

## chapter

# 13

## Family Communication: It's All Relative

### OBJECTIVES

- Identify sibling relational maintenance strategies.
- Describe elements of systems theory and examine their impact on family interactions.
- Explain family communication patterns theory.
- Identify family types identified by Koerner and Fitzpatrick.
- Discuss ways in which families form their own identity (stories, myths, metaphors, themes).
- Explain the ABCX model of stress as it applies to family interactions.

### SOUND FAMILIAR?

As the end of the semester approached, Bailey felt more stress than he had ever experienced in his life. He knew that his parents were going to be less than pleased when he told them about his decision to change his major, and he was worried about how he would break the news to them that his roommate got him a summer job with his father's company and he wouldn't be coming home this summer. A few minutes after he tweeted, "Stressed to the max—parental units are NOT going to be happy!" his cell phone rang. As he glanced and saw his mother's Caller ID, he groaned and considered letting the phone go to voice mail. "That's what I get for accepting my parents' requests to follow me on Twitter," he thought to himself as he reluctantly answered the call.

### OVERVIEW

Of all the relationships we form throughout our lifetime, our family relationships

are the most enduring. We begin this chapter by advancing an important question about family communication: What makes family relationships unique from the other types of interpersonal relationships we experience in a lifetime? Vangelisti (2004) describes the significance of the family by labeling it “the crucible of society” (p. ix). These relationships are unique from other types of interpersonal relationships because they are described as both voluntary and involuntary and play a significant role in shaping self-perceptions. After all, our family relationships offer our first glimpse into what it means to form an intimate connection with another person.

**“The family. We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another’s desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together” (p. 9).**

Source: Bombeck, E. (1987). *Family: The ties that bind...and gag!* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Consider the fact that families have unique communicative features. After all, you have a frame of reference for understanding communication in families since these are the first and likely to be the longest-lasting relationships formed in your life. Perhaps the best way to understand family relationships is to take a look at the role of interpersonal communication in the family and how it shapes our sense of identity and serves as a model for communication choices. Even in situations where relationships with family members have become strained, the

bonds shape an individual’s sense of self, serve as a model for desirable or undesirable communication, and shape expectations for future relationships. In this chapter we examine classic and contemporary family communication research, theories, and concepts. We will also address interpersonal communication concepts as they apply across the family life span.

## DEFINITION OF FAMILY

If you were asked to list the number of people you consider to be part of your family, who would you include? Would you list in-laws, close family friends, close personal friends, neighbors, siblings’ spouses, stepfamilies, or even co-workers? Would you include only those relatives related by blood or marriage? When students are asked this question, they often include a wide range of individuals in their list of family members. Most family relationships are described as *involuntary* because we do not get to choose our parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and so on. Some family relationships may be formed of *voluntary* members. An example of this is the television series *Friends*, which showcases how non-biological relationships can fulfill family roles.

As we grow older, our choices of who we include in our “family” expand. Voluntary families are created as a result of conscious decisions made to include others in the familial relationship. For example, we select our spouse or life partner. We all have experience with family relationships, but have you considered the unique nature of these bonds? A scene from the 2005 film *The Family Stone* illustrates this sense of family ob-

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Most family relationships are involuntary because we don't get to choose who to include.

Even in situations where relationships with family members have become strained, the bonds shape an individual's sense of self, serve as a model for desirable or undesirable communication, and shape expectations for future relationships.

ligation. Sarah Jessica Parker portrays a young woman struggling to be accepted by her fiancé's close-knit family. At one point she becomes frustrated and asks her future mother-in-law, "What's so great about you guys?" Diane Keaton replies, "Uh, nothing . . . it's just that we're all that we've got." Each family member recognizes other family members' idiosyncrasies, but also realizes that the strength of the family bond surpasses all other relationships.

have provided scholars with opportunities to take a glimpse into how communication develops in these relationships. While we do not have the space to discuss all family types, three specific interpersonal relationships that exist in the family structure will be discussed: marital relationships, parent-child relationships, and sibling relationships.

## TYPES OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

It is difficult to describe a "typical" family in the twenty-first century. Over the years, the structure of the typical American family has changed. The *Handbook of Family Communication* explores several different family types such as intact families, divorced or single parent families, stepfamilies, and gay or lesbian families. But while the types may have changed, core family relationships continue to exist and

### Marital Relationships

According to family communication researchers Turner and West (2002), "marriage is often seen as the most important intimate relationship two people can share" (p. 232). Some research indicates that individuals in healthy marriages tend to be both healthier and happier than unmarried individuals or those in unhealthy relationships. The longstanding question posed by researchers from a variety of academic and professional fields has always been how to obtain and maintain an enduring marital relationship.



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Individuals in healthy marriages tend to be healthier and happier than others.

Each life partner brings his or her own set of expectations to the marital relationship. Tune into a television talk show and at some point you will likely see a couple asking the host to solve their marital problems. It is not unusual for the host to identify differing expectations as the root of the problem. Earlier in this text, we mentioned that messages have both content and relational dimensions. The same is true of our expectations for marital relationships—couples hold content expectations and relational expectations for their partners.

**CONTENT EXPECTATIONS.** Content expectations focus on how the relationship is defined by the role each partner plays. Roles are defined by the expectations held for a position in the family. The ABC television show *Wife Swap* focused on the role expectations established for wives in two different types of families. In each episode, the wives switched families for two weeks. Clashes ensued over differing content expectations for husbands' and wives' roles in housekeeping and child-rearing. It is important to note that one of the difficult tasks involved in the marital relationship is ensuring that the two sets of expectations are congruent.

**RELATIONAL EXPECTATIONS.** Relational expectations refer to the similarity, or correspondence,

of the emotional, or affective, expectations each partner has for defining the relationship. In one episode of *Wife Swap*, the Kraut and Hardin wives exchange households. One wife spends considerable time shopping and focusing on current fashion trends while her husband tends to the household duties. She is perceived to focus on herself rather than on the emotional needs of family members. The other wife expects all family members to participate in household chores, and the couple has formed the expectation that the role of the wife will include being responsible for homeschooling the children. She is extremely involved in every aspect of the children's lives and is aware of any changes in their emotional states. When the two families swap wives for the two-week period, they discover that their relational expectations are incongruent in the new environment. This often causes the sparks to fly! When the wives are in their own homes, communication is more satisfying because their spouses and children have congruent expectations for the relationship. They have become comfortable with the communication expectations associated with the maternal roles. Marital satisfaction is greater in relationships where couples discuss their expectations for the relationship—failure to talk about expectancies is often equated to playing “guess what’s inside my mind.”

To explain the various expectations that couples have for communication and for the relationship, Fitzpatrick (1987) developed a model to distinguish each couple type and how they view role conventionality, interdependence, and their approach to conflict. Three couple types were identified: traditionals, separates, and independents (see also Figure 13.1). Characteristics that distinguish the various couple types from one an-

other are their expectations for sex roles and their approach to conflict in the relationship.

**TRADITIONALS.** Those who exhibit a high level of interdependence and sharing are considered **traditional couples**. Conventional sex roles are adopted in traditional couples, with males performing tasks such as lawn care, automobile maintenance, and taking out the garbage. Women fulfill the role of nurturing caregiver and are responsible for housekeeping and childcare duties. In her research, Fitzpatrick (1987) found that traditionals tend to be the most satisfied of the three couple types. A 2009 study of 210 couples found that traditional couples reported the highest level of commitment to the relationship compared to other couple types (Givertz, Segrin, & Hanzal). Clear expectations for the roles partners will play and for their relationship result in dedication to the relationship.



