

Communication: A Tool for Building Healthy Family Relationship within the Family's System.

***Priscilla Yaaba Ackah & Joana Antwi Donkor**

Home Economics Education Department
University of Education, Winneba.
priscillaadjei@gmail.com/pyackah@uew.edu.gh/chinivans@yahoo.com

Mobile Number: +233248368188.

Abstract

This paper attempts to emphasize on the need of using communication as a tool to strengthen the family from the systems theory perspective. It looks at family and communication concepts and concentrates on how subsystems of the family system can perform their individual yet collective roles by making use of effective communication which of course is also a system within the family system.

Keywords: Family, System, Interdependency, Interaction, Communication, Resolution and Role.

Introduction:

Today, people find themselves immersed in a tangle of worldwide changes in the economy, society, institutions, education, the markets and individual lifestyles. The family which is the bedrock of society in the face of these changes has weathered many storms and is saddled with lots of challenges of which communication is one. Researchers report that there is less interaction among family members as they strive to meet the needs and goals of the family. This coupled with other factors result in family conflicts. This paper therefore fills the gap in presenting communication as a tool for building healthy family relationship from the systems theory perspective. It presents how families can effectively integrate communication into their family's system to ensure healthy family lives.

Theoretical Framework

This paper discusses effective communication in the family based on systems theory. The Bowen family systems theory is a theory of human behaviour that views units and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in family that its members are intensely connected emotionally (Kerr, 2000). A system is a set of elements that form an orderly, interrelated, and functional whole. The family as a system is made up of components that are interrelated and arranged in an orderly pattern with the various components of the family as a system being

functional. Implying that the family is made of members with various statuses; and roles to perform to fulfill some purpose as a whole. The system's perspective helps us to understand how a family made up of several components yet functions as a unit. Each member of a family is affected by what happens to any of the other family members. Again, each family member and the family as a whole are also affected by the many other systems in the family's environment. Asare & Quartey (2002), defines the family's system as a group of units or an integrated set of parts that function to achieve a common purpose.

Family systems theory stresses that the whole of the family is more important relative to the individual contributions each family member provides. Family systems theory is derived from a more general systems theory that argues that systems (of which family is one example) can be understood only in their entirety. In this way, the concepts of wholeness, interdependence, and homeostasis are all central to understanding the mechanisms of family systems theory.

The systems theory concept of **wholeness** emphasizes that "the sum of the whole is greater than the individual parts." The systems theory concept of **interdependence** also stresses the intricate and necessary interrelationships of family members. Interdependence stresses that family members rely on one another to promote the functioning of the family. Supporting this with concepts of roles theory, it becomes evident that a family is a system in which each member has a role to play and rules to respect. Family members are expected to respond to each other in a certain way according to their role, which is determined by relationship agreements.

The family system theory describes the nature of families as goal-attaining systems. The primary assumption here is that families have goals (e.g., well-raised children, social and emotional well-being, family satisfaction) and set about to attain them collectively. The concept of **homeostasis of a system** emphasizes the balance that families attempt to achieve as they set about attaining these goals. For instance, within the boundaries of family system, patterns develop as certain family member's behaviour is caused by and causes other family member's behaviour in a predictable way. Maintaining the same pattern of behaviours within a system may lead to balance in the family system, but also to dysfunction. The change in roles may maintain the stability in the relationship, but it may also push the family towards a different equilibrium.

Communication therefore is imperative to the central of the family and to its functioning. This is especially true for the two primary functions of nurturing and control. Nurturing function of the family includes communication that is central to encouraging development, including both verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are encouraging and supportive. Control function of the family also includes communication that is central to guiding, influencing, and limiting the types of behaviors evidenced by family members. (www.sagepub.com/upm-data/11827_Chapter1.pdf Sept. 28, 2005).

Communication and family concepts explained

The ability to communicate effectively is an essential skill individuals must master if they are to enjoy close relationship in a family system. Experts in family studies point out that the ability and willingness to communicate effectively plays important role in maintaining a satisfying relationship in a family system, hence enabling the family to function to achieve its common purpose.

