RESEARCH FILE FOR
SP200 Interpersonal Communication

TOPIC #4: Intimate Relationships
Family Life Cycle

Topic 4: Intimate Relationships- Olson and McCubbin’s Family Life Cycle model was developed to quantify how family dynamics change over time and was broken down into 7 stages. Additionally, families have their own unique requirements of communication. (1) How did the researchers come up with these 7 stages (2) Describe and explain the 7 stages (3) Consider if this model works for all the different types of modern families (blended, divorced, single parent, etc.) (4) What are some unique communication challenges in families

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WORKS CITED

control. If a husband forgets to run an errand, his wife might explain it by telling herself, "He forgot because he is so overwhelmed at work right now. This isn't like him; generally, he's a thoughtful person."

In less satisfying marriages, partners tend to attribute negative things the other says and does to stable, enduring qualities that are within personal control. For example, a wife might think, "My husband didn't do the errand because he's a selfish person who never does anything to help me." Partners in unhappy marriages also tend to attribute positive thoughts and actions to unstable, external factors or to circumstances beyond personal control. To explain why her husband brought home flowers, a wife might think, "The florist must have had a sale."

A third key to marital satisfaction is emotions, which we discussed in detail in Chapter 7. As we saw in that chapter, emotions are affected by words and thoughts. How we feel is affected by what we say to others and what we communicate to ourselves through self-talk. For example, the attributions we make for our partners' behaviors affect how we feel about those behaviors. If a wife sees her husband's gift of flowers as evidence of his thoughtfulness and caring, she will feel closer to him than if she sees the flowers as something he bought because they were on sale.

Obviously, the words, thoughts, and actions that partners find satisfying depend on many factors, including couple type. For example, we would expect separate partners to communicate less than traditional partners. However, we would still expect that separates who are happy together and satisfied with their shared life would communicate supportively, make relationship-enhancing attributions, and feel positive about each other and the relationship.

Words, thoughts, and emotions affect each other in overlapping ways: What we feel affects how we communicate and how we think about ourselves, others, and our relationships. What we think influences how we feel and communicate. How we communicate shapes how we and our partners think and feel about relationships, ourselves, and each other.

The Family Life Cycle

Many families follow a general pattern of evolution. Figure 12.2 shows a widely accepted model of family development that includes seven stages in the life cycles of families (Olson & McCubbin, 1983). Although these stages are experienced by many families, they may not apply, for instance, to the developmental paths of many cohabiting, gay, and lesbian couples. Nor do all the stages apply to all heterosexual marriages. For example, a woman who chooses to have a baby and not to have a partner would not experience Stage 1. Couples who do not have children would not go through Stages 2, 3, 4, or 5 because raising and launching children would not be part of their relationship.

Stage 1: Establishing a Family

During this phase, a couple settles into marriage or a cohabiting relationship and works out expectations, interaction patterns, and daily routines for their shared life. Partners

![FIGURE 12.2](image-url)
get accustomed to living together. For couples who are married, spouses get used to the labels "wife" and "husband" and to the social and legal recognition of their union.

**Stage 2: Enlarging a Family**

A major change in many families’ lives is the addition of children. The transition to parenthood typically brings a whole array of joys, problems, challenges, and new constraints for the couple. It also introduces new roles. A woman becomes not only a wife or partner and probably a worker but also a mother. A man becomes not only a husband or partner and probably a worker but also a father.

Furthermore, children decrease the amount of couple time and change the focus of a couple’s communication. For most parents, children are a primary focus of conversation: “How are they doing?” “Which of us is taking Susie to the doctor tomorrow?” “When you had the conference with Bobby’s teacher, did she have any suggestions for dealing with his behavior problems?” “How do we save money for their college education?”