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Traditional couples adopt conventional sex roles in their marriages.

### Traditionals

- Demonstrate a high amount of interdependence and sharing
- Adopt traditional or conventional sex roles

### Separates

- Emphasize each other's individual identity over relational maintenance
- Typically avoid conflict

### Independents

- Respect the need for autonomy
- Negotiate a high level of communication and sharing
- Adopt nonconventional sex roles (husband stays home and wife works outside of home)

Figure 13.1 Description of marital types.

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Marital satisfaction is greater in relationships where couples discuss their expectations for the relationship.

**SEPARATES.** *Separate couples* tend to emphasize each individual's identity and independence over maintaining the relationship. In addition to maintaining conventional sex roles in the relationship, this couple is characterized by their avoidance of conflict. As is evident, this couple type typically reports a low level of marital satisfaction. Givertz, Segrin, and Hanzal (2009) found that separate couples experience the lowest levels of marital satisfaction and commitment of the three couple types.

**INDEPENDENTS.** *Independent couples* simultaneously respect the need for autonomy and engage in a high level communication and sharing with one another. Sex roles in the independent relationship are unconventional. Individual freedom is a priority, and partners are willing to engage in conflict when they disagree on issues and tend to be assertive in expressing and defending their position on issues.

## Parent-Child Relationships

Consider for a moment that the first family relationship formed is between a parent and a child. As well as having a legal responsibility to care for and protect their children, parents are responsible for the moral and character development of their children—not an easy task. In his book, *Family First*, Dr. Phil McGraw (2004) discusses the role that parents play in preparing children for life's challenges, and points out that parents need to realize the influence they have as a result of the messages they communicate to their children.

A parent's role is complicated; biological and emotional attachments create a special bond that makes communication both rewarding and frustrating at times. Television shows such

as *Nanny 911* and *Super Nanny* provide parents with advice for managing interactions with their children. They also provide a glimpse into the parenting challenges experienced by others, offering support to parents who can see that others are enduring the same, or worse, situations.



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Young children assert their independence when they state they want to “do it all by myself.”

Over the course of the family life cycle, communication between parents and children evolves as new events occur. It is during this time that the dialectical tensions between autonomy and connection are perhaps the strongest. In the beginning of their lives children are totally dependent on the parents to provide for them and look out for their best interests. In the United States, many parents begin teaching children at a young age to become independent. Children are encouraged to learn to eat by themselves, pick out their own clothes, and to explore their individual interests in sports and other extracurricular activities. But even while encouraging independence, many parents simultaneously reinforce the message that they are still connected to their children. Providing children with cellular telephones is one strategy currently used by parents to stay connected as their children explore autonomy.



As children progress through adolescence, a new set of communication issues needs to be considered. Up to this point, children have been encouraged to become independent, but eventually the dialectical tension between autonomy and connection kicks in and parents may begin to feel that children are becoming too independent. Adolescence is often a difficult transition period for both children and parents alike, and it is not uncommon for conflicts to occur during this time in the family life cycle. A common communication issue during this period involves the negotiation of rules, with new guidelines for behavior being added on a regular basis as parents and children clash over preferences for clothes, manners, curfews, and activities. As the occurrence of parent-child conflict increases during adolescence, issues that once seemed unimportant now take on new relevance. Consider the issues you and your parents disagreed on during your adolescence. Why do you think communication surrounding these issues was so problematic?

As children grow up, identify their aspirations, and pursue their goals, families may find that their time is divided, and this provides yet another source of tension in the household. A 2015 study examining the impact of the time mothers spend with young children (ages 3–11) and teens (ages 12–18) found that the time spent directly engaged together during younger years does not have a significant impact on the child's behavior or academic success. However, there are important social and academic implications for increased mother-child time during the teen years. Teens who spend time with their mothers are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, and time spent with both parents together enhanced the teen's sense of well-being (Milkie, Nomaguchi, & Denny, 2015). Figure 13.2 highlights some of the trends in the amount of time parents spent with their children from 1965 to 2010.

### Spending time with the kids

The average number of hours parents spent with their children each week rose since 1985.

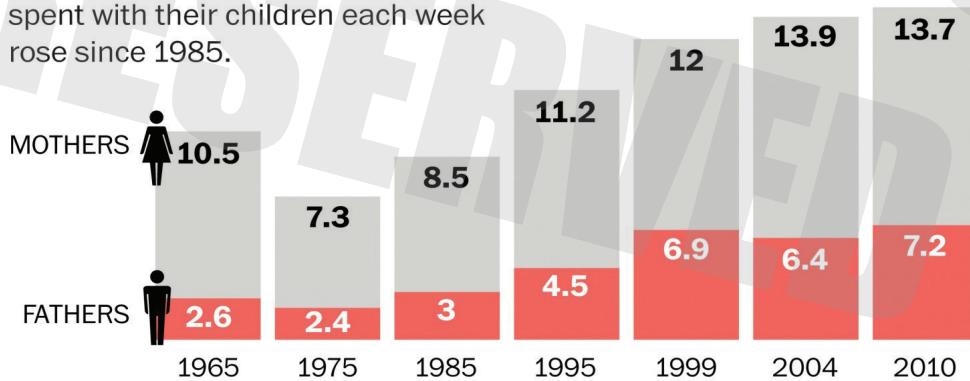


Figure 13.2 The average number of hours U.S. parents spent with their children each week, 1965–2010.

Source: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/making-time-for-kids-study-says-quality-trumps-quantity/2015/03/28/10813192-d378-11e4-8fce-3941fc548f1c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/making-time-for-kids-study-says-quality-trumps-quantity/2015/03/28/10813192-d378-11e4-8fce-3941fc548f1c_story.html)

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During adolescence, issues that once were insignificant can result in conflict.

While many adult privileges are granted to children when they reach the age of eighteen, parents and children view and negotiate the transition to adulthood in different ways. The period when children begin the separation process from their parents is often referred to as the **launching stage**. However, this term is often misleading because many families continue to experience a sense of interdependence in their lives for a period of time after the child reaches legal age. For example, after returning to college after Christmas break, one student was overheard saying, “It was kind of nice being back home and knowing that my mom would stay up and wait for me to come in at night. I guess I have to admit that I missed that during my first semester at college.” While some may find comfort in the old routines, others may find that new rules need to be negotiated during the launching stage. Statistics reported on [forbes.com](http://forbes.com) indicate that approximately 13 percent of adult children move back home with their parents after living on their own for a period of time. Researchers have coined the term **boomerang children** to refer to young adults who return home to live with their parents after living on their own for a period

of time. Daily chores, financial contributions, and respect for household rules are only a few of the topics that require negotiation between boomerang children and their parents as they readjust to living under the same roof again.

Divorce and remarriage create additional issues to consider in parent-child interactions. Stepfamilies face unique challenges that revolve around issues relating to discipline, resources, and ties to the biological family unit. According to a 2011 Pew Research Center report, almost 42% of American adults are part of a steprelationship, as a stepparent, a stepsibling, or a stepchild. Should stepfamilies and stepchildren expect communication and relationships to be similar to those between biological parents and children? Family communication scholars use the analogy of starting a novel halfway through the book to describe the experience of negotiating the stepfamily relationship (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2004).

Images of stepfamilies portrayed in stories and the media often depict these relationships as filled with challenges and negative communication. In the 1998 film *Stepmom*, a conversation between a biological mother (Jackie) and her daughter (Anna) about her stepmother (Isabel) illustrates one of many potential communication issues associated with stepfamily relationships.

