

family education: can extension accept the challenge?

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A recent concept in the family development field has been the application of Systems Theory to families. Using Family Systems Theory has been effective and given much acclaim by family specialists. Extension educators offering family life programs need to be aware of the challenges posed by application of this theory. This article explains Family Systems Theory and its application in Extension programs.

Family Systems Theory

Systems Theory approaches an individual family member's "problem" by focusing on the relationship of the person and his/her family. For example, let's identify the problem family member as a youngster who runs away from home. On closer examination, it's found these behaviors occur when Mom and Dad argue over family finances. When these intense arguments start, the youngster will run away from home. This behavior makes the parents join forces again for the mutual concern of the family. Equilibrium returns to the family system as a result of the youngster's problem behavior.

When viewed from the systems approach, the problem family member is exhibiting symptoms of a problem family system. A family therapist working with such a family would counsel the entire family rather than the identified problem member individually. Using this systems approach, the therapist tries to get a holistic view of the family and identify the problems of the interdependent family system.

For illustration purposes, the family can be likened to a balloon. Using Family Systems Theory, if one family member demonstrates a behavior change, that change will affect the entire family system. What happens when you punch or put

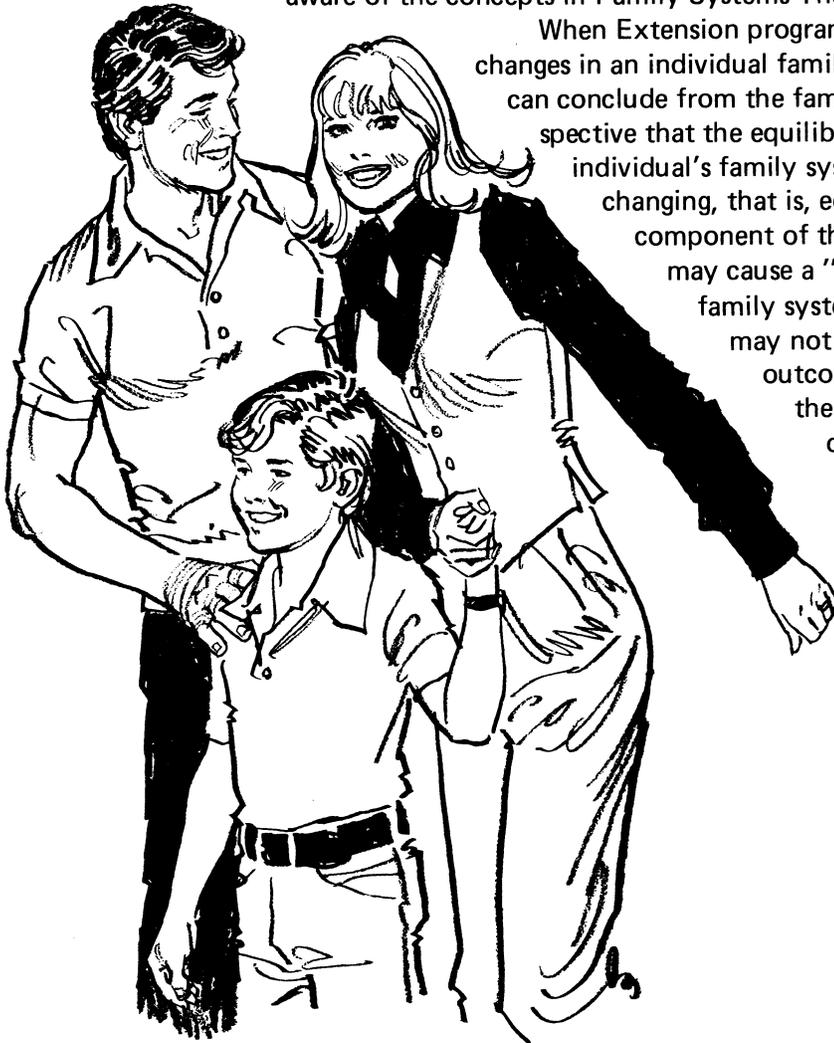
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an indentation in a balloon? A bulge occurs in another part of the balloon, the air inside readjusting to absorb the change. Using the runaway youngster illustration, if that youngster no longer acts as the vehicle to bring the parents together, it's likely that another family member will take on that role. The change in behavior (indentation in the balloon) can be felt within the family system (bulges in another part of the balloon).

**The Challenge:
Applying Family
Systems Theory**

In Extension education, the emphasis is on enrichment or preventive education, not on remedial concerns. However, in our education and evaluation efforts, Extension is looking for behavior changes that will positively influence the relationships within the family. Extension education typically works with *one* family member. Because of this, we need to be aware of the concepts in Family Systems Theory.

When Extension programs create behavior changes in an individual family member, we can conclude from the family system perspective that the equilibrium of that individual's family system may be changing, that is, educating one component of the family unit may cause a "bulge" in the family system. This change may not have the positive outcome desired by the family member or the Extension educator.