Communication according to Olson and Defrain (2000), is the way human beings create and share information both verbally and non-verbally. Asare and Kwofoa, (2009) are of the view that communication is the exchange of information such as facts, opinions and feelings. They further emphasized that communication is usually a mixture of verbal and non-verbal message; and how well an individual sends and receives messages will influence the person's school, work and personal life.

Talabi, (2011) also asserts that communication is sharing information or providing entertainment through speaking, writing, sign language, different kinds of symbols, gestures or a combination of two or more of these methods. He continued by stating that one of the most important types of communication is interpersonal communication which occurs when people make their thoughts, feelings and wishes known to one another. Interpersonal communication enables us to make plans and take decisions, share knowledge and feelings.

From the aforementioned definitions it can easily be agreed that communication is a process of expressing one's thoughts, opinions, facts, feelings and it is essential in every human society. Communication also as a subsystem of the family system is needed in connecting other subsystems of the family system. Its role within the family system is to support the interdependency and the interaction roles of the family subsystems. More especially, as the family system faces tremendous changes within its environments.

In the human society, individuals make a family and families form a society. Anyakoha and Eluwa (2010), stressed that the family is made up of a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption. Ejinkonye (2011), stated clearly that communication exists in the family. Nanalee (1994), pointed out the different types of families as nuclear family, single family, blended family and extended family. It was further stated that since family members have common residence and economic cooperation, there must be good communication among the members to have a healthy family relationship.

A healthy family relationship therefore is the interaction that exists among family members. Family members depend on each other for many things. This family relationship involves intimacies that no other relationship does (Anyakoha and Eluwa, 2010). Zastrow & Kirk-Ashaman (2007) citing Barker, (2003 p. 338) believe that a family as a primary group entails people who are intimate and have frequent face-to-face contact with one another, have norms

(that is, expectations regarding how members in the group should behave) in common, and share mutually enduring and extensive influence.

Thus family members as members of a primary group have significant influence on each other. The next concept from these definitions of family involves obligations for each other which means mutual commitment and responsibility for each other family members. Lastly, the third concept in the definitions is “common residence”- that is, to some extent family members live together.

Healthy family relationship depends on family communication. In other words, communication within the family is extremely important because, it allows members of a family to express their needs, concerns, feelings, wants, thought among others to each other for attention. Buttressing this, Zastrow and Kirk-Ashman (2007), purport that the family functions include a wide range of care giving functions including nurturing and socializing children, providing material and emotional support and assuming general responsibility for the well-being of all members. All family members need adequate resources to thrive. Additionally, family members should be able to call on each other for help when necessary.

In view of the vast range of family configurations, it is extremely difficult to define a “healthy” family. However, at least two concepts are important when assessing the healthiness or effectiveness of a family. These include; how well the functions are. Peterson, *et.al* (2009), writes that effective communication is an important characteristic of strong healthy families. They further assess that family communication refers to the way verbal and non- verbal information is exchanged between family members. It involves paying attention to what others are thinking and feeling; in other words, an importance of listening to what others have to say. Communication within the family is extremely important because it enables members to express their needs, wants, ideas among others. In addition communication creates an atmosphere that allows family members to express their differences as well as love one another.

It is through communication that family members are able to resolve the unavoidable problems that arise in all families. Just as effective communication is almost always found in strong healthy families, poor communication is usually found in families with weak ties. It is reported by family therapists that poor communications is a common complaint of families who are having difficulties and can lead to numerous family problems, including excessive family conflict, ineffective problem solving, lack of intimacy. Poor communicators are also associated with an increased risk of divorce, and marital separation. Good communication involves clear expression of personal idea and feelings even when they differ from those of other family members. Again, good communication also involves being sensitive to the needs and feelings of other family members. Further, good communication promotes compromise so that the most important needs of all involved are met.

