**Family Dynamics**

Bahareh Jabbari; Audra S. Rouster.

[Author Information and Affiliations](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK560487/#__NBK560487_ai__)

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Family dynamics refers to **the patterns of interactions among relatives, their roles and relationships, and the various factors that shape their interactions.** Because family members rely on each other for emotional, physical, and economic support, they are one of the primary sources of relationship security or stress. Secure and supportive family relationships provide love, advice, and care, whereas stressful family relationships are burdened with arguments, constant critical feedback, and onerous demands.[[1]](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK560487/)

Interpersonal interactions among family members have lasting impacts and influence the development and well-being of an individual via psychosocial, behavioral, and physiological pathways.[[2]](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK560487/) Thus, family dynamics and the quality of family relationships can have either a positive or negative impact on health.

**Several factors can influence family dynamics. Some researchers have identified individuation, mutuality, flexibility, stability, clear communication, and role reciprocity as the primary factors contributing to healthy family dynamics**. In **particular, mutuality, meaning a shared feeling of cohesion and warmth, has been identified as the strongest contributing factor. In contrast, factors contributing to unhealthy family dynamics include enmeshment, isolation, rigidity, disorganization, unclear communication, and role conflict**.[[3]](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK560487/)

The definition of family itself has morphed over the years. **In previous generations, families stayed close to each other, and multiple generations helped raise the children.**

Extensive research has demonstrated the importance of family dynamics to health, illness, and recovery outcomes. However, there is little scholarly consensus on the exact definition of family and family dynamics. For example, several studies of patients receiving treatment for mental illness have defined family strictly as the patient’s parents.[4][5] Other studies investigating the role of family dynamics in recovery processes consider the patient’s current living situation, thereby including the spouse and children. Some studies define family loosely to include parents, siblings, extended family members, and children, while others do not define it at all.

**Family dynamics play a significant role in health outcomes and therefore, merit attention in clinical settings. Unhealthy family dynamics can cause children to experience trauma and stress as they grow up. This type of exposure, famously known as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), is linked to an increased risk of developing physical and mental health problems. Specifically, ACEs increase an individual’s risk of developing heart, lung, and liver disease, depression, anxiety, and more.[9] Unhealthy family dynamics also correlate with an increased risk of substance use and addiction among adolescents.[10] Role conflict between parents and adolescents, a contributing factor to poor family dynamics, is associated with adolescent aggression, whereas mutuality (cohesion and warmth) is shown to be a protective factor against aggressive behavior.[11]**

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to various traumatic events or circumstances affecting children before the age of 18. Such experiences include multiple types of abuse; neglect; violence between parents or caregivers; other kinds of serious household dysfunction such as alcohol and substance abuse; and peer, community and collective violence. This concept is increasingly recognized as a public health crisis and cumulative effects of these experiences lead to a wide range of deleterious physical and psychological outcomes (CDC, 2022).**

**Such adverse childhood experiences are common across all parts of societies (CDC, 2022). Traumatic events are experienced uniquely by each person, and their impacts will vary depending on the meaning attached to the experience and one’s resilient characteristics (SAMHSA, 2023). Childhood adversity is not typically an isolated event, and it can therefore create a web of experiences by which a child organizes an understanding of self, others, and the world (Bloom et al., 2014). Exposure to ACEs can stimulate distorted cognitive schemas, poor self-regulation capacities, and unhealthy attachment styles, all of which can contribute to risk for engaging in crime. Moreover, people who commit sex crimes perceive that there is a connection between their past trauma and sex offending (Grady et al., 2017).**