

# Communication Within the Decision- Making Process

# 10

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### Application to Family Decision-Making

## Objectives

- Describe the communication process.
- Apply the communication process to family decision-making.
- Explain family communication patterns.
- Explore power and conflict within family communication.
- Understand the impact of technology on family communication and decision-making.

*Half the world is composed of people who have something to say  
and can't, and the other half who have nothing to say and keep on  
saying it.*

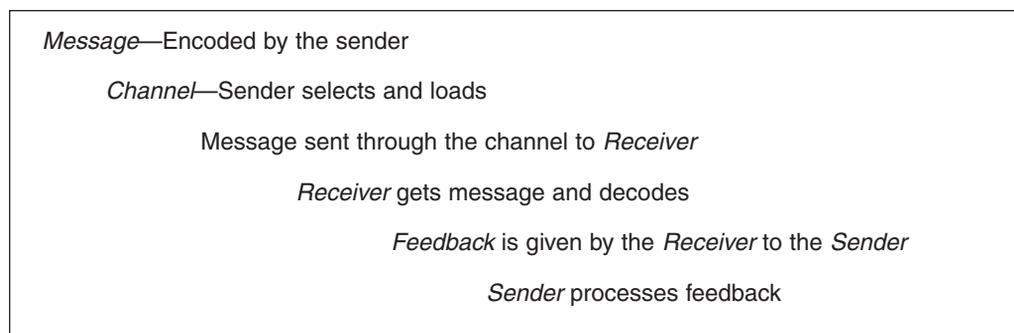
—Robert Frost

**T**he decision-making process that guides families in identification of needs and selection of alternatives to meet those needs is heavily dependent on another process—the communication process. Galvin, Bylund, and Brommel (2004) view communication as a “symbolic, transactional process of creating and sharing meanings” (p. 23). Family communication illustrates this process of creating and sharing meanings as it unfolds to identify needs, alternatives, and ultimately the completion of the decision-making process.

The **family systems theory** refers to these shared understandings as family rules. Strong, DeVault, and Sayad (1998) explain family rules as patterned or characteristic responses, generally unwritten, that are formed over time and difficult to change. These rules fall within a hierarchy and are ranked in order of significance to the family unit. They are created consensually or through conscious and unconscious power struggles among family members. These rules may operate at overt levels (visible to family members) or at covert levels (hidden and unrecognized).

## Communication Theory

The communication process operates within a framework (see Fig. 10.1). Communication involves multiple senders, receivers, and messages, and is thus a complex process. Multiple points exist for noise to impact the message. *Noise* is anything that detracts from the pure, intentional message. It could be static on a telephone line (channel) or the bad mood of your friend (channel) who is taking a message to your teacher.



**Figure 10.1** The Communication Process

Source: Adapted from Schermerhorn (1996).

## FAMILY COMMUNICATION

**In The News****Mommy, Tell My Professor He's Not Nice!****(Over)involved Baby Boomer Parents—  
and Cell Phones—Redefine Adulthood.**

*By Shannon Colavecchio-Van Sickler, Times Staff Writer*

Parents of University of Florida students log on to their children's personal Gator-Link accounts to check grades, then call deans when they don't like what they see.

University of Central Florida parents call administrators to complain when their kids can't get into classes they want.

At Florida State University, parents of graduating seniors haggle with job recruiters. They want to make sure Junior gets a good salary and work schedule.

University administrators have a name for these baby boomer moms and dads who hover over their offspring's college lives.

"Helicopter parents," says Patrick Heaton, FSU's assistant dean of student affairs.

The worst of them—those who do unethical things, like write their kid's term papers—are branded "Black Hawks," a nod to the souped-up military helicopters.

"I also call them tether parents," says Heaton, who directs FSU's freshman orientation program. "It's like a leash. Students are afraid to make decisions about classes or anything without calling home."

Good luck finding a parent who admits being a helicopter, much less a Black Hawk. But across the nation, college administrators are struggling with what they say is a growing phenomenon, a product of the unique relationship between many boomer parents and their millennial-generation children.

Administrators say they know these parents mean well. But their frequent phone calls and unreasonable demands stunt student development and test the patience of college officials.

"Where parent behavior becomes a challenge for us is when they encourage dependence, and they become too involved because they are afraid their son or daughter will make a mistake," says Tom Miller, a University of South Florida dean of students.

"Our students are graduating," says Jeanna Mastrodicasa, associate dean of the UF honors college. "But they are not ready to go into the real world."

Administrators noticed the hovering problem a few years ago, when the first members of the so-called millennial generation entered college.