**STAN**  Just about everything in our lives changed when Dina was born. We had to sell our little two-door sports car because we couldn’t use Dina’s car seat in it. We used to enjoy a glass of wine before dinner, but now one of us fixes the dinner while the other feeds and bathes Dina. We used to sometimes decide on the spur of the moment to drive to the beach for a day trip, but now we either have to plan ahead and hire a babysitter or pack everything Dina will need, from diapers to food to toys. We’re both so tired from ragged sleep because Dina wakes up several times each night. When we go to bed, neither of us is interested in sex—sleep is far more appealing.

Stan’s reflection on becoming a parent is not unusual. Mari Clements and Howard Markman (1996) note that a baby can be both a bundle of joy and a home wrecker. A great deal of research shows that marital satisfaction declines after the birth of a child or children (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Clements & Markman, 1996; Cowan, Cowan, Heming, & Miller, 1991; Segrin & Flora, 2005). For many years, researchers assumed that the decline resulted from the presence of children and the demands they make. Yet, that may not be true.

A research team headed by Howard Markman (Markman, Clements, & Wright, 1991) followed 135 couples from engagement through 10 or more years of marriage. The team discovered that marital satisfaction declines after children arrive, which usually occurs after a few years of marriage. However, they also found that marital satisfaction declines after the first few years for couples who do not have children. In other words, after the first few married years, most couples experience a dip in marital satisfaction regardless of whether they have children.

Thus, the second stage of family life may be a time of adjusting expectations and experiencing some disappointments. It may also be that this period in family life is prone to a phenomenon known as pileup (Boss,
Stage 3: Developing a Family

Most parents invest a great deal of time, thought, and energy in raising their children. Children must be taught everything from potty training to table manners, and parents are the primary teachers. During preschool years, most parents also devote themselves to instilling values in their children. This phase in the lives of families with children is one of establishing the foundations of the children’s self-esteem, values, and lives.

Parent–child relationships are critical influences on children’s identities (Socha & Stamp, 2009; Socha & Yingling, 2010). Recall from Chapter 2 that attachment styles develop in a child’s first human relationship, which is usually with a parent, and that parent is more often the mother than the father. A consistently loving, attentive parent cultivates a secure attachment style in the child. Other attachment styles are fostered by other patterns of caregiving. Parents also shape children’s self-concepts through labels (“such a sweet little girl,” “such a big, strong boy”) and identity scripts that make it clear who children are and are supposed to be.

Consistent with our discussion of gendered speech communities in Chapter 4, mothers also tend to communicate more with children than fathers do. Mothers use talk to give information, advice, encouragement, and support to children (Segrin & Flora, 2005). Mothers also use communication to teach children about relating to others, building social connections, and becoming emotionally competent. Fathers’ communication with children focuses more on encouraging initiative, achievement, and independence (Luster & Okagaki, 2005; Poponen, 1996; Stacey, 1996).

The sex of children also affects parent–child communication. Fathers tend to talk more with daughters and to engage in shared activities with sons (Buerkel-Rothfuss, Fink, & Buerkel, 1995). Mothers tend to talk about emotions and relationships more with daughters than with sons (Galvin, 2006; Segrin & Flora, 2005). Because women as well as men talk more intimately with daughters than with sons, it’s not surprising that daughters disclose significantly more information to parents than sons do (Pennington & Turner, 2004).

Although fathers spend less time than mothers with children, today’s fathers are more active parents than fathers of previous generations. Today, college-educated mothers spend an average of 21.2 hours a week with children and mothers with less education spend an average of 15.9 hours a week.
Stage 4: Encouraging Independence

As children enter adolescence, they tend to seek greater autonomy. This is a natural part of their effort to establish identities distinct from those of their parents. Most adolescents don't want to develop interests independent of their families and want to pursue them with peers. Often, this stage involves some tension between parents and children. Parents may feel hurt by the children's disinterest in being with them and with the family. Also, parents may not approve of some of their children's interests, activities, and friends. Children may feel that parents are overly protective or intrusive.

For children, this is a very important phase in personal development. They are learning to be less dependent on their families, which is essential to becoming a healthy adult. Ideally, parents realize that their children need to try their wings, and the parents encourage progressive independence—while keeping a watchful eye.

