15 Signs You Come From A Dysfunctional Family

1. It’s been years since your parents slept in the same bed.

2. Family vacations were rarely enjoyable and always full of fighting. In fact, some of the worst fights your family ever had were during vacation.

3. You’ve said something, or multiple things, to someone in your family and in retrospect, you’re ashamed of how hurtful they were. You regret that you’ll never be able to fully take them back.

4. When people tell you that you’re like your mom or dad, you get upset and hope that it isn’t true. In many ways—and it makes you sad to admit it—they’re exactly what you don’t want to be like when you’re older.

5. You long to be in supportive, loving, and monogamous romantic relationships, perhaps to compensate for the stability you lacked growing up.

6. You related to others who had dysfunctional families—people with drug addicts in their families, divorced parents, etc.

7. You rarely brought friends to your house growing up, because of the fighting going on, the cleanliness of the house, etc.

8. To a degree, your close friends feel like your family. You love being in tight-knit social groups: your guy friends feeling like your brothers, your girl friends feeling like your sisters, etc.

9. You felt envious of the friends of yours that had “good” families in which their parents were kind, chill, and supportive.

10. You became introverted and shy because of the constant conflict around you.

11. You seem to want and enjoy sex more than the average person.

12. You don’t want to live in the same city you grew up in.

13. You tried to get out of your house as much as you could, often to do “bad” things that you know your parents would have disapproved of.

14. It was hard for you to do drugs growing up because getting too high would make you think about your family and how fucked up it was, which might give you an anxiety attack.

15. You often think about how you’re not going to make the mistakes of your parents, that you’re going to marry someone you truly love, and that you’re going to be a great mom or dad to your kids—if, not when, you end up having them.

What Makes a Family Functional vs Dysfunctional?

The other day I was responding to someone who was dreading the holidays with her ‘dysfunctional family’ (her words). It got me thinking about that word, dysfunctional, and how it implies that there is an opposite, functional, family somewhere. What does that look like? Is it a Perfect Family? Some Stepford-like pod of people who never fight, are always neat and smiling? Yeesh! That sounds horrible. In fact it sounds downright dysfunctional!

So what is a functional family? How do we know if we have one? How would you define a functional family?

The study of family dynamics, [family therapy](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/family-therapy/MY00814) and treatment are complex and a whole field of psychology in itself. While I don’t have all the answers, I do have some thoughts. These impressions come as much from my experience as from education and training. No family is perfect, even the functioning ones. My family of origin was what I’d call dysfunctionally functional. From them I learned as much what *not* to do as the opposite. In my work with couples and counseling parents, I see what works and what doesn’t.

So here’s my personal list of qualities that make up a family that functions. It’s unscientific, but it’s a good place to start the discussion. Functional families encourage and provide:

**R-E-S-P-E-C-T**
Respect is the Holy Grail of functional families. All people in the family, brothers to sisters, mothers to fathers, parents to kids must be respectful as consistently as possible. Being considerate of each other is the tie that binds, even more than love. I think too much emphasis is put on love in general. I’ve heard of many atrocities done within families in the name of love but never in the name of respect. Just about all the things on the list come out of respect first.

**An 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.

**A Resilient Foundation.**
When relationships between and amongst people in a family are healthy they can withstand stress, even [trauma](https://blogs.psychcentral.com/mindfulness/2010/03/mindfulness-and-trauma-an-interview-with-john-briere-ph-d/), and, if not bounce back, at least recover. [Resilience](https://blogs.psychcentral.com/dbt/2010/05/building-resilience/) starts with encouraging sound health, eating and sleeping well, and physical activity.

**Privacy.**
Privacy of space, of body and of thought. Knock and ask permission to enter before going through a closed door. All family members are sensitive regarding personal space and aren’t insulted if someone needs a wide berth.

**Accountability.**
Being accountable is not the same as planting a homing device on your kid or abusing the cell phone to track her whereabouts 24/7. That’s not much better than stalking. No, being accountable is (again with the respect thing) respectfully and reasonably informing people in the family where you are and what you are doing so they can grow trust and not worry.

**An Apology.**
It’s sad when people hold out for an apology on a point of pride, never acknowledging their 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’?

A functional family will have conflict. It’s very cool when we can have an argument and get to the other side of it still friendly and satisfied with the outcome. But let’s face it, that’s not always the case. Sometimes we say things that we regret. If we can feel and show remorse for our part, quickly apologize, ask for and receive forgiveness, no harm is done. You may even become closer for it.

**Allow Reasonable Expression of Emotions.**
When I was growing up I wasn’t allowed to be angry at my parents and my father would walk out on me if I cried. I was determined to not do that to my kids. It hasn’t been easy. The main thing for me was to teach them to state their anger in a managed manner and to teach myself not to fly off the handle when they did. I had to learn that their telling me they weren’t happy with something I did or said could be done with respect. And, very importantly, vice versa.

**Gentle on Teasing and Sarcasm.**
Teasing can be OK as long as the teased is in on the joke. Same with sarcasm. A functional family won’t use either as a poorly masked put down.

**Allows People to Change and Grow.**
It used to be people in the family were labeled the smart one or the pretty one, the funny one or the shy one. While that’s not done so overtly any more, labeling is still something to watch. A functional family lets people define themselves. Individual differences are appreciated even celebrated. It also lets the kids become independent when it’s appropriate and come back to the safety of the family when they need nurturing.

The adults in the family need to be allowed to grow as well. A mother may want to get a graduate degree, or a father may decide to retire early and start something new. These changes merit discussion on how they will effect everyone in the family, adjustment, perhaps negotiation, but again, if done with respect every one can be satisfied.

**Parents Work as a Co-**[**Parenting**](https://psychcentral.com/lib/category/parenting/)**Team.**
I strongly believe that a functional family is one where the adults are at the center of the family, in charge and pulling together in the same direction. In a functional family parents, divorced or married, take responsibility. Kids need the assurance that a firm hand (not too tight and not too loose) is at the tiller, even if they may not thank you for it.

**Courtesy at Home First.**
An ounce of a well-placed ‘please’ or ‘thank you’, ‘you’re welcome’ or ‘I’m sorry’ is worth a pound of explanations, defensive arguments and misunderstandings.

**Encourages Siblings to Work Together.**
Brothers and sisters have a unique relationship and it’s a dead shame when it is not nourished. Functional parents encourage siblings to play, work and problem solve together, enhancing inter-sib communication, instead of interfering with their arguments. That way siblings feel empowered and their bond is closer when they find a solution by themselves.

**Provides Clear Boundaries.**
We aren’t each other’s friends. A parent is a parent no matter how friendly they may be. Our children are not extensions of ourselves, they are individuals. Do not ‘friend’ them on [Facebook](https://psychcentral.com/news/2010/04/23/new-college-addiction-social-media-facebook-or-friends/13108.html) unless you talk about it first and they say it’s OK *and they mean it.*

**Has Each Others’ Backs.**
Part of resilience – being supportive to each other no matter what, will allow your kid to call you when he thinks he’s in trouble, like needing a ride home from a party that’s gotten too wild.

**Get Each Other’s Sense of Humor.**
Functional families laugh a lot. They have ‘inside’ jokes and favorite stories, anecdotes of memories shared that delight and re-enforces a healthy bond.

**Eat Meals Together.**
So hard to do in today’s society but research does show that communication within a family is enhanced if we take more meals together, even if it’s in front of the TV.

**Follow The Golden Rule.**
It’s golden for a reason. “Treat each other as we wish to be treated in turn.” It was true way back when and it’s still true now.