 Traits of a Healthy Family

For many people the notion of a “healthy family” conjures up laughter or even outright cynicism! Do healthy families really exist anywhere on this planet? We all have memories of the good aspects and more strange dimensions of our original families. And indeed, for many people the concept of “family” has unfortunately become synonymous with “dysfunctionality.”

In fact, the notion of a “dysfunctional family” has become an overused pop psychology cliché that too often makes it impossible for us to see the healthier side of family processes and development. It has been our philosophy that all families evolve through cycles and changes, sometimes demonstrating amazing resiliency and health, other times showing signs of chaos, problems and conflict that causes pain among members. No family is completely “diseased” or 100% “at-ease” and healthy. As is true for all organic systems in nature, families ebb and flow, constantly revealing new traits, patterns and stages of development, but what about the “traits of a healthy family?” Are there a set of characteristics that families reveal when they are functioning at their best? Can we portray such a picture of temporary health to counter the media preoccupation with “the dysfunctional family?” We think so. So we offer these 15 Key Traits as a stimulus for discussion, and as food for thought as you reflect on your original family of origin, and the new family that you may be building with a significant other. Let us know what you think.....we welcome your input and opinion on this very interesting topic.

**15 Traits of the Healthy Family**

The Healthy Family....

1. Understands that listening is as important as speaking when the family tries to communicate on a daily basis. Family members are patient when others are speaking, regardless of whether or not they agree.
2. Can use humor and can laugh at themself. The family can play, become silly and at times, mock itself or its behaviors. This takes great consciousness and high family self-regard.
3. Regularly engages in some shared activities, but maintains a balance so that parents have time for adult-centered activities. The family is connected to a larger community through clubs, organizations and friendships.
4. Respects privacy and the need for personal space. Although living under the same roof, the healthy family understands that individuals require “time out” from the family.
5. Shares some rituals and traditions that help define the family bond over time. These may be religiously based, or could evolve from common family interests and philosophies. These shared rituals help build a “family culture” that makes it a distinct unit. It’s different from all other families, however slight the difference may be.
6. Will seek outside help when things get rough, or when there is an impasse. These families are not afraid to disclose their observations of problems, and are open to counseling or guidance.
7. Has a mutual understanding of what is right and wrong. Here we are referring to a “moral code” or value structure that keeps the family on track. It is, in many respects, a shared family belief system.
8. Practice methods which are fair and non-violent for solving conflicts. If conflicts cannot be readily solved, the healthy family can manage the ongoing conflict without fueling further aggression or interpersonal hurt.
9. Maintains and respects confidentiality when it is requested by a family member.
10. Respects individual differences. Not all family members may enjoy sports for example, but the healthy family acknowledges the differences and refrains from ridicule or social pressure to conform.
11. Tolerates and respects change in its members as people grow and develop. The family understands and accepts the fact that people are constantly evolving and cannot be the same at all chronological ages or life stages. These changes are seen as interesting, despite temporary difficulties adapting to new roles or attitudes (anyone seen a teenager around lately!!!).
12. Allows people in the family to vent feelings appropriately. Family members don’t deny the need to express strong affect, and they recognize that forgiveness is an essential element of health.
13. Practices assertive communication as opposed to aggressive or passivedependent forms of communication. The assertive family accepts the need for a win-win orientation that preserves the rights of all parties; it rejects dominance and control as family norms.
14. Can express love and compassion directly to one another. Parents can model affection.
15. Recognizes that all families are unique and that there are many additional factors contributing to the health of a family, not just 15 traits. So, does the list remind you of your family? Or are you like most of us....many of the traits seem foreign, as if they belong to an alien family visiting from Neptune!!

We believe it is time for more of us to think about health, resiliency and a positive psychology when it comes to our families, and not just hear the media’s common preoccupation with “the dysfunctional.” And we also have to acknowledge that different cultures will see “health” in different ways.

Take a few moments and reflect back on the family you were raised in. What made it work? When it was healthy, what traits accounted for that health? And are you practicing any of these traits in your current family system? Families are a cornerstone to the survival of our culture, and indeed there are many types of families, not just the traditional nuclear family. Seeking health in our families is, in our opinion, an important and noble goal. What do you think?

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