Web-Based Radio Show

The Developmental Approach to Family Functioning:

The Historical background of the different ways or lenses or theories – all different ways of looking at families – a very complex process

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Good morning. Welcome to our web-based radio show. Today we're going to focus on something we get a lot of questions about – family functioning. We've talked in the past about how to support our children, both those with special needs and without special needs, in terms of their fundamental developmental capacities, including how to attend, engage, interact, problem solve, and how to be creative thinkers and logical thinkers; and then how to be abstract and reflective thinkers. We've talked about how to create care giving environments. But we haven't talked as much or as in depth about how a whole family comes together and how families work.

Now there are many theories of family functioning. Some focus on systems theories and some focus on psycho-dynamic explanations of the way families work. For example, the psycho-dynamic explanations look at mechanisms that are called "projective identification," where one member of the family perceives or sees another member in a certain way and then actually tries unconsciously to get that person to act that way, and that person unconsciously sometimes goes along with it and carries out the agenda of the other family member. It could be two spouses, but often it's a child and a parent. There are other theories of family functioning that look at individuals in families and personality dynamics. Needless to say, it's important to have an understanding of the historical background of the different ways or lenses or theories, but these are all different ways of looking at families – and they all probably look at different aspects of the proverbial elephant – a very complex process.

There is a huge amount of research literature on family functioning, as well, showing that families have very subtle ways of communicating with each other. Years ago David Reiss and his colleagues did some studies showing that families, even in big meetings and across big rooms, were communicating with each other in unconscious or

pre-conscious ways. Murray Bowen, a famous family therapist who was at Georgetown University for many years, used to try to change family functioning by holding a big family meeting with all relatives and family members present and he felt that if one family member acted differently than the typical role that that member held for the family, the whole family would go into a new equilibrium. He built a whole approach to therapy based on his view of family functioning.

For us, we want to look at families from an infant and early childhood and childhood perspective in terms of development. So we're taking a developmental focus on family functioning because our interest is in infancy and early childhood and also childhood, itself; so it's natural to take a developmental focus. So our focus will be on how the family as a whole unit supports or undermines the vital functions of these six fundamentals I mentioned earlier, and of the more advanced levels of thinking and social skills that we've described before, which I'll cover again briefly. So just as we look at how an individual caregiver can help a baby or an older child become regulated by creating a calm and nurturing and soothing environment that's tailored to the youngster's differences – whether they're sensory hyper reactive or hypo reactive – so, too, can we look at the whole family, when it's there as a unit. How do they support soothing and regulating and calm focus for a particular youngster in the family, whether it's a child with special needs or a child without special needs? The more extreme a child's sensory profile, in terms of being hyper reactive or hypo reactive or sensory craving, the more challenging it may be; and the more the child has language or visual-spatial processing problems, also the more challenging it may be for that family. So, it's not always easy, but we can look at how the whole family unit functions. We may see family members alone functioning very well and supporting, for example, regulation and interest in the world, but when it comes to the whole unit, we may see competition or tension between Mom and Dad or between other siblings who are vying for attention. The family dynamics may become chaotic and there may be nobody organizing or orchestrating the family or leading it to keep it calm and regulated. We can look at it from the point of view of the needs of any family member.

So, the first thing we look for is how well the family as a whole group promotes calm, regulated interactions among its members to foster focus and attention, whether it's a new baby or whether it's an older child with special needs, or whether it's a child with sensory processing challenges.

The next thing we look for is how well that family as a whole unit supports engagement and intimacy among its members, especially with a child. How much of a sense of warmth and intimacy is there in the family as a group? So that has to do with relationships among all its members – are certain members excluded and others included? Is there a sense of warm, shared intimacy among all the members? For each of these capacities that we're describing we can look at whether or not that capacity exists or whether they are mild or moderate or severe constrictions in it, or whether it's absent entirely. Is it a family that has warmth and intimacy when it's one-on-one, but as soon as they come together as a unit everyone does their own thing and there's no real cross-communication, no cross-fertilization or real intimacy going on?

The third thing we look for is how well the family promotes two-way communication and back-and-forth emotional signaling among its members. Again, do we get a continuous, back-and-forth communication during dinner, during times when the family's together in the family room or the living room? Even if they're doing something like watching TV, is there communication during commercials or between the breaks in the show? How purposeful are these? Do they get chaotic and random or does everyone withdraw into their own world? Is there a continuing dialog? Is it balanced – does it include all the family members? Is the child with special needs or regulatory challenges or the baby in the family included at their level? Does the family have the capacity to communicate with each person according to their level? Do the older siblings adapt to the younger ones? Do the parents adapt to each sibling according to their age? So we're going to have a dynamic process where everyone's in communication with everyone else. That can be a very rich experience if it's calm and regulated and has a lot of intimacy and if you really foster communication.