When faced with decisions or crises, healthy families involve all family members to solutions for their mutual good. Conflicts are settled through rational discussion and compromise instead of open hostility and conflict. If a family member feels strongly about an issue, healthy families work to accommodate his/her views in a satisfactory way. It is important to note that both unhealthy and healthy families suffer conflicts and disagreements. However, a healthy family deals with conflict much more rationally and effectively. By so doing, good family relationship is built and maintained. All these are made possible through effective communication.

Types of communication within the family system

Communication in a family can be divided into two namely; instrumental and affective communication. Instrumental communication is the exchange of factual information that enables individuals to fulfill common family functions such as telling a child specific time or location to collect an item from. The affective communication is the way individual family members share their emotions with one another such as anger, joy etc. It is a known fact that some families function extremely well with instrumental communication yet have great difficulty with affective communication (Peterson, 2009, cited in Ejinkonye, 2011). Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller & Keitner (1993) are of the view that communication can be clear or masked and direct or indirect. Clear communication occurs when messages are spoken plainly and the content is easily understood by other family members. Masked communication occurs when the message is muddled or vague. They viewed communication as direct if the person spoken to is the person for whom the message is intended. In contrast, communication is indirect if the message is not directed to the person for whom it is intended.

Epstein *et. al.* (1993) further explained that clear and direct communication is the healthiest form of communication and occurs when the message is stated plainly and directly to the appropriate family member. With the clear and indirect type of communication, the message is clear, but it is not directed to the person for whom it is intended. The masked and direct communication occurs when the content of the message is unclear, but directed to the appropriate family member. Nevertheless, the masked and indirect communication occurs when both the message and intended recipient are unclear. Often in unhealthy family relationships, communication tends to be very masked and indirect.

Communicating effectively within a family system

Communication experts are of the view that there are many things that families can do to become more effective communicators and in turn to improve the quality of their relationships.

Goldsmiths (2005), believes that an effective communicator has the ability to pass along information, giving advance notice of impending changes and plans. According to Kelly-Plate and Eubanks (1994) and Peterson, (2009), families can improve their communication skills by following some suggestions for building effective family communication. These are;

- **Communicate frequently**

One of the most difficult challenges facing families today is finding time to spend together. Find creative ways to make time to communicate with other family members.

Plan regular family meetings since it is extremely important for families to make time to communicate.

Family meetings are the perfect opportunity to make up for the lagged family conversations. It is a time where the entire family enjoys and treasures moments spent together. Regular family gatherings contribute towards healthy bonding and important discussions. Gatherings help in resolving conflicts, assigning key chores, defining roles and becoming a source of encouragement for family members.

- With our busy schedules, it is difficult to find sufficient time to spend with one another in meaningful conversation. Talk in the car; turn the TV off and eat dinner together; schedule informal or formal family meetings to talk about important issues that affect your family; and talk to your children at bedtime.

- **Communicate clearly and directly**

Healthy families communicate their thoughts and feelings in a clear and direct manner. This is especially important when attempting to resolve problems that arise between family members (e.g., spouse, parent-child). Indirect and vague communication will not only fail to resolve problems, but will also contribute to a lack of intimacy and emotional bonding between family members.

- **Be an active listener**

An essential aspect of effective communication is listening to what others are saying. Family members must acknowledge and respect the other person's perspective. Be an active listener either by being critical listener (listener evaluates / challenges what is heard) or reflective/ empathetic listener (recognizing the speakers feelings by putting oneself into the situation). Being an active listener involves trying your best to understand the point of view of the other person.

- **Be open and honest with one another**

In order for effective communication to take place within families, individual family members must be open and honest with one another. This openness and honesty will set the stage for trusting relationships. Without trust, families cannot build strong relationships. Parents, especially, are responsible for providing a safe environment that allows family members to openly express their thoughts and feelings.

- **Think about the person with whom you are communicating**

It is important to select words that will be clearly understood by your audience. Be mindful of the age levels within the family setup as you communicate.

