

7. Families First-Keys to Successful Family Functioning: Communication

Effective communication is an important characteristic of strong, healthy families. Research identifies communication as an essential building block of strong marital, parent-child, and sibling relationships.

7.1 Family Communication

Family communication refers to the way verbal and non-verbal information is exchanged between family members (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, (1993). Communication involves the ability to pay attention to what others are thinking and feeling. In other words, an important part of communication is not just talking, but listening to what others have to say.

Communication within the family is extremely important because it enables members to express their needs, wants, and concerns to each other. Open and honest communication creates an atmosphere that allows family members to express their differences as well as love and admiration for one another. It is through communication that family members are able to resolve the unavoidable problems that arise in all families.

Just as effective communication is almost always found in strong, healthy families, poor communication is usually found in unhealthy family relationships. Marriage and family therapists often report that poor communication is a common complaint of families who are having difficulties. Poor communication is unclear and indirect. It can lead to numerous family problems, including excessive family conflict, ineffective problem solving, lack of intimacy, and weak emotional bonding.

Researchers have discovered a strong link between communication patterns and satisfaction with family relationships (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). In fact, one researcher discovered that the more positively couples rated their communication, the more satisfied they were with their relationship five and a half years later (Markman, 1981).

Poor communication is also associated with an increased risk of divorce and marital separation and more behavioral problems in children.

7.2 Instrumental and Affective Communication

Communication can be divided into two different areas: instrumental and affective. Instrumental communication is the exchange of factual information that enables individuals to fulfill common family functions (e.g., telling a child that he/she will be picked up from school at a specific time and location). Affective communication is the way individual family members share their emotions with one another (e.g., sadness, anger, joy).

Some families function extremely well with instrumental communication, yet have great difficulty with affective communication. Healthy families are able to communicate well in both areas.

7.3 Clear vs. Masked and Direct vs. Indirect Communication

Communication can be clear or masked and direct or indirect (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). Clear communication occurs when messages are spoken plainly and the content is easily understood by other family members. Masked communication occurs when the message is muddled or vague.

Communication is direct if the person spoken to is the person for whom the message is intended. In contrast, communication is indirect if the message is not directed to the person for whom it is intended.

7.4 Four Styles of Communication

Epstein et al. (1993) have identified the following four styles of communication.

1. Clear and Direct Communication

Clear and direct communication is the most healthy form of communication and occurs when the message is stated plainly and directly to the appropriate family member. An example of this style of communication is when a father, disappointed about his son failing to complete his chore, states, "Son, I'm disappointed that you forgot to take out the trash today without my having to remind you."

2. Clear and Indirect Communication

In this second style of communication, the message is clear, but it is not directed to the person for whom it is intended. Using the previous example, the father might say, "It's disappointing when people forget to complete their chores." In this message the son may not know that his father is referring to him.

3.Masked and Direct Communication

Masked and direct communication occurs when the content of the message is unclear, but directed to the appropriate family member. The father in our example may say something like, "Son, people just don't work as hard as they used to."

4.Masked and Indirect Communication

Masked and indirect communication occurs when both the message and intended recipient are unclear. In unhealthy family relationships, communication tends to be very masked and indirect. An example of this type of communication might be the father stating, "The youth of today are very lazy."

7.5 Keys to Building Effective Family Communication

There are many things that families can do to become more effective communicators and in turn to improve the quality of their relationships. Families can improve their communication skills by following some suggestions for building effective family communication.

Communicate Frequently

One of the most difficult challenges facing families today is finding time to spend together. According to a recent Wall Street Journal survey, 40% of the respondents stated that lack of time was a greater problem for them than lack of money (Graham & Crossan, 1996).

With our busy schedules, it is difficult to find sufficient time to spend with one another in meaningful conversation. It is extremely important for families to make time to communicate. Talk in the car; turn the TV off and eat dinner together; schedule informal or formal family meetings to talk about important issues that affect your family; and talk to your children at bedtime. There are many creative ways to make time to communicate with other family members.

Communicate Clearly and Directly

Healthy families communicate their thoughts and feelings in a clear and direct manner. This is especially important when attempting to resolve problems that arise between family members (e.g., spouse, parent-child). Indirect and vague communication will not only fail to resolve problems, but will also contribute to a lack of intimacy and emotional bonding between family members.

Be An Active Listener

An essential aspect of effective communication is listening to what others are saying. Being an active listener involves trying your best to understand the point of view of the other person. Whether you are listening to a spouse or a child, it is important to pay close attention to their verbal and non-verbal messages. As an active listener, you must acknowledge and respect the other person's perspective. For example, when listening to a spouse or child, you should nod your head or say, "I understand," which conveys to the other person that you care about what he or she has to say. Another aspect of active listening is seeking clarification if you do not understand the other family member. This can be done by simply asking, "What did you mean when you said..?" or "Did I understand you correctly?"

In order for effective communication to take place within families, individual family members must be open and honest with one another. This openness and honesty will set the stage for trusting relationships. Without trust, families cannot build strong relationships. Parents, especially, are responsible for providing a safe environment that allows family members to openly express their thoughts and feelings.

Think About the Person With Whom You Are Communicating

Not all family members communicate in the same manner or at the same level. This is especially true of young children. When communicating with young children, it is important for adults to listen carefully to what the children are saying without making unwarranted assumptions. It is also important to take into consideration the ages and maturity levels of children. Parents cannot communicate with children in the same way that they communicate with their spouse because the child may not be old enough to understand.

Pay Attention to Non-Verbal Messages

In addition to carefully listening to what is being said, effective communicators also pay close attention to the non-verbal behaviors of other family members. For example, a spouse or child may say something verbally, but their facial expressions or body language may be telling you something completely different. In cases such as these, it is important to find out how the person is really feeling.

Be Positive

While it is often necessary to address problems between family members, or to deal with negative situations, effective communication is primarily positive. Marital and family researchers have discovered that unhappy family relationships are often the result of negative communication patterns (e.g., criticism, contempt, defensiveness). In fact, John Gottman and his colleagues have found that satisfied married couples had five positive interactions to every one negative interaction (Gottman, 1994). Couples who are very dissatisfied with their relationships typically engage in more negative interactions than positive. It is very important for family members to verbally compliment and encourage one another.

7.5 Focus on Family Strengths

Communication is a key to successful family functioning. Researchers agree that clear, open, and frequent communication is a basic characteristic of a strong, healthy family. Families that communicate in healthy ways are more capable of problem-solving and tend to be more satisfied with their relationships.

7.6 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?