their relationships, but also kept them from engaging in behaviors that would have negative consequences. Many individuals, at some point in their lives, had engaged in activities such as drinking and hanging out with friends. They eventually realized that those activities were not helpful. Religion helped them by providing guidance for appropriate behavior regarding what was expected of a partner:

“When the person doesn’t have religion it’s different. They drink, they smoke, they go out with friends, they do what they want, and the wife is left to one side. And I was afraid of living like that. . . . But thank God that hasn’t happened to me. Religion has a lot to do with that. It changes the person’s life.”

SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

We learned from the couples in our study that spiritual and social support came in two important ways, from people with similar values and from a higher being directly. Couples received encouragement from other members of their religious organizations which helped build a social and emotional support system. Their churches typically organized activities that
gave the members an opportunity to interact, helping them build stronger bonds with each other. Sometimes the members of these religious organizations provided them with the support they could not find in their extended families:

“There we found all of the support, professional and from friends, that we needed. Our families could not give us that support. So the relationship with my family right now is, it’s okay, but since we are so into the church, we are getting more support there.”

During the difficult times, many turned to a higher being for strength. A higher being was seen as a powerful figure, and faith was a source of comfort because they felt that they would be helped with their problems. Rather than focusing on the negatives, religious beliefs enabled couples to look for the good things in their lives. They found happiness, not only by being helpful to their own family members, but also to others who needed support. They developed a personal relationship with a higher being, and asked for help with issues in their marriages and families:

“When I have had problems in my marriage I have never gone to look for help, to the bishop, to no one. What I have done is pray. I ask a higher being for help because I can’t do it alone.”

Commit to the Relationship

Shared values and religious beliefs helped to build a life-long commitment and helped couples understand that they needed to stay together through difficult times. They had to make adjustments because of the religious emphasis on sacrificing personal gain for the good of the couple relationship and the family. Couples found security in the family and a feeling that, unlike other material possessions that faded away, these relationships were supposed to last forever:

“I think marriage gives you security; you establish a commitment . . . it’s all for love, for the love of your children, for the love of your husband, for the love of the agreement or commitment that you’ve made . . . So that’s how it is. It’s a commitment, it’s not an obligation. But when you make that commitment, you take on various obligations.”

Establishing common values can occur as couples but can also extend to other family members. Having parents and children share values can strengthen the entire family.
**Developing Shared Values**

Couples who are married, or who are planning to be married, are encouraged to establish a system of values. Use the questions below to discover the strengths in your relationship. Two copies are provided so that you can individually answer these questions.

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

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After you have answered the questions below, compare your answers as a couple and talk about your answers with each other. Celebrate the strengths in your couple relationship and your family. You may also want to discuss ways to improve.

**Our Strengths and Areas in which to Improve**

1. As a couple and family, we are clear about our priorities.  
2. We feel a deep sense of commitment to our couple and family relationships.  
3. We have friends and family who support us in making good decisions.  
4. We talk about how to spend money in ways that reflect our values as a couple and as a family.  
5. We see problems in our lives as challenges that will help us to grow.  
6. We depend on our faith when bad things happen.  
7. We know we can go to someone we trust and who understands the things that are most important in our lives.  
8. We understand and strive to do what is right.  
9. We respect each other even when we don’t share a value.  
10. We try to fulfill our responsibilities to our family.
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8. We understand and strive to do what is right.

9. We respect each other even when we don’t share a value.

10. We try to fulfill our responsibilities to our family.
DEVELOPING SHARED VALUES

Below are some activities to do together to further develop and strengthen the values that you share. Even when we have a good relationship, we regularly need to work on keeping it good. Try one or more of these suggested exercises to strengthen your relationship. Children can also be involved in some of the activities to help strengthen the entire family. Modify or expand these suggestions, or use these ideas in any way that works for you.

1. Review together the commitments that you have made to each other. This may include marriage vows, personal promises, or other goals and expectations. Discuss how these commitments have helped you during difficult times. Then write down a sentence or two that summarizes your commitment to those goals and promises and hang it somewhere in your home where you will see it often.

2. Make a conscious effort to identify and put into practice the things that you as a couple or as a family believe are important. Discuss any behaviors that contradict what you believe is right and set goals and make plans to eliminate such activities.

3. Become active participants in a group that shares the same values and do all you can to build friendships with people who will support your beliefs. You should discuss various options and together as a couple, or as a family, decide where and how to be involved.

4. Consider sharing your dreams together. This can be done regularly and will help you understand better the things that are most important to your partner. You should take turns and always respect what is said. Children can also participate.

5. Separately make a list of things that are most important to each of you and then get together and compare your lists. Make adjustments as you learn more about what is important to your partner and talk about how the things that you have in common make you a strong couple. Also discuss how you can respectfully deal with differences.
“More than anything, it’s trust & respect and if you love each other.”
Trust & Respect
**Introduction**

Thirty-three individuals from the 50 participants discussed trust and respect as important elements of a strong marriage. Respect was both a general attitude and the specific behaviors extended toward one’s partner, such as being faithful, attentive, and/or non-abusive. In return, one gained the partner’s trust, or his or her confidence that a spouse would be supportive and truthful.

The couples in this study stated that trust and respect made their relationships stronger by:

- Having respect as the building block of the marriage,
- Displaying faithfulness,
- Not letting relatives interfere,
- Clear and gentle communication.

