

What Makes an Emotionally Healthy Family?

Families come in all sizes and shapes - two parent families, one parent families, blended families, extended families etc. Is there any way of evaluating the family as to its emotional health? The television models that we have lived with for the last three decades seem to be our only models about what families are supposed to be. When comparing themselves to these model families, people often feel that they are not "Normal. Usually we can easily identify the factors that make an unhealthy family. Popular literature on co-dependence focuses on the concept of a "dysfunctional family" with the assumption that dysfunctional means drug and alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, workaholics etc. I would briefly like to suggest a few characteristics of a healthy family that are not based on TV models or dysfunctional models.

It is important to realize that there are many qualities that make up a healthy family - no single thread produces a fabric of emotional health. It is many different qualities woven together that produce the healthy functioning unit. In healthy families there is the expectation that relationships are based on caring and concern for others. Family members are not guarded, distant, or hostile to each other and there is a sense of basic trust that people in the family will care for and respect the opinions of others in the family. One's own opinion is not the only one that counts! Families that have this characteristic seem free to be open and honest in agreement as well as disagreement. People in these families speak for themselves; they do not speak for each other. A pattern of dominance or authoritarianism is the opposite of this trait. Along with respect for each other's opinions is a willingness to explore many different solutions to a problem. Families with this trait are able to back off and try alternative solutions if one approach does not work. This allows for more effective problem solving, but as indicated the flexibility to try different solutions is based on the freedom of each family member to express feelings even if they differ with other family members.

Healthy families have a high level of initiative and energy. Not only are there many activities going on within the family, but there is frequently an involvement in the community such as church, scouts, sports etc. As a result such families receive a tremendous variety of new information and experience which enriches their lives.

In healthy families the marital relationship plays a deciding role in the overall mood and stability in the family. Leadership in the family is provided by the parents and is shared equally by both partners. In a single parent family there is a network of adult friendships to support the single parent. In a two parent family there is the absence of strong alliance between parent and child that is stronger than the alliance between each parent. The marriage forms the foundation of the family and sets the mood of the group.

Finally, in healthy families the overall feeling is one of warmth, affection and caring. There is a well developed capacity of empathy between family members. Children in these families learn that it is safe and acceptable to talk about their feelings. The ability to express feelings openly aid in the resolution of problems. Healthy families are not without conflicts, but problems do not seem to be long standing or result in unresolvable conflicts.

Most families have some of the above mentioned traits, but together they form a fabric of love and affection and tend to produce children who can ultimately be competent and responsible for themselves as well as others.

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