

Open and Closed Families

Families range between being "Open" and "Closed" families. Families that are closed and who isolate themselves from society create an environment that could be termed as "psychological incest." In this type of family, children are unable to evaluate their parents in a contrast to other families. This occurs especially when parents both agree on their philosophy to their children. Children do not learn or perceive differences and may follow blindly whatever their parents teach them. Idiosyncrasy becomes extreme in isolation.

When families are open, children are able to learn about other families and other lifestyles. They are able to evaluate what they think is appropriate in society. Extended families are important.

Families can be too open when their boundaries are blurred and individuals within the family are always changing and a sense of stability is lost.

On a scale of 1-10, (1 being isolated, 10 being too open, and 5-6 favorable), evaluate the openness or closeness of:

Your family:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Partner's Family:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

What I want for my family:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Partner:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Together:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Plans to incorporate:

Boundary Maintenance Questionnaire

In the questionnaire below think of the relationships you currently have and those you have most recently had with family, friends, and associates. Select T=True or F=False for each item. Look at the scoring key only after you have finished the questionnaire.

1. T/F I am honest most of the time in my relationships
2. T/F If ever I am embarrassed by someone, I let that person know
3. T/F I am aware of my wants and needs in my relationships
4. T/F I often communicate my wants and needs to others
5. T/F I am a person of equal worth to most with whom I interact
6. T/F If my parents get overly personal I let them know it
7. T/F I know what I want in life and I pursue it
8. T/F When I interact, I weigh the needs of others against my own needs
9. T/F I usually accept compliments when given to me
10. T/F I greet the challenges of most days with a positive outlook
11. T/F I enjoy communicating with others
12. T/F I often assert myself when it is appropriate
13. T/F I am in tune with my feelings and act accordingly
14. T/F When something bothers me I talk about it with those involved
15. T/F People understand me
16. T/F I know what I want in life
17. T/F I am comfortable communicating with most people
18. T/F I am aware of my skills, abilities, and talents
19. T/F I stop to negotiate when I feel I'm giving too much in the relationship
20. T/F I am just as valuable as my dates, spouse, partner, or significant other
21. T/F Sometimes I will focus on the needs of others before mine if the circumstances call for it
22. T/F I get a lot out of my relationships
23. T/F I don't let others control and manipulate me
24. T/F I might be sad if I lost certain relationships but I would eventually get over it
25. T/F Others appreciate me and value my relationship with them
26. T/F I let no one touch me in ways I am not comfortable with
27. T/F Most people who know me respect me
28. T/F I usually don't pretend that the relationship is going well if it isn't
29. T/F I will offer criticism at times to others
30. T/F If someone tells me to "back off " I usually do

Scoring Key: Give yourself 1 point for each true answer. Thirty points are possible. Higher scores indicate healthy boundary maintenance in your relationships.

Do the findings from this assessment accurately reflect you, your expectations, and your life experience? Why?

My House, My Boundaries

Understanding Boundaries in Family Systems Theory Using the “My House” Metaphor

“Boundaries” is a concept used in human relationships and family systems which are basically defined as: “emotional, psychological, or physical separateness between individuals, roles, and subsystems in the family.” Social scientists have known for years that boundary maintenance is important for healthy relationships. From the Family Systems perspective we learn that family subsystems need to be maintained properly so that the overall family system functions properly. It is also important that interpersonal boundaries be maintained. But how exactly does one maintain them in our families which tend to be diverse and complex? One answer is to use the house paradigm of personal boundaries. Think of yourself as having a personal house which exists in the suburbs of your many relationships. We put locks and latches on our real house doors and windows to keep intruders out. This paradigm will teach you how to put relationship locks and latches on our personal house so that only those you choose to invite into your house will be allowed in and at a level of interaction that you are comfortable with.

Each of us has the responsibility of taking charge of our own house. That means we choose which people we invite in, when they are invited in, and which level of closeness in our house we allow them to share with us. We also have the responsibility of ensuring that we don't violate others' house boundaries. (*Look at the floor plan on next page*). Think of it in terms of varying levels of intimate or personal interaction with others. The gate is the most superficial level of interaction; whereas the bedroom is the deepest level. Let's consider each part of the house and its level of intimacy. The **Gate** is where we typically interact with strangers. We say “hello, hi, how's it goin'?” We often don't really want to have the person respond. These are simply polite greetings we use with people we don't know. The **Porch & Entry Way** is for people you are getting to know better, say another student you sit next to in class. You might begin to share personal information about: your name, where you are from, or your major. At these levels you rarely share extremely personal information. That is reserved for people you have known for a long time and already trust.