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Millennials are the children of baby boomers, born between the early 1980s and 2000. Sociologists and higher education officials say this generation is unlike any other, thanks to the child-rearing approach of their parents and the unprecedented influence of technology.

Many boomer parents carefully planned and fiercely protected their children, according to *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, by Neil Howe and William Strauss.

They saw their youngsters as “special,” and they sheltered them. Parents outfitted their cars with Baby on Board stickers. They insisted their children wear bicycle helmets, knee pads and elbow guards. They scheduled children’s every hour with organized extracurricular activities. They led the PTA and developed best-friend-like relationships with their children, says Mastrodicasa, co-author of a book on millennials.

Today, they keep in constant touch with their offspring via e-mail and cell phones. And when their children go off to college, parents stay just as involved.

Sometimes the attention is healthy and supportive. But in some cases, administrators say, their hovering is intrusive.

“The biggest change is technology,” says Robin Leach, interim dean of students at FSU. “Where students in the past might just write home, now they’re on the phone with their parents all day, every day. If something goes wrong or right, parents know about it very quickly.”

An online survey in March by College Parents of America, an advocacy group formed 2½ years ago for the parents of college children, found that one out of three parents communicates with their child daily two to three times a day, typically via cell phone. More than half of the 839 parent respondents said their involvement with their children is “much more” than what they experienced with their own parents during their college years.

“When I went to college in the ’70s, contact with my parents was standing at a pay phone on Sunday afternoon,” says James Boyle, College Parents of America president. “And there was no expectation beyond that.”

Freedom High School graduate Ashton Charles, 18, will attend UF in the fall. She says her mother is supportive but “not ridiculously overprotective.”

They take yoga classes together. They watch *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Desperate Housewives*. They use their cell phones to chat and send text messages.

Ashton figures their close relationship will continue even when she moves to Gainesville this fall.

“I’m sure I’ll call her all the time when I’m here,” Ashton says.

Pensacola resident Janet Summers was in Gainesville last month for her 18-year-old daughter Christine’s freshman orientation. Summers’ daughter Elizabeth already graduated from UF.

Summers says Elizabeth knew students whose parents called to wake them up for class or decided their class schedules. Some parents visited so often that others figured they had moved into town.

“It was so over the top, it helped me not to be that way,” Summers says. “You just handicap them by being that way.”

Last month, hundreds of parents filled a ballroom on UF's campus, where two-day freshman orientation sessions are being held all summer.

They laughed when Mastrodicasa told them not to expect report cards in the mail. But she wasn't kidding.

"This is very different from high school," she said. "It is so tempting for you to do it all for them. But let them do the work. This is how they'll learn to be grownups."

Paige Crandall, associate dean of students, told parents: "I know you want to fight their battles for them. But you need to give them their space. Starting today."

A generation ago, a lot of parents didn't even attend orientation, Mastrodicasa said. They let their children attend on their own.

Today universities expect a full house of moms and dads and other guardians, and many colleges are refashioning their programs with parent-only talks that politely convey the message: "Back off, your kid's not a kid anymore."

"We talk about the value of letting go," USF's Miller said.

UF officials separate students from parents for much of the two-day orientation.

If not, "Mom will take notes and want to make decisions," Mastrodicasa says.

FSU students and parents also attend separate sessions, but that doesn't stop students from text messaging their parents for help before scheduling their first semester of classes, Heaton says.

At UCF, "we have parents who come and stay the whole first week of class, just to 'make sure they're okay,'" said spokeswoman Linda Gray, shaking her head. "They didn't use to do that."

In a recent online survey, "Helicopter Poll," by the career services provider Experience Inc., 38 percent of more than 400 college students admitted their parents participate in meetings with academic advisers.

One-quarter of the students polled think their parents are "overly involved" to the point of embarrassment or annoyance.

But Boyle, of College Parents of America, thinks concerns about helicopter parents are "overblown."

"It's better than the alternative, them not being involved at all," he says. "In every generation of parents, there are those that get too involved. I think it's a small percentage of parents who do things like try to personally intervene in a roommate dispute."

He says "smart schools" accept that parental involvement is higher with the millennial generation and respond by "catering to the parents."

"They are paying a large part of the tuition bill, and it's just good customer service," he says.

That is USF's approach, Miller said. USF, like an increasing number of universities, has a parents association. Other colleges are hiring parent "advocates."

This is the new reality, Miller said.

"When I was in college, had my parents actually called the dean, I would have been mortified. Now, it's very common."

