

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