

Web-Based Radio Show


Families and Communities

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Good morning and welcome to our show today. Today we're going to talk about a very important topic, one that is fitting with the Thanksgiving atmosphere, and that is about families and communities. To support good mental health and help children overcome special needs conditions, and any other challenges they may have, we not only have to focus on the child and the child-parent relationships that you have, but the entire family as a unit – as a whole – and the community in which they live. We define “community” broadly because some communities are hard to define these days. There are local communities, but also the national community, as well, and as we've talked before, there's the international community, which we hope can become a community and sometimes it is and sometimes it is not, in terms of the way it operates. We'll begin with the family and then we'll extend outward; we'll see that many of the same principles that we apply to the family apply to the community, whether it's local or part of a larger context.


With the family we look at a number of functions that correspond to a child's needs and how well the family as a whole – as a unit – can provide these. The first is a sense of regulation and security. Certainly, we know how individual children need to feel secure and need to feel regulated, but does the family atmosphere and environment provide this? Individual family members may – so a child may feel very secure with Mom, but Dad may have a drinking problem and be chaotic and unpredictable and may make the child feel unsafe and insecure. So part of security is feeling safe and protected and out of danger because one of the greatest ways of undermining security is through facing constant danger. Do the family members as a whole provide this? Is there a sibling who beats up on the baby or the toddler or the preschooler, undermining the sense of security? Does each family alone provide security, but as a whole are there so many conflicts between family members – arguments and fights – that they overwhelm the child?



To provide security – this first step of development – we have to use our whole DIR model, which is a DIR approach to family functioning. So we look at the need of the child – the “D” part, the developmental need – for security and for regularity, but we also look at individual differences. A child who is sensory reactive and easily gets overloaded won’t feel secure in a loud, noisy home, even with excellent parents who do well with other children. So that “R” part – the relationships – has to be calming and soothing. The family as a whole has to provide this; again, not just individual family members. So, the family as a whole has to tune in to each other’s individual differences and the new child – the youngest – is the most vulnerable, often, and in a sense requires the most flexibility on the part of other members. If the other members are not flexible because of conflict or because of fights, then it simply won’t happen. So that’s the first function of the family.

The second function is to provide the second need of the baby or child, and that is a feeling of being engaged, of being loved, of feeling compassion and warmth and intimacy. Does the family as a whole provide this, or does just Mommy provide it, but not other family members? Does the child feel alienated from the family as a group, while close to one or two family members – maybe one sibling out of three and Mom or Dad, but not the other – are their favorites? Are some of the siblings rivalrous with the new child so that there’s not that feeling of intimacy and warmth and compassion? How well is this need met? How well does a child respond? Again, here, is it tailored to the child? If the child is under reactive to sensation, the opposite of what we talked about in the last example, is that child wooed energetically into relationships? Is that child enticed by following his or her natural interests, and then is high energy used to pull them in, using experiences that work for them? If it’s a preschooler, it may be only when moving around that they can be enticed into relating. If it’s a new little baby, it may be very animated faces and noises and sounds coupled with a bright red rattle that the child or the baby likes. So how well does the family as a whole entice the child? How well does the family as a whole experience a sense of what we call “shared humanity”? How well are they caring for one another? How well is their sense of shared warmth and compassion among family members? So that is another function. Obviously, we recommend that the family share compassion and warmth and love and engagement with one another and provide that for the new child as a whole unit, not just as individuals. We’ve pointed out how individuals can be different from the family as a whole.


