

## FAMILIES FIRST: Keys to Successful Family Functioning Family Roles

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**ROLES PLAY AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT PART IN HEALTHY FAMILY FUNCTIONING. MOST RESEARCHERS AGREE THAT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CLEAR ROLES WITHIN A FAMILY IS DIRECTLY CONNECTED TO A FAMILY'S ABILITY TO DEAL WITH DAY-TO-DAY LIFE, UNFORESEEN CRISES, AND THE NORMAL CHANGES THAT OCCUR IN FAMILIES OVER TIME.**



Family Roles are patterns of behavior by which individuals fulfill family functions and needs (Epstein et al., 1993)

### TYPES OF FAMILY ROLES

Family roles are the recurrent patterns of behavior by which individuals fulfill family functions and needs (Epstein, N. B. Bishop, D., Ryan, C., Miller, & Keitner, G. (1993) Individual members of families occupy certain roles such as child, sibling, grandchild. Along with roles come certain social and family expectations for how those roles should be fulfilled. For example, parents are expected to teach, discipline, and provide for their children. And children are expected to cooperate and respect their parents. As family members age, they take on additional roles, such as becoming a spouse, parent, or grandparent. A person's role is always expanding or changing, depending upon his or her age and family stage.

### INSTRUMENTAL AND AFFECTIVE ROLES

Individuals within a family have both instrumental and affective roles to fulfill. Each serves an important function in maintaining healthy family functioning. Instrumental roles are concerned with the provision of physical resources (e.g., food, clothing, and shelter), decision-making and family management. Affective roles exist to provide emotional support and encouragement to family members. Both sets of roles must be present for healthy family functioning. In addition, families must also consider issues of roles allocation and accountability.

### FIVE ESSENTIAL ROLES FOR EFFECTIVE FAMILY FUNCTIONING

There are many roles within a family; however, researchers have identified the following five roles as being essential for a healthy family.

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- **PROVISION OF RESOURCES**

Providing resources, such as money, food, clothing, and shelter, for all family members is one of the most basic, yet important, roles within a family. This is primarily an instrumental role.

- **NURTURANCE AND SUPPORT**

Nurturing and supporting other family members is primarily an affective role and includes providing comfort, warmth, and reassurance for family members. Examples of this role are a parent comforting a child after he/she has a bad day at school, or family members supporting one another after the death of a loved one.

- **LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT**

The life skills development role includes the physical emotional, educational, and social development of children and adults. Examples of this role are a parent helping a child make it through school, or a parent helping a young adult child decide on a career path.

- **MAINTENANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF THE FAMILY SYSTEM**

This fourth role involves many tasks, including leadership, decision making, handling family finances, and maintaining appropriate roles with respect to extended family, friends and neighbors. Other responsibilities of this role include maintaining discipline and enforcing behavioral standards.

- **SEXUAL GRATIFICATION OF MARITAL PARTNERS**

A satisfying sexual relationship is one of the keys to a quality marital relationship. This role involves meeting sexual needs in a manner that is satisfying to both spouses.

## **ROLE ALLOCATION**

Role allocation is the assignment of responsibilities within a family that enables the family to function properly.

Families have to make many decisions, often on a daily basis, about who will be responsible for completing a certain task or fulfilling a particular responsibility. For example, families must decide who will take out the trash, who will take the children to school, who will cook dinner, who will watch the children after they return from school, who will work and provide financial support for the family, etc. In healthy families, roles are assigned in such a way that family members are not overburdened.



Sharing roles, such as child care, is an important family task.

## **ROLE ACCOUNTABILITY**

Role accountability refers to a family member's sense of responsibility for completing the tasks of an assigned role. In healthy families, there are procedures in place which ensure that necessary family functions are fulfilled. For example, parents in healthy families understand that they are responsible for disciplining their children. When discipline is needed, they do not hesitate. These parents know that a failure to fulfill this role properly will result in child behavior problems which will disrupt the family's ability to function.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING HEALTHY FAMILY ROLES

The assigning and carrying out of family roles can be a difficult task, requiring tremendous effort on the part of individual family members. However, listed below are some guidelines that can help families make this process easier, leading to healthier functioning.

### ESTABLISH CLEAR ROLES

Roles should be clearly identifiable. Individual family members must know and acknowledge their roles and responsibilities. For example, in healthy families, mothers and fathers have a clear understanding of their role as parents. They are to provide physical resources (e.g., food, clothing, shelter), discipline, and a supportive, nurturing environment that facilitates their children's physical and emotional development. Families that are having difficulties often find that their family roles are not well defined and individual members do not understand what is expected of them. Establishing clear roles helps a family function more effectively because each member knows what he/she is expected to accomplish. If these individuals fail to fulfill their roles then other family members might have to do extra work, making them feel resentful and overburdened, thus hurting the functioning of the family.

### ALLOW FOR FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility in roles is essential in a healthy family. Family roles naturally change over time. They also may change during times of crisis, such as when a family member becomes seriously ill or unexpectedly dies. The difference between healthy and unhealthy families in these situations is the healthy family's ability to adjust and adapt, which often requires a temporary or permanent shift in roles. In the case of illness or death, it is sometimes necessary for other family members to take on additional roles (e.g., becoming a financial provider).



Flexibility in roles is essential in a healthy family.

### ALLOCATE ROLES FAIRLY

In healthy families, every member is responsible for fulfilling certain roles. These roles are spread among the various members so that no one is asked to take on too many responsibilities. Problems arise if one family member is forced to fulfill too many roles. An example of this is when fulltime working mothers are expected to take care of the children and complete the majority of household tasks with little assistance from other family members. It is important to discuss, as a family, each member's understanding of the roles he or she has been assigned. If someone feels overburdened and unable to fulfill that particular role, then changes may be needed.



In healthy families, children are required to take on appropriate roles of responsibility within the family.

### BE RESPONSIBLE IN FULFILLING FAMILY ROLES

Families that function well have members who take their roles seriously and do their best to fulfill their duties. Members who fail to take their roles seriously, or who refuse to carry out their roles, can create significant problems for the entire family. An example of failing to fulfill a role is when a parent does not provide adequate physical and emotional support for his/her children. There are many problems that can result from this failure, including behavior problems, depression, and low self-esteem. Willingness to take responsibility for one's roles contributes to a healthy family.

## **FOCUS ON FAMILY STRENGTHS**

Establishing clear, flexible roles is a key to successful family functioning. Research indicates that families who do so will not only be able to deal with everyday family life, but also will be better equipped to handle unexpected family crises. (Family Therapy News, 1990). In families where clear, flexible roles exist, individual members will be much more likely to take their responsibilities seriously.

## **FAMILY ASSESSMENT**

**Successful Healthy families periodically take inventory of their strengths and weaknesses and take steps to improve their home and family environment. Isn't it time your family took an inventory of how well it is doing?**

**For more detailed information regarding family functioning in the six key areas, contact your local Extension Office for copies of other publications in this series.**

## **REFERENCES**

Epstein, N. B. Bishop, D., Ryan, C., Miller, & Keitner, G., (1993). The McMaster Model View of Healthy Family Functioning. In Froma Walsh (Eds.), Normal Family Processes (pp. 138-160). The Guilford Press: New York/London.

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