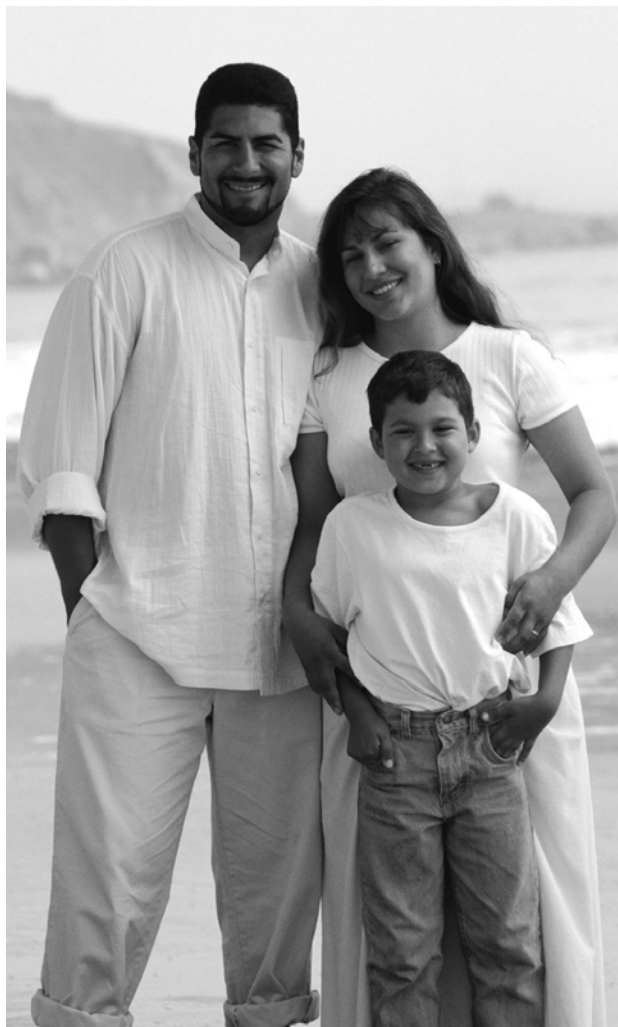


Families First: Keys to Successful Family Functioning An Introduction

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**FAMILIES PLAY AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN THE
EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL, AND SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUAL FAMILY
MEMBERS**



Healthy families are able to cope with and adapt to stressful life events and transitions.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL FAMILY FUNCTIONING

Healthy families promote the emotional, physical and social welfare of individual family members. Among the many factors that contribute to this process are a family's internal strengths and the durability of the family unit. Unlike any other social group, families are able to provide the close emotional support needed to produce self-confident and well-adjusted children and adults. Likewise, families that function in a healthy manner are well equipped to deal with the many normal changes and unexpected crises that confront them throughout their lifetime. Therefore, the family's primary function is to create a healthy environment where family members can successfully grow and develop.

FAMILY TASK AREAS

The family's task areas include basic, developmental and crisis tasks. The basic task area is concerned with the provision of food, money, shelter and other necessities of life. The developmental tasks include individual and family stages of growth. Individual developmental stages include infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and aging. The family developmental tasks are stages in the family life cycle. These stages include the marriage and early years before children; the childbearing family; the family with school age children; the family with teenagers; the family/launching center; the family/middle years; and the aging family.

Crisis tasks are family hardship events such as illness, job loss, accidents, relocation, or death. Families that are able to cope with and adapt to stressful life events and transitions are better able to maintain a healthy family environment.

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KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF HEALTHY FAMILIES

Research has identified several characteristics possessed by successful families. Families that do well in each of these areas have fewer problems and are able to deal more effectively with problems as they arise. On the other hand, families that have difficulty in these areas tend to have more problems that remain unresolved.

- **PROBLEM-SOLVING**

Problem-solving is defined as a family's ability to resolve problems on a level that maintains effective family functioning (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). A problem is an issue without an easy solution that will threaten the family's ability to function if it is not resolved.

- **COMMUNICATION**

Communication is defined as the way verbal and nonverbal information is exchanged within a family (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). Effective family communication depends on several factors, including clear and direct communication between family members. Families who can express their feelings to one another are better equipped to solve problems as they arise.



The ability to listen to others and to pay attention to what they say are essential skills for effective family communication.

- **FAMILY ROLES**

Family roles are recurrent patterns of behavior by which family members fulfill family functions

(Epstein Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). The establishment of clear roles within a family is directly connected to a family's ability to deal with normal and unexpected changes. Healthy families are able to establish clear, yet flexible, roles that enable them to carry out family functions.



Deciding work roles inside and outside the home is an important family task.

- **AFFECTIVE RESPONSIVENESS**

Affective responsiveness is the family's ability to respond emotionally to other family members in an appropriate manner (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). Families need to be able to share and experience feelings such as love, tenderness,



Responding emotionally to family members in an appropriate manner is a key to healthy family functioning.

joy, fear, and anger. Families that are unable to respond, for example, with sadness or tenderness, may be restricted or even distorted emotionally.

- **AFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT**

Affective involvement is how well the family as a whole shows interest in and values the activities and interests of individual family members (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). Both over-involvement and under-involvement are patterns of behavior that can pose problems for families.



Showing interest in and valuing the activities of other family members is essential for healthy family functioning.

- **BEHAVIOR CONTROL**

Behavior control refers to patterns of behavior that the family adopts for dealing with family situations (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). Some families have flexible behavior patterns while others may have more rigid patterns. Families with flexible behavior patterns are better able to adjust to and cope with changing family circumstances.

FOCUS ON FAMILY STRENGTHS

Families can make a difference in the lives of their children. Research has identified several factors that promote resiliency in children. Among these are social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose and future (National Network for Family Resiliency, 1993). Children whose families promote these skills have a better chance of becoming successful adults.

In addition, families who express caring and support, create high expectations for family members, and encourage children's participation in school and other activities are more likely to have happy and successful family members

FAMILY ASSESSMENT

Successful Healthy families periodically take inventory of their strengths and weaknesses and take steps to improve their home and family environment. Isn't it time your family took an inventory of how well it is doing?

For more detailed information regarding family functioning in the six key areas, contact your local Extension Office for copies of other publications in this series.

REFERENCES

Epstein, N. B., Bishop, D., Ryan, C., Miller, & Keitner, G., (1993). The McMaster Model View of Healthy Family Functioning. In Froma Walsh (Ed.), *Normal Family Processes* (pp. 138-160). The Guilford Press: New York/London.

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