

Family Engagement Basics

Family and Family Systems

WHAT IS A FAMILY?

While we all know that families influence a child's development, it is important to first consider what we mean by the word *family*.

In this section, we will briefly review the definition of family and the basics of family systems theory.

Reminder: this may be a review of some of the content in other early childhood courses. If you are familiar with family systems theory, the material will be an opportunity to expand your knowledge. If you have not, this section will offer a definition of family and briefly highlight family systems theory.

In short, make sure that you understand the following:

- Families are a key influence on child development.
- There are different definitions of a family.

MYSTERY OF FAMILY



“I find the family the most mysterious and fascinating institution in the world...”
-Amos Oz

Many practitioners (and family members!) find families and family dynamics fascinating. Periodically in this course you will have the opportunity to explore the mysterious nature of families, including your own.

THINK ABOUT: HOW DO YOU DEFINE FAMILY?

Take a few moments and jot down two things you feel define family. How has this perspective changed through your life? Reflect on what experiences have shaped these beliefs and ideas.

Keep in mind that an individual's definition of a family will vary and be influenced by their own experiences.

FAMILY DEFINITIONS

Family is a complicated construct to define. Review the definitions here:

- “A family is a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together.” – U.S. Census Bureau
- “Ultimately, I define ‘family’ as the smallest, organized, durable network of kin and non-kin who interact daily, providing domestic needs of children and assuring their survival.” (Stack, 1996, p. 31).
- “We define family as any group of people related either biologically, emotionally, or legally. That is, the group of people that the patient defines as significant for his or her well-being.” (McDaniel et al., 2005, p. 2).
- “...the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) adopted the definition of a ‘network of mutual commitment’ to connote the new structures that are the reality of families in the 1990s.” (Pequengnat & Bray, 1997, p. 3).
- “There are diverse types of families, many of which include people related by marriage or biology, or adoption, as well as people related through affection, obligation, dependence, or cooperation.” (Rothausen, 1999, p. 820).

The concept of family is ever dynamic, ever evolving, and ever defined by the immediate cultural and political context it is embedded in.

FAMILY FUNCTIONS AND STRUCTURES

While there could be many functions of a family, here is a list of the most common and basic functions of a family:

- Provide basic needs: shelter, nutrition, social-emotional, and economic.
- Create own norms.
- Transmit culture and beliefs.

Families provide economic support and physical resources for children. They provide children with shelter, nutrition, clothing, and other basic needs. The family also provides social and emotional support for children.

Family processes are basic patterns of interaction and are shaped through norms and beliefs. Families create their own internal norms. These norms guide how the family interacts with each other, the roles individuals have in the family (mother does all the laundry; children should not question adult authority), and how the family is organized (no television on weekdays for every family member; read books at bedtime).

Family belief systems are “shared values and assumptions that provide meaning and organize the experience in the social world and guide the family life” (Walsh, 1998). Cultural beliefs and practices from the family (and the program or classroom, for example) help the child situate and define their interactions with others.

Family structures can vary. These include: two-parent or single-parent families, grandparents acting as parents, and parents who are LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender).

Main Takeaways:

- Families provide the child’s physical and social emotional needs.
- Families also have a set of norms that guide their family processes; these are influenced by culture and beliefs.

THINK ABOUT: FAMILY STRUCTURE

Take a few moments to ponder some of the different family structures or configurations, such as single-parent family or grandparents raising grandchildren, that currently exist. Other questions to consider are:

- How do you see your family structure and how has it changed over time?
- What are some of the implications of these diverse family configurations for early childhood educators?

WHAT IS A FAMILY?

There are many different answers to this question. One definition of family, “a group of people who are related by birth, marriage, or adoption,” is often used by the government. However, for many, this definition does not encompass everyone in the family.

The *traditional family* epitomizes this historical, governmental definition of the family. The traditional family is often depicted as the nuclear family, comprising a two-parent family household, in which the husband works and provides for the family and the wife tends to the house and the children. However, this traditional family is not an accurate depiction of what families really looked like in the past. Rather, it is a view of what some families looked like. The definition and the standard of the ideal family were set by dominant groups, rather than considering the possibilities of other ways to create a family.

Currently the definition of family has greater variance and may include individuals who have no legal relationship or ancestral bonds. Family can be broadly defined as a group of individuals who have a shared destiny and have an intimate relationship with each other.



Main Takeaway:

In the current society, the definition of family is varied. It is important to understand this when working with families and their children.

