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Families First: Keys to Successful Family Functioning

Affective Responsiveness

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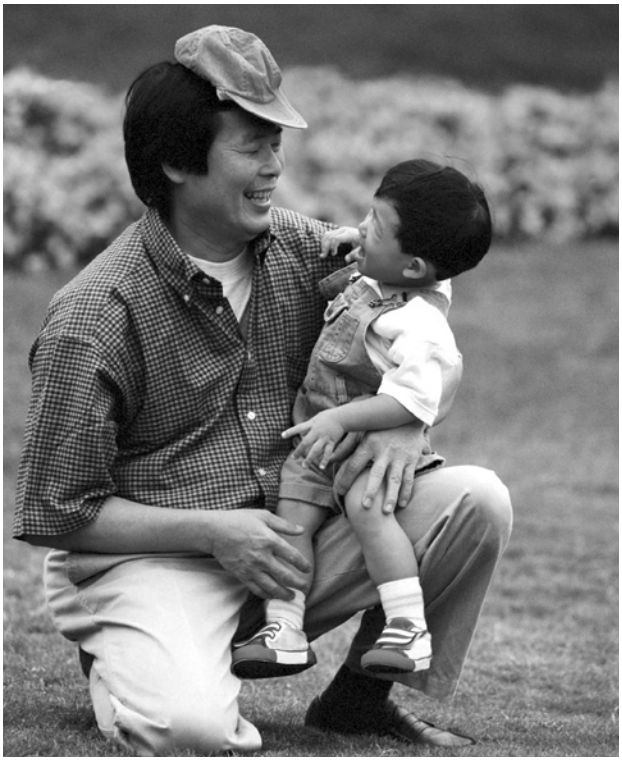
AFFECTIVE RESPONSIVENESS IS THE ABILITY OF AN INDIVIDUAL TO RESPOND TO ANOTHER WITH APPROPRIATE FEELINGS (EPSTEIN, BISHOP, RYAN, MILLER, & KEITNER, 1993). AFFECTIVE (EMOTIONAL) RESPONSIVENESS IS VERY IMPORTANT BECAUSE FAMILY MEMBERS INTERACT WITH ONE ANOTHER ON A REGULAR BASIS AND OFTEN NEED TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER DURING DIFFICULT TIMES.



Affective (emotional) responsiveness is the ability of an individual to respond to another with appropriate feelings.

INTRODUCTION

The ways in which family members emotionally respond to each other reveals a lot about the quality of their relationships. In healthy families, the members can respond with a wide range of emotions. For example, when something good happens to a family member, such as a promotion at work, the other members will most likely be happy and joyful. And if something bad happens to this same individual, such as losing a job, family members might be disappointed, sad, or even angry.

In healthy families, members also respond with emotions that are appropriate for a given situation. Using the example above, it would be appropriate for family members to be very pleased with the individual who received the promotion after years of dedication to an employer. However, it would be inappropriate for the same family members to react to the individual's promotion with anger.

TYPES OF EMOTIONS

Family researchers classify the emotions that we experience into two areas: 1) welfare emotions and 2) emergency emotions (Epstein et al., 1993).

WELFARE EMOTIONS

Welfare emotions are emotional responses that are associated with positive events. Included in this category are affection, warmth, tenderness, love, consolation, and happiness. In healthy functioning families, individual members consistently respond to one another with these emotions. People express welfare emotions with such actions as a hug, a kiss on the cheek, a pat on the back, a word of encouragement, or even a simple smile.

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EMERGENCY EMOTIONS

Unlike welfare emotions, emergency emotions are typically negative responses. Included in this category are anger, fear, loneliness, anxiety, sadness, disappointment, and depression. Although these emotions are often associated with negative events, they are not abnormal or unhealthy in appropriate situations.

At some point in a person's life, he or she will almost always experience some type of disappointment or anxiety provoking situation. In healthy families, the members respond to one another with appropriate emotions. For example, when a family member is confronted with a serious illness, such as cancer, it is appropriate for the rest of the family to experience fear, sadness, disappointment, and depression. It would be inappropriate not to have such feelings .

Suggestions for Improving Emotional Responsiveness Among Family Members

As families pass through various stages of the family life cycle, they are exposed to many experiences: some are positive (e.g., births, marriages, graduations) and others are negative (e.g., untimely death, chronic illness, accidents). Families are one of the best sources of support for children and adults during stressful times. A major way that family members support each other is through the appropriate expression of emotions. Following are some suggestions to improve emotional responsiveness among family members.

- **STAY TUNED IN TO WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE LIVES OF OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS**

  In order for family members to respond to one another with appropriate emotions, it is very important to be involved in each other's lives. This requires an effort on the part of each family member to be concerned with how the others are doing, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. For example, parents of young children should know how their children are doing in school. Did a child receive a good or bad report card? Did he/she win an award? Have a fight with a friend? Is he/she sick? Family members who are tuned in to what is going on in each other's lives will be able to respond more quickly and more appropriately.

- **LISTEN TO WHAT OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS ARE SAYING**

  In healthy families, members make a special point of listening to what others in the family have to say, whether they be children or adults. Sometimes you may not be able to fully understand why another person is experiencing a certain emotion, such as loneliness or sadness. However, by asking questions and carefully listening, you can gain a better understanding of the other person's feelings, and can thus respond in a more helpful way.

- **PUT YOURSELF IN THE OTHER'S SHOES**

  Empathy, which is the ability to experience as one's own the feelings of another, is a major asset in being able to respond with appropriate emotions for a given situation. For example, a wife who is able to take the perspective of her husband who has just been diagnosed with cancer will be better equipped to respond emotionally to him than someone who is very disconnected. By putting yourself in another family member's shoes, you will be a better source of strength and encouragement in both positive and negative situations.

- **LEARN TO CONTROL AND EXPRESS ANGER APPROPRIATELY**

While anger is a common emotion, if not kept under control it can lead to many family problems, including child abuse, spouse abuse, marital conflict, and other serious issues. When you become angry over a particular incident, it is very important that you take some time to think about the situation before acting. In healthy families, individual members express their anger in a calm, constructive, and assertive manner (Epstein et al., 1993).

- **PRACTICE EXPRESSING WELFARE EMOTIONS**

Families that express welfare emotions such as warmth, affection, tenderness, and love will produce family members who support and care for one another. There are many ways to practice expressing these emotions. Give hugs and kisses to children before bedtime; verbally express your love and appreciation for other family members; compliment others on something good they have done; console a family member who is feeling sad; express joy over a family member's accomplishments.

Focus on Family Strengths

Being able to respond to other family members with a wide range of emotions, appropriate for each situation, is a key to successful family functioning. Families who become proficient in this area are better equipped to build strong relationships and to deal with stressful life events as they occur.

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

Carter, B., & McGoldrick, M. (Eds.) (1989). The Changing Family Life Cycle (2nd Ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

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