Then we look at the fourth level, which we call shared social problem solving. How well does the family engage in shared social problem solving when something needs to get done, when the child with special needs wants something? Is there a lot of interaction between different family members and that child towards fostering initiative and problem solving to get to the videotape the child's looking for? Are there many circles of communication going on with back and forth interaction with gestures –even for the nonverbal child – to foster shared social problem solving? How well does that occur or does that break down and do people just do things for one another? Or do people ignore one another or do people expect too much of one another? As we get into shared social problem solving, and even just with communication in general, how

does the family do in terms of different emotional realms? Do they do better in terms of communication and problem solving when it comes to dependency and nurturance and closeness, but it gets chaotic or everyone withdraws or gets overly punitive and rigid when it comes to discipline or aggression? How are they at fostering initiative and assertiveness? Is it fine when it involves taking care of someone and fostering intimacy, but as soon as it comes to initiative or assertiveness or curiosity then everyone is doing things for each other, not fostering the initiative or curiosity of the children or the individual family members. In other words, where does the family pattern become dysregulated, chaotic, withdrawn, or aggressive? What are the trigger points? What emotions are hard for the family? Which ones are easy? So we may see different levels for different emotions and we may have constriction in that capacity, i.e., it's present, but not for all the different emotional areas of life. It may also involve not just different emotional areas, but also different capacities, like language or motor skills. So, maybe talking is fine, but doing things physically together may cause dysregulation and disorganization. So, we need to look at all these different parameters to see how the family is "cooking" and how it's functioning.

Then we get to sharing ideas. How well does the family do when it comes to sharing ideas together? Let's assume for the moment that all the children are verbal and can engage in pretend play and can share ideas. How well does the family promote that? Is it an action oriented family that does things but doesn't talk a lot? Is it a family that helps all the children to elaborate? Is it a family where the parents help each other elaborate on feelings and, if so, which feelings? Are they as good with intimacy and warmth as they are with anger or assertiveness or curiosity? What feelings does the family support, in terms of a dialog, among family members? When it comes to siblings talking to one another, do the families help the siblings talk about anger or rivalry or jealousy or assertiveness or goals or what they want? How well does the family tune into one another and tune into each other's ideas and agendas, versus trying to control each other. So there will be different dynamics in the family. Again, a family that tunes into each other's agenda and supports the full range of emotions, in terms of expression and discussion and dialog, and with the younger children fosters pretending and imagination, is really cooking on all fronts. A family that can do it for some emotional areas but becomes over controlling or rigid or avoids others is showing constrictions. A family that doesn't use ideas at all, or hardly at all, is showing a deficit in that capacity.

Then we look at the next area – the ability for connecting ideas together, for being logical. Can the family, when they're verbal and discussing things and interacting, close circles of communication? Can they connect ideas together? Do they, in a sense, connect the dots? Are they logical? Do they make sense? Are they reality based? Do the parents help the children appreciate reality? Are the parents realistic with each other or is the family more emotionally driven, where they're dealing with the emotions of the moment and become illogical or deal more with fantasy without adapting to reality? In other words, we want fantasy and imagination, but we want to also be able to do reality based thinking, as well. For which emotions can the family do this? Are they causal thinkers when they come together as a group? Can they stay logical or do they get fragmented and do they begin misidentifying each other's feelings, saying something like, "I know you were out to hurt my feelings; you did it on purpose," even though it was just an accident. How much do they blur each other's boundaries versus how much do they understand the reality of each other's boundaries? So we look at the degree to which they're unrealistic and whether they're unrealistic in certain areas, such as do they blur boundaries just around aggression or just around intimacy or just around the children's emerging sexuality, if the children are four and five years old? So we can look at the specific dynamics of the family, but we can also look at what we call the broad patterns of family functioning.

We want to see how well the family can be reality based in terms of all the different emotions, all the different themes of life, and how they do this as a whole family unit. Again, do they become fragmented? Do they become illogical? Do they make misperceptions of each other, such as saying, "I know you were doing that on purpose!" when children are accusing each other of evil intent? Are the parents overly jealous of one another or overly suspicious? Do they withdraw into their own worlds when it comes to anger or intimacy or themes of sexuality? Are certain issues handled more irrationally, while only others are handled in a reality-based and logical way? So, again, this helps us assess the full degree to which the family as a group supports reality-oriented, logical thinking.

