Characteristics of Healthy Families: Two Perspectives


Despite using an unsophisticated “research” method, the author has developed a valid and useful list of “fifteen traits commonly found in healthy families by those who work with them.” Her work is actually an “opinion survey” rather than a clinical study.

According to the author, a healthy family:

- Communicates and listens
- Affirms and supports one another
- Teaches respect for others
- Develops a sense of trust
- Has a sense of play and humor
- Exhibits a sense of shared responsibility
- Teaches a sense of right and wrong
- Has a strong sense of family in which rituals and traditions abound
- Has a balance of interaction among members
- Has a shared religious core
- Respects the privacy of others
- Values service to others
- Fosters family table time and conversation
- Shares leisure time
- Admits to and seeks help with problems


A 7-year study of volunteer families by the Timberlawn Foundation in Dallas, Texas. Families were videotaped working on a variety of tasks, and the tapes were evaluated in three ways: by clinical standards, rating scales, and by microanalytical analysis.

Although the research sample was small and limited by its homogeneity, the methodology was sound and included comparison with families who sought treatment at the family counseling center of Timberlawn Hospital. The study group was composed of white, middle to upper middle class, Protestant, urban, biologically intact, families that self-referred for the study.
At the conclusion of the 7-year study, the clinical research team concluded that family health is a multifaceted phenomenon, including numerous variables. “Our data suggest that health at the level of family was not a single thread, and that competence must be considered as a tapestry, reflecting differences in degrees along many dimensions.”

• An affiliative attitude about human encounter

  The expectation that human encounter is likely to be benevolent

• Respect for subjective views

  Respect for one’s own worldview and the worldview of others

• A belief in complex motivations

  Family has a rather small core of beliefs that do not interfere with creative exploration. If one approach did not work, the family was free to explore other options. The system has the capacity to test, modify, explore and to change as needed.

• High levels of initiative (in response to input)

  Constructive reaching out to others; much involved with people outside the family; wide range of individual and shared interests among members.

• Structure of healthy families

  Flexible structure, especially with regard to distribution of power and influence within the family. The parental coalition is crucial: strong affectional bond between parents, mutual respect and absence of competition. Opinions of children are valued and negotiation is possible. However, generational boundaries are clear, and leadership resides with the parents.

• Regard for personal autonomy

  Encouraged a high degree of personal autonomy. Clear communication; comfortable with spontaneity. Permeability of family: feelings are mutually valued. Good measure of responsibility within the family (acceptance of one’s own feelings, thoughts, and actions). Belief that basic human needs and drives are not evil. Absence of shame.

• A congruent mythology

  Family perceives itself much as it is seen by competent observers.

• The healthy family and feelings

  Open in expression of affect. Prevailing mood of warmth, caring, and affection. Well-developed capacity for empathy. Safe and acceptable to talk about feelings. Limited conflict, but conflict and differences are handled respectfully.

• Other factors

  High degree of spontaneity, humor, and interaction; limited scapegoating.