

FAMILIES - WHAT MAKES THEM HAPPY

Our definition of 'family' has changed over the past few decades to include single parent and blended families as well as the traditional family structure of two parents and their children living together. The study of family dynamics has shown that happy families, whatever their makeup, have certain traits in common. It might be valuable to occasionally evaluate the dynamics of your family to ensure that everyone is as happy as they could be.

Positive communication

Both children and their parents benefit from communication that is loving, understanding and patient. Positive communication in families includes:

- Talking honestly
- Listening with full attention
- Reassuring each other of love with words, cuddles and making time
- Sharing thoughts and feelings without censoring or criticising each other
- Encouraging positive behaviour with praise
- Allowing the expression of negative emotions as well as positive ones
- Working together to solve problems and conflicts.

Quality time together

The pressures of modern living mean that some families tend to operate like a collection of separate individuals, all living their own lives without much interaction as a family. Happy families spend time together, even if this means scheduling 'appointments' that suit everyone. Suggestions include:

- Making dinner time an opportunity for round table family discussions.
- One-on-one conversations to strengthen individual relationships within the family.
- Regular family outings.
- Deciding as a group on important family 'traditions', such as how to celebrate birthdays and Christmas.
- Holidays that cater for the whole family.

Working as a team

Children need to be involved in some of the decision making if they are to feel like a worthwhile family member. Happy families tend to work as a team, including:

- Sharing household chores fairly
- Taking the needs and wishes of everyone into account
- Allowing children their independence within safe parental boundaries
- House rules that apply to everyone, not just the children
- Disciplining with love, patience and understanding.

Appreciating each other

Families are made up of individuals with different likes, dislikes, opinions and beliefs. Happy families support and encourage these differences and appreciate each member for who they are, including:

- Taking an active interest in each other's hobbies
- Talking about the events in everyone's day
- Supporting each other by attending sports days, concerts and special events.

Unhappy families

Families that don't function very well have certain traits in common, including:

- Unfair power distribution, such as one parent ruling the household.
- Problems with conflict negotiation.
- Lack of respect for each other as individuals.
- Not talking or listening to each other.
- Refusing to acknowledge or accept anyone else's point of view.
- A tendency to rely on negative forms of communication, such as yelling, criticising or sulking.
- The use of physical punishment such as smacking or hitting as the main form of discipline.

Overcoming problems with professional help

There are services available that help family members work through difficult issues. Seek professional advice if you think you need some assistance.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Parenting helpline
- Family counsellor.

Things to remember

- Typical traits in families that function well include positive communication, respect, spending time together and working as a team.
- Evaluating your family dynamics may highlight areas that need a little work.
- Unhappy families can benefit from professional help.