Communication in Everyday Life

**Date Night**

It's easy for romance to diminish after years of marriage—jobs, housework, raising children, and familiarity all take a toll on passion. Long-term partners often fall into communication that centers on the logistics of maintaining home and family. Michelle and Barack Obama embodied an alternative when they went out on a date night in June of 2009. Just the two of them. Many long-married partners say they barely keep up with taking care of work and coordinating about children. There is no way, they say, that they could fit in a date night (Hoffman, 2009). But the president and First Lady both keep jammed schedules. If they can make time for date night.

**MAGGIE** After Annie arrived, Rick and I decided we wanted to attend a parenting class. It was really helpful in preparing us for the stages Annie would go through. But one thing that the teacher emphasized was that our primary job as parents was to "prepare your children not to need you." Those were her exact words. I still remember them. It just crushed me to think my job was to prepare our baby not to need me, but I knew that was good advice. Hard but good.
Social media play a complex role in children's differentiation from parents. On the one hand, social media make it very easy for adolescents to stay in minute-by-minute touch with peers. Yet, those same media make it easy for adolescents to stay in touch with parents. Sherry Turkle (2008), a psychologist who directs the Initiative on Technology and the Self at MIT, notes that some teenagers text their mothers 15 times a day, asking their moms' opinions on shoes they are thinking about buying, course registration, and so forth. That makes it harder for adolescents to separate from parents (Hafner, 2009).

Stage 5: Launching Children

Launching is a time of vital change for most families. Children leave home to go to college, marry, or live on their own. When the last child leaves home, parents, who for 18 years or more have centered their lives around children, now find themselves a couple again. For parents, this can be an abrupt change. For instance, if there is only one child (or twins or triplets) in the family, when that child leaves, the parents become a couple. For parents who have more than one child, the children tend to leave home at different times, so the adjustment to being a couple again may be more gradual.

For the children, who are now young adults, this is a time of increased independence and self-discovery. As they live on their own or with peers, they begin to discover all sorts of things about themselves: what they don't know how to do because their parents did it for them when they lived at home; what time they like to eat dinner, a time formerly set by their parents in the home; and how much emotional support they can provide for themselves.

**MARK** When you have a child with special needs, the launching phase doesn't happen. We'll never have an empty nest, because Josh will never be able to live on his own. When he was born, we thought he was the most perfect baby in the world. By the time he was 1, we knew he wasn't, knew something was wrong. He is brain-damaged and somewhat autistic. He's 32 and still lives in our home. I retired last year, but our nest isn't empty.

Mark makes a good point. Some parents never experience the so-called empty nest. Although some special needs children are able to live relatively independent lives, many are not. In addition to having a child with special needs, parents may feel responsible for raising grandchildren or for letting their children live at home if they are unable to support themselves.

The recession that began in 2008 made it very difficult for new college graduates to find jobs. Often called "boomerang children," they often return to parents' home for financial reasons: high debt, a need to save money, or inability to find a job. When adult children move in with parents, family roles have to be renegotiated (Vogl-Bauer, 2009). Unlike when they lived at home earlier, the adult children have become accustomed to freedom from parental rules and supervision. Parents, too, may have come to enjoy greater space and freedom that comes with not having children in the home. Individual families have to figure out logistical issues and how financial responsibilities and contributions to the household will be managed. If the boomerang children have their own children, that adds to the complexity of family dynamics. Mark's reflection also reminds us that the stage model of family life cycles doesn't describe all families. Tracy makes the same point with her story.

**TRACY** It would be a real challenge to try to fit my family into the model of the family life cycle. My parents divorced when I was 6 years old. My sister and I lived with Mom until we went to college, her 4 years ago and me 2 years ago. Then, Mom started seeing this man who transferred to our town. He was a widower with 3-year-old twin boys. Last year, they got married, so my family is in the post launching and developing-a-family phases!
Stage 6: Postlaunching of Children

After the departure of children from the home, partners have to redefine their marriage. This period, often called the "empty nest," can be a time of lower satisfaction between partners if the couple is out of practice in engaging each other outside of their roles as parents. The partners have more time for each other, but that may be a blessing, a curse, or both.

