

Family Dynamics

This handout will present some ideas to help parents be more effective in managing their children and households. While the information presented here is not the only way to view family functioning, it is a brief summary of one of the more popular theories on the subject: Family Systems Theory.

A Well-Oiled Machine

Many mental health professionals who work with families see a similarity between how members of a family interact and how a machine works. Machines are usually made up of many parts. When the individual parts are working well the machine functions properly as a whole. However, when one or more of these parts aren't functioning properly, the machine performs more poorly. The same can be said of families.

In most families, the members depend a lot on each other to function optimally. For instance, if a father has an alcohol problem, his ability to be an effective parent is reduced. This adds stress to the mother which may, in turn, make her a less effective parent. When parents are unable to do their best, it is not unusual for their children to have difficulties in school, home and/or socially. This is an example of how one person's dysfunction can impair the family as a unit. Since kids learn from watching their parents, dysfunctional roles can be passed from one generation to the next.

That is why it is so important for the adults in a home to address personal problems that interfere with their ability to function as parents. These problems include job stress, substance abuse, marital discord, or emotional difficulties such as depression or anxiety. Sometimes the support of friends and family is enough, and at other times counseling may be needed. In extreme situations, medication may be indicated.

Like a machine, when parents are functioning well their family will do better. They are able to cooperate and support each other. There is a clear hierarchy with the parents in command. They communicate effectively to avoid children exploiting their differences of opinion. They are able to compromise so that one parent doesn't sabotage the other's power and effectiveness, accidentally or on purpose. This can happen when one parent keeps secrets from the other to prevent a punishment, or says "yes" after their co-parent has already said "no." Perfect parenting is impossible, but improvement comes from effort and making decisions consciously.

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