**Anna:** I think Isabel’s pretty.

**Jackie:** Yeah, I think she’s pretty too . . . if you like big teeth.

**Anna:** Mom?

**Jackie:** Yes, sweetie?

**Anna:** If you want me to hate her, I will.

(*Stepmom*, directed by Chris Columbus, 2hr. 4 min., 1492 Pictures, 1998.)



Anger or guilt can impact communication about the relationship, and both children and parents may find it difficult to be open about their true feelings. Not only are families required to negotiate nuances (such as children addressing stepparents as “Mom” or “Dad”), but the role of step grandparents in the blended family is also a consideration. Gold (2015) offers suggestions to assist stepgrandparents in adapting to the new family structure. These include:

- Respect the rules established by the new stepparent. Resist the temptation to “take sides” in situations involving the stepparent and stepchild.
- Be flexible and understand that the new family needs to create their own traditions. Have a conversation with the new spouse and their children about your traditions to see where they might “fit” into the new family’s plans.
- Realize that stepgrandchildren have tremendous adjustments in their lives. Do not force affection (hugs, kisses) until they are ready. Learn about and support the stepgrandchildren’s interests before expecting them to become interested in you. (Gold, 2015)

**RELATIONAL MAINTENANCE IN PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS.** Parents and children often find the need to increase efforts in maintaining their relationship as children grow older and gain more autonomy. Activities, new friends, and, eventually, the process of starting a new family can detract from the time and energy available for relationships with parents. In some instances, the onset of these maintenance challenges begins much earlier when parents decide to divorce. Non-custodial parents are faced with identifying new strategies to maintain their re-

lationship with their children in the absence of the close physical proximity they once shared.




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Parents and children often find the need to schedule special time together to maintain their relationship as children grow older.

While many strategies used to maintain the relationship are similar to those found in other types of relationships, a 1999 study by Thomas-Maddox identified several strategies unique to this context:

- Non-custodial parents indicated that they depend on mediated communication (sending letters, emails, phone calls) and material/monetary offerings (sending gifts, taking children on “exciting” trips) to maintain their relationship.
- Children identified strategies for maintaining their relationship with non-custodial parents that include mediated communication, proximity (living with non-custodial parent during summer vacations and breaks by choice), and suggesting joint activities (proposing ideas such as going to the movies).

While being physically separated as a result of this difficult decision may not be easy for par-



Parents and children often find the need to increase efforts in maintaining their relationship as children grow older and gain more autonomy.

ents and children, there are communication strategies that can be used to continue the relationship from a distance.

### Sibling Relationships

Relationships with siblings generally last the longest, given that our brothers and sisters are often still with us long after our parents are gone. Approximately 80 percent of individuals have siblings and, with the exception of firstborn children, sibling relationships are simultaneously formed with parent relationships. In their younger years, siblings often spend more time playing and interacting

#### RESEARCH IN REAL LIFE: The impact of overinvolved parenting

Is it possible for parents to become too controlling and involved in their children's lives? A 2014 study by Givertz and Segrin of 339 college students and their parents asked a series of questions to explore the role that parenting style plays in shaping family satisfaction and a child's sense of identity and entitlement. The study concluded that:

- Both parents and children report higher levels of family satisfaction when parents adopt an authoritative communication style that is open.
- Parents reported using authoritarian and permissive styles less frequently than their children perceived them using them.
- Families that exhibit high levels of adaptability and cohesion report greater levels of satisfaction.
- Children whose parents exhibited controlling (authoritarian) behaviors reported lower levels of self-efficacy and higher levels of perceived entitlement.

Overall, parents perceived their family as higher in cohesiveness and more effective in communicating with one another compared to the evaluations of their children.

- Do you think your evaluations of family satisfaction, cohesion, and parenting styles would be similar to your parents' evaluations? Why or why not?
- What factors do you think impact the different ways in which parents and children view the family relationship?

with one another than they do with their parents. But that does not necessarily mean these relationships are always positive. One minute siblings may be collaborating to “team up” against their parents, and the next minute they may be fighting like cats and dogs.

Communication in the sibling relationship often reflects both negative and positive characteristics. As family resources such as time, parents’ attention, or physical objects are perceived to be scarce, siblings may engage in conflict or competition. Same-sex siblings tend to be more competitive than opposite-sex siblings. In some instances, siblings may be expected to fulfill the role of teacher or “co-parent.” If you have siblings, chances are you have probably been instructed to “Watch out for your brother (or sister)” at some point in time. Often this occurs in single-parent families or in families where both parents are employed outside the home.

As siblings approach adolescence, their relationship experiences new transformations. Perhaps the competition for resources may become more intense, or siblings experience frustration when they are compared to one another. In these instances, a sibling may seek deidentification from other siblings. **Deidentification** is defined as an individual’s attempt to create a distinct identity that is separate from that of their siblings. Have you ever had a teacher compare you to an older sibling? Or perhaps you have had friends at school who point out how similar or different you are compared to your brother or sister. When siblings are constantly evaluated against one another, they may experience a desire to create a unique identity and sense of self. Perhaps your ability to play soccer was often compared to one of your siblings who also played soccer.

In an effort to distinguish yourself from your sibling, you quit playing soccer and played basketball instead.

## Maintenance in Sibling Relationships

Recall our discussion of the importance of relationship maintenance in Chapter 8. Relational maintenance is of particular importance in the sibling relationship, since these typically last longer than any other family relationship. In a study designed to investigate unique maintenance strategies employed by siblings, six behaviors were identified (Myers & Weber, 2004). These include the following (see also Figure 13.3):

- **CONFIRMATION.** **Confirmation** consists of messages used to communicate the importance or value of siblings in one’s life. Statements such as, “I’m lucky to have you as my brother” or “I really appreciate having you here to support me” are often viewed as validating the relationship.
- **HUMOR.** Often siblings use **humor** as a way to bring amusement or enjoyment to their relationship. Sharing private jokes about family members or making fun of their behaviors are ways siblings use humor to strengthen their bond.
- **SOCIAL SUPPORT.** Siblings provide **social support** to one another by using comforting strategies to assist one another through difficult times. Asking a sibling for advice or sharing information about difficulties in other relationships illustrates the trust that is present in the relationship.
- **FAMILY EVENTS.** Siblings often maintain and strengthen their relationships with



each other and other family members through participation in **family events**. They may agree to visit their parents at the same time during the summer or holidays to spend time together.

- **ESCAPE.** Siblings approach the time and communication spent with one another as an **escape** or diversion during difficult situations.
- **VERBAL AGGRESSION.** While the final strategy, **verbal aggression**, may seem counterintuitive to maintaining a relationship, this maintenance mechanism allows siblings to vent their frustrations with one another. Yelling at one another may be the most effective method for having their concerns heard in a specific situation.

Additional research on adult sibling maintenance identified verbal statements, nonverbal gestures, and social support as additional options for strategies that are often used when siblings make purposeful or strategic attempts to maintain a relationship, as opposed to using messages and behaviors that are more habitual or routine (Myers, Byrnes, Frisby, & Mansson, 2011).



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Figure 13.3 Sibling relational maintenance strategies.



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Often siblings use humor as a strategy to maintain their relationship with one another.

## FAMILY COMMUNICATION THEORIES

Several theories can be applied to the study of communication in family relationships. Recall the definition of interpersonal communication: a process that occurs in a specific context and involves an exchange of verbal or nonverbal messages between two connected individuals with the intent to achieve shared meaning. The family is one context of connected individuals in which these interactions occur. Scholars of family communication have applied a variety of interpersonal theories to explain these interactions. In essence, virtually any theory of interpersonal communication could be applied to the study of families. Three theories that have specific implications for the family relationship include systems theory, family communication patterns theory, and symbolic interactionism.