THE FAMILY INSTITUTION

Like the earlier quote, this quote highlights the difficulty of understanding the construct of family:

“No other social institution is as poorly understood as the family.”
(Gelles, 1995, p.2).

There are many aspects to family—social, emotional, historic, cultural, and more.

Some researchers describe family as the *household* or the *people who share a common table*. Another broad definition would be: individuals who have a shared past and a shared future.

Recognition of the shortcomings of the definition of family signaled an important step forward: a move toward studying the interactions and transactions of family life through the study of family practices. The family is no longer to be conceived of as a static or concrete social unit.

The notion of family practices carries with it a sense of *action* and *doing*, rooted in the everyday. Family practices are linked to wider notions of parenthood, kinship, and marriage and the expectations and obligations associated with these.

Understanding Family Systems

Have you ever have taken a course that covered family systems theory? Now you will be able to apply this theory to content in this course. Whether you are familiar or not, this will be a brief primer on family systems theory to support your understanding of family engagement.

FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Core principles of family systems theory include:

- The family is made up of interconnected members who impact each other in predictable ways.
- Families have entrenched patterns of behavior that allow them to operate and survive in the world. These may be influenced by prior generations, current experiences, and stressors, as well as broader cultural expectations. The way a family maintain its emotional balance even when there is disruption will be discussed later.
- It is important to consider the family as a whole when working with the individual child. It is a complex system with subsystems. Each family system has invisible boundaries that dictate who is *in* or *out* of the family. Again this will be covered in more depth as we continue.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

If we are going to understand family engagement in a young child's learning and development, we need to first understand family systems.

Our families teach us how to be in the world and shape our expectations of how the world might interact with us. The way a child interacts with you as an educator may well be linked to relationships the child has in their family.

The intersection with attachment theory is important, both in looking at the child's attachment strategies and the adult's.

It is important to maintain a curious, reflective stance when thinking about these behaviors. How do they serve the child across realms (home, program or school) or across domains of functioning (academic, social and emotional).

ATTACHMENT WITHIN FAMILY SYSTEMS

The style of attachment between the child and adult is one of the manifestations of a family system. This table is adapted from an article by Joan Stevenson-Hinde and briefly highlights different styles of attachment.

As you can see, family functioning can be linked to the adult attachment classification. As family systems tend to repeat patterns, the parent's classification then tells us something about how interactions might be with the child and then the child's attachment strategies. This is, of course, more complex than the chart can capture. But in global broad brush strokes, this gives us a sense of how attachment styles and family functioning might be related.

Table 1

Coherence in Styles Across Parental Classifications on Family Functioning, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), Dyadic Interactions, and the Child's Classification In the Strange Situation (SS)

Family functioning	AAI classification	Interactions with child	SS classification
Adaptive	Autonomous	Sensitively responsive	Secure
Mutually sensitive, supportive, appropriate autonomy	Coherent, balanced	Reads signals appropriately	Confident in parent's availability when needed
Disengaged	Dismissing	Rejecting	Avoidant
Insensitive, angry	Idealization, poor recall, denial	Averse to contact, unresponsive, tense	Guarded, minimal emotional responses, neutral affect
Enmeshed	Preoccupied	Inconsistent	Ambivalent
Overinvolved, ambivalent, poor "boundaries"	Overwhelmed or preoccupied with past, angry/resentful	Intrusive & ignoring	Uncertain of parent's availability, dependent & resistant
Chaotic?	Disorganized	Emotionally unavailable	Disorganized
Lack of structure? Abuse?	Unresolved trauma or loss	Fear-inducing	Apprehensive, confused, depressed affect

FAMILY SCRIPTS

It is through family scripts that attachment styles and family functioning play out. The family scripts are entrenched patterns of behavior within the family system.

In *The Changing Face of the United States: The Influence of Culture on Early Childhood Development*, Beth Maschinot talks about *cultural scripts* that are often outside of awareness but yet hold one's worldview. They become just the way things are done. A family script becomes the way a family does things.

Reflect on these points about family scripts:

- From pre-verbal years, children absorb a family's way of talking, behaving, emoting, and being.
- Parents are influenced by their parents and their parents before them.
- Family scripts are embedded in social, economic, and cultural expectations.
- Unwritten scripts are memorized from the start.
- Each person grows up *knowing* how to be a part of a family.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES

According to family systems theory, families have characteristics that govern their day-to-day functioning and operations.