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Source: "But professor, my daughter deserves an A!" by Shannon Colavecchio-Van Sickler. Copyright St. Petersburg Times, June 19, 2006. Reprinted with permission of the St. Petersburg Times.

The communication process is continuous and always changing. It is transactional, in that when people communicate they have a mutual impact on each other. This impact can be intrapersonal, interpersonal, within the group, or out to the external world. Communication can be oral or written, formal or informal, verbal or nonverbal.

Because communication plays a central role in the family, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) suggest that any theory of family communication must include both **intersubjectivity** and interactivity. **Intersubjectivity** is the element of communication that involves shared meanings. When multiple members are interacting in the communication process, the understood meanings within messages are key to the successful outcome of the process. Individuals within the family system bring uniqueness to their encoding and decoding activities. However, family units have shared vocabularies and archived histories that serve as reference points for encoding and decoding messages. Interactivity is the way in which a family communicates. How family members interact with each other to get messages across is the focus of interactivity. Both are necessary to understand because they take place at the same time within a family.

Communication is at the center of family functioning because it is through communication that members are able to establish social reality (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002). In addition, family members participate in the process because the focus is on relationship building and maintenance, rather than on the individual participants.

The encoding or decoding process is impacted by a variety of factors, and there are many variables that cause the message to be misunderstood. These misunderstandings are found in filters and distorters. Filters convince the sender and receiver that the message was not intended in its true form. *He really did not mean it like that.* Distorters convince the sender and/or the receiver that the message has a hidden meaning. What did he mean by that tone or that choice of words? Common filters are culture and wishful thinking. If a woman receives an e-mail with sexual overtones from her male boss, she and others may brush it off as something men say, but don't actually intend. If a parent receives a note from a child away at camp, "I hate it here," he or she may interpret it as, he hasn't adjusted yet, but it couldn't be that bad. An example of wishful thinking is common among young adolescents. He pushed me because that is his way of showing that he likes me.

Common distorters may result from the differences found between the two genders. Expectations and responses of men and women differ in regards to communication. Tannen (1990) argues that men typically use **report talk**, which is meant to convey information, and that women use **rapport talk**, which is meant to strengthen intimacy. Using Tannen's model, Edwards and Hamilton (2004) did not find that gender was the cause of difficulty in communication, but that differences between males and females are reconciled by the gender roles of dominance and nurturance. In contrast to Tannen's earlier work, they believe that the characteristic of

nurturance leads to cooperation, which actually reduces difficulty in communication between the sexes. Strong, DeVault, and Sayd (1998) report that in conversations where conflict is present, wives tend to send clearer messages to their husbands than their husbands send to them. Women are often more sensitive and responsive to messages received from their partners. Husbands tend to either give neutral messages or withdraw from the conversation. In arguments, wives set the emotional tone, escalating conflict with negative verbal and nonverbal messages and deescalating argument with an atmosphere of agreement. Wives tend to use emotional appeals and threats more than husbands, who tend to seek conciliation and try to postpone or end an argument.

Differing worldviews may also be a common distorter in communication. Cultures differ in terms of high and low context. The United States tends to operate in a low context, where words carry most of the meaning in a conversation. A high-context country allows body language and other behaviors to have equal, if not higher, meanings than the actual words used.

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*Jasmine wants to convert the basement storage room into a private room of her own. When she approaches her parents about this, her father utilizes a low-context response. "If you are willing to clean it out and fix it up, it's all yours." Jasmine's mother most often utilizes high context in her communication. "Jasmine, go for it." Her eyes roll upward as she says these four words, and her shoulders and hand gestures imply that she is sure Jasmine will never follow through on her promise, so the private room will never become a reality. Her words and mannerisms say two very different things. Jasmine knows from experience that her mother's implied messages are much more accurate. She can anticipate little, if any, support from her mother in her efforts to convert the storage room.*

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## Worldview

### Cultural Impact on Communication

How does the culture of individuals engaged in communication affect the communication process?

1. **Different Communication Styles**—Across cultures, some words and phrases are used in different ways. Nonverbal communication is also different across cultures. Facial expressions, gestures, personal distance, and sense of time can communicate different ideas across cultures. One family may see an increase in volume as a sign of exciting conversation, whereas another family might react with alarm.

