



Family matters

It's 10am on a Saturday and the Jones family are very busy. Mike (the dad) is taking James (the 12-year old son) to soccer; Joan (the mum) is helping Brittany (the 10-year old daughter) make a puppet for her school project, while Nathan (the 6-year old son) is racing through the house chasing the dog in a hectic game of tag. This family went to see a psychologist yesterday because they are worried about James's angry outbursts at school and at home. His teachers are concerned that he is disruptive in class, gets into fights, and is not learning much, and his parents are worried about the amount of fighting that goes on between James and his siblings at home. Last week, he became so angry while his mother was demanding an explanation for his aggression that he lashed out and hit her. Everyone was shocked. Mike and Joan are becoming increasingly concerned that Brittany is also becoming aggressive, defiant and oppositional.

The Jones family would describe themselves as a very close family. Their extended family would agree with this, and people outside of the family would say that that they really stick together. They spend most of their time together, being very involved in each other's activities, seldom have visitors around, and don't visit other people much, apart from family. Weekends revolve around family outings or activities. Mike and Jenny both say that they don't have hobbies or recreational activities outside of the family, and depend on each other to talk about problems. They are very firm about the values they hold, and make sure that the children share them. These are values of absolute loyalty to the family, not disclosing their problems to people outside of the family, and shielding their children from outside influences in the form of videos, movies, and books they disapprove of. They also believe in including their children in decision-making. For example, everyone was included in the decision to move to a new neighbourhood, and James knows about the financial pressures his parents face due to an increased mortgage. In fact, Joan sometimes describes James as her "little helper" because Mike does a reasonable amount of travelling with his work, and she finds that James is good company in the evenings before he goes to bed.

On the face of it, there doesn't seem to be many clues in this story that might point to an explanation of the family's current difficulties. However, an examination of how this family functions as a system (all members are connected together in a network that changes when one member of the family changes) may provide valuable information. As psychologists, we always look at the family system within which a child lives. No child operates as an island within a family, and all members play some part in the way the family, and its members, work. When we get to know a family, we are interested in at least three characteristics of the family, and we will look at these in this article.

The first characteristic we look at is how closed or open the boundary around the family is. That is, how much information is able to pass from the family members to the outside world, and how much influence the outside world has on the family members. When the boundary around the family is very closed, there is a benefit and a cost. On the one hand, the family feel very involved with each other and don't ask others for help, preferring to work their problems out themselves. Children are not exposed to influences that might model inappropriate behavior and remain innocent of the negative aspects of the world.

On the other hand, children may grow up not knowing how to be independent, how to get on with people who are different from themselves, and may remain dependent on their families into adulthood. Important world events and the changes in culture and society are not given time for discussion and judgements. Members have no other families with which to compare the way they operate, so may be unaware of unhelpful patterns in their functioning. In contrast, when the boundary is completely open, there may be little sense of belonging or commitment to each other between members. This can mean that children grow up with an incomplete sense of who they are as people, as there is no family culture (with its birthday rituals, beliefs and standards) with which to identify, or against which to rebel! This makes it hard to know what to stand up for, or how to make a new family when their time comes. Additionally, children may be exposed to potentially dangerous external influences without parental guidance before they have the maturity to be able to evaluate them, such as violence, drugs and unsafe sexual practices.

Therefore, the optimal situation is one in which information is allowed into the family in a way that is appropriate for the less mature members, and allows family functioning to adjust to changes inside and outside the family. For example, without good information from the world, parents may find it difficult to adjust their parenting practices to allow for the developmental changes associated with their children becoming adolescents. Equally, family members are able to access people and information outside of the family which broadens their knowledge and experience of the world and enhances their development.

The second characteristic we look at is the particular style of communication and balance of intimacy and independence between family members. Members need to know enough about each other to be able to support and care for each other. On the other hand, privacy is respected and thus members are free to develop independence and autonomy as they mature – able to survive without constant input from each other. Members spend enough time together to know each other, but have enough time for independent activities that enable them to develop friendships and activities outside of the home. Communication is direct so that members can let each other know, in unambiguous ways, what they need from each other. There is no need to use a third party to pass on messages, or to put pressure on another. For example, one parent can give an instruction to a child without needing to use the other parent as an enforcer, and members do not have to resort to manipulation by "emotional blackmail" to get their needs met. This kind of open and respectful communication is only possible if it is modelled by the more mature members of the family. Listening (without interrupting) and allowing differences of opinion are important when discussion is appropriate, but when serious decisions need to be made, the adult members of the family should be in charge.

Our third important characteristic is the structure of the family, which helps members to know and perform their particular roles effectively. The family system contains subsystems within it. First, the adults run the family and make up the parental subsystem. They make and enforce the rules, identify and solve problems when they arise, and seek outside help when needed. The adults do not depend on the children to meet their needs for intimacy and emotional connection. Thus, there is a clear boundary between adults and children, ensuring that children are not drawn into adult problems, which are beyond their maturity to understand or solve. It is often the case that this kind of boundary crossing leads to significant anxiety in children, and can also mean that the adult does not reach for a more appropriate adult confidante. This boundary has another function in that it allows siblings to support each other as they are at the same level. When one child has been drawn into the parental arena, another child is left without vital sibling support. Sometimes one adult



joins forces with one of the children (particularly when the adult feels disconnected from other adults) and an alliance is established that pits one adult plus one child against another adult or child. In this case, the boundary between adults and children is violated as are the parental and the sibling subsystem boundaries.

Most importantly, a family that thrives is flexible enough to adapt to changing demands – both within the family and in the environment. This requires that members stay available to communicate with each other; that the adults are ultimately in charge of the family until the children are mature enough to take an active role in family decisions; that there is enough intimacy to ensure caring, and enough separateness to ensure independent development; that adults seek adult allies and not rely on their children for emotional support; that children are spared the anxiety of adult difficulties and are only given responsibilities that are age-appropriate; and that members seek out and heed appropriate information from the world around them to help make good decisions that ensure the positive development of all family members.

If we examine the Jones family in terms of the characteristics described here, we can see that their family boundary may be somewhat closed; that communication is becoming more and more aggressive; that there may be little opportunity for independent activities, causing frustration in a pre-adolescent; and that the parent-child boundary may be blurred between James and his mum, possibly causing him considerable anxiety. Importantly, there seems to be a lack of flexibility in terms of changing the way they work as a response to the changing developmental needs of all of the family members.