

Diagnosing your family:

Much research has been done on assessing and diagnosing family types. One of the more popular methods developed measures a family on two scales: Flexibility and Connectedness. I will explain each here today and as I do try to 'diagnose' your own family.

The first measure is of FLEXIBILITY and the flexibility of a family ranges from being RIGID to being CHAOTIC. A rigid family is a family that has set ways of doing things and has both explicit and implicit rules as to how to behave. With regard to trivial things a rigid family will for example, have set places where people sit at the table and there is general distress if someone sits in the wrong place; agreements are considered to be sacrosanct and if someone is to meet at a certain time then that will happen, come rain or come shine; there are protocols involving courtesy which are honoured – birthday gifts are given on time; phone calls are made if apologies are needed; holidays may be taken at the same time of year or there may be a tendency to go to the same place; etc. In other words there is a set way of doing things and these ways are honoured and if they are not then offence can be taken. With regard to more serious issues and emotions rigid families will struggle to be able to express themselves because maintaining the relationships in the family will always have been dependent on doing the right thing. However, at a time of crisis that might necessarily require the expression of deep emotions this family struggles. The belief that “we are a family because we relate to each other in respectful and set ways” is challenged when there are emotional problems to be dealt with. The expression of intense anger or hatred is hugely problematic. If the family is extremely rigid the consequences for a family member that continually breaks the rules can be serious. A family member may, for example, be ostracised. This may be extreme and result in not-talking or it can be moderate in such a way that the rest of the family are always talking about how they manage and deal with that person.

The chaotic family is the opposite of the rigid family. The chaotic family is all-over-the-place. This family lives its life like a soap opera with constant drama, fights, and uncertainties. Agreements may be made but they rarely last. There is always uncertainty and tension. While a rigid family will stick pretty much to the clock, a chaotic family rarely looks at it long enough. There are tears and fights. Ups and downs. Take-us-as-you-find-us may be the motto or attitude. While a rigid family has rules and sticks to them, the chaotic family has rules but they are forever changing. Children may be out late one night and then confined the next night. Chaotic families are always surviving at the edge of what is considered responsible behaviour. A person from a rigid family would consider a chaotic family to be either 'mad' or else wonderful because of the carefree energy and passion that flows through the household. A person from a chaotic family would consider a rigid family to be too reserved or else find it to be such a relief from the madness of their own family that they would idealise it.

Either way, rigid and chaotic families have their strengths and weaknesses but any extreme becomes problematic. An extremely rigid family finds it is unable to cope with the intense emotional life of its members so many feelings get repressed. An extremely chaotic family finds it is unable to care for its members because people are always fighting for themselves.

The other scale that families get measured on is CONNECTEDNESS, which goes from being ENMESHED to being DISENGAGED, or from being very close to being very distant.

In the enmeshed family everybody is involved in everybody else's business. Enmeshment is extreme of closeness to the degree that if one person has a problem then everyone has a problem. In these families the phone is going all the time between people as they deal with the effects of something or are trying to solve some problem. Boundaries are very loose in these families. Boundaries refer to the emotional fence that each person needs to have around them that needs to be respected by others if a sense of separateness and privacy is to be maintained. In enmeshed families these are almost impossible to maintain. Growing up people walked freely in and out of each others bedrooms, or else they were locked shut in weak attempts at separateness; people's personal business becomes the concern of everyone; advice is given even when it is not asked; etc. The mother or both parents may have drawn all the children around them into an emotional mass where the boundary between parents and children got blurred. In enmeshed families traditional hierarchies can break down. The parents can become the children minded by everyone or relatives can be intimately involved in the nuclear life of the family. Whatever way you look at it, the enmeshed family are over-involved in each other's life.

The other extreme then is the disengaged family where people are very distant. Boundaries in this family are set. People mind their own business and don't get involved with other family members except by invitation. People do their own thing and often events may happen in a person's life that others don't know about. The hierarchy between parents and children is pretty much set and privacy is honoured. There is not much intense closeness and as a result people can become estranged and end up not talking, not because there has been a huge problem, but because in adulthood members drifted apart and did their own thing. This might be the extreme. A moderately disengaged family meets at times of family ritual and people may call to see each other but it would have a formality and lack the involvement of the enmeshed family. People often tend to search for and find intimacy outside of the family more than within it. When there are serious problems there will be what we call 'cut-offs', that is when someone just decides they are not going to talk to or deal with someone else ever again. A cut-off often arises when one family member invades another's boundary a breaks a fundamental family rule regarding loyalty and respect. In disengaged families such cut-offs can carry on for generations.

So the categories of CONNECTEDNESS and RIGIDITY are essential in understanding and predicting family behaviour. Where would you score your own family if each went on a scale from zero to ten?