### Family Systems Theory

Systems theory has been employed by family scholars to explore a variety of interactions, including children's attitudes about their single parent dating (Marrow-Ferguson & Dickson, 1995), family involvement in addressing children's problems at school (Walsh & Williams, 1997), and adolescent abuse of their parents (Eckstein, 2004).

**Family systems theory** is one of the most frequently used theories in family communication scholarship (Stamp, 2004).

In essence, virtually any theory of interpersonal communication could be applied to the study of families.

The basic premise behind this theory is that family relationships can be treated as systems and can include the study of systemic qualities such as wholeness, interdependence, hierarchy, boundaries, calibration, and equifinality (Stamp, 2004). Each of the elements of systems theory is particularly relevant in explaining how and why

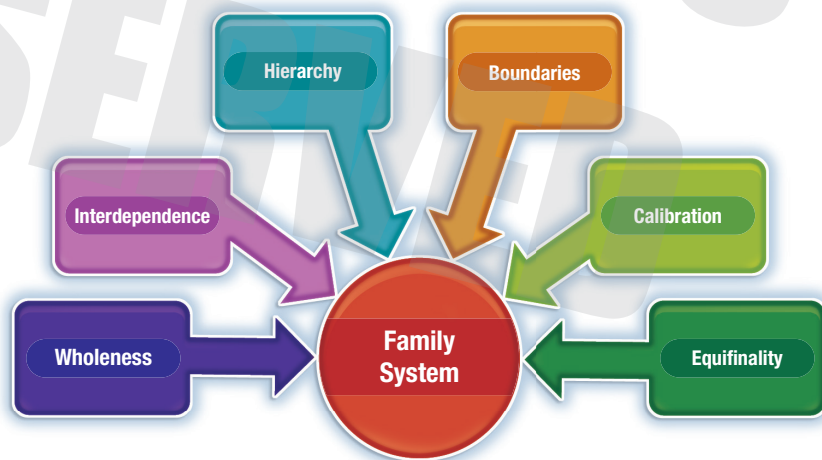


Figure 13.4 Elements of family systems.

family members relate to one another (See Figure 13.4).

**WHOLENESS.** *Wholeness* implies that a family creates its own personality or culture, and that this personality is unique from that of each family member. Many studies that have applied systems theory recognize that in order to understand the dynamics of families, the role of individual family members must be considered as well.

**INTERDEPENDENCE.** *Interdependence* proposes that the family system comprises interrelated parts, or members. A change experienced by one family member is likely to result in changes that impact all other family members. Suppose a child catches the flu and cannot attend school for several days. If both parents work outside the home, one will have to make adjustments to his or her work schedule to stay at home with the child. To protect other family members from being exposed to the illness, family routines such as sharing dinner or watching television together may be altered.

**HIERARCHY.** All systems have levels, or a *hierarchy*, present. Typically, parents take on the powerful roles in the family and are responsible for seeing that children's needs are fulfilled and that discipline and control are maintained in the system. It is important to note that power is often linked to respect among family members. We may differ in how we perceive power structures in the family. A 2008 study surveyed 133 African American, European American, and Latina girls and their mothers to explore how culture influences the display of respect for power in families. Results indicated that:

- European American girls showed the lowest levels of respect for their mothers com-

pared with the other two groups.

- In situations where conflict was present, African American and Latina mothers indicated that arguments were more intense than reported by European American mothers (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008).



Parents often assume primary responsibility for childcare and discipline in the family.

**BOUNDARIES.** Families create *boundaries* that facilitate communication with members who are considered to be part of the system. These boundaries are often flexible as the family expands to include friends and pets. *Ambiguous boundaries* often create confusion about who family members perceive as being part of the system. Some families may view close friends as part of their family even in the absence of biological or legal connections. In these situations, even though the bonds are not biological, individuals may view one another as an important part of the family.

**CALIBRATION.** The system element of *calibration* is the mechanism that allows the family to review communication in their relationships and decide if any adjustments need to be made to the system. For example, reality shows that feature



families interacting with one another may provide examples of effective (or ineffective) family interactions that we can use as a reference or basis for comparison. Feedback communicated through messages received from others can also be taken into consideration. While waiting in line at the grocery store, a mother might receive a compliment about her well-behaved children. This provides her with feedback to gauge her performance as a parent.

**EQUIFINALITY.** The final system element, **equifinality**, refers to a family's abilities to achieve the same goal by following different paths or using different communication behaviors. For example, one family may teach the children independence by communicating the expectation that the children are responsible for getting themselves up and getting ready for school in the morning. In another family, the mother might enter the bedroom and gently sing "Good Morning" to the children, lay out their school clothes, and have breakfast ready for them. Both families accomplish the same goal: working through the morning routine of getting to school on time. However, each family has a different method for accomplishing the goal.

## Family Communication Patterns Theory

Perhaps one of the most complicated phenomena to factor into the family communication equation is the role that intrapersonal communication plays in the process. **Family communication patterns theory** is a comprehensive theory that focuses on the cognitive processes used to shape and guide our interpersonal interactions. Originally developed by McLeod and Chaffee (1972, 1973) as a way for explaining family

members' interactions associated with television viewing, the goal of the theory was to explain how parents help children to understand messages received from multiple sources through mediated channels. But consider for a moment all of the different messages received from outside the family that are processed on a daily basis. Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) expanded the focus of this theory beyond mediated messages to focus on how a variety of messages are processed and discussed within the family to create shared meaning. This revised theory identified two primary orientations used by families: conversation and conformity

**Conversation orientation** refers to the level of openness and the frequency with which a variety of topics are discussed. Families who adopt a high conversation orientation encourage members to openly and frequently share their thoughts and feelings with one another on a wide variety of topics. It is rare that a topic is "off limits" for discussion in families who have a high conversation orientation. On the other hand, families with a low conversation orientation experience less frequent or less open interactions, and sometimes there are limits with regard to what topics can be discussed.

The second dimension of the communication pattern analysis focuses on the family's conformity orientation. **Conformity orientation** refers to the degree to which a family encourages autonomy in individual beliefs, values, and attitudes. Families who emphasize a high level of conformity in interactions encourage family members to adopt similar ways of thinking about topics, often with the goal of avoiding conflict and promoting harmony in the family. At the other end of the conformity continuum, family members

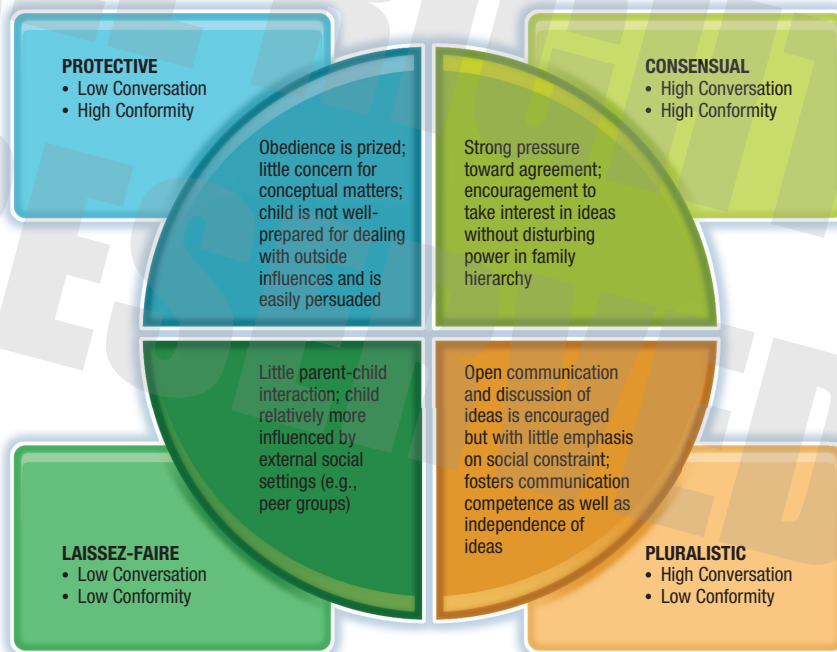
are encouraged to form independent beliefs and attitudes, and these differing opinions are often perceived as having equal value in discussions and decision making.

