
From Doctrine to Dialogue: Applying the Mettānisamsa Sutta to Strengthen Family Relationships through Meditation

Kittima Srisomsak

International Buddhist Studies College, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University

Corresponding author email: kittimas@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This article explores the practical application of contemplative Buddhist teachings, particularly the Mettānisamsa Sutta, to enhance family relationships. The study has three objectives: (1) To analyze the Mettānisamsa Sutta and its implications for family welfare; (2) To examine the effectiveness of loving-kindness meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*) in improving communication and emotional connections within families; and (3) To propose a framework for incorporating *mettā* into mindfulness-oriented family programs.

The results show that the eleven benefits described in the Mettānisamsa Sutta are quite similar to the mental attributes needed to create a positive family environment, such as managing emotions, acting prosocially, and avoiding interpersonal conflict. Regularly practicing *mettā bhāvanā* increases empathy, reduces reactivity, and improves communication and emotional ties, leading to stronger relationships and less conflict in the family. This framework combines classical Buddhist ideas with family-oriented activities, including techniques such as *mettā* (mindfulness-based communication), ethical behavior based on the Brahmavihāras and the Noble Eightfold Path, and other relevant topics. These activities encourage respect across generations, make polite conversation easier, and increase kindness.

Keywords: Mettānisamsa Sutta; Loving-kindness meditation; Buddhist family practice; Mindfulness-based family therapy; Family communication

Introduction

The family unit is often described as the foundation of society and is essential to both individual and societal development. But in today's world, families are facing more and more dedicated problems, such as emotional alienation, communication failures, and a growing psychological discrepancy between parents and children. These pervasive issues are often intensified by external stressors, including work-life imbalance, the pervasive influence of social media, economic insecurity, and rapidly shifting cultural values (Apata et al., 2023). The resultant relational stress not only erodes trust and weakens emotional resilience but also fosters behavioral misunderstandings, significantly undermining the well-being of the family unit and, by extension, the broader community.

Ancient Buddhist teachings can help with many of today's relationship problems. Meditation is where the notion of loving-kindness (*mettā*) originates from, and it is at the center of these. This way of thinking leads to both deep peace with others and peace inside oneself (Hine et al., 2025). There is a lot of research on the overall benefits of Buddhist peaceful ways, such as being conscious and doing the right thing. But there is still a lot of research to be done on how to use particular Buddhist texts, such as the *Mettānisamsa Sutta*, in a planned and effective way to help modern families address their problems.

The *Mettānisamsa Sutta* (AN 11.16) specifically outlines eleven profound benefits of cultivating loving-kindness meditation, including peaceful sleep, emotional composure, greater safety, and universal social affection. While these qualities are inherently beneficial for individuals, their direct implications for fostering a nurturing home environment and contributing significantly to emotional security, prosocial behavior, and robust inter-familial communication are often underexplored in current academic discourse on family well-being. Furthermore, while core principles from the *Brahmavihāras* (especially *mettā* and *karuṇā*), the Noble Eightfold Path, and *Saṅgahavatthu* emphasize respectful speech, non-harming action, and familial responsibility as the ethical groundwork for household peace (Masrungsom, 2016), the specific utility of the *Mettānisamsa Sutta* as a guiding framework for family intervention remains largely untapped.

This article aims to (1) analyze the *Mettānisamsa Sutta* and its implications for family welfare, (2) examine how *mettā*-based practice can support compassionate communication and emotion regulation in family systems, and (3)

propose a practical framework for integrating mettā into contemporary family dialogue and well-being programs.

Analyzing the Mettānisamsa Sutta and its Implications for Family Welfare

The Mettānisamsa Sutta (AN 11.16), a key text in the Anguttara Nikāya of the Buddhist Pali Canon, is the primary source for this research. The text lists eleven separate advantages, or 'anisamsa', that come to those who practice mettā (loving-kindness) meditation regularly. It describes these advantages as results for 'an individual whose consciousness-expansion is cultivated, developed, pursued, entrusted, established as a foundation, stabilized, consolidated, and completely engaged, as a result of benevolence' (AN 11.16). While these benefits are typically framed as personal successes, a closer look shows how they really affect society as a whole and, most importantly, how they affect the development of healthy, happy families. The Sutta shows how practicing mettā naturally creates a space that is good for relationships:

1. “One sleeps easily” and “wakes easily”: These advantages include a deep sense of peace and relief from mental tension, which is an important part of controlling your emotions (Luberto et al., 2018). The ability to get a good night's sleep and stay calm might tell you a lot about a person's mental health (Fredrickson et al., 2008). Family members who feel this way are less likely to be irritable, respond emotionally, or hold grudges, all of which can disturb family peace (Burgdorf et al., 2019). This personal peace immediately leads to a more peaceful family, lowering the chances of conflict and making parents and children more patient with each other, in turn leading to more beneficial interactions at the start of the day.

