

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Understanding the Reasons : Family Dynamics

Each family has its own patterns of relating to each other. These are their family dynamics. They are influenced by things like the structure of the family – the numbers of children and adults and how they are related – the personalities of each family member, cultural background, values, and personal or family experiences.

It can be helpful to try to understand the dynamics at work in your family. Family dynamics can influence the way a young person and others in the family are behaving, and can make it harder for a young person to get on track.

Family of origin

As we grow up, we learn how to behave and what to expect of relationships and life in the families we grow up in. These experiences shape our lives. Our experiences of growing up strongly influence the way we behave when we become parents ourselves. We often repeat the patterns we learnt as children.

It is all too easy to slip in to repeating a damaging pattern from our family of origin. If you have grown up in an abusive family, you may find you need help to learn other ways to live as an adult and parent.

Culture and values

Family culture is our set of beliefs about how things should be. It covers things like who is the boss, who does what work around the house, roles for men and women.

Cultural background is an important part of this. A common source of strain is when there is a culture clash in the family – such as between parents from different backgrounds, or between Australian-born children and migrant parents.

The value system a family holds is also part of their family culture. Such things as attitudes to education, attitudes to employment and employment status, the importance placed on family loyalty and defending each other, the amount of time family members are expected to spend together, all constitute family values.

It can be very hard for a young person who wants to break with family tradition and live differently. Or for a young person who feels they cannot achieve what their family expects.

Skeletons in the closet

Many families strongly value privacy and are secretive about things they consider shameful. They believe speaking to anyone outside the family about their difficulties is disloyal, or will invite interference.

When a young person is struggling with problems, it can be tempting for parents or family members to keep it a secret. You may worry about being shamed, or feel like a failure as a parent. You want to try to look normal and happy.

But keeping secrets can be unhelpful. It can isolate you from other people who might be able to support you. It can take up time and energy that you could be using on other things. It can make the young person feel like a failure, or they might see you as two-faced and lose respect for you.

Some parents have said the best thing they did was finally admit to themselves that their child was experiencing problems and then to share this fact with other supportive people. They found this helped them feel more free, and was the first step towards tackling the problem/s more effectively.

Roles

You can come to have a particular role in your family – you might be the reliable one, or the funny one, or the disorganised one. This can influence others expectations of you and how you behave.

Black sheep

Often one child takes on the role of the “black sheep” in the family. They are labelled as the difficult one, and blamed for the family’s problems. But sometimes their problems are caused by family dynamics. Their behaviour can be a symptom of a problem in the family, not the cause.

Birth order

One theory says birth order plays a role in family dynamics and how we behave: the oldest child in the family tends to be more responsible and dutiful; the middle child is often rebellious; the youngest sometimes struggles to be allowed to grow up.

Child as parent

Sometimes young people start to act as parents to their parents. They provide a lot of practical support (cooking, childcare, helping them fill in forms) and/or emotional support.

Helping out is good. But if a young person is too responsible and this is a general pattern in the relationship, it is not so good. The child may keep problems to themselves so as not to burden the parent or may learn to look after others at the expense of their own needs. Or they may eventually rebel against the role and distance themselves from the family to escape the responsibility.

This role swap tends to happen when parents are fragile or lack support. Sometimes when parents separate, they lean on a child to cope.

Sometimes parents can be childish. If you have an argument with your child, and you are both swearing and slamming doors, you are both behaving like children.

Make a new story

People can get stuck in their roles and find it hard to get the family to see a different side of them. If a young person has been labelled in a negative way – as the one always in trouble, perhaps – it can keep them stuck in that role. It can be useful to try to build a more positive picture of them in the family. A better image in the family can help their self-esteem.

Alignments

Each family has several alignments, or “groupings”: the one between the parents as a couple; between siblings; between each parent and child. Each parent ideally has a close and unique relationship with each child.

Often alignments between certain pairs are stronger. A child may be closer to one parent because of similar personalities, or gender, or other factors. It is natural for alignments to form to some extent but it can be a problem if it goes too far.

It is unhealthy for children and teenagers to have too much power in the family dynamic. They need their parents to be parents. A power imbalance can develop if a child has a very strong personality, or parents are weak in asserting their authority, or they do not have the time or energy to be firm.