To explain the interrelationship between conversation orientation and conformity orientation, Koerner and Fitzpatrick identified four different family types (2002). These include pluralistic, consensual, laissez-faire, and protective families. See Figure 13.5 for an integration of the family types into the two family orientations.

Parents who encourage their children to form relationships outside the home and couples who believe that each partner should pursue his or her own network of friends typically do so in an

effort to broaden the perspectives of individuals within the family. Complete the Family Communication Patterns scale located at the end of this chapter to find out what you perceive your family orientation to be.

**PLURALISTIC.** **Pluralistic families** adopt a high conversation orientation and a low conformity orientation. Almost anything goes in this family! A wide range of topics are discussed, and family members are encouraged to have their own opinions without feeling the pressure to agree with one another. Children in pluralistic families are often encouraged to participate in decision-making on topics ranging from where the family should go for vacation to the establishment of family rules.



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Figure 13.5 Family types as identified by family communication patterns theory.

**CONSENSUAL.** **Consensual families** adopt both a high conversation and a high conformity orientation. These families often encourage members to be open in their interactions with one another, but they expect that family members will adopt similar opinions and values. Parents in consensual families promote open conversations, but they still believe that they are the authority when it comes to decisions in the family.

**LAISSEZ-FAIRE.** **Laissez-faire families** adopt both a low conversation and low conformity orientation. Rarely will family members talk with one another, and when conversations do occur, they are focused on a limited number of topics. Children are encouraged to make their own decisions, often with little or no guidance or feedback from their parents, in the laissez-faire family.

**PROTECTIVE.** **Protective families** score low on conversation orientation and high on conformity. The phrase “Children should be seen but not heard” is characteristic of this family type. Parents are considered to be the authority, and children are expected to obey the family rules without questioning them.

Identifying and understanding the approaches used to communicate and to promote autonomy and independence is beneficial to understanding how these interactions shape both individual and family identities.

## Symbolic Interaction Theory

**Symbolic interactionism** is perhaps one of the most widely applied theories in the study of family life. In Chapter 2 we discussed the role that messages play in assigning meaning to our experiences, and in how we perceive others and ourselves.

### RESEARCH IN REAL LIFE:

#### Family communication patterns and students' decisions to “friend” parents on Facebook

How likely would you be to “friend” your parent on Facebook? If you do provide them with access to your posts, would you change your privacy settings to limit what they could access or what others could post to your page? A 2013 study (Ball, Wanzer, & Servoss) asked 189 college students to report on their Facebook use and evaluate their family's communication patterns. Results found the following:

- A total of 154 students (82 percent) reported that they were Facebook friends with their parents.
- Females were 2.5 times more likely to friend their parents than males.
- Participants who perceive their families as having a higher conversation orientation were more likely to accept friend requests from their parents.
- Only 25 percent of the students who are Facebook friends with their parents adjusted their privacy settings to limit access to profile information.

Mead's (1934) five concepts of symbolic interactionism (mind, self, I, me, and roles) are particularly useful in understanding the impact that family interactions have on shaping your identity. In his discussion of the concept of “mind,” Mead explains the role that symbols play in creating shared meaning. Children interact with family members and learn language and social meanings associated with words. Similarly, Mead points out that our sense of “self” is developed through interactions with others. Families are influential in shaping this view of self through the messag-



es and their reactions to one another. Members gain a sense of how they are viewed by others from messages that are exchanged. Statements such as “You’re such a good husband!” or “He’s such a rotten kid” shape how individuals see themselves.

It is important to note that individual differences, such as personality traits or communication predispositions, may cause family members to view the same situation in very different ways. Consider the following scenario:

Kaija was quiet as Jay drove up the driveway. Jay smiled at her and said, “Trust me, they’ll love you!” Kaija was meeting Jay’s family for the first time since he had proposed. As they entered the front door, she was bombarded with hugs and kisses from various aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. During dinner the talking never stopped! Kaija felt so left out—and nobody even seemed to care enough to ask her questions about herself. At one point, she slipped out to the back patio just to have a few moments of peace and quiet. As they drove back to campus, Jay commented, “Wasn’t it a great evening! Everyone thought you were awesome!” Kaija couldn’t believe what she had just heard. How could Jay have come to the conclusion that his family liked her? After all, they didn’t take the time to find out anything about her. And the hugs and kisses were so intimidating. Kai-



Families are influential in shaping this view of self through the messages and their reactions to one another.

ja’s family would have never shown such open displays of affection the first time they met Jay. She was confused—how could Jay have thought the evening went so great when she thought it had been horrible?

Who was correct in his or her assessment of the evening’s events? Symbolic interactionism would indicate that both Jay and Kaija formed accurate perceptions. Each of them had formed his or her own meaning of the event based on their individual interpretations of the messages and behaviors. We learn in the scenario that Kaija’s family would not have displayed affection so openly, while Jay’s family background shaped his acceptance of effusive greetings. Our experiences in our family of origin shape the meanings we see in events, messages, and behaviors. The fact that Jay’s family did not ask Kaija about herself caused her to perceive them as being uninterested. But suppose Jay had shared with his family that Kaija was an only child and tended to be shy around large groups. He may have asked them to refrain from bombarding her with questions that might cause her to feel uncomfortable. To

better understand how symbolic interactionism applies to this scenario, it might be useful to examine the three underlying assumptions of the theory (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

First, *our interactions with family members influence the meanings we assign to behaviors and messages*. Children determine if they should evaluate experiences as being positive or negative by watching the reactions of family members to various events and messages. A child whose parents avoid conflict may believe that conflict is a negative behavior that should be avoided at all costs. Coming from a family that shows caring through conversation, Kaija assigned a negative meaning to Jay's family's failure to ask her questions about herself.

Next, *individuals create a sense of self, which serves as a guide for selecting future behaviors*. We assess situations and take into consideration whether others will perceive behaviors and messages in a positive or negative way. This assumption goes beyond our own evaluation of events to include the perceptions of others. A child whose father has told him "You're a rotten kid" and "You'll never amount to anything" has learned to misbehave. As the negative messages are repeated, he comes to believe that others expect him to misbehave.

Finally, symbolic interactionism posits that the *behavior of family members is influenced by culture and society*. Perhaps this assumption sheds light on the reasons families are reluctant to admit that they experience conflict from time to time. Based on media portrayals of family life and from listening to the happy stories of other families, an expectation has been established that "normal" families do not fight.



## CREATING A FAMILY IDENTITY

While Chapter 2 focused on how individuals form their own identities, the family as a unit also creates a collective identity. Communication is the primary mechanism for creating this family identity, with various messages and behaviors providing insight as to how the family views itself as a group. Four ways that families create and sustain an identity as a unit are through stories, myths, themes, and metaphors (see Figure 13.6). As we discuss each of these elements, reflect on your own family of origin and how these communicative acts shaped your sense of what it means to be a part of your family.