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2. **Different Attitudes Toward Conflict**—Some cultures view conflict as a positive, whereas others view it as something to be avoided. Some families may see conflict as necessary and are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that arise. Other cultures would find open conflict embarrassing.
3. **Different Decision-Making Styles**—The roles that individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. Although some cultures value individual decision-making, others prefer consensus.
4. **Different Attitudes Toward Disclosure**—In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, the reasons behind a conflict or misunderstanding, or personal information. Other cultures would have no problem in sharing these kinds of details.
5. **Different Approaches to Completing Tasks**—People across cultures have different ways to complete tasks based on the resources available, beliefs about what is important, and their orientations to work. Even how cultures view relationships as they work together can impact how a task will be accomplished.
6. **Different Approaches to Knowing**—How people come to know things represents cultural differences. European cultures gather information based on measurement of facts. Other cultures may base their information on symbols or stories that have been passed down from generation to generation.

How would these differences affect an interracial marriage?

How would these differences affect an international couple living in the United States?

*Source:* [www.wvcd.org/action/ampu/crosscult.html](http://www.wvcd.org/action/ampu/crosscult.html). Adapted from Working on Common Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges, DuPraw and Axner.

Families are the purveyors of culture. Members learn culture of the larger group through interaction with older family members. In reality, families have unique cultural frameworks within their own units. These shared understandings increase the complexity of the communication process when it functions within family decision-making situations.

### Family Communication Patterns

Families usually follow two types of communication orientation: conformity and conversation (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Although the family usually fits one or the other type of orientation, some families have a mix of

**Table 10.1** Family Communication Patterns Versus Family Types

Family Communication Patterns	Family Types	
	High-Conversation Orientation	Low-Conversation Orientation
High-Conformity Orientation	Consensual	Protective
Low-Conformity Orientation	Pluralistic	Laissez-faire

Source: Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1994), Koerner and Fitzpatrick (1997), and Galvin, Bylund, and Brommel (2004).

orientations within the same family. A family that has a **conformity orientation** is one where common attitudes, beliefs, and values are expected. This family opposes conflict and stresses compliance to the decisions made by parents or older family members. **Conversation orientation** allows the family members of all ages the freedom to express their opinions openly and freely. From these two orientations, four family communication patterns emerge (see Table 10.1; Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994). **Consensual families** are high in conversation and conformity. A consensual family is able to communicate with each other and desire to have agreement.

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*Bob and Judy are in the process of deciding where to go for the family vacation. Although they have suggested some things to each other, they decided to ask their three teenage children for their suggestions. Judy tells them, "We want you to help make the decision because we want everyone to be happy and enjoy this vacation." Everyone made suggestions, and a vacation spot was determined.*

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The **pluralistic family** is one that is high in conversation, but low on conformity. These families are good at communication, but do not expect that everyone will agree.

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*Although the Phillips family had always attended church together, Paul, the oldest of the children, announced that he would not be going to church anymore. His parents were upset at first, but then sat down with him and had a conversation about his announcement. He explained that he wasn't sure that his beliefs matched those of the church and he didn't get anything out of the service. His parents listened and then talked about how faith was important to them. In the end, they said, "Paul, you know where we stand on this, but we will leave this decision up to you."*

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The **protective family** is low in conversation and high on conformity. This family expects everyone to follow the rules, and there is no need for communication about them.

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*Amanda just turned 16. The day she got her driver's license, she planned to go out with her friends. She was having so much fun that she completely forgot about the time. When she realized it was past her curfew, she immediately called her parents. When her dad answered the phone, he informed her that she would no longer have driving privileges for 2 weeks. He ended with, "You know the rules—now you will have to suffer the consequences. I don't care what excuse you have!"*

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The **laissez-faire family** is low in both conversation and conformity. This family does not communicate very much, and family members often carry on with their own lives outside the family.

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*Tim and Diane are high school friends. After they attended a friend's birthday party the night before, Diane noticed that Tim was wearing the same clothes the next day at school. When she asked about it, Tim told her that he had car trouble and spent the night at a friend's house. When Diane asked if his parents were worried, he said, "My parents don't even know. I don't have a curfew, and they are usually gone for work before I get up for school. I guess I don't know if they would be worried or not—we've never talked about it."*

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### Family Communication Standards

Individuals often have a set of standards or beliefs about what the ideal relationship should include. Many of these standards involve communication. Someone may believe that a good relationship includes full disclosure and would be concerned if his or her partner ever held anything back. Others may believe that it is necessary to withhold information that could potentially hurt their partner. Communication varies greatly across families because all families are different. Differences between generations, between cultures, and even the degree of closeness within the family can alter the way a family communicates. Some grow up in families that talk very little, and others are raised in households where conversation takes place continuously. These differences can cause problems for couples as they form a new family. Caughlin (2003) identified 10 distinct communication standards of family communication (see Table 10.2).