- **Pay attention to non-verbal messages**

Family members know each other so well that they tend to use nonverbal communications and highly expect to be understood. It is important therefore to pay close attention to non-verbal communication. For example, a spouse or child may say something verbally, but their facial expressions or body language may be telling you something completely different. On the other hand a laid back attitude with distracted gestures by the listener is a negative sign and becomes a hindrance in effective communication.

- **Be positive**

Based on the interdependency relationships that exist within families as systems, family members tend to be sources of motivation and support. In depressing situations, family members play significant roles in helping each other cope with loss. Family members must find time to compliment and encourage each other. Members should spread positive energy to lighten up the household setting. Marital and family researcher studies have highlighted that negative communication in the form of criticism, disrespect and defensiveness result in an unhappy family relationship. It is very important for family members to verbally compliment and encourage one another.

- **Practice conflict resolution**

Conflict is inevitable among families, and the ways families choose to resolve conflict makes a huge difference. Families who peacefully resolve conflict may grow closer as they learn from one another and work hard to take one another's feelings into consideration. When conflict remains unresolved, however, it may lead to family members harbouring anger, growing resentful and trying to force other family members to take sides. Whether a family conflict

remains simple, or it includes years of unresolved disputes among extended family members, attempts must be made to restore peace by reaching a resolution amenable to everyone involved.

In support of the above stated steps for effective communication within the family, David (2001) says it involves interpersonal skills, rapport with others and active listening. Interpersonal skills enable us to interact with others. It involves putting people at ease, respecting other's opinions and capabilities and encouraging the sharing of feelings and perceptions. Asare and Kwarfoa (2007), also agree to this by stating that to keep discussion positive, the family must develop a list of rules, encourage suggestions from each member. Family members must learn to treat every member with respect; compliment others for good ideas and suggestions, keep an open mind towards other's points of view, and importantly being tactful. Also to develop rapport with others is to develop a connection, a relationship or an understanding with others. To do this, one should signal that he/she is opened to the thought and opinions of others. Not the least, active listening, encourages others to continue interacting. Active listeners can demonstrate interest in what is being said by using both verbal and non-verbal communication technique. Here again, Asare and Kwafoa (2007), point out that during communication, family members should not interrupt the speaker, criticize or make fun of some one's personality, or be disruptive. They further stated that a good listener receives messages accurately. The most difficult communication problem in families is that family members do not listen and respond to each other timely. They further explained that active listening is when the listener tries to understand what the message really means. The listener participates more in the message exchange, making comment that are designed to clarify what the message sender means.

Another important skill in communication is the ability to send messages that reflect what you think, feel or believe. These messages are I-messages because they tell how a situation makes the speaker feel. You- messages are direct attack on the other person and his/her actions whiles I-messages state how you respond to those actions. Generally, I-messages are less threatening and cause more positive responses.

Giving feedback is equally important interpersonal communication skills; indicating whether the message was understood correctly. The receiver may ask for feedback to be sure that the correct message is heard. The act of being assertive is essential in communicating within the family system. When you are assertive you communicate your ideas and feelings firmly and positively, without bullying others for their words or actions. Assertiveness involves speaking up without being rude or offending others. You respect other's opinion but you do not allow them to overpower you. You are then not afraid to tell your opinion, and you are willing to let others express theirs.

Identifying and getting rid of barriers to communication is another means of ensuring effective communication as a family member. There are several barriers that prevent messages from being exchanged within the family or between family members. By learning to recognize what can interfere good flow of information and dealing with it is a key. Talabi (2011), opines that barrier

to communication can be in the form of noise or any distraction of the audience from the message. It can also be in the form of inefficiency of the source of the message or problem with the destination such as ill health etc. It can again be any external agent.

Some internal barriers are due to differences in sex, age and status, values, perceptions and understanding, self-image, language. For instance with level of understanding serving as a barrier, a parent might see or understand an aspects of a situation that an adolescent may not, simply because the parent has more experience which helps an in-depth understanding of issues than her adolescent child.