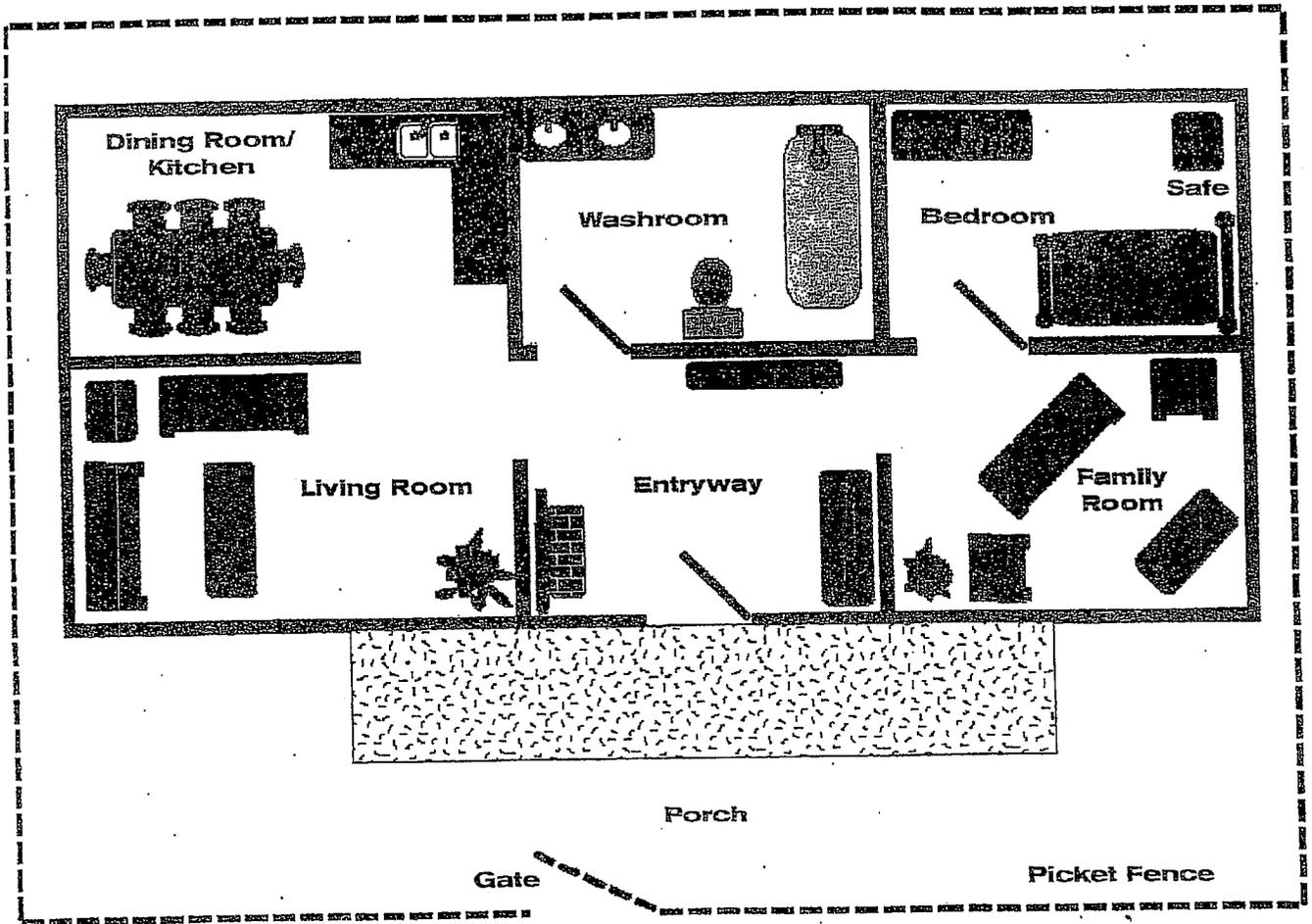
Let's say that after a few weeks of school, you form a study group including the classmate you previously introduced yourself to. After a few tests and projects, you find that everyone in the study group has been sharing personal information. This might include information about your family, career aspirations, struggles with your parents, and the like. You are now interacting at the **Living Room** level in your house. You share information but are still guarded about the more vulnerable things about yourself. In the **Kitchen** you share more personal information. This you might do with someone you are going steady with, dating, or feel very close to. In this level of interacting, you have deeply established trust and can share your fears, concerns, weaknesses, and hopes with someone in conversation. In the kitchen, confidences are kept. Each knows and respects this fact. The kitchen is often the deepest level of intimacy outside of marriage, cohabitation, or long-term commitments. The **Bedroom** represents the level of intimacy that spouses and partners experience. Here a person expresses intimacy at the most intimate level. You can think of the bedroom as representing a haven where physical and emotional intimacy can flourish. In the bedroom we are seen by our partner in our “naked” form. This implies that we are our “true naked self” here. In other words, our spouse or partner accepts us and interacts with us