When you think about it, since children spend a lot of their time with the family as a whole group – not just in one-on-one interactions – how the family functions as a whole unit is vitally important. As we look at the reality orientation of the family, we also want to see how they'll realistically work to supply the basic needs of the family. This has to do with their relationship to the community and if they have a child with

special needs, the services at hand – are they able to deal with those themes and issues and challenges realistically and in an effective and efficient manner?

The next capacity we look at is how complex the appreciation of reality is – can the family operate at higher levels of logical or reality-based thinking? There are three higher levels we look for: One we call multi-causal thinking. In other words, can they look at the multiple reasons for things? When family members are getting annoyed with each other, can they look at the multiple reasons why the other one may be annoying, or why they're having a certain feeling or why they're angry or sad or eager? Can the spouses do it with each other? Can they do it with their children? Can siblings do it with one another in an age-expected manner? You wouldn't expect a three-year-old to do that, but you'd expect a seven- or eight-year-old to do that.

Next we look for how well the family gets into gray area thinking, or do they stay stuck in an all-or-nothing mode? In all-or-nothing thinking the family tends to take extreme positions, like, "I hate you" or "I love you" or "You're all good" or "You're all bad" or "You're wonderful" or "You're the pits." Now we all have these reactions with strong emotions and the stronger the emotions, the more likely we are to have extreme reactions. But the question is to what degree these extreme reactions predominate and does the family itself function in an all-or-nothing way? Again, on which emotions do they do this if they do it? What one family member does affects how the other family member responds. Do they soften their response to help another family member become a gray-area thinker? In gray-area thinking you look for subtleties of gray, you look for shades, so instead of saying, "I hate you," you say, "I'm a little angrier at you than I usually get because this is annoying. I'm not as angry as I could be, but don't push your luck." In other words, how well does the family as a group moderate when a family member is taking an all-or-nothing position? Do the other family members or some family members throw fuel on the fire, making it even more extreme, getting into an argument? Or do they kind of counterbalance and soften by helping the person relax or helping the person look at the shades of gray? Again, the more extreme the emotion, the more likely an all-or-nothing reaction. Around which emotions can the family do this? Love, intimacy, dependency, assertiveness, anger, curiosity, loss, separation, vulnerability, embarrassment, humiliation – these are all strong feelings. Here's where you look at the sibling relationships, too. How well do the siblings get along? Siblings are prone to all-or-nothing reactions with each other, but if they're over seven years old

they're capable of gray-area thinking – how well do they do this? How does the family support it?

Then we look at how well the family can advance to an even higher level of thinking or a high level of functioning. In their social relationships and in their sharing of ideas together and their coming together can they reflect together can they figure out the why and the how they do something? Can family members can say to each other, "Gee, I was angrier than I should be in this situation. I don't know why. I wonder what was going on." Can the family as a whole problem solve in this way? Looking at why they're all tense this week, can they figure out, "Well, Grandma is ill and we're all worried about her and we're all on each other's case" or "Little Johnny's having a hard time at school and we're all worried about it," or ". . .and we're all angry at the school for not being more sympathetic or empathetic," or "Daddy's having a hard time at work and he's irritable and it's making us all on edge." How well does the family reflect on themselves? To do this the family has to have a baseline of how they function, generally; it has to have a common picture of that, a sense of that. It's almost intuitive; it doesn't have to be explicit or verbalized, even. Then they have to be able to take a step back from that and compare how they're feeling at the moment as a group. These discussions can occur spontaneously; they can occur, often, at an intuitive level where you feel it without even expressing it; or they cannot occur at all, where there's no capacity to reflect – people just act in the moment. Again, we look at the different emotional areas: dependency and intimacy and assertiveness and aggression and loss and embarrassment and see how well the family does this.

Obviously, the reflective family that can look at shades of gray has much better coping capacities than a family that's prone to all-or-nothing thinking or one that gets illogical under stress or that doesn't use ideas at all and becomes action oriented and impulsive under pressure. So here we can also look at the degree to which the family regresses with anxiety or with pressure or with stress or with tension and to what level they regress to. We can go all the way back down our ladder of development until they become extremist thinkers, illogical thinkers, or action oriented thinkers, where they're impulsive. Do they lose their problem solving abilities? Do they stop communicating? Do they pull away and withdraw from each other and become disengaged? Or do they become dysregulated, just chaotic or self-absorbed? Children with special needs who have advanced to higher levels may have an easier time regressing because their newly

acquired skills aren't as well established and the last skills are usually the first ones to go under pressure or under anxiety or under tension or when there are regressions.