Again, family relationships do involve authority, which can serve as barrier to communication. For example, parents have authority over children, older siblings over younger ones and in some communities, males over females irrespective of age differences. It is possible that older members or those in authority will disregard young member's opinions and desires. In truism, parents generally know what is best for their children due to their rich experiences in life. However, young people's feelings need to be respected for proper family cohesion. Considering the family as a system, decisions made affects everyone so children must be involved and they deserve a say even if their ideas are seen as not realistic. Notwithstanding, it must be acknowledged strongly that, young children are subsystems of the supra system - the family - and should be respected as such. Children learn and develop positive self-image, acceptable values and language, decision making and communication skills if their views are respected and guided in the family.

External barriers to communication may include any noise that could interfere with family's channel of communication. For instance a persistent noise such as music, sound from television, cries of babies, and movements of automobiles among others can take the listener's mind off from the issue being discussed. For proper communication, such interferences should be avoided. Older members should clearly understand that communication within the family system must include all family members. Other members of the family are and should be part of the family's communication system.

Riker and Brisbane (1992), share similar view on barrier to communication by recounting that communication can breakdown so easily. They outline some examples as it occurs at each stage of the main element of communication.

a) The message receiver

- Inattentiveness
- Giving no response to the speaker either verbally or non-verbally
- Interrupting when the speaker is talking
- Having a wondering mind
- Hearing only what you want to hear
- Sometimes fatigue on the part of the receiver which could be physical or mental

- Making use of negative body language. Examples are a frown, yawn, etc.

b) The message

Sometimes the message itself can cause problems or barriers for effective communication. This is made possible through the following;

- It could be unclear for some reasons
- Several messages presented at the same time leads to selective attention and the rest become distractions
- The choice of words; if the vocabulary level is too high, the message might not be understood.

c) The message sender

- Making use of you-messages makes the communication full of blames and accusations
- When the fear of losing some one overrides the strong desire to set things straight in a relationship, invisible barriers are erected.
- Hiding behind the walls of silence create communication barrier
- When the message sender tries to avoid an issue in order to keep the peace.

COMMUNICATING WITH DIFFERENT MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY

Not all family members communicate in the same manner or at the same level. It is important to take into consideration the ages and maturity levels of children. Parents cannot communicate

with children in the same way that they communicate with their spouse because the child may not be old enough to understand.

Communicating with preschoolers

When communicating with young children, it is important for adults to listen carefully to what the children are saying without making unwarranted assumptions.

The ability to listen to a preschooler is essential for that child, not only to successfully acquire information but to process it and communicate it to others as well. Good listening will however improve the preschooler's ability to communicate and this can be achieved when they are taught to;

- pay attention to the person who is speaking

- listen to special clue words that tell them to pay attention.
- Ask questions when they do not understand what is being said

Communicating with elementary children

Good communicating skills play a crucial role in the learning process of young children. These skills help children successfully to acquire process and communicate information. It is important to encourage children to show respect for the opinions of others. Children in this group often pattern their communication habits after those they see modeled in their life.

Communicating with middle / junior high adolescent

One of the biggest hurdles that families experience in having healthy communication is the lack of time. It is essential to make a considerable effort to make time for this group of family members. In this present age, children hardly spend time with their parents and often prefer hanging out with their friends.

Young people in this age group are at the threshold of adolescence. They see the world as a place of infinite possibilities, full of new people and new situation. So it is important that they understand that their ability to be understood clearly by others and understand others in return depends on good communication skills.

Communicating with senior high school teens

Teenagers who have good communication skills will be better able to deal with interpersonal problems and build positive relationships. Verbal and non- verbal communication are used

among teenagers. Therefore, it is critical that attention is given to body language and tone of voice when communicating with them.

Communicating with adults

Adults need to show through modeling how to improve communication skills within the family and other relationships. Children can flourish in a family where people are not afraid to show their feelings and where they know others wants to listen. Adults can help by expressing themselves openly and by listening carefully to others.

Make eye contact with the family member and your body postures should indicate that you are concentrating on what they have to say. Listen to the family member without any judgments and criticism. You can give your opinions and advices on the matter the family member is seeking help for after you have fully understood the message.