Power is a subtle, yet important element in family communication. The ability that one family member has to exercise power over another family member can be expressed in various ways. Power can be verbalized as:

**Table 10.2** Caughlin Family Communication Standards (in order of frequency)

<i>Communication Standard</i>	<i>Description</i>
Intimate Disclosure	Ability to discuss intimate topics such as one's feelings, drugs, and sex
Negativity/Conflict	A family's tendency to engage in certain conflict behaviors such as criticism, yelling, and swearing
Respect	Showing respect for other family members by not being rude, swearing, or talking back
Routine contact	Chatting, keeping up with other family members, importance of checking with others, importance of asking others what they mean rather than having the ability to mind-read
Creating/demonstrating cohesion	Importance of family being close or communicating to bond
Treating each other with equality	Everybody gets a say, parents talk to children as equals (vs. kids not supposed to talk), whether children get input in important decisions
Openness about problems	Expectations about whether family members should talk openly about potentially troublesome issues, problems, or disagreements
Politeness	The extent to which a family's communication is seen as proper and formal (rather than relaxed)
Discipline	Rule-setting, dealing with rule violations, curfews, groundings, etc. These include both rules that parents set for children and rules for the parents' behavior
Emotional/instrumental support	Manner or extent that family members provide each other with social support or acceptance when there is a difficulty

Source: From Caughlin, John P., "Family Communication Standards. What Counts as Excellent Family Communication and How Are Such Standards Associated with Family Satisfaction?" (2003) *Human Communication Research*. Blackwell Publishing, Ltd. Reprinted with permission of Blackwell Publishing, Ltd.

- Withdrawal
  - "I'm not speaking to you."
- Guilt induction
  - "How could you ask me to do this?"

- Positive coercion
  - “Kiss me and help me move this sofa.”
- Negotiation
  - “I’ll do that if you do this.”
- Deception
  - “I’ll just charge it to the credit card and he’ll never notice.”
- Blackmail
  - “If you do that, I’ll tell them about. . . .”
- Physical/verbal abuse
  - “Watch your back.”

Where does power within a family unit originate? Szinovacz (1987) developed a view of family power and describes it as a dynamic, multidimensional process with **power bases** that are linked to individual family members. Adult members of families have the ability to reward, coerce, and ignore younger members when making decisions that impact all family members. Other than age and financial resources, expertise is another important power base. Children with higher technological skills may hold more power in situations involving computerization than parents. Newly immigrated parents often find themselves reliant on their children’s ability to translate and communicate in the new language.

The balance of power within families is also reflective of the relationships between and among family members. Blood and Wolfe (1960) developed a **resource theory** of family power in their classic study. More power is given to the spouse of the family member with the most resources. In turn, the person gaining the most from the relationship at any given time will be most dependent on other family members. Such is the case of young children. Their survival depends on the actions of older family members. Adolescents sense lessening dependence as they mature, thus shifting the power balance in certain decision-making situations.

Family members may use resources to increase control within the family. McDonald (1980) identified five types of resources that are used as bases of family power:

1. **Normative resources** are those where culture or society identifies who should have the power in the family. For example, in a society where the traditional family is valued, the father will have more overall power, with the mother having power over the children.
2. **Economic resources** refer to monetary resources. Those that bring the money into the family will have more power and will probably make more of the financial decisions.
3. **Affective resources** are those that are more relational. An example would be a wife who withholds affection from her husband because she doesn’t approve of his behavior.

4. **Personal resources** are inherent with the personality or appearance of the family member. The person who has an outgoing personality is much more likely to garner power within the family. Another example would be the youngest child who may charm the others into getting them to do anything for him or her.
5. **Cognitive resources** allow a family member to gain power because of his or her intelligence. This often includes the person who logically reasons strategies to gain power from the other family members. An example of this is the child who learns how to get what he or she wants by working his or her parents against each other.

Waller and Hill (1951) discuss the impact of the **principle of least interest**. In marriages and cohabitation situations, the partner with the least interest in continuing a relationship has the most power in it. The changing dynamics of male/female dependency over the last several decades has presented increased complexity in family decision-making and communication. Some family theorists challenge the idea that women participating in the workforce have shifted the power balance within the family from one of subservient to one of equality.

