

## Families First: Keys to Successful Family Functioning Behavior Control

*Rick Peterson, Extension Specialist and Assistant Professor, Department of Human Development, Virginia Tech*

*Stephen Green, Graduate Student, Department of Human Development, Virginia Tech*

**BEHAVIOR CONTROL REFERS TO PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR THAT A FAMILY USES FOR DEALING WITH FAMILY SITUATIONS (EPSTEIN, BISHOP, RYAN, MILLER & KEITNER, 1993). FOR EXAMPLE, FAMILIES HAVE MANY DIFFERENT WAYS FOR DEALING WITH CONFLICT, SUCH AS AVOIDING IT ALTOGETHER, CALMLY DISCUSSING DISAGREEMENTS, OR ENGAGING IN HEATED ARGUMENTS.**



Family patterns of behavior are often handed down from one generation to the next. For example, have you ever caught yourself saying or doing something your parents did and wondered why you were doing it? Parents often find themselves disciplining their children in the same way they were disciplined. Understanding your family's behavior control or family patterns is an important step in finding effective ways to deal with everyday or difficult family situations.

### STYLES OF BEHAVIOR CONTROL

Researchers have identified four styles of family behavior control: rigid, flexible, laissez-faire, and chaotic. Families with a Rigid style of behavior control are very inflexible and leave little room for negotiation and change. In such families, individual members are forced to conform or agree to a set way of doing things within the family.

In contrast, families that can adapt their family rules and roles have a Flexible behavior control style. These families are capable of adjusting to changing family situations; whereas, rigid families have trouble when faced with changing or difficult family issues.

The "anything goes" style of behavior control is known as the Laissez-faire style. Families with this style of behavior have few rules or standards that guide family interactions.

Families that have no consistent style, or that jump back and forth between styles have a Chaotic behavior control style. This style leaves family members confused about their individual roles and the rules that govern their family's organization.

Each style influences how a family adapts to changing family situations. Therefore, the amount of control family members feel they have influences how they react to different family situations. Of the four styles, the flexible style is thought to be the most effective for healthy family interaction.

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## FAMILY BEHAVIOR PATTERNS

Families develop their own standards of behavior, based on what is and what is not acceptable within the family. These standards are reinforced by daily family interaction. Reinforcement of certain types of behavior is important, such as those surrounding physical danger (e.g., telling a child not to play in the street). Other family behaviors may need to be adapted or changed over time to meet changing family situations.

Research indicates that families who are able to be flexible and can adapt to changing family situations have healthier relationships. Rigid families have more difficulty in adjusting to stressful family situations and are more likely to have conflict or to cause resentment among family members.

## DETERMINING YOUR FAMILY'S STYLE OF BEHAVIOR CONTROL

What is your family's style of behavior control? Is your family rigid, flexible, laissez-faire, or chaotic? To answer this question, place a dot where you believe your family fits on the line below. For example, you may feel your family is flexible rather than chaotic. Ask each family member to participate in selecting your family's style of behavior control.



Once your family has chosen your family's style of behavior, discuss why each of you thinks you fall into this category. What reasons do family members give for their choices? What similarities and differences can you see from your discussion? Do family members feel there is too much control or too little control within the family? Discussing your family's style of behavior is an important step in understanding family members' feelings about the amount of control within the family.

Families tend to struggle with how much control is too much or too little. Striking a balance between these two is a key to building a healthy family. This balancing act comes into play especially when children are involved. Young children need structure and guidance, while older children need more independence and privacy. Looking at what style of behavior your family has will enable your family to make needed adjustments as your family grows and changes.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING A HEALTHY FAMILY STYLE OF BEHAVIOR

How does your family change its style of behavior? Do you simply wake up one morning and decide to change from being a structured family into a more flexible one? Not hardly. Instead, the family must make a purposeful decision to change. Change is difficult. It takes time and effort. But the results can be very helpful for individual family members and also for the family as a whole.

Families often run into problems surrounding issues of roles, rules, and acceptable behavior. For example, do family chores get assigned and carried out? If not, maybe your family needs more structure. Or does an adolescent feel he needs more freedom to be with friends? How does your family deal with such issues? One way is to negotiate with each other on how family roles and rules are established and maintained.

During this negotiation process, several key issues must be addressed. First, certain family rules and standards must be upheld, especially surrounding issues of safety. Second, rewards and consequences must be clearly spelled out and understood. Third, family members should agree to participate in and to commit to following through with the change process.

One way to achieve change is through a Family Contract. In the contract the family identifies changes that it wishes to make and creates a family action plan.

## CONTRACT STEPS

- **CALL A FAMILY MEETING (SEE VCE PUBLICATION 350-095).**
- **IDENTIFY AN AREA OF FAMILY CONCERN OR INTEREST.**
- **USE YOUR PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS TO CREATE A FAMILY SOLUTION (SEE VCE PUBLICATION 350-091). DO YOUR FAMILY MEMBERS FEEL THEY NEED MORE FLEXIBILITY OR MORE STRUCTURE WHERE ROLES AND RULES ARE CONCERNED?**
- **WRITE DOWN THE AGREED UPON SOLUTION SO EVERYONE KNOWS HOW IT WILL BE CARRIED OUT, INCLUDING REWARDS AND CONSEQUENCES.**
- **MONITOR THE CONTRACT. THE FAMILY SHOULD PERIODICALLY REVIEW THE AGREEMENT TO MAKE SURE THAT FAMILY MEMBERS ARE DOING WHAT THEY AGREED TO DO.**

This Family Contract is a good way for members to make important changes within the family. Sometimes family members, particularly adolescents, will push the limits of the contract. By holding firm to the bargaining contract, change can be maintained. Families who try to make changes may feel that they have lost their equilibrium or balance and will try to fall back on old family patterns. Don't get discouraged, do the best you can, but hold on to the changes your family agreed upon.



Families with the ability to negotiate new roles and rules within the family are better able to cope and adjust to life's changing circumstances.

## FOCUS ON FAMILY STRENGTHS

Behavior control is a key to successful family functioning. Research shows that families who can adapt to changing situations are better able to meet the challenges that face them. The flexible style of behavior control improves a family's ability to meet changing demands in and outside the family. In addition, families with the ability to negotiate new roles and rules are better able to cope and adjust to life's changing circumstances. By using a Family Contract, families can identify interests and concerns that may need to change, including the family's style of behavior.

## 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

Epstein, N. B. Bishop, D., Ryan, C., Miller, & Keitner, G., (1993). The McMaster Model View of Healthy Family Functioning. In Froma Walsh (Eds.), *Normal Family Processes* (pp. 138-160). The Guilford Press: New York/London.