



THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

Because children's lives are centered initially within their families, the family environment becomes the primary agent of socialization. The family environment "involves the circumstances and social climate conditions within families. Since each family is made up of different individuals in a different setting, each family environment is unique. The environments can differ in many ways. For example, one obvious difference lies in the socio-economic level. Some families live in luxurious twenty-four-room estates, own a Porsche and a Mercedes in addition to the family mini-van and can afford to have shrimp cocktail for an appetizer whenever they choose. Other families live in two-room shacks, struggle with time payments on their used '85 Chevy and have to eat macaroni made with artificial processed cheese four times a week.

VARIATION IN FAMILIES

Families in the United States today are no longer characterized by two first-time married parents who live blissfully together with 2.5 children. One might wonder if the traditional “healthy” families as depicted in early television shows ever really existed as happily and contentedly as they appeared. Currently fewer than 30 % of all families are composed of the traditional “nuclear family” (that is, one-time married parents with one or more children).

Today's families are more likely to conform to a variety of configurations. We arbitrarily define a family as "a primary group whose members assume certain obligations for each other and generally share common residences." Scrutinizing this definition shows how flexible the notion of family has become.

A family is a primary group which requires “people who are intimate and have frequent face-to-face contact with one another, have norms (that is, expectations regarding how members in the group should behave) in common and share mutually enduring and extensive influences. Thus, family members as members of a primary group have extreme influence upon each other. The second concept in the definition of family involves “obligations to each other.” Obligations concern mutual commitment and responsibility for other members in the family system. The third concept in the definition entails “common residences.” That is, to some extent, family members live together.

Families, then, may consist of intact two-parent families with or without children, single-parent families, reconstituted families, blended families, step-families or any other configuration that fits our definition of family. Some of these terms are defined as follows:

A **single-parent family** is “a family unit and household comprising the children and the mother or father but not the other spouse.” Over 90 % of single-parent families are headed by women.

A **reconstituted family** is “a family unit comprising a legally married husband and wife, one or both of whom have children from a previous marriage or relationship who live with them”. Reconstituted families may also be referred to as blended families. However, a **blended family** is defined as any configuration of people, either related or unrelated, where “members reside

together and assume traditional family roles.” Such relationships may not involve biological or legal linkages. The important thing is that such groups function as families.

Stepfamilies are primary groups in which “members are joined as a result of second or subsequent marriages.” Members may include stepmothers, stepfathers and any children either may have from prior marriages. Stepfamilies may also include children born to the currently married couple. Stepfamilies have become extremely common in view of the fact that about half of all marriages end in divorce. Stepfamilies may also become very complex in cases where one or both spouses were married more than once and/or have children from various relationships.

POSITIVE FAMILY FUNCTIONING

In view of the vast range of family configurations, it is extremely difficult to define a “healthy” family. However, at least two concepts are important when assessing the effectiveness or healthiness of a family. These include how well family functions are undertaken and how well family members communicate with each other.

Family functions include “child care and child socialization, income support and long-term care” in addition to other care giving functions. Children must be nurtured and taught. All family members need adequate resources to thrive. Additionally, family members should be able to call upon each other for help when necessary (for instance, in the event of sudden illness).

Good communication is the second aspect which characterizes “healthy” families. Communication and autonomy are closely related concepts. Good communication involves clear expression of personal ideas and feelings even when they differ from those of other family members. On the other hand, good communication also involves being sensitive to the needs and feelings of other family members. Good communication promotes compromise so that the most important needs of all involved are met. In families which foster autonomy, boundaries for roles and relationships are clearly established. All family members are held responsible for their own behavior. Under these conditions, family members much less frequently feel the need to tell others what to do or “push each other around.”

Negotiation is also clearly related to good communication and good relationships. When faced with decisions or crises, healthy families involve all family members to come to solutions for the mutual good. Conflicts are settled through rational discussion and compromise instead of open hostility and conflict. If one family member feels strongly about an issue, healthy families work to accommodate his / her views in a satisfactory way. As unhealthy families suffer conflict and disagreements, so do healthy families. However, a healthy family deals with conflict much more rationally and effectively.

Families can be compared and evaluated on many other dimensions and variables. The specific variables involved are not as important as the concept that children learn how to behave or are socialized according to the makeup of their individual family environments. The family environment is important in that children are taught what types of transactions are considered appropriate. They learn to form relationships, handle power, maintain personal boundaries, communicate with others and feel that they are an important subset of the whole family system.

Source: Understanding Human Behavior in the Social Environment By Charles Zastrow & Karen Kirst-Ashman