### Family Stories

**Family stories** are narratives recounting significant events that have been shared by members. In essence, family life is composed of a series of stories. Because they are about shared experiences, these stories are often personal and emotional; they may evoke positive or negative feelings in family members. Individuals often use these stories to shape their own sense of identity. One of the authors of this textbook had a difficult time gaining confidence in her driving ability. Do you think it might be due in part to the fact that her family members enjoyed telling and retelling the story of how she was responsible for wrecking the family car when she was four years old?

Three types of family stories that have been studied by family scholars in an attempt to explain how families define their experiences are birth stories, courtship stories, and stories of survival.

- **Birth stories** describe how each person entered the family and can define how members “fit” into the system. One woman shared a story of enduring a 42-hour labor prior to the birth of her son. She stated, “I guess I should have known then that he would always be challenging me because he gave me such a difficult time from the beginning!”
- **Courtship stories** provide a timeline for tracing romance in the family. They are often used to describe how parents and grandparents met and how they decided that they were right for one another. When asked how he met his wife, a grandfather explained that she was working in the fields on her family farm and that it was love at first sight. He joked, “I knew she was a hard worker, so I asked her to marry me!” He then went on to explain that he knew she was devoted to helping her family and that she would be dedicated to her own family.
- **Stories of survival** are narratives used to explain how family members have overcome difficult times. They are often told to help family members cope with challenges. Three sisters who, at a young age, were physically abused by their father, discussed how they shared their stories with one another to assist in coping with their similar experiences. The sisters viewed the stories as therapeutic; they reinforced the notion that if they could survive the abuse of their father, they were strong enough to face any situation.

## Family Myths

**Family myths** are created to communicate the beliefs, values, and attitudes held by members to represent characteristics that are considered important to the family. These myths are often

fictional as they are based on an ideal image the family wishes to convey to others. Consider the following example:

“I couldn’t believe what I was hearing! At my grandfather’s funeral, my dad’s family members were all talking about what a great man my grandfather was and how much they would miss him. My grandmother sobbed as she whispered, ‘He was such a loving and caring man. I don’t know what I’ll do without him.’ After the service, I asked my father why they were all referring to my grandfather that way. For years I had heard stories of the physical abuse that had taken place in the family during my dad’s childhood, and I had heard my grandfather yell at my grandmother on numerous occasions. My dad responded, ‘It’s just easier on your grandmother if we all remember him in a positive way.’”

In this scenario, the family creates a myth that portrays the grandfather as a loving, caring man. Doing so enables them to protect the grandmother and to perpetuate the belief that he was a good father and husband. In the movie, *Doing Time on Maple Drive*, a family goes to great lengths to portray the image of the “perfect family” to their friends and neighbors. At one point, the son reveals to his parents that he attempted to commit suicide because he would rather be dead than admit to them that he is gay. This scene illustrates the power of family myths and the tremendous amount of pressure placed on family members to live up to the expectations communicated in these myths.



## Family Metaphors

Sometimes families create **family metaphors** to assist in communicating how family life as a system is experienced by members. These metaphors make reference to specific objects, events, or images to represent the family experience and a collective identity. The metaphor of a “three-ring circus” may be used to describe the chaos and disorganization that exists within one family, while the “well-oiled machine” can depict the emphasis on control and organization that is the norm for another family. Metaphors can provide those within the family and outside of the family with an understanding of what behaviors are valued as well as how family members are expected to behave. A person from a “well-oiled machine” family can use the metaphor to understand the expectations associated with being a member of the family.

## Family Themes

**Family themes** represent important concerns regarding the expected relationship between family members and can assist family members in understanding how to direct their energy as a family unit. These themes often emerge from two primary sources—the background or experience of the parents, and the dialectical pulls experienced by the family. Suppose Joe and Marnie are having a difficult time managing the tensions of autonomy and connection as their children grow older, begin dating, and spend more time with friends than with family members. In an attempt to communicate their concern for the growing independence of family members, they remind the children that “Blood is thicker than water” and “Friends may come and go, but family is forever.” These themes are intended to remind the children that, while they may form many relationships outside the unit, the strongest ties should be reserved for those in their family.

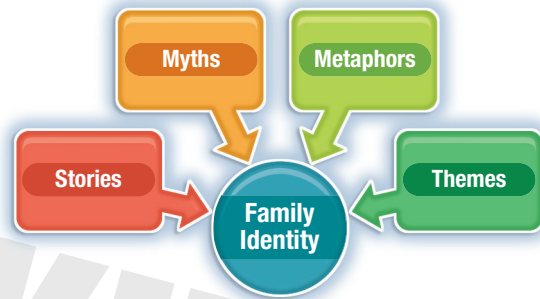



Figure 13.6 Communication strategies used to shape and sustain family identity.

## CONSEQUENCES OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Throughout this text, various communication variables have been identified as being both beneficial and harmful to our interpersonal relationships. Because families play such a vital role in the development of our self-identity, understanding how specific communication behaviors can enhance and damage our relationships and our sense of self is important.



Offering encouragement fosters the development of intimacy in family relationships.



Understanding and supportive communication are related to family satisfaction. If we perceive family members as being there for us, we are more willing to exert energy toward developing a more intimate relationship.

Families can serve as the primary source of understanding and support for individuals. As we grow older, we receive messages that let us know that we are cared for and accepted. These perceptions are often shaped by the types of verbal and nonverbal cues we receive from others and are often linked to the formation of our sense of self. Three types of messages are often used to indicate whether family members view us in the same way we see ourselves:

- **Confirming communication** occurs when we treat and communicate with family members in a way that is consistent with how they see themselves. A child who perceives himself to be independent is confirmed when a parent gives him responsibility and allows him to make his own decisions.
- **Rejection** occurs when family members treat others in a manner that is inconsistent with how they see themselves. Can you recall a time when you felt like you were “grown up” but your parents treated you as though you were still a child?

- **Disconfirming communication** occurs when family members fail to offer any type of response. We often get caught up in our busy schedules and fail to communicate with family members. Even though our response is neither positive nor negative, it can cause others to feel dissatisfied with the relationship.

Understanding and supportive communication are related to family satisfaction. If we perceive family members as being there for us, we are more willing to exert energy toward developing a more intimate relationship.



## DIFFICULT COMMUNICATION

It is important to note that families are not immune to difficult communication. Just as romantic partners and friends experience highs and lows in relationships, so do families. Because families evolve as members grow and encounter new life experiences, additional communication challenges emerge. The key to managing these issues effectively and maintaining a positive relationship is to understand the role of communication in guiding us through the muddy waters.

### Family Stress

Reuben Hill developed the **ABCX model** to study the stress experienced by families during war (1958). Each component of this model provides a glimpse into how different families cope with stress.

- “A” represents the stressor event and resulting hardship.

- “B” refers to the resources a family has available to manage the stress.
- Given that different families define stress in unique ways, “C” is used to explain how the family defines the stress.
- Depending on how a family defines “A,” “B,” and “C,” the perception of an event as a crisis is represented by “X.”

The model is useful for understanding how and why families label situations as stressful and cope with stressors. Consider the stress experienced by a military family when a mother is deployed and won’t be home for months.

The mother has a young child who is left behind while she is stationed in Iraq. Her three-year-old son is confused and upset that his mother is away. His grandmother does her best to comfort him when he mistakes another woman for his mother and runs to her. His grandmother tries to explain that mommy is still far away, flying helicopters, soothing him until he falls asleep. Once he is tucked in bed, she must try to calm her own fears for her daughter’s safety, knowing that she is in a hostile land. This is the life of a soldier’s family.