**Respect as the Marital Building Block**

Strong Latino relationships were founded on respect. Another participant said, “More than anything it’s trust and respect and if you love each other.” This did not mean that all strong relationships started out with mutual respect, but once partners began to show respect towards each other, for example by no longer drinking or being abusive or unfaithful, the couple relationships grew stronger. Respect included sexual fidelity, non-abusive forms of communication, and general consideration of a partner’s feelings and wishes. In elaborating on respect, some respondents took it beyond just the avoidance of infidelity to the active promotion of communication, as in this woman’s words:

“That he respects her. For example, he doesn’t cheat on her, doesn’t go out with other girls. And whatever thing that she is going to do, that they communicate and agree. And when he wants to do something he tells her, so they are in agreement. The two have to agree.”

Individuals also connected respect to trust. If respect made up the marital building blocks, mutual trust was mortar that held them together. A wife said, “From trust comes everything. Respect comes, love comes, and an understanding of the couple.”

**Displaying Faithfulness**

Going with friends, even to the store, was a concern for some. Going with a person of the opposite sex, or even the appearance of such an act, caused significant consternation for most couples. When asked what could undermine a strong marriage, time and again these participants described their own or others’ real or imagined sexual infidelities. Echoing this sentiment a woman remarked, “If he cheats once, he will do it again. And the trust is terminated.”
A Relative Problem

Latino couples in strong relationships often maintained solid marital ties despite the tugs of loyalties toward extended families, for these tugs often pulled in opposition to the best interest of the couple. Extended family members sometimes caused problems for them, rather than being a source of mutual support.

These couples also made it clear that focusing on each other and their immediate families—to the exclusion of extended families—bolstered strong couple relationships. In fact, several couples cited interference from third parties, especially relatives, as harmful to their marital bond.

One man said, “parents just see one part of the problem.” Another person, when asked if his extended family affected his marriage, said, “I try to avoid it. If I see that something is going to be wrong I try to avoid it. So I don’t bother my family with my wife and children that much.” A woman said she would not go to her family with her problems “because later [there would be] more problems with the family.” If an individual or couple feel they need help with a problem, they might consider seeking help from a spiritual leader or trusted friend.

Rely on Gentleness and not Abuse

Allowing for space in their togetherness was a nonabusive means of dealing with problems. Clear and gentle communication was essential. These couples abhorred insults and violence. It is never okay to hit each other. For one husband, it was also important not to yell or insult his wife, “Well [a good marriage needs] good communication always with the partner . . . Not insults, yells, but being able to say, “I don’t like this and we are going to try to make it better.”
Building Trust & Respect

Couples who are married, or who are planning to be married, are encouraged to build a strong sense of respect and trust in their couple relationship. Use the questions below to discover the strengths in your relationship. Two copies are provided so that you can individually answer these questions.

Instructions:

• Mark an “S” (Strength) after each statement that indicates a strength that already exists in your relationship.
• Mark an “I” (Improve) after each statement that indicates an area you would like to strengthen in your relationship.
• Mark a “NA” (Not Applicable) if a statement does not apply to you.

After you have answered the questions below, compare your answers as a couple and talk about your answers with each other. Celebrate the strengths in your couple relationship. You may also want to discuss ways to improve respect and trust.

Our Strengths and Areas in which to Improve

1. I know where my partner is most of the time and it does not worry me.  
2. We trust each other with such things as finances and caring for our home and children.  
3. We always discuss problems between us instead of going to extended family.  
4. I can trust him/her to be completely faithful.  
5. We avoid yelling or saying insulting things.  
6. I always respect my partner by letting him or her know where I am.  
7. I avoid situations where I am alone (or could appear to be alone) with others of the opposite sex.  
8. We try to make our communication clear and gentle.  
9. We limit outside influences on our relationship, even from relatives.  
10. We trust each other and have great respect for one another.
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Building Trust & Respect

Below are some activities that you might do together to further develop and strengthen respect and trust. Even when we have a good relationship, we regularly need to work on keeping it good. Try one or more of these suggested exercises to strengthen your relationship. Modify or expand these suggestions, or use these ideas in any way that works for you.

1. Review together an argument or disagreement that you have had recently. Here is not the time to rehash what was said but it may be useful to review how it was said. Individually write down a few things that you personally could have done to keep your communication more gentle and respectful. Share these goals for improvement with your partner. You can also apply this to an argument that you have had with one of your children.

2. As a couple, you trust each other with many responsibilities. For example, one of you may trust the other to pay the bills or to take the kids to school. Try to make a list of all the things with which you trust your partner. Talk about how you have grown closer by trusting and relying on each other.

3. One way to let each other know where you are when you are not home is to keep a family calendar. It will help in planning ahead where you will be and when you will be home. Hold a planning session periodically and talk about each other’s plans for the next week or month. Combining this with reminders about events throughout the day may help increase communication and build trust.

4. Non-verbal communication is essential in showing respect and trust. To illustrate this, first try telling your partner a story about a significant event in your relationship. Tell this story at the same time you are doing something else (e.g., watching TV or preparing a meal). Then re-tell the same story as you sit across from one while another holding hands and looking at each other. Discuss the difference and set goals to use what you have learned to increase respect in your daily communication.

5. Make a list of things that your partner does that shows his or her respect for you. Anything as small as saying “thank you” can be used. Try to fill an entire page. Share your lists.
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