

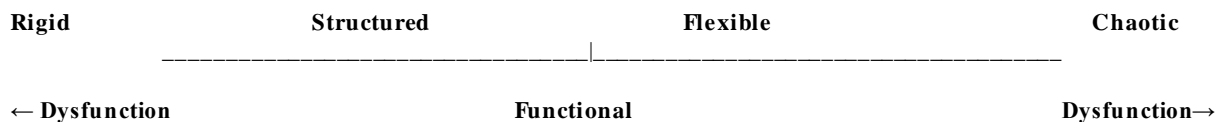
Family Dynamics

All people require both a certain amount of structure and a modicum of cohesiveness in their lives.

A number of studies have looked at the way families operate and interact. Olson's work was among the first and is still the most comprehensive. David Olson (1985; 1989; 2008; 2011) has looked at the function of families in terms of two different dimensions: **Adaptability** – how families cope with changing circumstances, and **Cohesiveness** – how families operate and stick together. Too much or too little Adaptability or Cohesiveness can be problematic.

Adaptability: Rigid vs. Chaotic [This was changed to **Adaptation** in later studies.]

Adaptability is a measure of the family's ability to change with changing circumstances. Most families have roles (scripts, if you like) delineating how each family member should behave, who has what responsibility, and who is in charge of what. Laid out along a spectrum, families are either: Rigid; Structured; Flexible; or Chaotic. The further a family is from the centre, the less they are able to change and tend to react in dysfunctional ways.



Rigidity

Rigid families have very strict rules about conduct and behaviour. Often both parents, but sometimes just one parent, is an autocrat and all decisions are referred to and punishments handed out by him/her. In some rigid families, other family members may live in fear of the autocrat, and physical, but certainly emotional abuse is a possibility. In other families control is exercised by the withdrawal of love, or, in families which are also Enmeshed, by cloying sweetness ("Where has my sweet little boy/girl gone?"). Rigid homes tend to have a clinical look, with a place for everything and everything in its place. Meal times are usually, or exactly, at the same time every day, sometimes with a set menu for different days. Meals may be eaten in silence, with only the parents speaking, or following a format set by the parents e.g. a conversation about a particular topic perhaps between the main and second courses. Occasionally, families may be rigid in emotional structure, but not visually so. Physical abuse is possible in such families. Most rigid families would not see themselves as rigid, but as traditional or structured.

Most functional families have a preference for structure or flexibility and changing circumstances may bring about a temporary move along the continuum. Having house guests for a short time tends to move most families towards structure and children will be expected to do certain chores without having to be reminded.

Structure

Structured families have a number of rules, but allow some flexibility within the boundaries of those rules. For example, most things are in particular places and the home looks clean and tidy, but in individual rooms owners may express their individuality. Certain family members may have certain roles, e.g. rubbish, cleaning, but sometimes these may be swapped or negotiated. Meal times tend to be fairly structured, but occasionally the family may eat Pizzas on the floor in front of the TV. This kind of home is more harmonious if people generally stick to the structures in place.

Flexibility

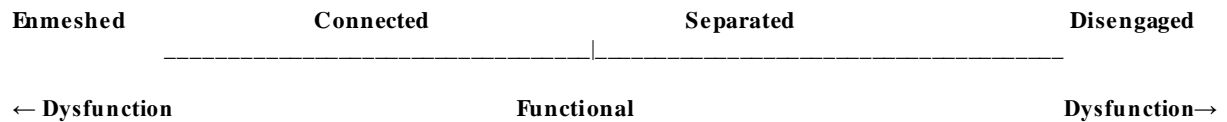
Flexible families have a few rules and may allow negotiation on these, allowing for difference in ages. However, there may be some structures or rules which are always adhered to, e.g. rules of hospitality involving visitors: rooms which may be untidy, but must be cleaned either regularly/occasionally, but basically harmony is seen as more important. There may be certain places for particular items, but such homes have a slightly messy lived-in look. Meal times may vary but there may be particular meals which are always eaten in a certain way, e.g., Sunday lunch. Different family members may take turns at doing different tasks, especially cooking favourite meals.

