

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Understanding Families : **Family Dynamics**

Family dynamics are the patterns of relating, or interactions, between family members. Each family system and its dynamics are unique, although there are some common patterns.

All families have some helpful and some unhelpful, or even abusive, dynamics.

Even where there is little or no present contact with family, a young person will have been influenced by dynamics in earlier years. Family dynamics often have a strong influence on the way young people see themselves, others and the world, and influence their relationships, behaviours and their wellbeing.

An understanding of the impact of family dynamics on a young person's self-perception may help workers pinpoint and respond to the driving forces behind a young person's current needs.

Family Systems Theory¹

Traditional individual therapy tends to focus on problems in a linear manner, that is, 'event' A caused 'problem' B. The history of the problem is explored, in order to understand what has caused the problem and identify what is needed (deficit) in order for a person to move forward.

Family systems theory, in comparison, views problems in a more circular manner, using what is called a 'systemic perspective'. Both A and B are seen to exist in the context of a relationship, in which each influences the other (the dynamics of the relationship). Understanding problems requires the assessment of patterns of interactions, with an emphasis on what is happening, rather than why.

This approach emphasises the bi-directional nature of relationships, and moves away from blaming one person for the dynamic (with the exception of abusive relationships, where responsibility is clearly placed with the perpetrator).

Symptomatic behaviour is seen as arising out of the inter-related behaviour of all family members. Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of a young person's situation, their behaviour is explored in the context of their family system, rather than in isolation. The focus is on the pattern of dynamics within a young person's family system, including the effect of the young person's behaviours.

What influences family dynamics?

Some of the many influences on family dynamics include:

- nature of the parents' relationship
- having a particularly soft or strict parent
- number of children in the family
- personalities of family members
- an absent parent

- the 'mix' of members who are living in the same household
- level and type of influence from extended family or others
- a chronically sick or disabled child within the family
- events which have affected family members, such as an affair, divorce, trauma, death, unemployment, homelessness
- other issues such as family violence, abuse, alcohol or other drug use, mental health difficulties, other disability
- family values, culture and ethnicity, including beliefs about gender roles, parenting practices, power or status of family members
- nature of attachments in family (ie secure, insecure)
- dynamics of previous generations (parents and grandparents families)
- broader systems- social, economic, political including poverty

More than One Side to the Story

Family therapy approaches consider that there are many versions of a family's story. Each person in a family unit has their own perspective about issues that are causing conflict in a family and each perspective is seen by family therapists as being both legitimate and flawed.²

There is an attempt to transcend 'either/or' dichotomies, and instead to embrace the idea of 'both/and'. This means that where there are two different theories or ideas (or stories) about what has happened, there is no requirement to reject one, but instead to see both as two sides of the one coin.

One cannot exist without the other, and one gives meaning and contrast to the other. Of course, this assumes

1. Becvar, D. and Becvar, R. (2002). Family Therapy: A Systemic Integration. Pearson Education Australia.
2. Becvar, D. and Becvar, R. (2002). Family Therapy: A Systemic Integration. Pearson Education Australia.

goodwill on the part of the people involved; lying and/or manipulative behaviour requires a different approach.

When talking to a young person about their family dynamics, it is important to keep in mind that other family members may hold different perspectives and interpretations of events and behaviours. The meaning given to behaviour is the personal truth for someone, and not the true meaning. Each family member's perspective is valid in its own right.³

It is important to 'hold' a variety of possible truths, while continuing to explore patterns and possible ways forward. Understanding the patterns that are maintaining the problem, including the patterns of communication and language used to discuss the problem, allows the worker to challenge perceptions of events. In most cases, family members have underlying goodwill to work on family problems, although they may not know how. Workers can harness this goodwill and use it to facilitate positive change in the family system.

Strengths-Based Practice with Families

Traditional therapies have focused on problems, deficits and 'risks'. Strengths-based practice, which arises from the Family Systems Theory tradition, aims to bring strengths of individuals and family systems into therapeutic awareness.

This approach does not ignore the seriousness of risk and/or abuse, but intends to bring a more accurate and balanced picture to light, when appropriate. For example, it may involve exploring how a behaviour or dynamic may be adaptive or functional within the family system, or may involve reclaiming a particular behaviour in a positive light. This approach facilitates change and growth by building self-confidence, optimism, motivation and a sense of empowerment. A strengths-based approach helps a client to identify their coping capacities and strengths to build a reality in which they are able to cope more effectively.⁴

See: [Reframing Feelings about Family](#)

How do family dynamics influence young people's behaviour

Family 'Roles'

People take on different roles or functions within the family system. These roles may be the result of family dynamics. The way that people behave and interact in their roles may not be a result of conscious choice. Some of the more common roles that young people take on in a family include:

'Peace-keeper'

A young person may be unintentionally playing the role of 'peace-keeper', mediating and reducing tension between conflicting parents. Their behaviour may be in response to their unconscious anxiety about family breakdown. This role may lead them to stay as a child in their family rather than to move towards age-appropriate independence.