2. “Dreams no evil dreams”: This benefit means that the mind is free of negative or unpleasant thoughts, even at the subconscious level. This suggests that there is less internal psychological turmoil. In a metaphorical sense, it means less hidden fears and unsolved issues that might lead to relationship strain in families (Cheung & Lau, 2021). This made things clearer for everyone in the family, which reduced the tendency to project personal negativity onto others. This led to fewer misunderstandings, more empathy, and less desire to hold grudges, helping the family be more open and trusting.

3. “Is dear to human beings” and “is dear to non-human beings”: Mettā practice consistently brings out a natural warmth, fairness, and genuine kindness

that all beings appreciate. Studies show that loving-kindness meditation makes people feel more connected to others and more likely to act prosocially (Hutcherson et al., 2008; Luberto et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2015). This leads to more love, respect, and a greater willingness to help in family relationships. The practitioner helps people feel valuable and gives them real positive attention, which builds trust and warmth—two important parts of strong and happy family relationships (Leppma, 2012). This creates a space where family members truly value one other's presence, feel respected, and openly express their love for one another, which strengthens their emotional ties.

4. “Devas protect one”: When looked at in a more complicated or spiritual way, this benefit means feeling safe, protected, and healthy because of how you act morally. For the family, this may be understood as a symbolic way to make it harder for bad things from the outside and problems within to get to them. The practice of mettā among family members creates a metaphorical protective energy field around the house. This makes it easier for everyone to work together to solve problems and maintain peace, reducing the likelihood that relationships will fall apart.

5. “Neither fire, poison, nor weapons can touch one”: This strong metaphor stands for a lot of resistance to harmful influences, whether they are physical or, more importantly for families, emotional. In family relationships, it means being safe from the "fire" of heated arguments, the "poison" of bad behaviors, and the "weapons" of hurtful words. Mettā helps people control their emotions and feel empathy, enabling them to deal with situations calmly rather than react. This change turns bad ways of talking to each other into helpful, enlightening arguments, allowing family members to respond with understanding and compassion (Sui et al., 2015; Luberto et al., 2018). This keeps the family from fighting and encourages peace through acts of love and forgiveness (Cheung & Lau, 2021).

6. “One's mind gains concentration quickly”: This benefit stresses the need to develop a calm and focused mind, which is one of the main benefits of practicing mindfulness (Creswell, 2017). This makes people more present and involved in their daily family life. A family member with a mind that is quickly "immersive" is more involved in conversations, more aware of nonverbal cues, and less distracted by what is happening around them. Deep presence and attunement are necessary for effective communication, active listening, and

building strong emotional bonds within the family (Carson et al., 2007; Siegel, 2007).

7. “One's complexion is bright”: This outward indicator means that the person is calm, strong, and in a good emotional state on the inside. Studies have shown that positive emotional experiences are linked to better health and stronger connections with others (Fredrickson et al., 2008). A family member who is calm and happy on the inside makes the whole house seem better and more alive. Their presence lifts everyone's spirits and creates a nicer, more harmonious environment that encourages everyone to get along, have fun, and help one another.

8. “One dies unconfused” and “if penetrating no higher, is headed for a Brahmā world”: The spiritual benefits show how mettā may help clear your mind, let you connect with others on a deeper level, and make you more conscious throughout your life. Even if they are personal, they show a life full of deep peace, moral purity, and good karma (Wang et al., 2021). A family that works hard to develop mettā can help its members deal with the problems of life, such as sickness, death, and grief, with more acceptance, calmness, and strong support from each other. This development leads to a virtuous cycle of positive behaviors and interactions within the family, leaving a legacy of love, knowledge, and strength that will benefit the community and future generations (Masrungson, 2016).

In conclusion, the Mettānisamsa Sutta offers a powerful, ancient approach to addressing family problems today. All of these advantages lay the theoretical groundwork for how loving-kindness training may improve family harmony, strengthen emotional bonds, foster mutual respect, and build relationships that last.

