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Understanding Family Dynamics

It's a given that no two families are alike. However, our first forays into becoming more aware of our families' dynamics begin when we gather with extended family. Differences also show up when visiting friends' families. We even see contrasts to our own experiences within the portrayals of some of the most beloved families in popular culture. It can leave us questioning why our families can't more closely align with what we may perceive to be idealized versions.

But, for better or worse, there's close to a universal agreement on the value of family as a concept because it teaches us about belonging to something bigger than ourselves. Families are where we first learn about connections, relationships, and friendships.

This article looks at different aspects of family dynamics and family compositions. It will explore some of the characteristics of healthy family dynamics and contrast these with behaviours considered damaging and toxic. Finally, we'll consider ways to learn how to navigate the complexities of family life and touch on what someone can do if they think their family could use some help.

What are family dynamics?

The ways that family members interact with one another are commonly referred to as family dynamics. They are heavily influenced by culture, traditions, family history, learned skills, emotions, and the roles and hierarchy within a family. Family dynamics patterns affect the behaviours and relationships we see within a specific family environment.

When families are close, "a person [can enjoy] better health and well-being, as well as lower rates of depression and disease throughout a lifetime."¹ However, even close families can experience complicated family dynamics that create tension, introduce rivalries, and threaten stability.²

Types of family structures

Today, it's common to see many different family structures.

Nuclear

The idea of the nuclear family (a married couple with two children) was the model to aspire to around the middle of the twentieth century. It began after family structures shifted away from large, extended families with many children and relatives who contributed their labour to a family business.

Instead, children from those larger families left home with dreams of economic independence. In their new surroundings, single people would pair up, get married, have a couple of kids, and buy a home to settle down in. In a nuclear family, it was typical for men to earn income and for women to stay home raising children.³ Today's nuclear family often sees both parents working to support the family, focusing on shared responsibilities to raise children together in a family home.

Single-parent

Single-parent families have become increasingly more common in the past sixty years. They often result after a relationship breakdown where one adult leaves the household, and the children reside with a custodial parent and visit the other. Some people have been widowed, and others have chosen to remain single. Single-parent families often "are at a financial disadvantage" because of having to rely on one income and often face economic difficulties.⁴

Multigenerational

Multigenerational families have "three or more generations of relatives" living in the same household and are becoming increasingly common.⁵ These family structures have many benefits, such as "shared expenses, reduced loneliness, and help with childcare and eldercare."⁶ But there are also challenges when members of multigenerational households try to find privacy. Younger family members tend to receive unsolicited advice and opinions.

Blended families

When a parent with their own children enters into a new relationship with someone in a similar situation, there's often a lot to consider. Suppose the couple decides to merge the two families within one home. Blending these two families can take time for everyone to adjust. There is a lot of potential for rivalries to develop, and some family members could feel neglected. Since bonds take time to develop, parents of blended families can face challenges around developing ground rules and agreeing on how to establish authority and handle discipline, especially for teens.⁷

Families with many siblings

When there are many children in a family, there are a lot of shared experiences. From the standpoint of child development, having siblings can positively affect "a child's social skills," where people can become "more agreeable and sympathetic."⁸ It's not always smooth sailing, however. Sibling rivalry, jealousy, and conflict are all normal aspects for families to deal with. There are many assumptions and stereotypes about birth order and the characteristics siblings present as part of their personalities. Still, not all of them "seem to hold up in research."⁹ Firstborn and older siblings tend to be more "motivated to fulfill parents' expectations and therefore become more responsible. Since middle children

are not the only ones vying for their parent's attention, they may feel overlooked. However, it also seems that youngest children receive the most attention and affection from parents because older siblings have become more self-sufficient. It can lead to situations where the youngest children may "develop social skills that will get other people to do things for them."¹⁰

Only children

Many factors can influence a family's decision to have one child. Sometimes, families must weigh the costs of raising children and make decisions based on economics. Having one child may offer the best chance to fulfill parental responsibilities and obligations and provide for a child's welfare. The cost of post-secondary education, which parents often feel obligated to help their children, continues to increase each year. But there could be other factors, such as the progress of a woman's career. A woman may choose to delay pregnancy to stay in the workforce. Despite many false stereotypes, only children tend to be comfortable with independence, flexibility, and creativity. They may also have greater confidence and language abilities from being socialized amongst adults.

No children

A family is still a family without children: having children is a profoundly personal decision. Couples facing infertility challenges may not be able to. It could also be a conscious choice for people who don't want to have kids. Couples with no children may enjoy their lifestyle, career freedom and the ability to travel at any time. But they may have pets or enjoy spending time with extended family (nieces, nephews, or friend's children).

Family by choice

Friends who are trusted can be just as supportive, if not more so, than family members. Relationships often have less stress because friends are there by choice and share similar perspectives and values. They don't share memories of complicated family history. They are less likely to feel liberated to cast judgment on you simply because of an association. Having a close network of friends you enjoy spending time with is a great way to increase your well-being.

Living life estranged from family

Estrangement happens when there are rifts in relationships that create uncomfortable feelings and situations, resulting in prolonged periods of distance where there is little to no contact. It can be a choice to help protect someone from "abuse, neglect, betrayal, bullying, unaddressed mental illness, not being supportive, destructive behaviour, substance abuse...sexual orientation, choice of spouse, gender identity, religion, or political views."¹¹ Taking a break from family members can be temporary, but it may also be a permanent choice. Only you know if you want to work towards a future reconciliation.