“A” represents the stressor event of a young mother stationed with the U.S. military in Iraq. In this story, extended family members serve as resources to assist with the care of a three-year-old child in the absence of his mother, representing the “B” in the model. The confusion experienced by the grandmother as she tries to help her grandson cope with the separation causes her to define the stressor as emotionally draining (C). While the family knows that the daughter will return home eventually, they also understand that she chose to serve her country and realize the danger associated with this respon-

sibility. This may keep the family from evaluating the stress as a crisis (X). Take a look at Figure 13.7 to review each step of the ABCX model.

Stressor events can take many forms; Boss (1988) developed a typology of stressors that families face. Table 13.1 lists these various types of stressors.

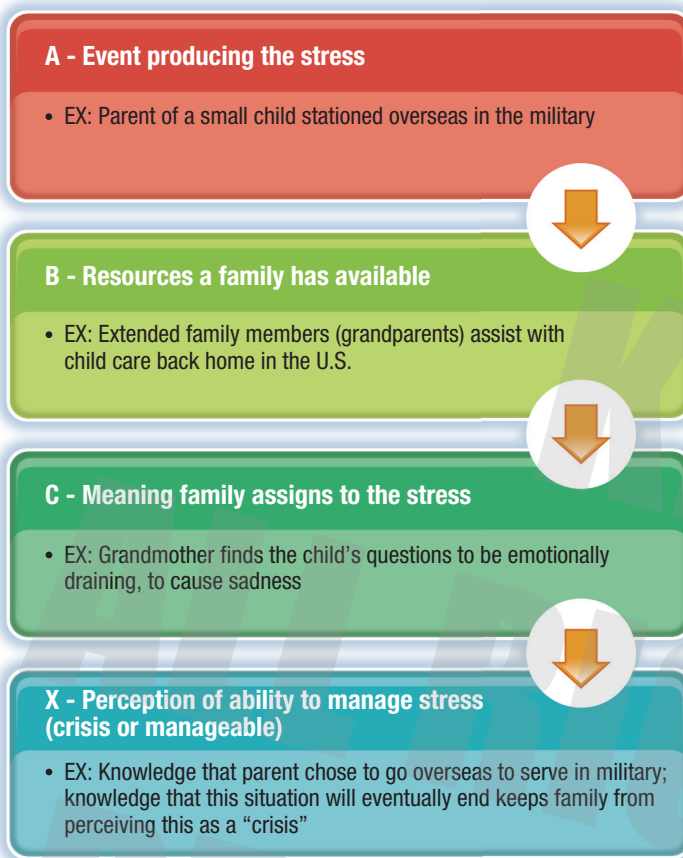
Table 13.1 Types of Stressors

TYPES OF STRESSORS	
<b>Internal</b> • Originate with a family member	<b>External</b> • Originate outside the family
<b>Normative</b> • Expected; part of family life cycle	<b>Non-normative</b> • Unexpected
<b>Voluntary</b> • Stress that is sought out	<b>Involuntary</b> • Events that simply occur
<b>Chronic</b> • Long-term	<b>Acute</b> • Short-term

**Internal stressors** are those that evolve from a family member. Examples might include a daughter’s upcoming wedding or a teen who has tried to run away from home. **External stressors**, on the other hand, are often the result of an event that occurs outside the family, such as a hurricane destroying a family’s home or even just an increase in the price of gasoline.

**Normative stressors** are those that are expected to occur at some point during the course of the family life cycle. The birth of a child or the death of an elderly parent are events that families anticipate dealing with at some point in time.

**Non-normative stressors** are unpredictable and often catch families “off guard.” While most people think that winning the lottery would be



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Figure 13.7 The ABCX model of family stress.

a great stressor to experience, families do not typically anticipate having difficulty dealing with the new challenges posed by their good fortune.

Some families make decisions that bring about **voluntary stressors**, or those events that family members seek out on their own accord. Examples of these types of stressors may include changing careers and moving to a new city or deciding to run for political office. **Involuntary stressors** are events that simply occur—a family member who is unexpectedly injured in a car accident or the announcement of an unplanned teen pregnancy.

Illnesses such as cancer or alcoholism are examples of **chronic stressor** events that require families to cope with the situation for an extended period of time. **Acute stressors** are relatively short-lived and include events such as a student getting suspended for misbehaving or losing the only set of keys to the family car.

## SUMMARY

While we form countless interpersonal relationships throughout our lifetime, the relationships and interactions with family members are perhaps the most influential. Beginning at a young age, messages received from family members shape our identity and influence our own choice of communication behaviors. In addition to the individual identities that are shaped by these interactions, the family itself begins to create an identity that is shared by members.

Throughout this chapter we have discussed the importance of interpersonal communication throughout the family life cycle. Various interpersonal theories can be applied to the study of family communication to illustrate the dynamic nature of these relationships. While we often assume that "family is forever," it is important to recognize that just as other types of interpersonal relationships experience a "dark side," family relationships can experience challenging communication as well. By exploring the



## RESEARCH IN REAL LIFE: Stress and deciding how to reveal family secrets

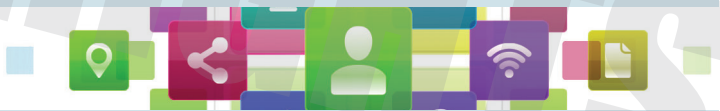
Identifying the right time and way to reveal a secret that has long been kept from family members can be stressful. In a 2009 study by Affifi and Steuber, 629 members from 171 different families were asked to describe a secret they were keeping from a family member and describe how they would reveal the secret if they were to share it. Six specific strategies for revealing secrets were identified in the study:

- **Directness:** tell the person face-to-face; reveal the secret if asked about it
- **Indirect mediums:** share the secret via email, letter, or text
- **Third-party revelation:** share the secret with someone else and let them reveal it
- **Incremental disclosure:** reveal small parts of the secret or share a similar secret from someone else to gauge reactions
- **Preparation and rehearsal:** plan a script or practice telling the secret to others
- **Entrapment:** leave clues or evidence about the secret and allow them to draw conclusions

role that interpersonal communication plays in families, we are better able to understand our own family's communication tendencies, both

when interacting with each other and when interacting with people from outside the family group.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. How would you define “family”? Who would you include in your family? Explain why these individuals are included. What individual differences affect how you define this term (e.g., sex, culture, age, your family of origin, relationship experiences) and who you include in your family?
2. Identify a family from one of your favorite television shows. Use systems theory to analyze the characters’ communication patterns and relationships with one another (e.g., interdependence, wholeness, etc). Would you describe the family members’ communication and relationships as healthy or unhealthy? Defend your response to this question and be sure to use specific examples to support your arguments.
3. Identify what you think are the “Top 5” issues facing families today. If you were to offer advice to families for communicating about these issues, what would you tell them?

## SELF ASSESSMENT

### Revised Family Communication Patterns Instrument

Respond to the following statements as they apply to your communication with your parents while you were growing up. Place a number on the line that best describes your agreement with the statements below, using the following scale:

5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. My parents often said things like, "You'll know better when you grow up."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. My parents often asked my opinion when the family was talking about something.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. My parents often said things like, "My ideas are right and you should not question them."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. My parents encouraged me to challenge their ideas and beliefs.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. My parents often said things like, "A child should not argue with adults."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I usually told my parents what I was thinking about things.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. My parents often said things like, "There are some things that are just not to be talked about."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I can tell my parents almost anything.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. When anything really important was involved, my parents expected me to obey without question.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. In our family we often talk about our feelings and emotions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. In our home, my parents usually had the last word.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. My parents and I often had long, relaxed conversation about nothing in particular.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. My parents felt that it was important to be the boss.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I really enjoyed talking with my parents, even when we disagreed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. My parents sometimes became irritated with my views if they were different from theirs.