Examining the Effectiveness of Loving-Kindness Meditation (Mettā Bhāvanā) in Improving Communication and Emotional Connections within Families

This part examines how effective loving-kindness meditation (mettā bhāvanā) is as the primary meditative practice that yields the benefits listed in the Mettānisamsa Sutta (AN 11.16), especially in improving communication and emotional bonds within families. The Sutta discusses the benefits of developing mettā, and recent psychological research shows that mettā bhāvanā helps develop

traits important to a strong family, directly addressing problems with emotional distance and communication that are common in today's world.

The effectiveness of mettā bhāvanā in enhancing family relationships can be understood through several key pathways:

1. **Cultivating Empathy and Reducing Reactivity:** Mettā bhāvanā is the intentional development of the ability to give compassion, initially towards oneself, then to loved ones, neutral others, and eventually to those with whom one has conflict. This strategy has been empirically validated to markedly enhance empathy and compassion (Leppma, 2012; Luberto et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2015), which are essential for comprehending and effectively responding to family members' feelings and needs. Mettā clearly addresses the Sutta's metaphorical promise of safeguarding against 'fire, poison, and armament' in interpersonal dynamics by diminishing emotional reactivity and the tendency for harsh or defensive communication via the development of a compassionate attitude (AN 11.16). The fostering of inner peace allows family members to approach disagreements with greater composure, thereby turning potential conflicts into opportunities for growth and understanding (Sui et al., 2015; Luberto et al., 2018).

2. **Enhancing Emotional Connection and Prosocial Behavior:** Mettā bhāvanā makes people feel love, thankfulness, and connection. Studies have repeatedly shown that LKM makes people feel happier and more connected to others (Fredrickson et al., 2008; Hutcherson et al., 2008). This means people feel more like they belong to one another, which is what the Sutta says when it says that one “is dear to human people.” The development of prosocial behavior, in which people are more likely to help, show compassion, and forgive, also helps strengthen the emotional connection between family members. This is because these behaviors build trust and warmth, which are important for strong family groups (Leppma, 2012; Cheung & Lau, 2021).

3. **Improving Mindful Communication and Presence:** One of the main benefits of mettā bhāvanā is that it helps you develop a more focused and alert mind, which is what the Sutta says: "one's mind attains concentration swiftly" (AN 11.16). This extra attention is important for improving how family members talk to one another. Mindful people are better at listening carefully, picking up on nonverbal cues, and responding thoughtfully instead of quickly (Carson et al., 2007; Creswell, 2017). This increased presence brings family members closer together, clears up misunderstandings, and makes it easier for them to talk to each

other and be emotionally close. This instantly improves the Sutta's proposed benefits of peaceful interactions and a peaceful atmosphere.

4. *Mettā bhāvanā* is a therapeutic strategy that assists individuals in managing tension, anxiety, and negative emotions (Luberto et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). This is consistent with the Sutta's assurance of "sleeping comfortably," "rising effortlessly," and "experiencing no dreadful nightmares." The mental health of family members enhances emotional resources in relationships, aiding the family in managing external challenges such as work-life balance and financial instability (Burgdorf et al., 2019). Individual and collective *mettā* foster a secure and nurturing environment, consistent with the Sutta's tenets of safety and well-being.

Many studies have indicated that the practice of *mettā bhāvanā* can help families communicate better and feel closer to one other by promoting certain psychological and social features. This meditation, based on the *Mettānisamsa Sutta*, helps families build better, more connected, and more resilient relationships.

Proposing a Framework for Incorporating *Mettā* into Mindfulness-Oriented Family Programs

This section presents a framework for mindfulness-oriented family initiatives, based on the *Mettānisamsa Sutta* (AN 11.16). This framework takes the eleven advantages listed in the Sutta and turns them into specific actions that will improve family welfare, encourage good communication, and strengthen emotional bonds. The main meditative practice remains the cultivation of *mettā bhāvanā*, but this framework also includes supporting principles from the *Brahmavihāras* (AN 10.208), the Noble Eightfold Path (SN 45.8), and the *Saṅghavatthu* (AN 4.32) as additional ethical and behavioral guidelines. It shows how the Sutta's promises can be kept in a modern family setting. The goal is to connect ancient teachings with the needs of modern families, encouraging everyday relationship practice.