Healthy family dynamics

There are several characteristics of healthy family dynamics to consider. While this is not an exhaustive list, you can view their positive qualities and recognize that they may help support your family's functioning.

- Honest, open communication** – Having regular, face-to-face discussions where family members respect one another by listening to understand someone's perspective.
- Supportiveness** – Parents, take an active role in their children's lives appreciating them for their individuality and offering support for decisions and goals their children wish to undertake. Siblings should also be supportive of one another.
- Safety and security** – Where family members feel that they belong, and they experience positive emotional well-being in their interactions.
- Love and caring** – Family members who are in tune with others' needs openly express their affection and demonstrate it through gestures and actions that convey love and caring.
- Valuing and respecting** – Where all family members believe in making their other family members feel important and appreciated.
- Addressing conflict** – Working together to resolve or repair conflict so that relationships between family members become strong and more resilient.¹²

Toxic family dynamics

In toxic families, behaviours are almost always destructive and harmful, which can significantly affect family members' mental health. It is more than the occasional conflict. Unhealthy behaviour patterns are often unrelenting and become the norm within the family, so much so that affected family members may not recognize the harmful behaviours.

Parentification

Parentification is a role-reversal where the parent chooses not to or is unable to take on household responsibilities. Instead, the parent relies upon a child to take the lead in providing comfort, nurturing, giving advice, mediating conflicts, and more. The child takes on the role of an adult in the relationship. The lack of boundaries can create significant trauma for the child because it "interferes with a child's ability to engage in developmentally appropriate activities" because they have to "grow up quickly."¹³ This dynamic is often observed in households where an adult may be living with addiction.

Family violence

Family violence often erupts when there is an "abuse of power" or trust that "threatens the survival, security, or well-being" of a family member.¹⁴ The violence can be physical, emotional, environmental, financial, ritualistic, sexual, religious, or social. While women and children are often the victims, men also experience family violence.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a "form of manipulation" where one person attempts to insert themselves between two others to create divisiveness and seclusion.¹⁵ It's born out of feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, and the person who is orchestrating it is attempting to keep the two others apart by limiting communication and serving as their intermediary.

Rivalry

Rivalry, especially amongst siblings, is competitiveness born from jealousy, often leading to competition between two or more siblings. It usually begins during childhood and can carry forward into adulthood. While it may seem that it's something affecting the siblings, it has quite a negative effect on the entire family dynamic.¹⁶

How to navigate through family dynamics

Family dynamics change and evolve. It can help to learn more about managing some of the challenges that inevitably arise as part of family dynamics.

- Division of labour** – Ensuring that the responsibilities for maintaining a functioning household do not fall on one person. All family members should participate in helping to keep a home in good order.
- Discipline vs. punishment** – Recognizing the differences between these two actions is essential. With discipline, you are teaching someone a new behaviour and helping them learn. The focus is on the learner. With punishment, you are using fear to obtain the desired behaviour. The focus is on the person delivering the punishment.
- Listening to understand** – Learning to listen carefully and understand what someone is expressing is a skill to develop. Restrain yourself from the urge to interrupt and offer solutions.
- Establish healthy boundaries** – Boundaries help determine what family members believe are acceptable and unacceptable topics to discuss within the family dynamic. Setting boundaries helps protect individuality and allows some information to stay private during interactions and conversations.

- ❑ **Supporting honest expression of feelings** – Creating a safe space for family members to discuss topics that preserve boundaries and allow for transparency and honesty within the boundary terms is something for families to strive for.
- ❑ **The importance of independence** – Recognizing and supporting the need for people to develop and express themselves as independent individuals while remaining beloved family members can make all the difference in someone's health and well-being.
- ❑ **Letting go and severing ties when necessary** – Sometimes, people need the room to move through a situation in their lives on their own. Family members can offer support and guidance but appreciating the need for someone to find their way can strengthen the family dynamic.
- ❑ **Divorce** – Relationships break down and can lead to divorce. It can be a traumatic and painful experience for everyone involved. Preserving a sense of the family dynamic in the future will be essential to convey to everyone, especially children.
- ❑ **Self-preservation** – In situations where families experience trauma or toxicity, some people may need to step away for some time to preserve their mental health and well-being. Being gracious and understanding is the best approach. The person will reach out if and when they are ready.

Families also need to appreciate how different events in their lives will affect the family dynamics. Being patient and accepting of the changes and working through any difficulties together will help when getting through the big, demanding things like:

- Grief
- Aging parents
- Chronic illness or disease
- Children leaving home (empty nest)

Finally, family members should educate themselves about unhealthy behaviours that create conflict so that they can work to avoid these disrupting the relationship dynamics.

Look out for:

- ❑ Controlling
- ❑ Blaming
- ❑ Threatening
- ❑ Criticism
- ❑ Dismissiveness
- ❑ Extremism / Dramatics

Naming the behaviour is a way to acknowledge that you won't support or continue discussions or interactions that exhibit these characteristics.

Family dynamics can be complicated, but our experiences as part of a family inform and influence how we interact with the world throughout our lives.



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