The bond between the parents should be strong – their authority is built on it. If the bond between a parent and one child is stronger, it can undermine the authority of the other parent. If one child is seen as the favourite, it can provoke jealousy and rebellion in other siblings.

If parents are in conflict, it is easier for unbalanced bonds to develop. One parent may lean on a child for the support they are not getting from their partner. The parents may undermine each other's authority. They may have different rules. Power imbalance or conflict means that young people may not get the kind of good supervision that they need.

Children may play parents off against each other. This can happen when one parent tries to be too firm with a child and the other parent isn't firm enough. Ideally both parents are warm and loving towards the child but both are also firm when firmness is required.

Sole and separated parents

Sole parents often develop a close bond with a child, especially when no other adults are around. It can be damaging if this becomes a bond where the adult relies too much on the child. It can help to have another adult – a friend or relative – in your life that you can talk to about parenting issues and strategies. There are support groups for sole parents.

It is important not to involve a child in a conflict between separated parents. A positive relationship between both parents and their child should be protected and kept separate from any conflict between the parents. It is often very hard, but parents in this situation really need to talk together and support each other as parents, even if they don't like each other much as people any more.

Adolescence can be one of the toughest times for families with separated parents. The parents may struggle to keep control and have any influence over a difficult young person.

When things get tough, it can be tempting to tell a difficult teenager to go and live with the other parent. Sometimes the child is able to come and go between homes when they fight with a parent. Swapping homes to avoid dealing with issues is not usually helpful. It is better to try to fix any conflict and not let the child get away with bad behaviour in either home.

An absent parent

When one parent is absent, children may react by either feeling very hostile towards them, or thinking that they are the ideal parent.

A teenager who feels a lot of anger and resentment towards an absent parent may need some help to get past those feelings. Whether it is right or not, it is not good for the child to hold onto that anger forever.

Sometimes the child can use an idealised image as a weapon to hurt the parent they live with or to get their own way. Professional counselling may help the child develop a better understanding of the family dynamics and more appropriate ways to communicate.

Step-families

When parents separate and form couples with new partners, a new set of relationships is created.

The parent and new partner are in a couple relationship. That does not necessarily mean that the new adult in the child's life takes on the parenting role. Often the original parents maintain their roles as 'the parents', and the new partner has a different relationship with the child.

Teenagers – because they are wanting to be their own person – often react badly to a new authority figure in their lives. In stepfamilies, there is extra work in creating new understanding. Negotiation is needed so that everyone understands their new roles.

Get help when you need it

Family therapists are trained to explore family dynamics, and help families improve relationships. Family therapy ideally involves the whole family, but it can still be useful even if not all family members are willing to go. If you're struggling with family dynamics or are experiencing poor communication in your family, you might want to consider consulting a family therapist.

(Ideas for this sheet come from the 'Structural', 'Narrative' and 'Strengths-based' Family Therapy approaches).



Related Help Sheets

- Adolescent Development
- Parenting an Adolescent
- Parenting Styles
- Need a helping Hand?



Tips from this Help Sheet

- Our own family experiences influence the way that we parent now.
- Some parents say that admitting to having a child with problems was the best step they took towards tackling the problem more effectively.
- We all have different roles and alignments in our family that influence our behaviour.
- People can get stuck in their role and find it hard to get others to see a different side to them.
- Alignments or power imbalances in a family can cause problems for young people.
- After separation, it is critical for parents to work together and support each other, without drawing the children into conflict.
- In stepfamilies, there is extra work in creating understanding about new roles and responsibilities.



Useful Resources

- Bradshaw, John. (1988). Bradshaw On: The Family – A Revolutionary Way of Self-Discovery. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.
If you are interested in more information on birth order, look for John Bradshaw's book 'The Family'. There are also critiques of this theory. See, for example: www.littletree.com.au/birthorder.htm
- Bradshaw, John (1996) Family Secrets – The Path to Self-Acceptance and Reunion, Bantam, USA.
- Social network and support for sole parent families: see <http://victoria.ymca.org.au> and go to link for Parentlink
- Stepfamily Association of Victoria www.stepfamily.org.au
- Victorian Association of Family Therapists: to locate a family therapist in your region go to the online family therapist database on the following website: <http://www.vaft.asn.au/>





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→ **Strong Bonds is a project of Jesuit Social Services.**

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