

Families First: Keys to Successful Family Functioning Affective Involvement

Prepared by Rick Peterson, Extension Specialist and Assistant Professor, Department of Human Development, Virginia Tech
Stephen Green, Graduate Student, Department of Human Development, Virginia Tech

**HOW MUCH THE FAMILY AS A WHOLE
SHOWS INTEREST IN AND VALUES THE
ACTIVITIES AND INTERESTS OF FAMILY
MEMBERS IS AFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT
(EPSTEIN, ET AL., 1993).**



AFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT

Healthy families are able to maintain a consistent level of involvement with one another, yet at the same time, not become too involved in each other's lives. Therefore, the focus is on how much, and in what ways, family members show their interest and investment in each other. Affective (emotional) involvement is concerned with how much family members are involved with each other, and not with what a family does together. Both overinvolvement and underinvolvement are patterns of behavior that can pose problems for families.

DEGREES OF INVOLVEMENT

The degree to which family members are involved in each other's lives is an important factor in family functioning. The level can range from overinvolvement at one end of the scale to a total absence of involvement at the other. Families that show little, if any, interest or investment in each other except for shared instrumental (practical) functions, such as handling money, are an example of an underinvolved family. In this case, family members act more like boarders in a house than like family members.

Some underinvolved families share some interests but show very little investment of self in the feelings or life situations of other family members. Often, the members of such families are self absorbed and invest in other family members only when they can gain something from the involvement.

In overinvolved families, the members become too involved and sometimes are overprotective of other family members. As a result, the overprotected members remain dependent and fail to grow and develop. Overinvolvement may create conflict and resentment among family members who try to break out of the dependency role.

www.ext.vt.edu

Symbiotic involvement occurs when the involvement is so intense that the boundaries between two or more family members are blurred. Boundaries are the rules that define a person's role in the family. Symbiotic involvement is thought to be the least effective type of involvement because family member's boundaries are not respected. Without boundaries it is difficult to identify who the parent is and who the child is because their roles are often confused.

The healthiest families have a type of interaction called empathic involvement where the members have an emotional investment in one another and care deeply about each other's activities and feelings. Families whose members show that they truly care about what others are doing, even though it may not be related to their own interests, are the most effective type of families.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING HEALTHY FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Healthy families protect their boundaries, but at the same time, give members room to negotiate their independence. Achieving this balance is often difficult in our fast-paced culture. And it is particularly difficult in families with adolescents.

Families whose members want to increase their involvement with one another need to set aside time during the week when they can tell each other about their interests, jobs, hobbies or activities. On a weekly basis, the focus could shift from one member to the next until each has had a turn in sharing. Family members will need to listen and ask questions to better understand what is important to each other.

The goal of this exercise is to familiarize family members with each other's interests, what is important to them, what bothers them, and the way they look at things. Gaining a better understanding of each other's lives helps family members to be involved and concerned about each other. Families who can achieve this empathic involvement will function more effectively.

Overinvolved families create hard feelings among family members with intrusive and over-protective behavior. These families need to reduce the overinvolvement by some family members, which allows room for others to accept their family responsibilities.

Changing your family's style of involvement is not an easy task. However, steps can be taken to promote change within the family by using family meetings.

FAMILY MEETING STEPS

A meeting provides a safe, structured environment where family members feel free to bring up issues and concerns they may have about the family. The meeting is a way to share hopes and achievements as well as to resolve family conflicts. Families may use the following steps to set up their meetings:

- **SET A DEFINITE AND REGULAR TIME AND PLACE TO MEET.**
- **THE MEETING SHOULD INCLUDE THE WHOLE FAMILY, BUT NO ONE SHOULD BE FORCED TO ATTEND.**
- **A CHAIRPERSON SHOULD BE CHOSEN AND THAT ROLE SHOULD BE ROTATED AMONG FAMILY MEMBERS WHO ARE CAPABLE OF LEADING THE MEETING.**
- **THE PURPOSE OF THE MEETING IS TO HEAR FAMILY MEMBER'S CONCERNS, FIND SOLUTIONS TO FAMILY PROBLEMS, OR MAKE PLANS FOR ENJOYABLE FAMILY ACTIVITIES. NO ONE SHOULD ATTACK OR BLAME OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS DURING THE MEETING.**
- **EVERYONE CAN BRING UP ISSUES AND DISCUSS CONCERNS THAT AFFECT THE WELL-BEING OF THE FAMILY. FOR EXAMPLE, PARENTS MAY SEEK AGREEMENT ON WHO IS TO DO CERTAIN CHORES. CHILDREN MAY VOICE CONCERNS ABOUT GAINING MORE INDEPENDENCE OR THEY MAY MAKE PLANS FOR A FAMILY OUTING. (TRY USING THE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS FOUND IN VCE PUBLICATION 350-091.)**



Family meetings can be called any time to resolve issues or problems that come up in the family.

- **DECISIONS MADE DURING THE MEETING CANNOT BE CHANGED OR IGNORED, BUT CAN BE RENEGOTIATED AT ANOTHER FAMILY MEETING.**
- **EVERYONE MUST CARRY OUT THE DECISIONS MADE IN THE MEETING.**
- **FAMILY MEMBERS MUST FEEL THAT THEY ARE BEING HEARD AND RESPECTED, AND THAT THEIR ISSUES ARE TAKEN SERIOUSLY. END THE MEETING IN A POSITIVE MANNER BY COMPLIMENTING ONE ANOTHER OR BY GOING OUT FOR ICE CREAM.**

A family meeting can be a way to address family issues, discuss concerns, resolve family problems, and plan for family activities and outings. However, families should be cautious because learning a new skill is difficult and takes time to master.

FOCUS ON FAMILY STRENGTHS

Emotional involvement is a key to successful family functioning. Researchers have identified several characteristics of strong families. Among these are expressions of appreciation, spending time together, strong commitment to the family, good communication, and positive conflict resolution.

When family members feel they are supported and encouraged, and that their personal interests are valued, family interaction becomes more effective. If your family would like to improve its family involvement, try using the family meeting.



Family members spending quality time together is a way to develop affective involvement.

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 (Eds.), *Normal Family Processes* (pp. 138-160). The Guilford Press: New York/London.

Sherman, R., & Fredman, N. (1986). *Handbook of Structural Techniques in Marriage and Family Therapy*. Brunner/Mazel, Inc.

Olson, D.H., McCubbin, H.L., Barnes, H.L., Larsen, A.S., Muxen, M.J., & Wislon, M.A. (1983) *Families-What Makes Them Work*. Sage Publications, Inc. Beverly Hills, California.