- \_\_\_\_\_16. My parents often say something like “you should always look at both sides of an issue.”
- \_\_\_\_\_17. If my parents don’t approve of it, they don’t want to know about it.
- \_\_\_\_\_18. My parents like to hear my opinions, even when they don’t agree with me.
- \_\_\_\_\_19. When I am at home, I am expected to obey my parents’ rules.
- \_\_\_\_\_20. My parents encourage me to express my feelings.
- \_\_\_\_\_21. My parents tended to be very open about their emotions.
- \_\_\_\_\_22. We often talk as a family about things we have done during the day.
- \_\_\_\_\_23. In our family we often talk about our plans and hopes for the future.
- \_\_\_\_\_24. In our family we talk about topics like politics and religion where some persons disagree with others.
- \_\_\_\_\_25. My parents often say something like “Every member of the family should have some say in family decisions.”
- \_\_\_\_\_26. My parents often say something like “You should give in on arguments rather than risk making people mad.”

### SCORING DIRECTIONS:

Items 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 26 represent the Conformity items. Add these items and divide by 11 to determine your Conformity score.

Items 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25 represent the Conversation items. Add these items and divide by 15 to determine your Conversation score.

Scoring—Your scores will range from 1–5 and the higher score is more likely to be the perceived communication pattern in your family.

Source: ). “Revised Family Communication Pattern Instrument” by L. D. Ritchie from Roloff, M. E. (1990). Family communication patterns: Measuring interpersonal perceptions of interpersonal relationships. *Communication Research*, 17(4), 523–544. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications Inc.

## KEY TERMS



**ABCX MODEL:** includes various elements to examine the stress experienced by families and the various ways in which they cope with stress.

**ACUTE STRESSOR:** relatively short-lived or temporary stress-producing events encountered by families.

**AMBIGUOUS BOUNDARIES:** vague or indistinguishable boundaries that may create confusion about who family members perceive as being part of the family system.

**BIRTH STORIES:** one type of family stories that describes how a person entered the family and defines how members “fit” into the system.

**BOOMERANG CHILDREN:** young adults who return home to live with their parents after living on their own for a period of time.

**BOUNDARIES:** created by families to indicate who is considered part of the family system. May be flexible to include the addition of new family members, friends, or even pets.

**CALIBRATION:** a component of family systems theory that allows the family to review the communication in their relationships and decide if any adjustments need to be made to the system.

**CHRONIC STRESSOR:** events that require families to cope with a stressful situation for an extended period of time.

**CONFIRMATION:** relational maintenance strategy in which messages are designed to communicate the importance or value of a family member in one's life.

**CONFIRMING COMMUNICATION:** messages that indicate that we see family members in a way that is consistent with how they see themselves.

**CONFORMITY ORIENTATION:** focuses on the degree to which a family encourages autonomy in individual beliefs, values, and attitudes.

**CONSENSUAL FAMILIES:** promote open conversations while still maintaining control and authority when it comes to decisions in the family.

**CONTENT EXPECTATIONS:** focus on how the relationship is defined by the role each partner plays in the family.

**CONVERSATION ORIENTATION:** refers to the level of openness and the frequency with which a variety of topics are discussed.

**COURTSHIP STORIES:** one type of family stories that provides a timeline for tracing romance in the family. Often used to describe how parents and grandparents met and how they decided that they were compatible.

**DEIDENTIFICATION:** an individual's attempt to create a distinct identity that is separate from that of their siblings.

**DISCONFIRMING COMMUNICATION:** occurs when family members fail to acknowledge or offer any type of feedback or response to another family member.

**ESCAPE:** relational maintenance strategy in which family members turn to one another to divert one's focus during difficult situations.

**EQUIFINALITY:** a component of family systems theory that refers to a family's ability to achieve the same goal by following different paths or employing different communication behaviors.

**EXTERNAL STRESSOR:** the result of an event that occurs outside the family.

**FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERNS THEORY:** focuses on how messages are processed and discussed within the family to create shared meaning. Includes the two primary orientations of conversation and conformity.



**FAMILY EVENTS:** relational maintenance strategy in which family members participate in events together as a means of sustaining their relationship.

**FAMILY METAPHORS:** references to specific objects, events, or images to represent the family experience and a collective identity.

**FAMILY MYTHS:** created to communicate the beliefs, values, and attitudes held by members to represent characteristics that are considered important to the family; are often fictional as they are based on an ideal image the family wishes to convey to others.

**FAMILY STORIES:** narratives recounting significant events that have been shared by members.

**FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY:** proposes that family relationships can be treated as systems and includes the study of six elements to explain how and why family members relate to one another.

**FAMILY THEMES:** represent important concerns regarding the expected relationship between family members and can assist family members in understanding how to direct their energy as a family unit.

**HIERARCHY:** perceived levels of power or control associated with roles in the family.

**HUMOR:** relational maintenance strategy in which family members incorporate amusement or joy to sustain the relationship.

**INDEPENDENT COUPLE:** describes a couple that simultaneously respects the need for autonomy and engages in a high level of communication and sharing with one another.

**INTERDEPENDENCE:** proposes that the family system is composed of interrelated parts, or members, and a change experienced by one family member is likely to result in changes that impact all other family members.

**INTERNAL STRESSOR:** family stressors that result from within the family.

**INVOLUNTARY STRESSOR:** stress-producing events that unexpectedly occur within a family.

**LAISSEZ-FAIRE FAMILIES:** adopt both a low conversation and low conformity orientation. Family members rarely talk with one another, and when conversations occur they focus on a limited number of topics.

**LAUNCHING STAGE:** the period when children begin the separation process from their parents.

**NON-NORMATIVE STRESSOR:** unpredictable and often catches families “off guard.”

**NORMATIVE STRESSOR:** stress-producing events that are expected to occur at some point during the course of the family life cycle.

**PLURALISTIC FAMILIES:** adopt a high conversation orientation and a low conformity orientation. Children are encouraged to participate in decision-making.

**PROTECTIVE FAMILIES:** adopt a low conversation orientation and a high conformity orientation. Parents are considered to be the authority, and children are expected to obey the family rules without questioning them.

**REJECTION:** occurs when family members treat others in a manner that is inconsistent with how they see themselves.

**RELATIONAL EXPECTATIONS:** refer to the similarity, or correspondence, of the emotional, or affective, expectations each partner has for defining the relationship.

**SEPARATE COUPLES:** tend to emphasize each individual's identity and independence over maintaining the relationship.

**SOCIAL SUPPORT:** relational maintenance strategy in which family members provide comfort for one another via verbal and/or nonverbal messages.

**STORIES OF SURVIVAL:** narratives used to explain how family members have overcome difficult times; often, they are told to help family members cope with challenges they face.

**SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM:** proposes that one's sense of self is developed through interactions with others; families are influential in shaping this view of self through the messages and reactions to one another.

**TRADITIONAL COUPLES:** couples who exhibit a high level of interdependence and sharing in their relationships with one another.

**VERBAL AGGRESSION:** relational maintenance strategy in which family members vent or express their frustrations with one another.

**VOLUNTARY STRESSOR:** those events that family members seek out (such as changing careers or moving to a new home) that result in stress.

**WHOLENESS:** implies that a family creates its own personality or culture, and that this personality is unique from that of each family member.

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