The third function of families, which really goes along with the fourth function, so we’ll describe the third and fourth functions together, is the degree to which the family provides opportunity for communication, where the family as a whole can communicate around basic needs and “get” each other – get each other’s messages. So much of that is



conveyed through facial expression and tone of voice. These are cultural patterns. Whole cultures often share nonverbal communication systems where the slightest tilt of the head or a movement of the arm can convey safety or danger or acceptance or approval or disapproval or rejection or humiliation. How well does the family “get” each other, so they can communicate very rapidly? How well is the new child or new baby welcomed into the system or given an opportunity to practice purposeful, interactive communication at his level of gestures and facial expressions and emotional expressivity? Also, in terms of this function, how broad and wide-ranging and flexible is this system of communication developing, which involves a lot of emotional expressivity and emotional understanding of one another. In other words, is it a family that only tolerates warmth and shows of compliance? Or is it a family that tolerates assertiveness and curiosity and even occasional aggression – not destructive aggression, but aggressive experimentation? How well does the family as whole provide limits and boundaries to one another? Or is it a family that meshes and merges with one another where needs are confused, where the Mommy believes that because she needs a hug, the baby needs a hug; or Daddy is feeling humiliated at work so when the baby won’t play with him, he feels that the baby is humiliating him and doing it deliberately, when the baby prefers Mommy. So how much are personal feelings, in a sense, put on to the baby versus respecting the baby’s own wishes and feelings and identifying what those are interactively?


The question is to what degree there is an implicit or nonverbal system of communication developing that involves purposeful two-way interaction that shows initiative and develops shared social problem solving where the family as a whole can communicate with one another and can get approval and anger and excitement and curiosity all nonverbally, as well as verbally, and also use the system to solve problems quickly, getting things that are needed, protecting one another? How broad-ranging and flexible is the system and how well does it begin to show respect for boundaries versus where everyone’s needs are placed on everyone else?

Next, we look at how a family functions in sharing ideas together. The communication through gestures of the basics of life, including danger, approval, and disapproval, are the foundations of many families and cultures, but how well do they share ideas together? How well are they creative together? Do they imagine together? Do they share a wide range of ideas together? Are they limited in what they can talk about? Again, we know individuals can be playful and creative with one another, with two children doing natural pretend play with two adults, creating fantasy trips together or even writing poetry to one another or writing short stores, but how well does the family, as a group, create together and share ideas together? This is not an easy thing for families



to do and, just as with gestures, how broad-ranging are the ideas? If they share ideas together, do they share just around being nice to one another and being compliant, or can they be assertive together? Can they even tolerate some conflict with one another and resolve it? Can they, in other words, flex their muscles with one another? Can they be curious together and describe their curiosity? Can they tolerate each other's curiosity? Can they explore new territory, new ideas, and find intrigue and excitement in the other person? Is this the environment the child is growing up in, where there's excitement in the child just with a new idea or a new discovery or a new question about the planet or the sky or the appliance or the insect they see for the first time? Is there a fascination with the child's first try at pretending when he wants to feed the doll or wants to put a stick on top of the doll's head and call it a hat? Does the caregiver or the sibling or the parent say, "No, no, no; that's a stick, not a hat!" or "Wow! That's an interesting hat! What can we do with that? Do you see any more like that?" So how well does the family, as a group with each other and with the new baby, function at this level of sharing ideas together? Are there certain ideas that hold the family together, a certain perspective, such as that all ideas are acceptable; that thinking and expressing are different from doing? In other words, for the child to graduate from acting out his aggression, for example, to talking about it or playing about it requires the family as a unit to embrace the notion that there's a difference between the doing and talking or the thinking. So how does the family, as a unit, bridge this gap and broaden the perspective of the child into actual thinking and using ideas, rather than doing?


