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January 2010

Characteristics of a Healthy Family

Across the last century, our society's definition of what makes a family has changed dramatically. Today, families come in all shapes and sizes with no two being alike. Often what works for one family may not work for another. With all of these changes and variations, many parents are left to wonder or worry whether their family is "normal." In reality, it is often more helpful to focus on whether your family is functioning in an emotionally healthy manner than it is to try to decide what "normal" is. There are several common features of healthy, happy families that include cohesiveness, open communication, parents leading by example, conflict management, and setting clear expectations and limits.

Healthy families stick together.

In healthy families, there is constant cohesiveness with one another in meaningful relationships that are stable. People enjoy spending time with each other, and have shared values and interests. There often are family rituals they engage in such as family traditions, religious activities or even an expected pattern of daily activities. In healthy families, these interpersonal connections are stable and predictable even in difficult times. Everyone knows they can count on each other. However, each family member is still allowed to be an individual with separate likes and dislikes, which is respected by the other family members. Individual strengths are valued and promoted by the family.

Family cohesiveness can be built and strengthened in many different ways. It frequently comes down to finding ways to spend time together doing something that is enjoyable. It works best if there is give and take in the so everyone gets to participate in activities that they prefer some of the time. It is important for parents to engage in activities that their children enjoy, even as they grow older. For some families, this might mean that the parents will play video games with their adolescents; whereas in other families, parents may engage in sports with their teens. In other families, religious activities form the basis for family cohesiveness. It may take a blend of these rituals and activities in some cases, and it is always good to try new things together as a family. Regardless of the ritual or activity, parents should put their energy into creating positive interactions with the child rather than specifics of the task. This time spent together forms the glue that helps a family stick together during hard times.

It is OK to talk openly and honestly.

In well-adjusted families, it is acceptable to talk about problems even when it is uncomfortable. Communication is highly valued and there is respect between family members. Family members actively listen to each other, and allow each other to express their feelings. Difficult conversations are excellent opportunities for us to teach our children good communication skills.

Meet the Johnson family. They schedule weekly family meetings where everyone has an opportunity to talk about family issues that are of concern. Last week, the meeting was spent talking about chores and household responsibilities. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson listened to their children's dissatisfaction with the way chores were currently assigned and sought input from their children on possible solutions. In the end, everyone worked together to develop a new chore list, which is now written and posted on the refrigerator.



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Healthy families are able to manage their conflicts.

Let's face it; this can be really difficult to do when emotions are running high. None of us were born knowing how to do this and none of us do it perfectly all the time. As parents, it is important that we are able to reflect on our own emotional states. Sometimes it is best to talk about difficult issues once we have had an opportunity to get our emotions in check. The same goes for our children. It is often not productive to push open communication during highly emotional times and we should wait until everyone is ready. In healthy families, importance is placed on owning one's feelings and not resorting to blame, shame or aggression.

Parents lead by example and teach their children so they have the skills to succeed in life.

As we all know, actions speak louder than words. It is so important for parents to display the behaviors and communicate in a manner they want their children to emulate. Parents don't have to be perfect, but it never works to ask your children to do something that you can't or won't do yourself.

In healthy families, this entails an understanding that part of growing up means learning the skills needed in life. Children are taught these skills by their caregivers and the expectations match the child's developmental level. The goal of parenting in a healthy family is to raise their children to become responsible members of the larger society. This requires a balancing act for parents of setting a safety net without becoming a rescuer for their children. This means that children are allowed to make mistakes and learn from them while making sure that the potential mistakes are not so great as to seriously harm the child.

Last year, the Johnson's oldest son was not completing his homework on a regular basis and was at risk of failing his Algebra class. The family has an expectation that their children maintain a grade of "C" or better in all classes. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson met privately several times about this issue to determine how they were going to respond to this. They reminded their son of the expectation and offered to help him find a solution to the problem. If necessary, they were prepared to allow him to fail Algebra so that he could experience the natural consequences of his mistakes. In the end, they agreed to not nag, yell, threaten or coerce their son as a strategy to resolve this problem, as they recognized this needed to be his problem to fix. Thankfully, their son refocused his efforts to get his homework completed in time to earn a "C+" for the semester.

There are clear boundaries and expectations.

In healthy families, parents have responsibility for raising the children, and consequently have authority over them. While parents may be friends with their child, they are always first and foremost the parent. Healthy parents make decisions out of love and with concern for what is best for the family. In addition, parents should not look to their children to meet the needs or unfulfilled dreams of the parents. This means that the parent has a network of other adults for friendship and they are capable of meeting their own emotional needs. Furthermore, we all need and want to know what is expected of us. Children are ultimately happier when there are clear, reasonable expectations set for them.

So, what makes a family work is different for every family. However, there are some basic characteristics of families who are healthier and more satisfied with their family relationships. It often comes down to making time to spend together in positive ways and engaging in open communication. Healthy families work through their problems while maintaining respect and concern for each other. While no family is perfect, each of us can strive to keep these characteristics in mind as we work to be the best we can. It's well worth the effort.