

A GUIDELINE FOR FAMILIES

Functional and Dysfunctional our Present Day Mythology about Families

From StepWisdom, *Knowledge from the Ages for Successful Stepfamilies*,

By

Eleanor Spackman Alden, LCSW, BCD

“Functional” Families:

- 1) Support the growth of individuals without the inappropriate sacrifice of other members' goals. (Some personal sacrifice by members of a group is normal for the benefit of other individuals or the benefit of the whole system, as long as the sacrifices are understood, appreciated, and acknowledged appropriately.)
- 2) Are flexible, able to adapt to new changes and to external and internal stressors.
- 3) Have creative responses to problems; the family teaches its members to solve problems thoughtfully and empathically.
- 4) Are free of chemical and behavioral addictions.
- 5) Are violence free.
- 6) Have appropriate roles for mother, father, and children that are age appropriate.
- 7) Support relationships within the family and outside the family. (Families encourage friendships, hobbies, and activities that involve individual members of the family as well as the entire family.)
- 8) Cherish the cultural identity of family without intolerance of others who are different.
- 9) Support some form of spiritual or transpersonal ethic and awareness.
- 10) Encourage members in being creative, relational, and successful at achieving social and personal goals that serve community and society as a whole. In present-day Western culture, this usually means supporting educational successes and career goals.
- 11) Enjoy each other's company individually and as a group without splitting behaviors. (Not encouraging hostile or demeaning attitudes or behaviors toward others; this can include gossip, sharing confidences inappropriately, and connecting with one person at the expense of another's confidence and security or self-esteem.)
- 12) Act respectfully and with awareness of each other's needs and boundaries, respecting emotional and physical privacy and space.
- 13) Define emotions, thoughts, and behaviors as separate aspects of human awareness, which are expressed appropriately, with constructive behaviors.
- 14) Work happily and play well together.
- 15) Encourage and support intimacy rules:
 - a) Tell the microscopic material truth (truth that shares important information which, if withheld, results in behaviors that would be different if the truth were known.)
 - b) Feel your own feelings.
 - c) Keep your commitments.
- 16) Actively supports the individual and group commitment to physical, spiritual, intellectual, and psychological journeys.

“Dysfunctional” Families:

- 1) Do not acknowledge or address addictions to chemical substances, gambling, work, sex, spending, etc.
- 2) Use addictions or compulsive behaviors to mood alter and avoid genuine expression of feelings.
- 3) Use passive-aggressive communication.
- 4) Are plagued by violence: physical, verbal, or emotional abuse used to control.
- 5) Use fear- and shame-based control methods on each other.
- 6) Have inflexible and rigid rules, or chaotic or inappropriate rules and boundaries.

- 7) Have confusing rules, roles, and role reversals.
- 8) Use a merged sense of self that uses mind rape (someone insisting they know what you are feeling or thinking in an aggressive and uninvited way that causes pain.)
- 9) Are characterized by emotions expressed inappropriately (sexual, hostile, or feelings used to produce shame and guilt).
- 11) Are characterized by secrets: the more secrets, the more dysfunctional.
- 12) Are hostile to outsiders: relationships outside the family that support individual growth are taboo or discouraged.
- 13) Are intolerant of other cultures or one's own culture.
- 14) Are strictly authoritarian without earning respect or trust.
- 15) Have chaotic authority or no authority.
- 16) Are characterized by an inability to play well or work well together.
- 17) Have inappropriate rules around communication:
 - a) Don't feel or express unpleasant emotions.
 - b) Don't talk.
 - c) Don't trust.
- 18) Emotional or physical incest is present.
- 19) Have poor and inappropriate boundaries and role confusion.

Alden, Eleanor Spackman, *StepWisdom, Knowledge from the Ages for Successful StepFamilies*, Tucson: Wheatmark Publishing, 2010, pages 41 - 43.