knowing our less apparent flaws. But even for couples, boundaries must be maintained. Each of us has a **Safe**. Our safe represents the most intimate, vulnerable, and personal part of who we are. We rarely open it, even for our spouse or partner. When we do open it we must train our significant other to treat its contents with the utmost in respect and dignity. This takes practice, time, and lots of forgiveness for couples to achieve. Only we know the combination to our safe and we choose when to open and close it. You will notice that the bedroom can be attached to another bedroom. You and your spouse or partner each have your own house and each interact in each other's bedroom simultaneously.

Often newlyweds have the challenge of removing extended family members from the bedroom level (especially parents). We have heard horror stories of parents interfering with their married children's relationship by: giving unsolicited financial, sexual, and/or contraceptive advice; setting up financial deals which keep the children indebted to them; and over involving their married children in their family so that their children have to struggle to establish their own marriage traditions and customs. Couples sometimes have to be extremely diligent in removing the parents or other offenders from their bedroom issues. If this is the case for you keep in mind that in the long run, it will be worth it. Relationships tend to be healthier and people tend to be happier when boundaries are maintained. The other two rooms represent unique concepts in this paradigm.

The **Washroom** represents a place where you can clean up the messes people sometimes bring into your house. For example, sometimes parents get too personal with their newly married children and can be offensive at times. After you and your spouse or partner remove them to the level of interacting you are comfortable with, you can symbolically wash their muddy footprints out of your rug, forgive, and get on with things. The **Family Room** represents the level of interacting that is appropriate to the family but not necessarily to others outside of the family system. Family jokes, stories, traditions, and other appropriate interactions occur in this room.

As was mentioned before, you are responsible for maintaining the level of interaction in your house. You should interact at levels that you define as comfortable and appropriate for you. Many in our society are conditioned not to respect boundaries and most who don't are not even aware of why it is such an unhealthy practice. There are numerous methods you can use to either remove an intruder from rooms in your house or to remove yourself if you are invited into someone else's house at a level you are not comfortable with. First, you might distract the other person by changing the subject or talking to another person in the room. Second, you might confront the person about the level of intimacy he or she is interacting on and why you are uncomfortable with it. Third, you might also consider harshly confronting the other person (the sooner the better in most relationships) or if your previous efforts appear to have brought little change in the relationship. You are the very best judge of specifically how to maintain your personal boundaries. Keep in mind that this paradigm is based on the belief that personal boundary maintenance is really about interacting with others based on your true feelings, needs, and wants. It is not about controlling others. It is about self-control and to a large degree honesty with our self. We have included a worksheet to assist you in thinking through those strategies you might employ for specific people. We have given you an example of a generic floor plan of the house (you would do best to draw your own).



Boundary Maintenance Worksheet

Sketch the floor plan of your intimacy house and yard or use the one I've provided for you. Your house should include everything in the list below. Remember, this is **your** house. **You** hold and control all of the keys, latches, and combinations.

Components of House:

Level of Intimacy

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| ▶ Fence with a gate | Low |
| ▶ Porch with front door to house | |
| ▶ Entry way/Foyer | |
| ▶ Living room | |
| ▶ Dining room/kitchen | Moderate |
| ▶ Family Room | |
| ▶ Bathroom/washroom | |
| ▶ Connecting garage with spouse's house (if applicable) | |
| ▶ Bedroom with locking door/windows | |
| ▶ Safe with combination lock in the bedroom | High |

Now that you have your house and yard planned out, map out which relationships are appropriate in which place or level. For example, you might complete the phrase:

_____ (Name of person) is my _____ (Relationship to you). I am comfortable with him/her interacting with me in the _____ (List room or level you feel is appropriate).

_____ (Name of person) is my _____ (Relationship to you). He/she is often interacting with me in the _____ (List room or level) when I do not want them there. I will remove him/her to the _____ (List room or level) by closing and locking my windows and doors until they are at the level I am comfortable with.

_____ (Name of person) is my _____ (Relationship to you). He/she often stains or muddies the carpets in my _____ (List room or level). I will do the following in order to negotiate how I believe they should act in my house:

_____ (Name of person) is my _____ (Relationship to you). He/she often stays in my _____ (List room or level). I would like him/her to move into the _____ (List room or level). I will do the following in order to invite them to feel comfortable there:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.