This paradigm advocates an awareness-based approach for pain management, aligning with contemporary mental health issues. In "Engaging Suffering: Towards a Mindful Revisioning of Family Therapy Practice," Gehart and McCollum (2007) assert that the pursuit of eliminating suffering perpetuates the Western ideal of a problem-free existence, perhaps leading individuals to experience isolation and loneliness. Buddhism emphasizes the need to understand

pain and to perceive adversity as an opportunity for improvement. This cognitive approach allows individuals and families to navigate challenging circumstances with minimal stress while upholding their ethical principles, especially during adversity. It accomplishes this by emphasizing the need to maintain distance and to closely observe the situation. The suggested paradigm endorses a prudent strategy to address familial challenges that emphasizes compassion in altering individuals' responses to pain rather than merely suppressing it.

The suggested framework categorizes program aspects into the clusters of benefits delineated in the *Mettānisamsa Sutta*, highlighting the contributions of individual *mettā* practices and overarching Buddhist precepts to each cluster.

Cultivating Inner Peace and Emotional Resilience within the Family: This part discusses how the *Sutta* can help you feel mentally calmer. It claims that "one sleeps easily," "wakes easily," and "dreams no bad dreams" (AN 11.16). These benefits provide people a deep sense of peace and relief from mental stress, which is important for controlling one's emotions in family settings (Luberto et al., 2018; Fredrickson et al., 2008).

1. The first step in this method is to practice self-compassion, which means that family members should learn to be nice to themselves first (Thompson-Lastad et al., 2025). Affirmations like "May I be happy, may I be healthy, may I live with ease" help people become more resilient and better at controlling their emotions. This makes them less likely to be impatient and more emotionally accessible to their family. Practices like *mettā bhāvanā* help people develop self-discipline and empathy, which in turn improve their health and well-being (Rana, 2015). This aligns with the *Brahmavihāra* of *Upekkhā* (equanimity), which helps people remain emotionally stable during stressful times. This trait is becoming increasingly important for health and happiness in many situations (Jiwattanasuk, 2021).

2. Emotional and Mindful Presence: People learn basic mindfulness techniques, like *Anapanasati* (mindfulness of breath), to help them be more present and understand their feelings without acting on them right away (Creswell, 2017; Rana, 2015). This rapidly boosts the *Sutta*'s advantage of a mind that "achieves attention fast" (AN 11.16), thereby rendering it easier to get along with family. These tactics help people avoid letting their thoughts, feelings, and physical experiences determine who they are as individuals (Rana, 2015).

3. People are able to keep their emotions in check, which makes the home setting calmer. When each family member focuses on their own inner peace, they reduce sources of conflict while making their intellect clearer and their emotions more open during encounters. This helps everyone feel safer and better equipped to deal with the stresses of daily life (Burgdorf et al., 2019; Brody et al., 2018).

Fostering Compassionate Communication and Strong Emotional Connections: This section discusses the Sutta's benefits for getting along with others and being accepted in society. For example, “is cherished by humans,” “is cherished by non-humans,” and “neither fire, poison, nor weapons can harm one” (AN 11.16) show that it is strong against negative influences on relationships.

1. **Family-Mettā Practice:** "May my parents/spouse/children be happy, healthy, and live with ease" is an example of the kind of pleasant thoughts and wishes that family members communicate to one another as part of community mettā bhāvanā. Studies in science have shown that this activity makes people more empathetic, compassionate, and conscious of their social relationships (Leppma, 2012; Hutcherson et al., 2008; Luberto et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2015). It closely resembles the Sutta's pledge that familial relationships will be "valued by humanity" by encouraging true love and affection among family members.

2. **Mindful and Ethical Communication:** The curriculum includes practices for honest, caring, and non-harming communication based on the Noble Eightfold Path's Right Speech (Sammā-Vācā) and the Saṅgahavatthu's Benign Communication (Piyavācā) (Stanley, 2015; Amaro & Chah, 2002). This means not lying, gossiping, using harsh language, or talking about things that don't matter. Instead, it means showing empathy and support (Sharda, 2019). The Mindfulness-enhanced Strengthening Families Program (Coatsworth, 2014) clarifies this approach, emphasizing that teaching mindfulness to parents and teens can improve family harmony by fostering enhanced communication, attentive listening, and non-judging. This shift in communication patterns, cultivated through mettā, changes destructive interactions into productive and illuminating conflicts, embodying the Sutta's resilience against 'fire, poison, and weapons' (Sui et al., 2015; Burgdorf et al., 2019; Shorey & Ng, 2021).

3. **Conflict Resolution through Compassion:** The framework teaches family members to apply Karuṇā (compassion) during disagreements, moving beyond reactivity to understand and alleviate each other's distress. Practices for expressing appreciation and forgiveness (Cheung & Lau, 2021) are emphasized.

