



Promoting Successful  
Relationships with  
Families

# 8.2

## **SENSITIVITY TO FAMILY EXPERIENCE**

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**Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity**

**Open Families**

**Closed Families**

**Highly Structured Families**

**Unstructured Families**





## SENSITIVITY TO FAMILY EXPERIENCES

**A**s a Direct Support Provider (DSP) you will encounter a variety of families. Some will seem familiar to you and some will seem very different from your own experience of family. This is because each family has a "culture" of its own. In this section you will learn about the following:

- ◆ Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity
  - Open Families
  - Closed Families

- ◆ Highly Structured Families
- ◆ Unstructured Families

## CULTURAL AWARENESS AND SENSITIVITY

Culture is often thought of as the ideas, customs, food, art, and literature of a society or group of people. Culture can also refer to the organization and behaviour of a family.



Action

*When you work with a family you enter their world or culture. You bring your own beliefs, assumptions, and expectations for how a family should function. These are based on your experience with your own family. As a DSP you need to be aware of your own feelings about what you believe a family should be. **The key thing to remember is that your role is to support and not judge families.***

While it is true that each family you support will be unique, it may be helpful to examine a couple of general styles of family behavior.

### Open and Closed Families

When we refer to families as “open” or “closed” these are not judgments of families as good or bad. Both of these styles have the potential to form healthy families. The terms open and closed are used to help you understand why some families behave the way they do.

## OPEN FAMILIES

Some families have had very positive experiences with supports and human service systems. They, in fact, tend to look outside the family for some of the supports they need. These families tend to:

- ◆ Be welcoming and cooperative
- ◆ Want to partner with services and supports for the well-being of their family member
- ◆ Not see support as interference or a loss of control over the family
- ◆ Not create boundaries to support and assistance

### Working with Open Families

It is typically easier to establish cooperation and partnerships with families who are open to the idea of support. They want you there. However, a problem can occur if their expectations go beyond your responsibilities or job description. In these situations it is important that:

**Action**

- ➔ *You identify the kinds of support you can and cannot offer the family*
- ➔ *You communicate with the family in a calm and straight forward manner - to clarify expectations*

If you take these two actions you are likely to be successful in your support of this style of family.



## CLOSED FAMILIES

Not all families are “open” to having support providers involved in their lives. Some families maintain strong boundaries that limit the participation of “outsiders”. This is because:

- ① They may not want outside support or assistance with what they perceive to be a family issue
- ② One parent may want support and the other may not
- ③ Some families may have had challenging experiences with human services and outside supports in the past
- ④ They may view support as interference
- ⑤ They may be nervous about the presence of strangers within the family
- ⑥ They may be fearful that they are being judged

As a DSP you need to be sensitive to the reasons some family cultures are closed to the idea of support from outside the family:

### Working with Closed Families

If a family seems closed you need to proceed in a positive and assertive manner.

*Assertive does not mean being aggressive. Aggressive behavior is typically hostile, threatening, and insulting while assertive behavior is direct, honest, and clear.*

You can establish trust and build a partnership with the family by:

**Action**

- ➔ *Being Reliable - someone they can count on*
- ➔ *Being Trustworthy - someone they feel confidence in*
- ➔ *Being Respectful- someone they see as understanding and supportive*
- ➔ *Being Competent - someone who they experience as helpful*

If you take these actions you will increase the chances of playing a positive support role with the family.



**Final thoughts on Open and Closed Families**

Families actually move along a continuum from “open” to “closed”. They can and do change from one style to the other at different times in the family life-cycle. Most families are striving to adapt to the circumstances that surround them and are at times open and at other times more closed.

## HIGHLY STRUCTURED FAMILIES

Another way to think about family organization is as “unstructured” and “highly structured”.

### Remember

*When a family is described as highly structured or unstructured it is NOT meant as a judgment of the family. The description is used to help us think about how families organize themselves.*

**Highly structured** families tend to have clear roles for family members, set rules and routines, and clear expectations for how things will be done.

This style of family typically values:

- 1 Clarity around who will do what
- 2 Having agreed upon times when things will happen
- 3 Consistency and continuity

The challenge for highly structured families is adaptation to change. For instance, the family may have problems integrating new people and new roles into the life of the family. They may show a lack of interest in partnering with others to organize and deliver support. While they excel when routines are consistent and predictable they often have a more difficult time when there is a change in roles, schedules, or set patterns of family activity.

## Working with Highly Structured Families

The task for you as a DSP in this kind of a situation is to establish yourself as a member of the team. You can do this by being organized around things the family values, such as:



- ➔ *Being Reliable - Arrive on time for work and leave at an appointed time.*
- ➔ *Being Dependable - If you have to miss work make sure to call as soon as possible.*
- ➔ *Being Communicative - Share information with the family in a clear and organized manner.*

If you do your work in this way the family will see you as someone who shares their goals and you will be seen as an asset.

## UNSTRUCTURED FAMILIES

Unstructured family cultures tend to be organized very differently from highly structured family cultures. Some characteristics of this style of family are:

- ① Roles tend not to be set-in-stone
- ② Rules can change or differ depending who you talk to
- ③ Negotiation is valued over rules

These families tend to adapt well in situations where change occurs frequently. Unstructured family cultures tend to have less trouble integrating new people into the family, and have openness to new ideas and different ways of doing things



### Working With Unstructured Families

As a DSP your challenge with this style of family will be to work within the dynamics of the family and do an effective job of support. You will need to be consistent and maintain schedules and commitments.

This will require that you:

#### Action

- ➔ *Clarify your role as the service worker*
- ➔ *Model follow-through on the tasks you do*
- ➔ *Be very organized in how you do your work*
- ➔ *Communicate to the family that both planning and follow through are important*

In most cases your planning and organization will be highly valued and appreciated. If you follow the actions outlined above you will contribute to an improved quality of life for the person being supported and their family.

### So . . .

As a DSP you will work with many different family styles. These are styles that the families have developed over time.



➤ *There are no "good" or "bad" styles. All styles have the potential to create healthy families.*

*Families change as circumstances change. Families adapt to meet the challenges they face.*

➤ *You are not there to judge others. Your role as a DSP is to support the family.*

Try to think of each family as unique. The task for the DSP is to recognize and adapt to the style of the family you are working with.



## Individual Reflection:

- 1 Think about the various family cultures that have been presented in this section. These included Open and Closed, and Structured and Unstructured. Which style do you feel most closely resembles the family you come from?
- 2 Which type of family do you feel you would have the most difficulty working with?
- 3 What strategies do you feel will help you the most as you work with different styles of families?

**Resources:**

**Video: Understanding Families.** Concept Media Inc.: Irvine, California.

Features nationally known educator Ann Turnbull Ph. D. This video illustrates a systems approach to working with families. It discusses family characteristics, family interactions, family functions, and family life-cycle. The focus is on how support workers can empower families through positive attitude, sharing information, and partnership.

**Magazine: Families - The Family Support Magazine.** This is published by the New Jersey Developmental Disabilities Council. The website is [www.njdc.org](http://www.njdc.org). The magazine contains useful information on the kind and quality of support families need and desire.

**Website: Family Village.** The website is [www.familyvillage.wisc.edu](http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu). Information related to family, recreation, leisure, health, and daily living is available at this website.