If power is defined as the ability to change the behavior of others intentionally, women, in fact, have a great deal of power. It is rooted in their role as nurturers and kin-keepers, and flows out of their capacity to support and direct the growth of others. (Kranichfeld, 1987, pp. 42-56)

Fitzpatrick (1988) views power dynamics and communication within the interactions of adult partners as either **symmetrical** or **complementary**. Symmetrical conversations occur when partners send similar messages that impact how the relationship is defined. Both individuals adopt the same tactics, but utilize different approaches within the communication process. **Competitive symmetry** occurs when both partners view the situation as a competition, where both aim to defeat the other. This creates a win/lose situation that results in escalating hostilities. Ammunition in this conversation is open to everything that has ever transpired between the two individuals. **Submissive symmetry** results when neither individual will accept responsibility for making a decision and taking action. The eventual goal is win/lose, to outlast the other in the process of passing the responsibility back and forth. **Neutralized symmetry** reflects the desire for a win/win outcome. Both individuals respect each other and seek to avoid assuming control over the other. Each gives a little and both gain. A **complementary interaction** results when both individuals adopt different tactics. One must accept the dominant position, and the other must accept the submissive position. This action is not to be confused with exertion of power, but rather with a give-and-take relationship where individuals work together for mutual enhancement of the unit.

The Everett family must decide what to do for Christmas this year. We assume that other members of the family are too young to participate fully in the decision:

Competitive Symmetry:

Mother: I don't want to go to your family's celebration; it's too far to travel.

Father: It's not much farther than your family. You just don't like my mother.

Mother: I don't like your mother, she's bossy and she can't cook.

Father: My mother's bossy. What about your mother?

Submissive Symmetry:

Mother: I don't care where we go; I just don't want to have it at our house.

Father: I don't care, either. My family won't be unhappy.

Mother: My family won't be unhappy, either. Maybe you should call your sister.

Father: Why don't you call your brother . . . ?

Neutralized Symmetry:

Father: Where did we go last year?

Mother: We went to my family for Christmas Eve and yours for Christmas Day.

Father: That worked for me. How about you?

Mother: I think it might be good to switch this year.

Father: That sounds fine.

Complementary Interaction:

Mother: My mother really wants us to come there this year.

Father: My parents will be disappointed, but they'll understand.

Mother: We'll find a way to make it up to them.

*COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT*

**Photo 10.1** All families have conflict.

Source: © Sean Locke/iStockphoto

Not all communication in the family is positive. Some communication patterns incorporate negative tactics of manipulation through guilt or power. These communication habits are difficult to break and may cycle into tremendous problems and extraordinary circumstances for a family. Anticipation and prevention of conflict within the communication process are helpful, but conflicts will occur. **Conflict** is a state of disagreement or disharmony. It creates a stressful situation that is uncomfortable to one or to all parties involved. **Conflict resolution** is the negotiation of conflict toward a positive goal. This negotiation may involve a generation of consensus among participants or a majority rules process.

It is inevitable that there will be conflict in a family. Relationships are intimate, and an internal struggle of roles and expectations plays out over time. Each new family member creates more complexity in relationship building and maintenance. Each family member who leaves creates a chasm or a hole that needs bridging or filling. Our communication patterns evolve from our interaction with parents, caregivers, and siblings.

The most harmful conflicts within a family are interpersonal—those that exist between and among individual members. These conflicts shake the foundation of the family unit. Especially destructive communication in these situations includes direct verbal attacks on an individual. Things

can be said and retrieved from past situations that damage the individual's perception of self and ultimately split families into opposing sides. This type of destructive communication has been associated with lower relationship satisfaction and higher divorce rates (Gottman & Notarius, 2000)

Money is a major source of marital conflict. Who makes it? Who decides how it will be allocated? Who sets priorities? Who enforces priorities? Another mitigating factor in money-based family conflict is the difficulty inherent in talking about money matters. People can be both secretive and defensive in such discussions. In addition, decisions about money affect everyone in the family, and power and control issues may come into play by those making the decisions (Jenkins, 2002). Olson, DeFrain, and Olson (2003) suggest others reasons that finances cause problems for families. These include unrealistic expectations, inability to create and stick with a budget, heavy reliance on credit, differences in spending and saving habits, and family members' different meanings for money.

Some conflict within a family unit, or any group, is necessary and healthy. When communication focuses on the problem, not the individual, positive problem solving can occur. Kranichfeld (1987) suggests that resolution of family resource conflicts can result in three outcomes:

1. **Agreement.** Members agree without coercion or threats, giving freely without resentment. This agreement is based on perceived reciprocity at a later time.
2. **Bargaining.** Within relationships, equity is a goal. During the discussion, family goals and relationships are focus points.
3. **Coexistence.** When differences can't be resolved, they will be accepted. Discourse is absorbed within the family relationship without jeopardizing individual relationships.