This approach enhances interpersonal communication and emotional attunement, diminishing impulsivity and refining family decision-making (Brody et al., 2018).

4. Family Impact: This part immediately increases emotional closeness, establishes deep trust, and makes family conversations much better, which leads to relationships that are more supportive and less full of conflict.

Building Ethical Responsibility and Collective Family Resilience: This section discusses the significant and transformative benefits outlined in the Sutta, including “Devas provide protection,” “One's complexion radiates,” “One passes away without confusion,” and the ultimate spiritual aspiration of “ascending to a Brahmā realm” (AN 11.16). These benefits demonstrate how a life characterized by virtue, clarity, and positive influence may fortify the family unit and create a lasting legacy.

1. Shared Ethical Conduct and Prosocial Action: The framework promotes ethical and non-harming behavior within the family and the broader community by integrating principles from the Noble Eightfold Path's Right Action (Sammā-Kammanta) and Right Livelihood (Sammā-āvjīva), as well as the Saṅgahavatthu's Benevolent Conduct (Atthacariyā) (Pineault, 1995; Yeh, 2006). This include promoting shared duties, doing acts of service within the family (Buddhadasa, 1994), and positively impacting their social milieu. These activities provide a strong ethical basis, bolstering the family's 'protection' and favorable reputation, while fostering familial support and assistance (Coatsworth, 2014).

2. Generosity and Mutual Support: The Saṅgahavatthu's idea of Generosity (Dāna) inspired the program. It encourages family members to be generous by giving not just money, but also time, attention, and unconditional love (Jayasaro, 2013). This strengthens bonds on an emotional level and ensures a strong system of mutual support.

3. Equality and Inclusivity (Samānattatā): According to Suvaco (2013), the framework prioritizes Impartiality (Samānattatā), which emphasizes treating all family members with equal respect and gratitude for their distinct contributions. This helps people feel appreciated and respected, which is vital for relationships to thrive and society to remain cohesive. It's similar to the Sutta's assurance of a "bright complexion" that proves everyone's progress.

4. Family Impact: This growth leads to a family culture that is fundamentally moral and caring, with shared responsibilities, a common goal, and lasting strength. This kind of family is peaceful, and its favorable effects spread to society and future generations (Masrungson, 2016).

Process Diagram: *Mettānisamsa Sutta* Guiding Family Relationships. Figure 1 presents a simple graphic of the main procedure in a straightforward, succinct way. This is how this framework is visually represented. This flowchart shows how the *Mettānisamsa Sutta* is the main teaching that leads to the practice of Loving-Kindness Meditation (*Mettā Bhāvanā*), which subsequently manifests in key programming pillars that help families get along better.