So, here, too, we can look at the family unit. Individuals may embrace all these characteristics we're talking about, but the family as a unit may under the pressure of a grandparent or one of the parent's notions be very restrictive in what they can talk about or have certain topics that are taboo because of religion, or certain topics are taboo because of the way each parent was brought up. Perhaps one of the siblings is intolerant and they may overwhelm another sibling during conflict. Again, here, at the level of ideas, are individual differences and individual interests respected? Some children can be more interested in building things; others may be more interested in doing pretend play than building. Some are interested in moving around a lot while they talk, while others prefer to sit still. Some are more interested in labeling things and in reading or looking at books, while others are more interested in action. So how well are these differences tolerated, but not only tolerated, but also used as a basis for interacting and broadening so each child becomes capable of a whole range of ideas and of using them flexibly? To what degree does anger or stress or anxiety or fear cause the whole family to leave the world of ideas and become action oriented, become impulsive, withdrawing from one another or hitting one another or losing their tempers with one another in an explosive



and scary way? How are individual differences like sensory over reactivity taken into account so that the use of ideas is soothing for the oversensitive child, or energetic and enticing for the under reactive child; or visually complex for the visual child, the junior architect? So we have to look at the family as a whole group and how it functions, not just as individuals.

Then we get to another level – making sense of the world, being logical, connecting ideas together. How well can the family be logical together? Some families, when they get together as a group, become very illogical and live in a world of make-believe. Even though as individuals each one may be quite logical, there's something about the chemistry of the group – the amount of anger they feel towards one another or maybe the amount of anxiety they feel as a group – that prompts them to be illogical. Is there too much competition going on or too much fear in the atmosphere or not enough commonality with one another because each one has done his own thing for so long? Is underlying tension an issue? Parents may not get along, so that as individuals they do fine and each one is logical, but when they get together in a group all of the sudden it's illogical. They can't make plans to do something for the weekend. They can't figure out why any one member is having a feeling – or why they're angry or sad or happy. They can't decide on what to do for dinner and they can't make sense of things. A child stubs his toe and one parent feels he's got to go to the hospital and the other parent says, "Oh, let's just let him get over it; he'll be fine" and there's a big fight, so it becomes a big fight instead of a logical conclusion, like, "Oh let's watch it a little bit and see how it goes and if it swells up we'll take him over to the doctor." So, making sense of the world can vary from individuals to family when the family's working as a group or as a unit.


Then we go to higher levels of thinking and we get beyond simply making sense of the world. We get to higher levels of thinking, such as subtlety or what we call "gray-area thinking," and looking for multiple reasons for things and comparing different things. Let's look at multi-causal thinking and gray-area thinking and, finally, reflective thinking, where one can think of his own feelings, such as, "Gee, I'm angrier than I should be today," or "I wonder why I'm so happy today" or "Gee, we're similar to this other family in these ways, but not in those ways. I wish we were similar in those ways also. That would be nice to aspire to." They might think reflectively in terms of intellectual pursuits, such as talking about politics, and say, "Gee, I agree with what we're doing internationally for the following reasons because our long term goal should be this, and my long term goal is that and the two correspond." As you look at these higher levels of thinking as a group, you see some families embracing it as a whole group. They embrace subtlety. When they talk to each other about feelings they're



looking at to what degree they're loving or angry or sad about Grandmother or Grandfather.

Other families only take extreme views and they're very polarized, saying or thinking, "I hate this," or "I love this," or "This is terrific, this is wonderful" or "This is terrible." They can regress to more illogical forms of thinking, including magical thinking, or they regress to the ostrich approach where they just ignore things as a family unit. The family can be decidedly unreflective about the world by staying polarized, not being able, as a family, to look at themselves and how they're functioning and separate what they are as a family from what they would like to be as a family, what they aspire to be, where they're falling short, where they're meeting their own goals. They don't do this as a unit where, when the family gets together, they can discuss all kinds of feelings logically and in a sensible way, subtly in terms of degrees and shades of gray, as well as reflectively, figuring out what it takes to broaden their perspective. So a family, for example, that can only talk about love or being nice to each other, but not about anger or curiosity or assertiveness or individual expression of a need, can that family move forward and broaden their range to bring in some of these other themes? Can they talk about how to be more respectful of each other's individuality, including how to help the child who's a budding artist, even though Daddy wanted that child to be an athlete or Mommy wanted that child to be a musical performer, but, instead, the child wants to draw? How well can the family embrace that and pursue those interests? How about the child who's having difficulty with intimacy with friends and closeness and forming peer relationships? How well can the family as a group get behind that and offer more opportunities for intimacy in the family and, as a group, encourage inviting a friend of that child's over for play dates with the child or to participate in family outing to a special place so the child gets comfortable with more peer relationships?

