

# Issues vs. Patterns

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how there are a variety of sources that can cause conflict within a family; sometimes the conflict is over a single issue, and other times it is the result of a larger pattern of events. The particular areas of focus include:

1. Family Relationships and Norms
2. The Family as a System
3. Issues vs. Patterns in Conflict

## 1. Family Relationships and Norms

Family relationships are long-term, and have the tendency to be intense. One factor that has a large influence on family relationships is the set of norms to which a family adheres.

The **cultural norms** that people grow up with influence what they think is proper or correct behavior.

Likewise, individual families have their own ideas about what familial relationships should be like and how the family should function as a group.

Naturally, these norms can differ from family to family, and they can exist around a variety of different traditions or practices, such as the how the family celebrates birthdays or holidays or how the members of the family communicate with one another.

➞ **EXAMPLE** While one family may always have big holiday celebrations, another family may not place such a high value on those celebrations. Similarly, members of one family may constantly be in touch with one another, but members of another family might not communicate with for months on end, and that's just considered normal within that family. These differences can also occur over whether a family prefers more direct communication, or more indirect communication.

These differences in cultural norms are based on the assumptions/beliefs of each individual family; a family's beliefs can also influence roles.

The particular role a person plays in a family will differ depending on what that family thinks is "right" or appropriate for that person.



## TERM TO KNOW

## Cultural Norm

The variety of behaviors and perceptions considered "right", "true" or "proper" by a culture.

---

# 2. The Family as a System

When a family member violates one of the family's norms, that behavior is likely going to shake up the family.

This is because a family is a **system** made up of individual components. Each component in a system behaves in a particular way, and if one component changes the way it behaves, this causes a ripple effect throughout the entire system.

In terms of families, a change in one family member's behavior will likely have an effect on the entire family unit.

The **ripple effect** can also occur when a change, such as a birth, death, or other event, occurs within the system.

## IN CONTEXT

Terry and Neil are the children within a family. Terry has always done well academically; he gets good grades in all of his classes at school. Neil has a learning disability that he was born with, and school is a bit more difficult for him. One day, Neil and Terry's parents get a call from the school about Terry skipping class.

This causes a conflict between Terry and his parents. When Terry's father confronts him about skipping class, Terry says, "I just wanted to go to the mall with my friends. I have a right to do that if I want." Terry's father argues, "You can't just skip class and go to the mall. You're going to start getting worse grades, and then you're going to fail your classes."

Clearly Terry skipping class is the issue, but this issue may be the result of another pattern that's causing the conflict. Let's say that Terry and his parents sit down in a conflict resolution process; as they begin to talk, they discover that Terry is feeling left out and ignored because Neil is getting a lot of attention.

The parents are paying a lot of attention to Neil because he needs assistance with his schoolwork. Terry acted out by skipping class because his real interests lie in getting attention from his parents. He didn't necessarily want to go to the mall; he just wanted his parents to notice him. The pattern here is that Terry feels that because he's always done so well, he doesn't get extra attention from his parents; he thinks that if he acts out a little bit, he'll get the same amount of attention as his brother.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### System

A set of components whose behaviors affect one another causing a sequence of related events leading towards an outcome.

## Ripple Effect

A means of describing how a change to a system creates alterations of behavior or relationships throughout the system as a whole.

---

# 3. Issues vs. Patterns in Conflict

As you know, a conflict can emerge from violating a norm, and that conflict will affect the entire system.

When looking at a conflict, it's important to distinguish whether the dispute resulted from an individual issue or from a larger pattern.

An issue is just a single event that happens once, but a pattern is a series of events that happens over time.

➡ **EXAMPLE** Say you don't show up to a family gathering over the holidays, and this upsets your family because you have always come home for this event in the past. When your family asks you about it, you say, "I was just really busy. I'm sorry I couldn't make it. Maybe next time." The issue is that you missed this event; you said you were going to come, and then you cancelled at the last minute. But perhaps being busy isn't the real reason you cancelled; there's an underlying pattern here instead.

After some more discussion, you share that you don't like coming home because your mother and father inevitably start arguing. There's always some fighting that goes on, and you just didn't want to be part of it. Because of the tension caused by these arguments, the family gatherings are not enjoyable for you. You decided not to be there because of that pattern.



### BIG IDEA

Because families operate as systems that have particular norms or ways of behaving, a conflict often reveals an underlying pattern. This is not always the case, but it's certainly a possibility that a pattern caused something particular to happen.

There are times when an individual issue simply caused the conflict, but it's always helpful as the intervener in a family conflict resolution process to see if there are any patterns in addition to the specific issues. You can determine the existence of these patterns as you listen to the parties' positions and uncover their underlying interests.



### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that family conflicts tend to be more intense than other types of conflicts because of **family relationships and norms**. Families often have strong bonds as a result of shared experiences, and each family has its own set of norms regarding the behavior that it considers appropriate or correct for its members.

You now understand that the **family can be viewed as a system** made up of individual components, each of which performs a specific role. When one of these components changes its behavior, it can affect the entire system. If this leads to conflict within the family system, it's important to determine whether the **conflict is a result of this one particular issue, or of a larger pattern** occurring over time. As you are listening to the parties' positions and uncovering their underlying interests, you, as the

intervener, can determine which is the case. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Cultural Norm**

The variety of behaviors and perceptions considered "right", "true" or "proper" by a culture.

### **Ripple Effect**

A means of describing how a change to a system creates alterations of behavior or relationships throughout the system as a whole.

### **System**

A set of components whose behaviors affect one another causing a sequence of related events leading towards an outcome.