For some couples, this is a time of renewed love—a second honeymoon—as they enjoy being able to focus on their paired relationship and not having to plan around children’s schedules. Many couples find the "empty nest years" the happiest in their marriages because there are fewer stresses and more couple time (Parker-Pope, 2009; Scarf, 2008).

For other couples, the absence of children makes obvious the distance that has arisen between them, and dissatisfaction grows. Children can often be the glue that holds couples together: Some couples divorce after the last child has left home. Gretchen points out that many partners find that they have to relearn how to be together with just each other and how to enjoy activities that don’t involve their children.

GRETCHEN When our last child left home for college, Brant and I realized how little we had in common as a couple. We’d centered our lives around the three children and family activities. Without any of them in the home anymore, it was like Brant and I didn’t know what to do with each other. At first, it was really awkward. If we weren’t Christians, maybe we would have divorced, but both of us feel marriage is forever. That meant we had to rediscover each other. We went to a weekend workshop sponsored by our church. It was called "Rediscovering Love in Your Marriage." That workshop got us started in finding our way back to each other.

Stage 7: Retirement

Retirement brings about further changes in family life. Like other changes, those ushered in by retirement can be positive or negative. For many people, retirement is a time to do what they want instead of focusing on earning a living. Many people who retire are still highly active, often volunteering in community groups, traveling, and taking up new hobbies or interests. Fran Dickson (1995) reports that people who are happy in long-lasting marriages tend to find pleasure in each other’s presence and enjoy the luxury of having more time to be together.

For other people, retirement may evoke feelings of boredom and lack of productivity. Individuals whose identity is strongly tied to their work may feel unanchored when they retire. Naturally, this discontent can foster tension in the marriage.
Rosemary Blieszner (2000) reports that friendships in later life are very much like those in earlier life: They are important sources of emotional and instrumental support and personal growth. For many older people, friendships are a central priority and a primary way to spend their time.

**STUART** I looked forward to retiring for years, and I finally did it 2 years ago. For about 6 months, it was everything I had dreamed of—sleeping as late as I wanted, no pressures or deadlines, golfing anytime I felt like it. Then, I got kind of bored with nothing I had to do and nobody who was counting on me for ideas or work. Every day seemed like every other day—long and empty. You can only sleep and golf for so long.

**HOWARD** I retired 4 years ago, and the last 4 years have been the best years of my life! I'd always loved woodworking, but I had little time for it when I was punching the time clock. Now, I can spend as much time as I want working in my shop. I've even started selling things at the local co-op. When I was working, I always felt guilty that I didn't give anything back through civic or volunteer work. Now, I have time to contribute to my community—the Lions Club is my main volunteer activity. We raise a lot of money to help people who have vision problems and other kinds of things where they need some help. My life is more satisfying now than it has ever been.

During retirement years, the family may grow again, this time through the addition of grandchildren (Mares, 1995). Grandchildren can be welcome new members of the family who provide interest and an additional focus for grandparents' lives. The coming of grandchildren may also foster new kinds of connection and communication as grandparents talk with their children about raising grandchildren and as they interact with children for whom they don't have primary responsibility.

As we noted when introducing this discussion of family life cycle, the model doesn't apply to all families. Mark and Tracy wrote of their family experiences, which do not fit well into the sequence of stages in the generic model of the family life cycle. This is another reminder of how diverse families are in our era: No single model represents all of them.

**Guidelines for Effective Communication in Families**

Throughout this chapter, we've noted how varied families are: They come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. For that reason, families face different challenges and find different ways to meet them. Despite this diversity, four guidelines apply to effective communication in most, if not all, families.