Resolving family conflict through effective communication

In general, the goal of communication is to provide understanding that leads to desired actions. In some cases however, communication fails and conflict results. Conflict is a state of disagreement or disharmony. If the survival of the relationships within the family system is the ultimate goal, then conflict can pose a definite threat. Negotiations to remedy the conflict are known as conflict resolution (Goldsmith, 2005). Different views and perspectives in a single household often lead towards a state of constant conflicts and arguments. The responsibility to avoid such situations of dynamic volatility rests in the hands of the elder members of the family. Choose a method for resolving conflicts from your conversation instead of letting emotions get out of control during a heated argument. It's natural that many family members will have different views. What's more important is all the different views are heard and acknowledged.

Steps in resolving conflicts within the family**Step 1**

State the problem and determine who needs to work together to develop the solution. When family members clearly identify a problem, they can begin to work on it. However, when people don't acknowledge the problem, or avoid discussing it altogether, a successful resolution becomes impossible.

Step 2

Establish ground rules for resolving the problem. Before discussing ways to resolve the problem, set some rules for the discussion. For example, agree that no one will call anyone names or ban yelling. Encourage small breaks from the discussion if tempers flare, and emphasize the importance of resolving conflict peacefully.

Step 3

Brainstorm solutions to the problem. Allow everyone involved to offer input into potential solutions. During the brainstorming process, don't judge whether each solution is good or bad, but instead, create a list of potential solutions.

Step 4

Evaluate the risks and benefits of each potential solution. Listen to each family member's input about the pros and cons of the solutions.

Step 5

Reach a solution as a team. Try to reach a consensus about which solution will best resolve the conflict. Be willing to negotiate, and encourage family members to be open to new solutions.

Step 6

Identify what each family member will do to work on the solution. Each person should identify action steps he/she will take to work toward the solution.

Communication networks within family systems

There are different ways in which the members of a family communicate with each other with regards to the member in charge who is identified.

Some families have one person who is at the center of communication who in most cases is the mother. This network in a wheel like form has communication lines going from the mother who is at the center to each family member. The mother controls the messages and can adapt them as needed with each family member.

Other families may use the chain network where one person is in charge at the top giving messages to the next person down the line in successive manner. This type of communication network is recommended for busy families. The problem with this “top down” approach is that only the second person in the chain hears the complete message as there may be distortions.

Many stepfamilies use a “Y” type communication. The children are at the top points of the “Y” and the mother in the middle. The stepfather is at the bottom of the “Y.” Messages to the children are given through the mother. This network may be useful as the members work to become a new family. Messages in the networks discussed above are filtered through one person. Sometimes this is needed. It may help reduce family conflict. The problem is that it could also produce misunderstandings. The person who sent the message does not talk directly to all those who receive it.

A fourth network style is the “all-channel” network. In this setting each family member talks directly with each other. There is no filtering of information. This style is used more when children are older. The information does not get distorted with this style; however it is not quite effective when information needs to get to everyone quickly.

Families with good communication use a mix of communication networks. That is because each type of network can be useful in a specific situation. What is important is that all family members feel heard and valued.

Conclusion

Present survival conditions have taken its toll on families. The family itself is undergoing lots of changes likewise other systems found within its environment. This adversely has weakened the strong ties that use to exist among family members. Family members however can still take charge of the situation by learning the rudiments of communication and apply them to strengthen the interdependency and the interaction roles of the family's subsystem. It is therefore strongly believed that in the midst of the changes and challenges, families can use effective communication as a tool in building healthy relationships within the family system and still achieve its common goal.

Recommendation

Based on the discussions, it is therefore recommended that;

1. Views of family members irrespective of their age level, gender or status should be respected.
2. All family members must pay equal attention to both verbal and non verbal communications.
3. Positivity should be encouraged to foster trust and also help younger ones to emulate.
4. Family members must be groomed to be assertive and provide feedbacks when necessary since these promotes effective communication.
5. Families faced with other challenges such as distance and time can resort to ways that would help them connect to the rest of the family and must communicate their stance effectively.

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