## Communication and Information Technology

### Reality Check

#### Cell Phone Etiquette

##### Don'ts

1. Never take a personal mobile call during a business meeting. This includes interviews and meetings with coworkers or subordinates.
2. Maintain at least a 10-foot zone from anyone while talking.

3. Never talk in elevators, libraries, museums, restaurants, theaters, dentist or doctor waiting rooms, places of worship, auditoriums, or other enclosed public spaces, such as hospitals emergency rooms or buses. Don't have any emotional conversations in public—ever.
4. Don't use loud and annoying ring tones that destroy concentration and eardrums. Grow up!
5. Never "multitask" by making calls while shopping, banking, waiting in line, or conducting other personal business.

#### Dos

1. Keep all cellular congress brief and to the point.
2. Use an earpiece in high-traffic or noisy locations. That lets you hear the amplification—how loud you sound at the other end—so you can modulate your voice.
3. Tell callers when you're on a cell phone and where you are—so they can anticipate distractions or disconnections.
4. Demand "quiet zones" and "phone-free areas" at work and in public venues.
5. Inform everyone on your stored-number list that you've just adopted the new rules for mobile manners. Ask them to do likewise. Please.

Source: Adapted from Joanna L. Krotz, Muse2Muse Productions, New York, NY.

*Immediate access to others via cell phone technology has changed the communication patterns of families and other social groups. It, too, has resulted in a divide of haves and have nots. Those with the economic ability to purchase cutting-edge devices and to subscribe to expensive service plans are advantaged in a society where information is such an important resource. Some argue, however, that cell phone use creates an unnecessary dependence and a reduction of independent thinking. Legal issues of privacy and ownership of photographs and taped conversations are increasing heavy court loads. Regardless, the cell phone has quickly become an important part of social communication around the globe.*

Although radio, TV, the Internet, and cell phones are all means of communication common to American families, they also represent a large consumer market. What originally represented a way to connect to the outside world and as a form of entertainment for families has developed into a multimillion dollar industry that has had an effect on the family. The media now plays a role in the maintenance of family relationships and in their connection to society. Although the family has always been the center of socialization in preparing children to live in society, one aspect of

the media is its socialization role. It is through radio, TV, and the Internet that we learn about the world and ourselves.

### *RADIO*

Originally used as a way of communication for the military, the radio began to appear in American homes in the 1920s. As the first electronic media in the home, the radio was seen as an important window to the world. For the first time, Americans were able to have information in real time. At the same time, there were parents who were concerned about the effects of adult radio programming on their children. One parent organization in New York complained that radio “was causing nightmares and other emotional problems among their young children” (Cooper, 1996, p. 21).

Although the radio is still a popular form of media, it has changed dramatically over the last decade. Public radio stations compete with private stations for audience share. Younger listeners are turning to portable electronic devices and downloaded copies of preferred music, avoiding the social, political, and economic implications of radio broadcasting. Purchase of these electronics, accessories, copy permission fees, and subscriptions to private radio broadcasting channels have added to the financial costs of audio entertainment.

### *TELEVISION*

When the TV was first introduced in the 1950s, families placed this “appliance” in the living room or the most prominent place in the home. All members of the family had access and usually watched together. Wartella and Jennings (2001) report that, in the early days of TV, people believed it would benefit the family by keeping the family together, solving marital problems, and keeping problem children off of the streets.

TV viewing today is different from watching TV in the past. Passive TV viewers have become more active TV users (Atkin, 2001). As wealth increased, so did not only the size of homes, but the number of TVs in each home. Nielsen Media Research, Inc. (1998) reports that 99.4% of American households have at least one TV set. The cable and satellite industry provides the consumer with a multitude of options for specialized viewing. In addition, the opportunity to aggregate or stream video, as well as other technology such as scanning recorders (*Tivo*) serve to marry the TV with computer technology, which establishes individual viewing. The rise of Personal Video Recorders (PVRs) has also changed the way that families watch TV when one family member chooses programs to serve his or her individual preferences. As a result, TV viewing has become

more of an individual activity. Today, multiset households have viewing units in bedrooms, kitchens, and even bathrooms.

In the late 1970s, the government began to investigate the effects of TV on the family. Pearl, Bouthilet, and Lazar (1982) conducted research that looked at children's aggressive and antisocial behavior, which was believed to be associated with V viewing. Although most acknowledged that TV had some negative influence, it was generally considered the responsibility of the family to educate and instill morals. Not until the 1990s did parents organize to campaign for controls such as the V-chip or content labeling in addition to demanding antidrug commercials (Andreasen, 2001). In contrast to the view that all behavior exhibited on TV is negative, Bryant, Aust, and Venugopalan (2001) found that the majority of prime-time families were psychologically healthy and exhibited good communication skills.

