Family Communication

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I. Overview of Family Communication

While family professionals have maintained that communication is a very critical aspect of healthy family relationships, there have been few scales that have been developed to assess family communication. In the mid-eighties, Howard Barnes and David Olson (1985) developed the Parent-Adolescent Communication scale which had separate scales for the parents and adolescents. Considerable research has been done with this 20 item scale (see list of published articles at the end of this paper), but there has been interest in a shorter scale for both research and counseling. This paper describes the revised 10 item Family Communication scale that is based on the longer 20 item version.

A. Conceptual Definition

Family communication is defined as the act of making information, ideas, thoughts and feelings known among members of a family unit. Family communication can range from poor to very effective.

B. Theoretical Foundation of the Concept

Communication is generally accepted as one of the most crucial facets of interpersonal relationships. Its prominence in theoretical construction of human and family interactions attests to the great importance attributed to the role of communication. Various researchers and theorists examining the concept of family have had communication at the core of their work.

Olson, Russell, and Sprengle (1980) have developed a theoretical model of marital and family systems known as the Circumplex Model. Although this systems model focuses on the dimensions of family cohesion and family adaptability, communication is crucial component of the model. They hypothesized that effective communication facilitates movement to, and maintenance of systems at the desired (balanced) level of adaptability and cohesion.

One of the most detailed elaborations of the role of communication in human interactions is the classic book, Pragmatics of Human Communication (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967). They defined a family as a rule-governed system whose members are continually in the process of negotiating or defining the nature of their relationship.
Despite the widely acclaimed importance of communication to family relationships found in the writings of theoreticians and researchers alike, research into the nature of family communication presents some challenging difficulties. One of the main difficulties is the complexity of family communication which presents a wide variety of aspects upon which researchers might focus.

Hypotheses:

(1) Family communication will have a positive relationship to Balanced family systems and a negative relationship with Unbalanced family systems. More specifically: Balanced family systems will have significantly better family communication than Unbalanced family systems.

(2) Family communication will have a positive relationship to Family Satisfaction. More specifically: Families high in family communication will have significantly greater family satisfaction than those low in communication.

II. Review of Literature

The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PAC) upon which the Family Communication Scale (FCS) is based has been used in a multitude of family studies. A complete review of these works is beyond the scope of this manual but a brief review of some of the populations with which the scale has been used will be offered to familiarize the reader with some of the literature. See the reference list at the back of this paper.

One study used the PAC to study the families of pregnant teenagers. Ayoob (1990) used the PAC to examine the communication patterns of 100 African American mother only families. Fifty of these families had a pregnant teen and fifty had a never pregnant adolescent. The mothers and daughters in the families where the adolescent had never been pregnant scored significantly higher on the PAC (more positive on communication) than did the mother-daughter dyads where the daughter was pregnant.

Two studies have examined the relationship between family communication and sex education/disclosure in families with an adolescent using the PAC. Baldwin & Baranoski (1990) studied 96 adolescents and 106 of their parents and found that families with more open communication report significantly more sex education within the home. Papini, Farmer & Clark (1990) had similar findings in concluding that openness in communication contributes significantly to sexual disclosure to parents by adolescents.

Hamill and Goldberg (1987) and Weil (1994) both used the PAC to examine the relationship between family communication and the development of individual identity by adolescents. Weil found no significant relationship between family communication and the development of adolescent identity in 97 female college freshman. However Hamill and Goldberg did find a significant relationship in that more autonomous sons reported better communication with their mothers and fathers perceived better communication with sons who were more autonomous.

The PAC has also been used to study families of alcoholics (Cook, 1991), families with high and low academic achieving adolescents (Bhusan, 1989), families with adolescents classified as “problem” Masselam (1989), stepfamilies (Pink & Wampler, 1985), families...
classified as “clinical” (Thomas & Olson, 1990), and families with a suicidal adolescent (Zawaki, 1992). In all cases, better communication was associated with more positive outcomes in the adolescents.

III. Empirical Foundation of Family Communication

As stated above the Family Communication Scale is based on the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale. The PAC is a 20 item scale developed to measure communication in families with an adolescent. The FCS is a shorter 10 item scale which can be used with a variety of family forms and families at various life cycle stages.

A. Validity of Family Communication Scale

In the original development of the PAC 35 items formed the initial item pool. The 35 items were tested on a pilot sample of 433 subjects. The subjects were asked to rate the degree to which they felt the individual items were descriptive of their family. Factor analysis of the data collected in this study yielded three factors: openness, problems, and selectivity.

In the final 20 item version of the PAC there are two subscales, which were called Open Family Communication and Problems in Family Communication. The third factor of Selectivity discussed above was included within the Problem subscale and the Selectivity items loaded in the same second factor with the Problem items when the factor analysis was restricted to two factors.

The Open Family Communication subscale measured the more positive aspects of family communication with a focus on a free flowing exchange of information both factual and emotional. This subscale assesses the degree to which family members feel unconstrained and satisfied with the communication in their family. The second subscale is Problems in family Communication and assessed the degree to which negative aspects of communication such as hesitancy to share, negative styles of interaction and selectivity in what is shared are present in the family system.

After reviewing the results from numerous studies, the results demonstrated that the first factor was most predictive statistically. Also, there was interest in a shorter scale that was more generic. As a result, the Family Communication scale was created.

B. Reliability of Family Communication Scale

The internal consistency reliability of the scale is .90 based on a national sample of 2,465 individuals and test re-test of .86.

C. Mean and Standard Deviation of Scale

The mean score for family communication is 36.2 and the standard deviation is 9.0 based on a sample of 2,465 individuals.
D. Scoring of the Family Communication Scale:
1. Add all items of the Family Communication scale.
2. The sum of these items is the total score.
3. The range of scores is from 10-50.

### Family Communication: Interpretation of Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage and Levels</th>
<th>Family Communication</th>
<th>Raw</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Very High</strong></td>
<td>Family members feel very positive about the quality and quantity of their family communication.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>99</td>
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<tr>
<td>86-99%</td>
<td></td>
<td>49</td>
<td>97</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>48</td>
<td>96</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High</strong></td>
<td>Family members feel good about their family communication and have few concerns.</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>83</td>
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<td>70-83%</td>
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<td>42</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Moderate</strong></td>
<td>Family members feel generally good about their family communication, but have some concerns.</td>
<td>39</td>
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<td>50-65%</td>
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<td>61</td>
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<td></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
<td>Family members have several concerns about the quality of their family communication.</td>
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<td>44</td>
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<td>24-44%</td>
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<td>34</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Very Low</strong></td>
<td>Family members have many concerns about the quality of their family communication.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>10-20%</td>
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Family Communication Scale

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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Generally Disagree</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>Generally Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Family members are satisfied with how they communicate with each other.
2. Family members are very good listeners.
3. Family members express affection to each other.
4. Family members are able to ask each other for what they want.
5. Family members can calmly discuss problems with each other.
6. Family members discuss their ideas and beliefs with each other.
7. When family members ask questions of each other, they get honest answers.
8. Family members try to understand each other’s feelings.
9. When angry, family members seldom say negative things about each other.
10. Family members express their true feelings to each other.
Published Articles on Parent-Adolescent Scale