So what kind of flexibility do we see in the family as it provides this function? As we're getting into these higher levels of thinking, how well can the family help the child with the new organizations the child will come in contact with, including peer groups? How well can the family as a group – Mom, Dad, siblings – be good sideline coaches, helping the child cope with fears, figuring out peer problems and how to cope with rejection, acceptance, peer hierarchies, what he's good at, what he's not good at? How well can the family, as a group, provide an interest in helping the child identify what makes him really special, where his unique talents lie? Not in a "phony-baloney" way, like, "You're good at everything," but in an honest way, such as, "You're a great joke-teller" or "You're a great magician." How well do they help the child find something that




the child is gifted at? How well can the family help the child cope with school or identify whether a school is good for the child or not good for the child?

Typically, what we'll see is that some families are very flexible and broad and can embrace a wide range. Some families can use higher levels of thinking and not only make sense out of their own communications with one another, but they can look at shades of gray and look at subtlety in their communication and look at degrees of feeling and help the child with their involvement in the community and school. They can be good sidelines coaches with their child as he's interacting with his peer group and they can be reflective about themselves – assessing their own strengths and weaknesses – and they can keep moving forward. That's the ideal. When I say some families, I don't mean that every family that does this achieves it all, but they're on their way.

Other families, at the other extreme, tend to be very intolerant, as a group, of certain emotions because of conflicts, including marital conflicts, or because some of the siblings of a new child, or the new child, himself, has challenges that puts the family in turmoil. Under the stress of strong emotion – the anxiety, the fear, the worry, the anger – these are families who become very polarized and they get angry at one another or angry at the world or withdraw from one another or withdraw from the world or take extreme positions. They may go into, as I mentioned before, illogical forms of thinking or they may get impulsive with one another – maybe hitting or fighting. Sometimes it involves siblings, and sometimes it can involve parents themselves, or parents and children with one another. Sometimes they never achieve, as individuals, these higher levels of thinking, so it's hard for them to involve themselves as family members at these higher levels of thinking.

The goal of the family is clearly to move forward so they make sense of the world, embracing a wide range of different themes and feelings, from assertiveness and curiosity and creativity to closeness and compassion, and dependency; supporting the child so the child has greater involvement in his peer culture and the school environment and the challenges at school; and to help tailor that, to individualize that, to the child, providing assistance where the child is weaker in an area of learning and helping the child “fly,” so to speak, where he's strong, helping the child develop special interests, if he doesn't already have them, and nurturing the child's special interests along, so every child in the family feels a sense of uniqueness. The family also needs to work together with the school and with the peer group – through team sports, for example – to create a sense of community beyond the family. The basic task is to provide enough security and safety, and to keep securing the earlier levels that I just discussed so, the child feels safe enough and secure enough and engaged and loved enough and communicative enough



and creative enough in the family that he can take the family for granted, so to speak, and move out of the family and into the peer group, into the school environment, forming relationships with teachers and friends and embracing ideas in a broad, flexible and meaningful manner. That's our function of families.

Now, here are some of the danger points. Obviously, intense emotion or intense conflict, such as marital stress, leads to regression with polarized thinking or withdrawal or impulsivity, but reflective thinking helps one out of that, helps one get help – mental health help or tutoring help, whatever is required. So the role for our families is to progress to the highest level of family functioning, to be a reflective family that embraces a wide range of feelings and themes and the challenges of the day in a flexible and adaptive manner.

What we're going to do is approach communities, and community functions, which you'll see have many similarities, in our next show, because that requires a discussion in its own right. Thank you.