Healthy Family Dynamics
Introduction to Healthy Family Dynamics

Relationships are important to a satisfying life and learning about healthy relationships begins at home. Family provides the foundation for our sense of security and emotional connection with others. Parents and other adult members of a family pass on values and model behaviours to children. The way in which caregivers provide discipline is important for healthy family dynamics, likewise, healthy family dynamics is important for how caregivers provide discipline.

Healthy Family Dynamics means “how family members function together as a unit (how they get along, communicate, share feelings, accept and support one another, work together, make decisions and solve problems) and the quality of the relationship between parents or partners” (Ministry of Health Promotion, 2010, p. 20).

A family is “dynamic” because it is a system of interconnected and interdependent interactions of individuals within the family. The factors that affect the family system are: behavioural factors, biological factors, extended family, social welfare, health care and services, recreation, employment, social welfare, school, church, and friends. Dynamics within a family never remain the same. Each family is unique and special.
Quick Facts

According to the Early Childhood Development Agreement (Government of Canada, 2000) “parents and families play the primary role in children's lives, and a nurturing, supportive family is the best foundation for good child development”.

Research shows that family dynamics is one of the most important elements affecting healthy child development (Health Canada, 2003).

Children living in dysfunctional families are about 35% more likely to display signs of problematic behaviour such as aggression or difficult temperament (Health Canada, 2003).

62% of parents reported regular use of punitive /angry behaviour when their children misbehave (Oldershaw, 2002).

65% of child abuse cases involve inappropriate punishment (Ministry of Health Promotion, 2010).

Family violence is linked with severe psychological and behavioural effects on children and in later life (Letourneau, 2011).

In 2001, 85% of Census families were two-parent families. The remaining 15% are lone parent families (Statistics Canada).

Depression is clearly identified as one barrier to providing positive discipline/parenting. Treatment and supports are available through a physician, the Health Department and other community agencies.

Postpartum depression is difficult for the entire family. Untreated postpartum depression can cause impaired maternal-infant interactions and marital stress. A variety of treatment options are available and may include a combination of support groups, counselling and possibly medications.
Open-Ended Questions

What does “healthy” mean to you?

Discuss: Physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being. Not just the absence of disease.

What does “a family” mean to you? Describe “what it looks like”.

Discuss: Two or more people who depend on each other for support. Types of families: Nuclear family (2 parents and children), Single parent family, blended family (step-parents/step-children), grandparent family, adoptive family, same-sex family.

Having traditions is a way a family can enjoy each other and celebrate together. Think of some of the traditions you’ve experienced. What are some of the traditions you’ve continued in your family. Discuss why these are important to you as a family.

Prompts: Talk about memories, such as of lost loved ones, or creating new memories. Discuss how culture may determine traditions. Does anyone have any traditions based on their culture?
Healthy Family Dynamics
Tip Sheet

- Remember, it is important that a child be able to express his emotions when needed. *(Best Start, 2010).*

- Spend time together, play and listen.

- Feelings of anger can affect your relationship with your child. Don’t hold your anger in, learn to deal with it in appropriate ways.
  - try to understand why he is behaving in a certain way
  - let your child know that you understand, “I know you’re angry because he took your toy”
  - be clear about what behaviour is inappropriate
  - model the appropriate behaviour

- Create traditions for your family as a way to spend time together, celebrate and enjoy each other.

- Talk. Encourage conversation. Talk about daily activities, memories and feelings. Secrets can break down family communication.

- Actively listen. Show that you have the time to listen and that you hear what is being said (even if you don’t agree).
Resolving Conflict

Parents may disagree or challenge each other about family-related matters. Occasional disagreements between parents are a normal part of life; however, frequent and unresolved arguments may lead to a stressed or unhealthy relationship that will likely impact your parenting skills and your child. Parents need to learn the skills of conflict resolution. These include:

Listening
- Take time first to cool down
- Try to stay calm and really listen
- Try to put emotions aside
- Don’t interrupt

Clarifying points of difference
- Check that you understand by asking questions
- Communicate your point of view clearly and honestly
- Accept that the other doesn’t have to agree with you

Taking each other’s feelings seriously
- Respect each others feelings and point of view
- Be sensitive. Hurtful comments are not helpful and can be damaging

Creating alternative solutions
- Resist the urge to bring up other unresolved and unrelated issues
- Come up with as many possible solutions as you can together

Negotiating
- Be willing to compromise
- Make sure everyone clearly understands the chosen solution

Remember…the way you handle conflict in your family shapes how your child learns to deal with disagreement.

It is important to:
- Spend time together as a couple
- Work together to resolve any misunderstandings or conflicts
- Communicate, praise and forgive each other
- Try to understand each other
- Reflect on your relationship often and how it can be improved
- Seek professional advice if you think you need help to resolve long-standing issues of conflict.
True or False Quiz

1. The following factors can affect the family: behaviour of other family members, income, health care and education.
   
   True or False

2. Poor family dynamics will NOT affect a child’s development.
   
   True or False

3. Children will not remember and will not be affected by parents fighting and arguing.
   
   True or False

4. Telling secrets and keeping secrets are common in a healthy family.
   
   True or False

5. A healthy family has no struggles, conflicts or stresses.
   
   True or False

6. Healthy families are able to express support, concern and love for each other, even when faced with challenges or problems.
   
   True or False
True or False Quiz
Answers

1. The following factors can affect the family: behaviour of other family members, income, health care, and education.

   True
   
   Discuss: behavioural factors, biological factors, extended family, social welfare, health care and services, recreation, employment, social welfare, school, church, and friends.

2. Poor family dynamics will NOT affect a child’s development.

   False
   
   Discuss: Research shows that family dynamics is one of the most important elements affecting healthy child development (Health Canada, 2003). Poor family functioning and partner relationships are associated with poor child health and development outcomes and poor parenting practices. (Ministry of Health Promotion, 2010).

3. Children will not remember and will not be affected by parents fighting and arguing.

   False
   
   Discuss: Children are highly sensitive to other people’s emotions. Family violence and conflict can have long-lasting negative effects on children, including: Learning and adjustment problems, emotional disorders, aggressive behaviour, peer difficulties, substance abuse, and delinquency (Health Canada, 2003).

4. Telling secrets and keeping secrets are common in a healthy family.

   False
   
   Discuss: Family secrets can cause problems in the family dynamics. Secrets indicate a breakdown in communication. Communication is key to a healthy family.
5. A healthy family has no struggles, conflicts, or stresses.

   False

   Discuss: A family will have reasonable rules, expectations and routines. And although stress (work, finances, illness, etc) can cause difficulties, a healthy family provides the security and support to cope with most challenges.

6. Healthy families are able to express support, concern and love for each other, even when faced with challenges or problems.

   True

   Discuss: A healthy family provides the security and support to cope with most challenges.