

Family in Crisis

At what point should a family in crisis seek outside help?

Some families have trouble coping with life's inevitable crises. In these families even relatively simple problems are not resolved but take on the appearance and feel of major dilemmas. Thus, by their lack of successful coping skills, these families create additional problems for themselves and go from crisis to crisis, with little relief and little pleasure from life or from one another.

Although we all strive for perfection, there is no perfect family. Each family has its own strengths and weaknesses, assets and liabilities, challenges and problems. If your family seems overwhelmed with problems, or if there is a breakdown in relationships within your family, it is probably time for outside help.

Stress Points

Family problems come in all shapes and sizes; some are short-lived and easily managed, while others are more chronic and difficult to handle. Stress points include events such as illness and injury, changing jobs, changing schools, moving and financial difficulties. Each family develops its own ways of coping with these stresses, some of which work better than others.

Signs of Unsuccessful Coping

Unsuccessful coping can be recognized by a number of characteristics, including the following:

- **Poor Communication** Family members either avoid talking with one another, or have not learned how to listen well to what others are trying to say through their words, expressions or actions.
- **Inability To Resolve Conflicts and Disagreements** This usually occurs because family members avoid discussing problems or even avoid admitting that problems exist. This allows the conflicts to continue - which, while causing some discomfort and unhappiness, allows the family to avoid what they see as the greater discomfort of facing the problem. Some families just have not learned the skills of negotiating or, for some other reason, cannot let go of bad or hurt feelings. Children are likely to pattern their behavior after their parents' behavior and may learn to refuse to talk about feelings and problems.
- **Poor Problem-Solving** Family members have trouble deciding what problems really exist, who is responsible, the options for solving them, and how the family can agree upon an option and act upon it. There may not be agreement on what the priorities are within the family.
- **Poor Division of Responsibilities** Families often have not decided how family responsibilities will be divided among family members. When that happens, family life can become chaotic, and many things do not get accomplished. At the other extreme, some families are not flexible at all, and family members do not help one another out or fairly reassess responsibilities as family circumstances change.

- **Insufficient Emotional Support** Families are, especially for children, the most important source of emotional support. During the middle years, children find it hard to obtain this emotional support outside the family. Children do not perform or develop well without this support.
- **Intolerance of Differences** Families function best when the individuality of each family member is acknowledged and appreciated. At the least, even if someone else's personal traits or characteristics are not highly valued, each family member needs to tolerate these traits and respect that individual. When family members withhold love from one another because of personal differences, children are likely to have a difficult time developing a healthy self-image, and they will have low self-esteem and poor social skills.
- **Overdependency On Others** Children need to succeed in order to feel capable of successfully managing life's stresses and challenges. If they are taught or encouraged to depend on others (within the family or outside it) to solve their problems, they will have low self-esteem and limited initiative and will have trouble succeeding in the world.

As a parent, your task is to meet the multiple demands of family life with energy and creativity. By doing so, you will enable your children to grow and develop in positive, healthy ways and to experience satisfaction and success.