The problem as the 'role'

Sometimes a young person's problems, for example drug use, may play a 'role' in the family system distracting the family from other problems. One of the early family systems theorists, Minuchin, identified that the negotiation of spouse stresses through the child serves to maintain the spouse subsystem in "illusory harmony". Spouses may reinforce deviant behaviour in a child in order to allow them to avoid addressing their own relationship difficulties, thereby keeping the family together.⁵

'Scapegoat'

Often, a young person with difficulties is seen as the black sheep or the bad child within the family, while other children are seen as the good children. The young person has become the 'scapegoat' for the family, or the visible 'symptom' of a troubled family system.

For example, the young person may be labeled as 'mentally ill', although they may be behaving in a way that is actually adaptive and enables them to cope and function within a troubled family system. If the purpose or function of their behaviour is understood within the context of family dynamics, the young person can be supported to cope in less detrimental ways.

Ascribed characteristics

A family's attitude towards a young person has an important influence on their self-identity and self-worth. A young person's behaviour may, at times, be in response to labeling or being ascribed characteristics by the family.

For example, a young person may be called a 'sook' in a family where emotional toughness is valued. This may lead to certain responses by the young person, such as 'toughening up' or managing low self-worth in a destructive manner. The young person will benefit greatly from a worker who will assist them to identify their strengths and emphasise the value of their attributes.

Reinforcing patterns

Interactions between family members and behaviours surrounding a 'problem' such as drug use may inadvertently serve to reinforce or encourage problem behaviour. A parent may pay a fine, for example, in an effort to avoid a particular negative consequence of a young person's drug use, such as a police record. This may unintentionally 'enable' or encourage the drug use in a young person, as it can be seen to prevent them experiencing and learning from the consequences of their actions.

If parents are able to agree together on an approach to be taken in relation to a young person's behaviour, using warmth and firm boundaries, young people usually respond well.

Family Structural issues⁶

The structural family therapy approach conceptualises families as comprising 'parent', 'couple' and 'children'

3. Becvar & Becvar, op. cit.

4. Becvar & Becvar, op. cit.

5. Minuchin, S. 1974. Families and Family Therapy. London: Tavistock Publications, p. 102

6. Minuchin, S. (1974) Families and Family Therapy. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

subsystems. Family dynamics can become more complex when a child in the family is brought into the parenting subgroup, and inappropriately or excessively joins a parent in parenting younger siblings.

Other difficulties arise when a child enters the couple relationship with a parent, whereby the parent relates to the child/young person as an adult friend and confides in them about age-inappropriate issues.

Families also form alignments (closer connections) and hierarchies (positions of power), which may or may not serve the young person well. For example, families may form alignments across gender, or one parent may align with and have a closer relationship with a child than with their partner, including sharing secrets from the other parent.

Parents should share the power in a family and support each other in decision-making and appropriate discipline of children. There are times when instead a child carries the power in the family, for example, where there is conflict between parents, or when parents are busy or non-effective in their boundaries with the child. These inappropriate alignments and hierarchies can have a negative influence on a young person's functioning.



Ideas from this Help Sheet

- Exploring family dynamics with a young person helps you to understand their behaviour and difficulties in context and enables more effective interventions.
- Family dynamics include family alignments, hierarchies, roles, ascribed characteristics and patterns of interactions within a family.
- Where possible, use a strengths-based approach when exploring family dynamics, and identify strengths or ways a pattern serves those involved. Also identify patterns that are problematic and may need to be challenged.
- Listen to the young person's narrative about their family, paying attention to and eliciting family relationship patterns and interpretations, including during conflicts (e.g. what happens then? How did you react?)



Related Help Sheets

Worker Help Sheets

- Simple Guide to Genograms
- Family Development and Transition Points
- Role of Family in Adolescent Development
- When to Refer and To Whom
- Reframing Feelings about Family

Parent Help Sheets

- Family Dynamics
- Parenting Styles



Suggested Reading

- Becvar, D. & Becvar, R (2002) Family Therapy: A Systemic Integration Pearson, Australia.



Other Related Links

For training in family therapy approaches

- Visit the Victorian Association of Family Therapy (VAFT) website:
www.vaft.asn.au
(e.g. >Family Therapy> Related links>ANZJFT)

Strengths-based Resources

- St Lukes Website offers an explanation of Strengths-Based practice and resources to assist:
<http://www.innovativeresources.org/aboutus/ourterms.html>
- For resources by Insoo Kim Berg, one of the founders of Solution-Focused and Strengths-Based approaches, go to:
<http://www.brief-therapy.org/books.htm>
- Peoplemaking bookstore in Camberwell, Melbourne, have resources for Solution-Focused approaches. Go to:
<http://www.peoplemaking.com.au/counselling/solution.html>



Strong Bonds

Jesuit Social Services
PO Box 1141
Collingwood Victoria 3066

Tel (03) 9415 8700
Email info@strongbonds.jss.org.au
Web www.strongbonds.jss.org.au



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