

HOW FAMILY THERAPY CAN HELP CHILDREN IN FAMILIES

What is Family Therapy?

Family Therapy is a framework that has been developed in which an individual is viewed as part of a whole system. The individual (adult or child) is seen within the context of their environment, which includes their family constellation, their social network and their work or school setting.

How Family Dynamics Can Impact on Childrens' Behaviour

As a Psychologist and Family Therapist, I am often asked to see “problem” children or adolescents. Children who are misbehaving at school or at home or adolescents who are engaging in “acting out” behaviours such as self harm or risk-taking behaviour, disrupting class or being rebellious.

When I was growing up in the 1950's and 1960's, the general assumption was that children would “not know” what was going on if issues weren't discussed in front of them. It is now widely understood that even newborns pick up on stressful atmosphere in the home. Children are like sponges, soaking up opportunities to learn, social behaviours that they witness and the emotional “vibes” around them. I often hear parents say “the children don't know what's going on at home” or “we only argue when the children are in bed”. This is often in a context of stress and conflict, where parents may be under financial, emotional or familial pressures outside of their control.

In a home where a parent is depressed, they may be unable to support their child emotionally as their own inner world can become overwhelming and all consuming. These parents will be unable to be emotionally available to their child and the child may experience feelings of confusion as they struggle to understand their parent's seeming lack of connection with their lives. In the absence of a reasonable explanation children often blame themselves for the atmosphere in the home or their parent's mood. The child may experience the mood in the home as unpredictable and may become anxious or depressed themselves. The child's behaviour may then become more extreme.

To assume that children don't pick up on parental stress is erroneous. This is especially true for “sensitive” children who may react in various ways. Just as each child is an individual, their response to stress in the home will also be individual. Small children who have not developed sophisticated speech patterns and who do not have access to complicated emotional responses may react in a variety of ways. They may be more unsettled, have difficulty going to sleep or staying asleep, may act in out-of-character ways such as being aggressive towards siblings or other children, may start to wet their bed (if they are toilet trained) or may refuse food. Children may have increased tantrums, be teary for apparently no reason, or become quite demanding of parents' attention. Pre adolescent children may appear sad or angry and be unable to articulate their distress except in increasing “rebellious” behaviour at home or at school or withdraw from the family and appear disinterested. At a more extreme level, older children may engage in self harming behaviours if their distress becomes too much for them. They may also either seek out peer company more often and/or withdraw to their rooms at home.

These behaviours may be misconstrued if parents are unaware that their child is aware of the distress in the home. Parents may be so absorbed in their own discomfort and emotions that they are unable to recognize that their child is actually reacting to the atmosphere in the home.

How Can Family Therapy Help?

Family Therapists are practitioners who are trained to recognize patterns in family dynamics. A Family Therapist can assess the situation, even without the whole family being present. Talking with members of a family in distress can often begin to break unhelpful patterns that all families engage in from time to time.

When we were children ourselves, we learned rules and myths in our family of origin that often carry over into our adult lives. Often family rules are unspoken such as “don’t upset your mother” or “we don’t talk to anyone outside our family about our private lives”. These rules can become rigid and fixed and we often behave in our new family constellation “as if” we are still living in our family of origin. These patterns of behaviour are often unconscious and unspoken. A trained Family Therapist can begin to unravel these patterns of behaviour and help families understand their (often) automatic and (often) unhelpful responses to conflict and stress.

Many of today’s parents grew up in a household where conflict was never resolved, where arguments were settled by someone backing down or silence. Therefore, we may not have developed the appropriate skills to resolve disputes in a functional and helpful way. Family members, and especially children, need to feel safe to express their views (even if they are different views) in an atmosphere that will not result in chastisement or a withdrawal of emotional support or love from a parent.

Historically, families lived in “clans” evolving into villages and then neighbourhoods over the Centuries. It is only in the last 30 years or so that young families have had to move away from their families of origin due to societal pressures to own their own home. It is now the norm for mothers to work away from the home and there are an increasing number of single parent families. These factors can add great stress and distress to the couple relationship and the family as a whole. There is also the perceived notion that “everyone else is coping except me”. This faulty belief may make individuals more reluctant to seek help.

In addition, many of today’s grandparents still work and may be unavailable to be on hand to offer practical and emotional support. This perceived lack of support can add to a young family’s feelings of isolation and in the rush to “have it all” children’s “acting out” behaviour may be seen as “bad” rather than “sad”.

What Can Be Done?

If your child is acting in an out of character way, it may be useful to try to talk to them about what may be bothering them. With small pre school or early school age children, often their verbal skills are unsophisticated. They may have difficulty accessing their true emotional state as they may feel overwhelmed by their sadness, fear or confusion. It may be helpful to ask your child to draw how they feel. You can sit with them and ask them to explain their drawing to you.

With older children, it can be very useful to ask them to tell you what's making them feel unhappy. Just knowing that their parent is willing to sit and listen to them can begin to make a child feel more safe and secure. Your child may not be able to open up right away, or may even be unaware of what is really wrong, but encourage them to come to you when they feel like talking. If they do not feel comfortable talking about how they are feeling, it may be helpful for them to write down their feelings or begin to keep a diary of their feelings. If they are not practised at talking through their feelings with you, they may have a favourite Aunt or Uncle or Grandparent or neighbour that they could talk to. The important issue here is that the child has a trusted adult in their lives that they can confide in.

If a child expresses ideas about self harm or their behaviour continues to be distressing, always take them seriously and always seek professional advice. A good place to start looking for professional help may be your local G.P.

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