There are six characteristics of the family that might be helpful for you to know as an early childhood professional:

- Boundaries
- Roles
- Rules
- Hierarchy
- Climate
- Equilibrium

All of these exist on a continuum, and, over the course of your career, you will probably experience families at all points on the continuum. We will go briefly over each of these characteristics. As we do, consider where your own family (either your current family or family of origin) falls with each of these characteristics.

Boundaries

Boundaries are often invisible rules that dictate who is *in* or *out* of the family. Like all these familial characteristics, boundaries exist on a continuum. It is important to keep in mind that neither end of the continuum is good or bad. These are merely ways of being that families have adopted that work for them.

We will briefly discuss each end of the continuum. Keep in mind that these terms of disengagement and enmeshment are not value-laden in family systems work. They are descriptive. This is a little different from the earlier information on attachment theory where we see how child-family involvement can fall into disengaged and enmeshed modes of being, which can translate to various subtypes of insecure attachment.

Disengaged families tend to be open to outsiders. Plus, each family member is very independent, and separateness and autonomy are valued over a sense of belonging. Have you ever worked with a family like this? What did it feel like for you?

Enmeshed families are described as closed systems. They are close and restrictive within the family. Togetherness, belonging, emotional connectedness and conformity are valued. Identity is very much tied to the identity of the family. Have you ever worked with a family like this? What did it feel like for you?

Keeping these two types in mind is important in your work with families. It may help you understand why you feel brought in or held at arm's length when discussing a child. It is not necessarily personal, but a context for understanding how this family operates in the broader social world as well as within its own family system.

Roles

Each family member often has a role, and this role tends to continue at work, school, and other places.

Those roles might include:

- Helper
- Clown
- Peacemaker
- Fixer

Roles can be tricky in that individuals can become stuck in these. Each child in your program or classroom comes in with a role. You may see it playing out with peers and with you. How might you help this child broaden their sense of their role and try on other roles as well?

Ideas might include: giving children lots of opportunities to experience new roles both in structured and unstructured situations. You can also help families recognize the range of roles their child can take on successfully and their different strengths.

Think About: Family Boundaries and Roles

Answer these questions for yourself:

- Where does your family fall on the continuum between disengaged and enmeshed?
- What were your primary roles in your family of origin?
- Did these roles change over the years or stay the same?
- How does this impact you in your professional, student, and personal roles?

You may be able to think of other roles.

Rules

Rules are sets of standards and traditions, spoken and unspoken, that govern families. They also determine how people interact—how often playful interactions take place and in what context. The family rules have cultural contexts.

Educators may be aware, more or less, of family rules and how they carry over to impact children's school behaviors. As a early childhood professional, it is important to understand and make a distinction between home and school rules for the child and the family. Also, be very sensitive to the unspoken rules—what is NOT said as well as what IS said. Partner with families to understand both roles and rules from their point of view.

An example of a family rule: family meals are eaten without a lot of talking

Hierarchy

Each family has a hierarchy, and it is important to understand this concept to be able to engage appropriately with *the person in charge*, in terms of decision-making, control, and power in the family.

Not knowing this can lead to miscommunication and disconnect with families. Ask each family to share this with you.

For example, you might ask them to share:

- How decisions about children are made in the family.
- How they want information about the child shared.
- More general questions about how the family works.

As an educator, you may observe certain family interactions too:

- Does one parent defer to another or to the grandparent?
- How does this child bring this into the program or classroom?
- How might you offer the child different places in the program or classroom hierarchy to operate in different roles?

As always, it is important to reflect on your family and experience of familial hierarchy. Based on your experiences, what is it like for you to encounter a family with a similar hierarchy? Or a different one?

Climate

Climate is another characteristic that influences a family's day-to-day functioning and operations. The economic status of a family does not determine its climate. It is both the emotional and physical environment of the family. Emotional climate is about beliefs held about children and families. Physical climate is the actual environmental surroundings.

Provide chances for families to share their hopes and dreams for their children and how they support their children. Keep an open, curious, and non-judgmental stance so parents feel they can share many aspects with you, not only the positive ones. It may be important to understand some of the challenges as well as the strengths of home climates.

Create a safe, nurturing, and healthy early learning environment for all children. This can be an important buffer and source of resilience as well as a place to feel safe and loved regardless of the home environment.

Equilibrium

When the balance of families is thrown off by changes, it may impact children in your early learning setting as well as at home.

Balance tells family members what to expect; losing that predictability, even briefly, can be challenging.

Certain boundaries in the family may change, but the system may resist those changes. The system wants to return to *homeostasis*, which is the equilibrium for that system. But this makes it harder for families to change and is often why patterns continue and pass from generation to generation.