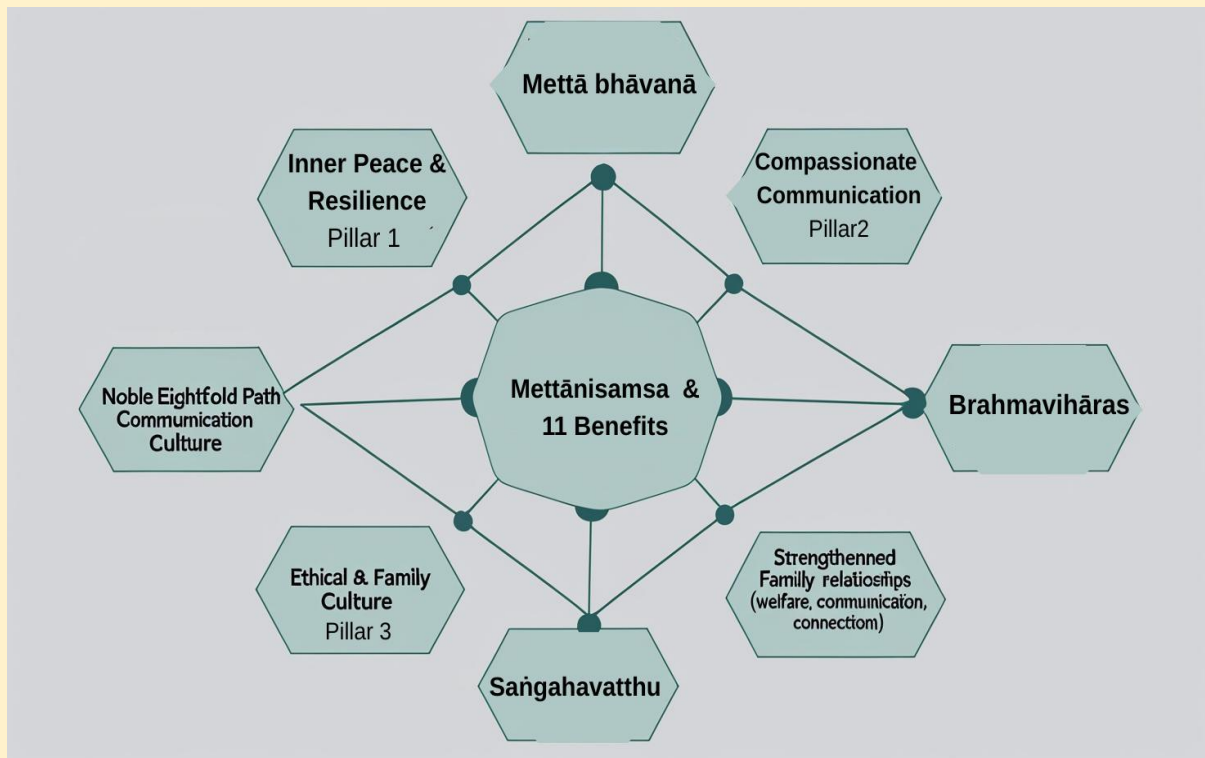


Figure 1: Framework for Strengthening Family Relationships

This diagram shows the importance of the *Mettānisamsa Sutta* (AN 11.16) as a guiding theory and lists the rewards that can be gained from it. Loving-Kindness Meditation (*Mettā Bhāvanā*) is the main practice that brings these benefits to life in the home setting. This practice is the foundation of three main programming pillars:

Pillar 1: Inner Peace & Resilience: Concentrates on fostering personal emotional equilibrium and tranquility, in accordance with the *Sutta*'s assurances of comfort and serenity.

Pillar 2: Compassionate Communication emphasizes building empathy and having clear, polite, and non-harmful conversations, which the Sutta says can help people get along better and avoid relationship problems.

Pillar 3: Ethical Family Culture: The Sutta's main ideas of protection and good influence are about creating a family atmosphere based on good behavior, helping one another, and treating everyone equally.

The Brahmavihāras, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Saṅgahavatthu continually inform these pillars, providing mettā-based activities and family relationships with moral and practical depth. When these elements work together, they strengthen family relationships, improving well-being, communication, and emotional ties.

Practical Implications and Ethical Safeguards

To translate mettā-based dialogue into contemporary family settings without diluting its ethical core, facilitators should attend to safeguards that are standard in contemplative and clinical applications: voluntary participation and informed consent; trauma-informed options (e.g., open-eye practice, shorter periods, and referral pathways); and a non-instrumental approach in which mindfulness is not used to silence legitimate grievances or reinforce harmful hierarchies (Davidson & Dahl, 2018; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Practical delivery can be operationalized through a brief routine: (1) settle attention with mindful breathing, (2) generate mettā phrases toward self and family members, (3) practice “right speech” rules for turn-taking and non-harming language, and (4) close with a concrete next-step commitment that supports household care and mutual responsibility.

- Voluntary participation and consent (no coercive or punitive framing).
- Trauma-informed adaptations and professional referral when distress escalates.
- Cultural humility and ethical use: mettā as compassion training, not a tool for compliance.

Conclusion

This article argues that the Mettānisamsa Sutta (AN 11.16) offers a doctrinally grounded rationale for strengthening family well-being through loving-kindness meditation (mettā bhāvanā). The sutta’s eleven benefits can be

read as a practical profile of psychosocial protection, sleep and waking ease, reduced fear, social acceptance, and mental stability, that speaks to contemporary concerns about emotional distance, communication breakdown, and conflict escalation in families. Read alongside current psychological research, mettā practice plausibly supports empathy, affect regulation, prosocial motivation, and skillful speech in ways directly relevant to family conflict prevention and relational repair.

Building on this doctrinal and empirical base, the article proposes a framework for integrating mettā into mindfulness-oriented family programs. The framework positions the Mettānisamsa Sutta as a guiding theory and operationalizes it through structured mettā practice, informed by complementary principles from the Brahmavihāras, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Saṅgahavatthu. Conceptually, it links inner peace, compassionate communication, and ethical family culture as mutually reinforcing pillars; practically, it translates these pillars into repeatable household routines and facilitated dialogues. Future work should test the framework across diverse family contexts, examine delivery formats and practice “dose,” and evaluate outcomes (e.g., conflict frequency, communication quality, and well-being) using mixed-method designs.

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