Understanding Family Dynamics for Optimal Support in Service Delivery

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Learning Objectives

➢ Describe an operational definition of boundaries.

➢ Identify roles/functions of parents/caregivers.

➢ Understand the issues that impact the boundaries between parents/caregivers and children.

➢ Identify protective factors that foster family structure and support maximum goal achievement.

Family Dynamics

➢ Patterns of relating or interactions between family members considered in terms of roles and boundaries.

➢ Each Family System and its dynamics are unique but there are common patterns.

➢ Family Dynamics exist in all families, regardless of the "type" of family.

Boundaries: Operational Definitions

- "Lines"/"Space" between People

- Limits/Parameters in Relationships

- Emotional Reactivity

Roles: "Knowing Where You Fit"

▸ Clear

▸ Consistent

▸ Effective in promoting well-being

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Roles: "Knowing Where You Fit"

- Family Alignments

- Ascribed Characteristics

- Patterns of Interactions

- Hierarchies

Hierarchy

- "Parent(s)" as Manager(s)/Executive(s) in Families – Responsible for/Managing:
  - Well-being of all Family Members
    - Physical Needs
    - Emotional Needs
  - Family Structure and Expectations
    - Establish Expectations for Children's Behavior
      - Expectations as explicit and implicit
    - Establish Routines

Decision-Making

▸ Parents having "Final Say"

▸ Parents creating opportunities for children to learn to make sound decisions for themselves
  ◦ Age-Appropriate Situations/Decisions
  ◦ Parents Limiting Possible Choices

Why Routines?

➢ Provides consistency, predictability, sense of safety
- Predictability & consistency vs. disorder & confusion

▸ Challenge to balance structure with flexibility
- "Goldilocks" effect
  - Rigidity/boredom = too far
  - Choice/flexibility = just right
  - Chaos/lack of predictability = not enough

Influences on Family Dynamics

- Nature of parents' relationship
- History of parenting example
- Number of children in the family
- Personalities of family members
- Absent parent
- "Mix" of household members
- Influence from extended family/others
- Chronically sick or disabled child
- Events: divorce, trauma, death, unemployment, homelessness, etc.

Influences on Family Dynamics

- Family violence, abuse, alcohol/drug use, mental/physical illness
- Family values, culture, ethnicity, gender roles, parenting practices, power/status of family members
- Nature of attachments (secure/insecure)
- Previous generations
- Broader systems – social, economic, political, poverty, language

Boundaries: Structural Issues

- ## Boundary between Parents and Children
  - Information-Sharing/Withholding
    - Rules & Secrets
  - Emotional Care-Giving
  - Peer Relationships

Boundaries: Structural Issues

▸ **Problematic Roles/Boundaries**
  ◦ Child as Partner/Spouse of Parent
  ◦ Children being brought into conflicts between parents
  ◦ Parent colluding with child against other parent
  ◦ "Parentification" – Child acting as parent to parent or other children
  ◦ "Adultification" – Expectations exceed what's typical for age

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Boundaries: Structural Issues

➢ **Boundary Between Parents and Children**
  • Single Parent/Care Giver issues in terms of need for support from adult

➢ **Boundary Between Parents**
  • Two adults who can:
    • Care for themselves and function independently
    • Parent in a coordinated manner

Boundaries: Structural Issues

▸ **Family Diversity Can Impact Boundaries:**
- ◦ Extended Families
- ◦ Blended Families
- ◦ Single Parenting
- ◦ Same–Sex
- ◦ Culture
- ◦ Age

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Family Diversity

- Changes in family life over 50 years
  - Decline of marriage
    - 1960 – 66% households headed by married couples
    - 2010 – 45% households headed by of married couples
  - Increase in number of women in the paid workforce
  - Blended, remarried and co-habiting families
- Families headed by single moms, (divorced, widowed or never married) – 22%
- Families headed by stay-at-home mom and breadwinner dad — 23%
- Marked increase in people living alone & in unrelated people living together.

- *Philip Cohen, The Family: Diversity, Inequality, and Social Change*

Protective Factors for Families

‣ Families thrive when protective factors are robust in their lives and communities.

‣ Protective factors are attributes that serve as buffers, helping parents who might otherwise be at risk of abusing their children to find resources, supports, or coping strategies that allow them to parent effectively, even under stress.

Protective Factors for Families

- Knowledge of Parenting & Child Development
- Parent Resilience
- Social Connections
- Social & Emotional Competence of Children
  ◦ Parent
  ◦ Child
- Concrete Support in Times of Need

Protective Factors for Families

- **Knowledge of Parenting & Child Development**
  - Understanding child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development
    - Nurturing parent behavior
    - Appropriate developmental expectations
    - Ability to create a developmentally supportive environment for child
    - Positive discipline techniques; ability to effectively manage child behavior
    - Recognizing and responding to child's specific needs

Protective Factors for Families

- **Parent Resilience**
  - Managing stress and functioning well when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma
    - Resilience to general life stress
      - Hope, optimism, self-confidence
      - Problem-solving skills
      - Self-care and willingness to ask for help
      - Ability to manage negative emotions
    - Resilience to parenting stress
      - Not allowing stress to interfere with parenting
      - Positive attitude about child and parenting

Protective Factors for Families

- **Social Connections**
  - Positive relationships that provide emotional, informational, instrumental and spiritual support
    - Multiple friendships and supportive relationships with others
    - Feeling respected and appreciated
    - Accepting help from others and giving help to others
    - Skills for establishing and maintaining connections
    - Having fun

Protective Factors for Families

- **Social & Emotional Competence of Children**
  - Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships
    - **For the Parent:**
      - Warm and consistent responses that foster a strong and secure attachment with the child
      - Encouraging and reinforcing social skills; setting limits

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Protective Factors for Families

- **Social & Emotional Competence of Children**
  - Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships
    - **For the Child:**
      - Age-appropriate self-regulation
      - Ability to form and maintain relationships with others
      - Positive interactions with others
      - Effective communication

Protective Factors for Families

▸ **Concrete Support in Times of Need**
  ◦ Access to concrete support and service that address a family's need and/or crisis and help minimize stress caused by challenges
    • Seeking and receiving support when needed
    • Knowing what services are available and how to access them
    • Adequate financial security; basic needs being met
    • Persistence

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Protective Factors in Families

- Promote positive outcomes
  - Strengthened families
  - Optimal child development
  - Reduced child abuse and neglect

- Connection to developmental science/brain development

- Cultural influences

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General Considerations/Cautions

- Parents' "job" is to "raise" children to enable the children to, ultimately, care for themselves – to "launch" them.
- Children's behaviors as a function of family dynamics vs. temperament, symptoms, etc.
- Can be many "versions" to a family's story; each member has their own perspective of issues.

General Considerations/Cautions

- Parenting can become more challenging with more children.
  - There is risk of "parentifying" older children, especially if younger child has special needs.
- Parenting can become more challenging as children gain autonomy.
- Change in family structure can impact expectations and routines.
  - New baby, divorce/death, disability of caregiver, etc.

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General Considerations/Cautions

- Inappropriate alignments and hierarchies can have a negative influence on child's functioning.
- Parents should share the power in a family and support each other in decision-making.
- The younger the child, the more the worker "goes through"/works with the parent(s).
  - There could be exceptions relative to limitations of parent(s).

Resources

- PA Strengthening Families
- Center for the Study of Social Policy
- National Alliance of Children's Trust Funds
- Strengthening Families and Communities: 2010 Resource Guide; Child Welfare Gateway, Children's Bureau, FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention
- Center for Schools & Communities

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