For example, let's look at the possible consequences of a series on assertiveness. The "Dorothy Doormat" individual in the class is unhappy with her submissive communication style and decides to communicate more assertively. Her first opportunity to practice her newly learned skills is in a conversation with her spouse about weekend plans. When she assertively states her feelings, her husband, who's accustomed to her acceptance of his plans, becomes upset and an argument follows. This may result in blocked communication and a general unloved feeling between the couple. However, it may later result in discussion of future weekend plans. The point is that when Extension educates one family member in a relationship skill, the behavior changes implemented can be felt by the entire system.

The change in the family system can also occur when working with 4-H and Youth programs. Let's assume, as the result of an energy program, the youth have been convinced to change their wasteful use of energy resources. At home, Dad has been watching TV and left the room for a moment. When he returns, he finds his son has turned off the TV and lights. He interprets this as a smart aleck trick his son has played on him and disciplines him accordingly. This also shows that by educating one member of the family, the whole family system is affected.

Family specialists have found success in using the systems approach. They realize the merits of developing programs to reach more than one family member. Extension educators need to respond to the challenge of family education.

The nature of our changing society warrants Extension helping families and individuals to live with the changes they experience in daily life. To adapt and survive these changes, a family and its members need to develop better interpersonal relationship skills. Extension programs can provide this training. Incorporating these skills will necessitate alternating the family's lifestyle and increasing the likelihood of the family system being disrupted.

It isn't the intent of this article to presume the family system should never be changed. When change is in a positive direction and elected by the family members, the stability of the family can be reestablished with a minimum of stress. If Extension educators truly want to be viewed as change agents, then the impact of change on the family as a system

needs to be considered. The educational programs offered in an area trying behavior changes need to reflect a knowledge of the possible consequences new behavior may have on the family as a system.

Programming Considerations

If Extension educators subscribe to the concepts of Systems Theory, there'll be a need for programming changes. The most obvious is offering family life education to total families. Carl Whitaker, a family therapist who insists on seeing the *whole* family (this sometimes includes the extended family), has said, "Looking back to individual therapy, I wonder how and if I changed anybody."

Extension educators offering classes in family relations to individual family members can ask themselves the same question. Historically, Extension programs haven't been attended by family units. In accepting Family Systems Theory, we need to think of more effective approaches to offering education for family units.

Team Approach

One barrier to total family education is a reluctance on the part of some men to attend family life programs taught by women. One solution is to team teach family relations programs with a male who has a compatible teaching philosophy. Possible individuals for team teaching could include other Extension educators, spouses, clergy, or individuals from human service agencies in the community. Teaching in this team manner would offer a less threatening experience to many men who would never consider attending a family life program presented by a woman. The use of such a team approach would present a more cohesive view of family life.

It will take effort to make changes in Extension family programming. Family life educators will need increased confidence and skills in this approach. To gain this skill and confidence, the support and encouragement of Extension subject-matter specialists will be necessary.

Total Family Education

Teaching techniques for total family education need to be developed. The education courses offered at universities need to emphasize skills in total family education. With family relations course work at universities and Extension subject-matter specialists both in tune to Family Systems Theory concepts, the Extension educator will be more comfortable and qualified to teach family relations to the whole family. The support of middle and top Extension administrators is also necessary before total family programs in Extension can become a reality. Extension administrators need to be aware

of Family Systems Theory and understand the philosophy behind offering total family programs.

Extension educators need to be aware that when individual family members attend a family life program that promotes behavior changes, there's a potential disruption to that individual's family. To help ensure that behavior changes are applied in a positive way, a portion of the program should include discussion on implementing the newly learned skills/knowledge. This discussion should stress the importance of sharing the skills with the family before they're put into effect. This would eliminate "hitting the family cold" with a new behavior. The individual could become the teacher of the skill/knowledge to the family unit.

Multiplier Effect

Extension has historically used the multiplier effect—the educator presents a lesson to 30 people who take the lesson to 300. This principle could be applied to helping the individual family member share or teach the skill to the family. Use of



this approach may illustrate that Extension programs are intended for the whole family and convince them that by attending the programs as a unit, they'll receive the education firsthand. The family's intention to incorporate the skills into the family system and its willingness to try the new skill for a given time may result in less disruption to the system.

To exemplify how this can be used, let's assume a mother is attending a program on parent education, which discusses use of a family council. The mother thinks this sounds like a good tool to increase communication in their family. She decides to try a meeting the next day. Previously, the father made all the decisions concerning family purchases. The entire family attends the meeting and all goes well until the daughter says it would be nice to have a plastic wading pool. The children and mother agree. Father feels threatened that his power is being usurped. To regain control, he vetoes the idea in a burst of fury and closes the meeting. The family members are confused by the father's behavior and feel unhappy.

A more effective approach would have the mother "teaching" the family the information she received at the program—the goal being to have the family agree to try the principles behind the family council concept. This would increase the likelihood of having a positive attitude toward the concept and improve its chances of being successful. When this approach is used to educate the family, the desired change in behavior could be achieved without the family experiencing unnecessary stress in the stability of their system.

Summary

Extension educators involved in family life education need to start implementing the concepts of Family Systems Theory. Three prerequisites to incorporating this theory into Extension education are: (1) understanding the family as a system, (2) teaching skills and techniques of family life education to whole families, and (3) making the impact of changed behavior on the family system clear to the individual learner.

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