Support families in finding other rituals and ways, in the midst of change, to keep life feeling secure and stable.

And, again, reflect on your needs for balance and equilibrium. How does what is happening in your life impact how you are in the early learning environment?

HOW DOES FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY HELP?

Family systems theory helps us understand why members of a family behave why they do. The family is a complicated, messy, and always dynamic and changing beast. As educators, we often get pulled into the family system, as ally, fixer, expert and even scapegoat.

Theory that provides a framework for understanding can help us avoid blaming or the natural tendency to try to *fix* families.



Your Role with Families

Next, we will consider the early childhood educator's role with families and family system theory. This topic is covered in more depth later in the course.

THINK ABOUT: YOUR ROLE

Answer these questions for yourself:

- What do you see as your role (current or future) with families in relation to three concepts just covered (hierarchy, climate, and equilibrium)?
- What kinds of information would it be helpful to learn from families and why?

FINDING YOUR PROFESSIONAL LINES

Defining the boundaries and roles of your professional self is very tied into family systems theory. In the field of early childhood education, we are often drawn into the lives of families and children in a very intense way. How do we maintain a professional stance that is warm, yet appropriate? In upcoming sessions on partnering with families, communicating about development, and tools for working with families, we will explore this question more thoroughly.

For now, just know this can be more or less challenging, often depending on how the professional boundaries are supported by the colleagues and supervisors in the setting you are immersed in. It can also be impacted by the level of containment you feel—it is hard to maintain your own boundaries and focus on defining your role with a family when you feel like others around you are loose with boundaries.

We need to define for ourselves, first, our boundaries, and then be clear, firm, and kind in sharing them. Understanding family systems theory helps us both in doing this and understanding how we interact with the boundaries, roles, and rules in families we work with. Maintaining professional boundaries and an awareness of your role and limits with families is an ongoing challenge.

BUILDING OUR TOOLBOX

Building your toolbox of skills takes time. This course offers you lots of opportunities to add to your toolbox in different ways. Early childhood educators need to actively cultivate and maintain their skills to preserve a professional stance and way of being with families.

Some of the skills include:

- Reflecting in the moment and after the moment.
- Being able to take the perspective of another and understand the parent's or child's position.
- Using what you know about the background and current events within the family to shape your questions and comments.
- Tolerating that urge we all have to jump in and *fix* it, or *know* it, or *solve* it. Instead, how do we move to a place of collaborative problem-solving? How do we reach a place of gentle and reflective inquiry that gives a more complete picture of what might be happening?
- Inhibiting our own actions, our natural tendency to want to do or act. How can we slow ourselves down, hit pause, and let things evolve a little more?
- Gentle reframing within the context of a relationship. This can be critical. How can we sit alongside the parent to see the child's behavior with a curious, wondering stance? How can we determine what might be going on without predetermining anything?

Keeping ideas open and all possibilities afloat may yield more in the long-term, although it may be challenging to juggle in the short-term.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED PRIMER

The ability to listen to the family, hear what is important to them about their child, and then collaborate with them on behalf of the child is an important skill to acquire. You must do this in spite of your school's or agency's agenda or the urge you may feel to respond. It requires an open, curious relationship with the family. You may feel the urge to make judgements or assumptions, which is natural. But noticing them and reflecting on them (without acting on them) is important to building authentic relationships with families.

Develop a relationship-based framework of practice in your program or classroom. Focus on children's various relationships at their early learning program or school—with you, other educators, and peers, as well as with those at home.

What are your ideas about building a relationship-based practice? Some to consider are:

- Notice your judgements
- Follow parent's lead
- Accept different styles of parenting
- Highlight connections
- Stay curious and caring

Specific relationship-based skills are covered later in the course in sessions on supporting positive parent-child relationships and communicating about development.

HOW TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS BEFORE YOU...

This maybe a historic pattern of behavior in the family system. An unwritten family script also may be at play in interactions.

Here is one approach:

- Listen carefully for what is said and NOT said. Can you see any patterns?
- Hold back or notice judgment or feelings that may be clouding your lens.
- Pose open-ended questions.
- Remain curious.
- Be tentative and exploratory as well as reassuring.

In conclusion, the value you bring when you are able to use your feelings and behaviors to inform your understanding of families should not be underestimated. Reflective use of self is both a simple and a complex tool we can use in our practice settings. Cultivating it over time and finding opportunities for reflection are integral to work in early childhood.

Another valuable resource:

- The Office of Head Start's *Self-Reflection and Shared Reflection as Professional Tools*

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