Chaos

Chaotic families, as the name implies, have few rules, or may change rules at a whim or mood of the parents. Behaviour which may cause punishment to be enforced at one time could be overlooked at other times. Chaotic homes often look chaotic, as there is no set place for certain things. Meals may be at any time with different family members eating different foods, grazing, or getting their own. Many families can become chaotic for a time if one parent, usually the mother, becomes very ill and no-one steps up. This chaos may be imposed by the long-term illness, or emotional dependence of a parent or child, or be “inherited” in that both parents came from homes like this and see that as normal. Neglect of children’s physical and emotional needs is possible, especially if the family is also extremely disengaged. Sibling incest is possible in such families, because parental responsibility is limited; either or both parents may suffer from depression, or may be so involved in activities outside the home that what goes on in the home is not noticed.

Cohesiveness: Enmeshed vs. Disengaged

Cohesiveness is a measure of how close the members of a family unit are; it is a measure of the emotional bonds towards or between each other. It looks at the boundaries between individual members of the family and the boundaries around the family. For most families, there is a perceptible boundary which others recognize as a family unit. The boundary around and between individuals: my rights, my space, my room, my body is another boundary.



Enmeshment

Enmeshed families have diffuse boundaries between family members. Family members usually know what each other are doing on a daily basis, and even as adults, are in daily phone or face-to-face contact. Personal pursuits usually need family approval or discussion before being undertaken. Friends, especially boy/girlfriends need to meet with the family's approval (this sometimes leads to running away with someone who is not approved of, if the family decision is strongly against). Visitors are entertained by the entire family so that everyone can express an opinion about the visitor later. This kind of family is characterised by a strong boundary around it. Statements like, "We always/never ... in *this* family," are common. The subtext, particularly in Rigidly Enmeshed families is, "to remain in this family, you must always/never do/be ..."). Individual members have, and may seek, little personal privacy but the family may keep itself private. Children would be expected to pursue a career directed by the parents, and, particularly if the family was also rigid, parents would make the decision about how much education the child received. All or most members of the family would have the same religion, sporting interests, etc. Those with a diary would assume that others would read it. People in this kind of family are most prone to saying, "My mother/father/sister/brother is my best friend." The key message in this kind of family is, "the family is everything." Parents may lie or give alibis for children who have broken the law, and may be known to intimidate opposing witnesses, simply because the family comes first. In cases of extreme enmeshment, particularly in families which are also rigid, there is so little personal privacy that incest is a possibility. Enmeshed families describe themselves as close.

Most families have a preference for connection or separation. Moving along the spectrum from Enmeshment to Disengagement, the families in the Connected and then the Separated sections of the spectrum have increasing amounts of personal privacy and liberty, while the boundary around the family unit becomes more diffuse.

Connection

Connected families generally know what each other are doing some of the time and not at others. Certain pairs of adult children in a family may remain close, but personal privacy, pursuits and developments are respected. There may be major extended family functions, particularly if there has been some sort of previous disagreement in the extended family, where a family show of force or cohesiveness is necessary. That means everyone must attend, and stay for the duration of the party/wedding/funeral/wake/etc. This is usually organized by a ring-around by the mother or an older sister. At functions like family weddings or funerals, there is likely to be a reasonable amount of mixing.

Friends are usually accepted at face value by the rest of the family, except if at least two of the family members have concerns about the influence of the friend. The family may keep

itself private if all or most members of the family are introverted, but are generally open to new experiences on occasion. Children would be encouraged to pursue their own career goals with guidance from the parents, but parents would generally make the decision about how much education the child received. Most members of the family could have the same religion, sporting interests, etc., but individuals are freer to develop their own beliefs and interests. Those with a diary would assume that its privacy might be respected but a particular person might read it. The writer may be encouraged to share. There may be an expectation that the writer may wish to share but few people would care if the writer refused. The key message in this kind of family is, “the family is important, mostly as a cradle for developing the children into functioning adults.” Connected families would describe themselves as normal, fairly close or close and might think that enmeshed families are a bit over the top.