As we're looking at the capacity to reflect, this gets stronger and stronger as individual members of the family age and mature. More can be taken into account, there is greater understanding of different emotional themes and of different relationships. The extended family can be taken more and more into account. The future can be anticipated far more effectively. Children can learn to think probabilistically – "This is more likely or less likely to happen in the future" – so the capacity for reflective thinking will improve with experience. Parents become more empathetic as they rear children – as they rear their third and fourth child – because they've been through it and they've relived their own development through their children and they're more experienced with their own conflicts and anxieties. So we can look at the degree of reflectiveness getting stronger and taking into account more experience as the family matures. But it's very important to look at the degree to which reflective thinking predominates; which emotional themes it can occur in; and which ones it can't, or whether it can occur in all of them or none; and what happens under pressure, tension, or anxiety – what patterns does the family employ when it regresses? There are characteristic signatures of families.

Now once we have this overall picture of the family's functioning, we then have the framework or the stage upon which the drama is playing out, and we can look at the content of the specific dramas. What does the family struggle with – rivalry or competition or lack of intimacy or just too many competing agendas or not enough nurturance or too many anxieties around the basics of survival (such as financial issues), or the problems of a family member (such as an alcoholic parent), or a child with extreme emotional problems and how other people in the family react to that child? What are the particular dynamics of this family? First we have to understand the broad level of the family first to understand the framework within which this dynamic is occurring. Rivalry will have very different implications on a family that's action oriented and impulsive and not sharing ideas together than it will for a family that's reflective and can reflect on the dramas occurring. For a family comprised of extreme, all-or-nothing thinkers, preoccupation with competition and rivalry will yet have different implications. People will accuse each other of being unfair or unjust, as opposed to a reflective family or a family that can do gray-area thinking that can look at this as a healthy, constructive, fun enterprise to engage the family to reach for high levels of achievement. A family

that struggles with aggression and that regresses to impulsive, action oriented thinking may be hurting each other – there may be abuse or neglect. So we have to understand the structure before we understand the dynamics. Then you can tell the story of that family.

Also, as you're looking at family functioning and you want to improve it, there are a few broad principles I've found very helpful, particularly for the adults in the family, but also for the children. First, in order for family members to function as a group, and also for them to try to have an understanding of each member, we always want to try to secure the basics, to do what we call "give more and expect more." Always nurture and give more first. Always establish the basics of engagement and warmth and time and relatedness, particularly when there's stress or pressure. Always start off with reestablishing a good equilibrium of nurturing and support, because a lot of stress is due to the family's being too busy or worried and therefore losing the basics. Then the children start acting out, parents get tense, and then everything gets fragmented.

The second general principle that's very important is always to try to bring out the best in each other. Often, family members are working at cross purposes, trying to have the moral high ground, accusing the other, each one trying to be the good one. Think of what happens, particularly among the adults in the family, when they focus on how to bring out the best in their spouse, because that's the mother or father of their children. If they function well, the whole family functions well. So, we can say, "Even if I'm angry, for the family's sake I want to bring out the best in my spouse. How do I support her/him? How do I help her/him feel secure?" So even if we disagree, we still want to help the other person feel secure. We may want to talk in a calm way later in the evening about our disagreement, but we want to help them feel calm and secure, particularly in the heat of battle.

To do this you have to recognize there are many different ways of parenting and that children benefit from differences between their parents. Therefore, we don't need to micromanage each other, we just have to make sure that each one has his own way of supporting the basics. Not every parent has to do all the basics, but the first ones are the important ones: security and engagement and communication. After that it's nice to have all the higher levels, but if one parent is better at it than another, so be it. Don't micromanage; always bring out the best in the other; and always think of how you can help the other one feel more secure. If you follow these general principles, knowing the

individual idiosyncrasies and uniqueness of each family member, the family will benefit. Always give more in terms of the basics before you expect too much in terms of engagement and warmth and intimacy and sharing, and then always try to bring out the best in each other, adult to adult, but also adult to children. Children will reciprocate, eventually, and they'll become more empathetic.

It's also important when you look at the family to see how well they deal with their neighborhood, their community, and the service community, as well as the extended family, and we can apply the same lens we've been talking about in terms of external relationships beyond the family to see how well their support is beyond the immediate family unit. These same parameters we've been discussing will apply there, as well.

This is a quick overview of family functioning from a developmental perspective and it adds to the other perspectives that have been in the literature and research for many years and hopefully will be helpful.