

Characteristics of Family Systems (John Bradshaw)

John Bradshaw On: The Family (2013 revised)

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feedback loops exist within family systems whereby the family acts as a dynamic social organism. The family functions by means of interaction and interdependence. What affects one part of the system will be felt by the entire system.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Autonomy or wholeness refers to the fact that a family is a total organism. Everyone is affected by everyone else. Each individual is partly a whole and wholly a part. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is some form of Leadership in the family The health of the marriage determines the health of the family. Or, the "executive" of the family, i.e., the single parent, the couple, partners, the grandmother, whoever is at the "head" of the family. How well the "executive" is functioning will determine the strength of the family as a whole.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individual roles exist within every family. For example, the role of the parent is to model how to be a man/woman, mother/father etc.. The role of the children is to be curious and to learn. In healthy families, roles are flexible.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Laws or rules govern the family system. There are rules about "how things get done", i.e., household maintenance, social life, financial issues etc..
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A polarity of individuation/togetherness exists within every family system. This refers to a tension which exists in every family whereby there is a push/pull between the need to be a unique, self actualized individual, and, the need to conform for the sake of the system. These polarities often clash and are in a constant state of flux, or, balancing.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Equilibrium is a basic need of all systems. The family as a system operates on laws of complementarity, i.e., if dad is angry often, mom is mild and soft spoken. Like a mobile, the system will always try to come to homoeostasis.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• System needs exist just as do individual needs. The system itself has needs for productivity, (food, clothing, shelter), emotional maintenance, (touching, stroking, warmth), good relationships, (love, intimacy), individuality and difference, (self actualization), stimulation, (excitement, challenge, fun), and, unity, (a sense of belonging and togetherness).

Within family systems which are functioning at an *optimal level*, we would might find the following:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The "five freedoms" are allowed expression. That is, the five basic powers that constitute human strength are allowed expression by all family members. They are: the power to perceive, to think and to interpret, to emote, to choose, to want and to desire, and, to be creative.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Within the leadership, partnership, marriage, etc. there is a continuing process unfolding whereby the couple moves to deeper levels of intimacy and sharing within their union. Again, as the marriage is the chief component of the family, it is important that it continue to grow and deepen. Moving from the stages of being in love, to working out differences, to compromise and individuality etc..
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Differences are negotiated. Negotiation is a crucial task in the process of intimacy formation. To negotiate differences there needs to be the desire to co-operate, and, the willingness to fight fair.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clear and consistent communication is required. This requires awareness of self and of the other. It also requires mutual respect.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trust. Trust is created by honesty. That is, the accurate expression of emotions, thoughts and desires is more important than agreement. Honesty is about self responsibility.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individuality. In a healthy family, differences are encouraged, and, the uniqueness and "unrepeatability" of each person is a priority.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Roles are open and flexible. One can be spontaneous without fearing shame.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Everyone's needs are fulfilled.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accountability. Functional families are accountable. They are willing to acknowledge individual and family problems and will work to resolve these difficulties.

- **Laws/rules are open and flexible.** Functional families allow for mistakes and laws/rules can be negotiated.

Within family systems which are struggling, and for whom functioning is significantly compromised, we might find the following:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denial and delusion. In families where struggle predominates, they likely deny their problems so that the problems never get solved. The five freedoms are also denied.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intimacy is lacking. True closeness and intimacy is lacking in troubled families.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These are shame based systems. Shame predominates in these families. The parents have internalized their shame, and, the children are ashamed of their family.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles are fixed, frozen and rigid. Roles are created by virtue of the needs of the family. In a troubled family, the children will give up their needs, or their reality, to take care of the needs of the system.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The family is characterized as having an undifferentiated ego mass. Family members are enmeshed in each others boundaries. For example, if mom is scared, then everyone feels afraid. Members feel for one another.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The needs of the individual are sacrificed to the system. Individual family members cannot get their needs met. Individual needs are put aside for the needs of the system. Often there will be a low grade anger/depression evident.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The togetherness polarity dominates. Individual differences are sacrificed for the needs of the family. The individual exists for the family. In these families, it is difficult for members to leave.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irrevocable rules exist. Rules are rigid and unchanging. The rules usually revolve around control, perfectionism and blame.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open secrets exist. Everyone knows what everyone pretends not to know.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They are non changing, closed systems. Everyone plays their role in order to keep the status quo.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disabled will exists. This is a major dilemma of troubled families. The will of each family member is disabled as they strive to meet the needs of the system.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of boundaries. Family members give up their own boundaries as a way to maintain the family system. This is equivalent to giving up one's identity.