Separation

Separated families may not necessarily know what others are doing, except, perhaps, for pairs of siblings who might be close or a child who is close to a particular parent. Personal privacy and pursuits are almost always respected and some family members may not keep up-to-date with their goings-on. Major family functions are sometimes well-attended, but some members may not be present because they have more pressing personal issue to attend to or may not stay for the duration because they find family functions boring. Individuals in this kind of family may be extraverted or introverted but this would not be an issue. Children would be encouraged to pursue their own career goals, assisted by the parents. Members of the family might have the same religion, sporting interests, etc., but individuals are quite free to develop their own beliefs, interests, etc, and children who marry out religiously are usually accepted. Those with a diary would assume that its privacy would be respected, that no-one would read it and this would be reinforced by parents as the property of the writer. The writer may be encouraged to share but no-one would care if the writer refused. The key message in this kind of family is, “the family is fairly important for developing functioning individuals.” Separated families would describe themselves as normal and might think that enmeshed or connected families are over the top.

Disengagement

Disengaged families live more like people sharing a house than a family. They have strong boundaries separating individuals from each other and a diffuse boundary around the family unit. From late childhood or early teenage years, children may come and go, sometimes without parents being aware of it. Visitors, sometimes even house guests, also may come and go without some family members being aware of them. Parents may not be aware of where some older children are. Personal pursuits are one’s own; there may be encouragement from a parent if the pursuit happens to overlap with the parent. Family functions may or may not be attended, depending on the individual’s desire. Children may be encouraged to pursue their own career goals or not, sometimes assisted by the parents or not. Those with a diary would assume that others could probably not find it, especially if the family was also chaotic, let alone read it. The assumption would be that this was the property of the writer. The key message of this family could be, “ ;” there is no key message. In extreme cases of disengagement, especially where the parents may be involved in partying, alcohol or drugs,

neglect of children is a possibility. Enmeshed families would see disengaged families as neglectful, but each group would see themselves as fairly normal.

The most extreme version of a disengaged family I know of was a couple who had just discovered that their sixteen-year-old son had had his fourteen-year-old girlfriend living in his bedroom for two months without their knowledge. She used to come for dinner most nights, after which he would walk her home. The reality was that she climbed into his bedroom window and after an appropriate amount of time he would return from supposedly walking her home.

Combinations

By placing each dimension at right angles to the other, it is possible to identify sixteen family types from Rigidly Enmeshed to Chaotically Disengaged. It is important to remember that these types are not boxes or labels; circumstances move families along either continuum. For example, families may change when Grandma comes to stay. Extremes, however, rarely change, and if they do, it is not by much. Family types which belong in **two** extremes are often dysfunctional as their ability to either adapt or be cohesive is unable to change in changing circumstances.

	Rigid	Structured	Flexible	Chaotic
Enmeshed				
Connected				
Separated				
Disengaged				

	Usually Dysfunctional
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Extremely *Rigidly Enmeshed* families are usually dysfunctional, with either physical, verbal, or sexual abuse a possibility. Children are emotionally entwined with their parents and each other, but constrained by strong rules and hierarchies. Runaways are more common from this sort of family. Sometimes a family member is expelled and never spoken of again.

Occasionally, when an in-law is not accepted by the family, the family member concerned must choose between the life partner and the family of origin.

Extremely *Rigidly Disengaged* families, also dysfunctional, *may* produce children who are potential victims of paedophiles. Parents are distant but imposing figures, and children may seek closeness or affection from any adult inclined to oblige. Children in these families tend to lack, and then later reject, guidance.

Extremely *Chaotically Enmeshed* families may produce co-dependents. Children are entwined emotionally with their parents, but have to provide their own structures. They may be required to put their parents' emotional needs ahead of their own. The physical abuse of younger children by older children is possible, if the older children are left the responsibility of providing structures for them, e.g., washing, cleaning school uniforms, making lunches, supervising homework, etc. Personality disorders are also possible.

Extremely *Chaotically Disengaged* families are more likely to produce neglected children than any other type. These children may turn to peers and gangs to provide structure in their lives. Such children may also turn to adults to provide affection, leaving them prey to paedophiles. Also, since their reality, in other words, their normality, is so out of sync with society in general, their world view may be distorted.

Most families, regardless of preference, are capable of change with circumstance. This teaches individuals in the family flexibility and coping skills in a more complex world. It is those people who cannot or absolutely will not change who tend to have problems in dealing with the world.