



Best Life Counseling

What Defines a Family as ‘Functional’?

Excerpted from Psych Central <https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2009/12/15/what-makes-a-family-functional-vs-dysfunctional/>

By Elvira G. Aletta, PhD

Elvira's qualities that describe a family that functions is a family that encourages and provides:

1. **RESPECT**

Respect is the Holy Grail of functional families. All people in the family – parents to children, brothers to sisters, fathers to mothers – are consistently respectful to one another. Respect for each others' time, needs, levels of capabilities, goals, perspectives, etc. Words such as “please” or “thank you” or “you’re welcome” or “I’m sorry” are heard often in a functional family.

2. **Emotionally Safe Environment**

All members of the family can state their opinions, thoughts, wants, dreams, desires and feelings without fear of being slammed, shamed, belittled or dismissed.

3. **Privacy**

Privacy of space, of body and of thought. This means each person knocks on the other's door and asks permission to enter, or being sensitive regarding personal space and aren't insulted if someone needs a wide berth. Respecting Privacy can also mean NOT planting a homing device on your kid or using cell phone tracking capabilities to know your child's whereabouts 24/7. (That's not much better than stalking.)

4. **Accountability**

Accountability means respectfully and reasonably informing people in the family of where you are and when you will be back, and then being where you said you would be, doing what you said you would be doing. This builds trust and prevents worry. This goes for both kids and parents.

5. **An Apology**

The ability to apologize means you are a big enough person to acknowledge your part in a dispute. How many times have you heard of rifts in families that last for years because someone feels they are “owed an apology?” Sometimes we say things we regret when in a heated debate or argument. The healthy family members can apologize to each other, forgive, and then move on. They may even become closer as a result.

6. **Reasonable Expression of Emotions**

In some households, children are not allowed to express the “unhappy” emotions such as anger or sadness. Most people have a range of emotions and they are meant to flow up and out. Therefore, rather than shut a child down, a child needs guidance in learning how to express an emotion in a respectful, non-aggressive and/or appropriate way. (This, of course, requires that the parent themselves knows how.)

7. Gentle on Teasing and Sarcasm

Teasing can be an expression of love, except when it isn't. When the person being teased is teased too often or doesn't agree with the teasing, it's crossed over into being hurtful.

Teasing and sarcasm should never involve personal attacks or criticism. Nicknames like "dunce" or "weakling" or "bucky beaver" are not teasing, they are attacks. If you would not like it said to you, then don't say it.

8. Don't Limit By Labeling

People change and grow and labeling someone "the smart one" or "the pretty one" doesn't allow them or others in the family to change and grow. A functional family lets people define themselves. Individual differences of all types are appreciated and celebrated.

9. Co-Parent as a Team

A functional family is one where the adults are at the center of the family, in charge and working together for the good of the whole family. Parents (whether divorced or married) share responsibility and tasks; they discuss issues and make a joint decision on how to handle things. Kids need the assurance that they are safe and protected, and parents who work together provide this safety.

10. Encourage Siblings to Work Together

Brothers and sisters have a unique relationship and it's a shame when it is not nourished. Functional parents encourage siblings to play, work and problem solve with each other, enhancing inter-sibling communication, and helping them negotiate arguments when they arise but not taking over the argument or leaving siblings to "work it out on their own". In this way, siblings grow up feeling they are partners not rivals.

11. Clear Boundaries & Expectations

A parent is a parent no matter how friendly he/she may be. Children are not extensions of the parent. Do not 'friend' your child on Facebook or stalk them on Instagram. Allow your child their space to be with friends; and maintain your space as the decision-making and direction provider. Allow your kids to make mistakes and be there to pick them up when they fall, not yell at them, laugh at them, or ignore them because they messed up.

12. Loyal & Supportive

Functional families are supportive but also respectful and honest in their feedback. Creating an "it's us against the world" family mentality can cause more harm than good. As well, facilitating an "every man for himself" environment is equally damaging. Children need to know they will be supported even when they stray. Doing this may allow your child to call you when he thinks he's in trouble rather than trying to handle a difficult situation on his own.

13. Follow the Golden Rule

It's a golden rule for a reason. "Do unto others as you wish were done to you."