Whatever position is taken on the value of TV within the family home, the messages received through this media format have had an impact on the social climate and social learning of the current generation. Signorielli and Morgan (2001) suggest that "television is one of the major players in the socialization process" (p.333) and is more likely to portray family life as it already exists, rather than to affect changes in future family life. This position is likely to be argued and debated for some time.

## TELEPHONES

The introduction of the telephone into the family represented a major change in communication. Although most were excited about the possibilities of being connected to the outside, some worried about the intrusion into the home and the loss of information out of the home that could weaken family relationships or compromise privacy. The technology of the mobile or cell phone was even more of a change in family communication and represents the fastest growing technology in history. In 2002, for example, 62% of U.S. adults owned cell phones (Schackner, 2002). Children and adolescents (10–19 years old) are also among those who own and use cell phones at 28% (Curry, 2001).

The original intention of the cell phone was for use in work-related situations and for safety or security. In time the advantages of cell phones expanded to include social interactions. Families use cell phones as a way to connect children, parents, and extended family members. Cell phones improve efficiency in time by providing immediate information, such as being able to ask someone a question and by coordinating events such as meeting at a restaurant. Ling and Yttri (1999) found that teenagers have created new forms of communication and interaction. **Microcoordination** is when social groups make plans over their cell phones to meet somewhere and activities are coordinated. **Hypercoordination** is when cell

phones are used not only to coordinate activities, but they also include the development of group norms through emotional and social communication. Teenagers are also much more likely to integrate other media into their cell phone use, such as making web connections, text messaging, digital camera capabilities, or gaming (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004).

Along with the advantages, cell phones have also created some disadvantages. Most notable is the lack of boundaries between public and private space. Users are connected between home and work at all times, not allowing for a break between being at work and being at home. In addition, others are exposed to private conversations when users talk with others while in public places. Cell phone disruptions in business meetings, classes, and public gatherings have prompted the need for cell phone etiquette (see Reality Check—Cell Phone Etiquette). Another disadvantage may be social control. With a cell phone, others have the opportunity to know where you are and what you are doing at all times. This may give some a feeling of being monitored or under surveillance.

### COMPUTERS

The computer was originally used in the home as a time-saving device. Word-processing and record-keeping capabilities were the reasons that Americans bought personal computers when they became available. Because families with children were more likely to own computers, marketing strategies for home computers focused on fear as a motivator for parents to provide their children with what they need to compete in the digital world (Wartella & Jennings, 2001). Although the computer was originally meant to be used for educational purposes, children use the computer more for entertainment and, according to Giacquinta, Bauer, and Levin (1993), game playing.

The Internet has also had an impact on the family. The Census Bureau reports that access to the Internet increased 139.1% from 1994 to 1997 (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1998). The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Fallows, 2004) reports that nearly two thirds of Americans are online, and daily living has changed dramatically (e.g., in the way we get news, communicate with others, and pay our bills). Grunwald Associates (2000) conducted a national survey of households and found that, according to parents, 80% of children use the Internet for school work at least once a month. However, the children surveyed seemed to have a different idea about the purpose of the Internet. The researchers noted that, although parents overestimated the amount of time their children used the Internet for school work, they also underestimated the amount of time children used it for entertainment. These was also a difference in the amount of time that parents thought their children were on the Internet compared to the amount reported by the children and how much time was spend alone as opposed to parental supervision.

Access to information, guidance, and material goods has grown exponentially with the continued growth of the computer industry and computer marketing services. This can be beneficial to families during the decision-making process if the increase in available information is not overwhelming. Time spent using the computer cannot be regained or redirected. It depletes certain kinds of family resources.

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*Tory was anxious to plan a vacation for herself and her two school-age children. She wanted to travel to the Florida area so that their paternal grandparents could join them for a day or two. When she "Googled" family Florida vacations, she received thousands of possible web pages devoted to that topic. She continued to narrow her search by limiting the city, type of activity, and desired cost, but she still had hundreds of options. Her initial search had taken seconds to find the information, but hours to process it. Individuals must weigh the value of time with the increased value of options generated to meet their needs.*

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What makes the Internet different from the other forms of media is its interactivity. The ability to connect with others in real time makes this technology different than the one-sided media of radio and TV. Although more people became connected to the Internet and others through e-mail, interactive websites, and chat rooms, it also provided for more commercial activity. Advertising and selling products online represented a whole new industry. This form of technology has opened many new opportunities to the outside world, but at the same time can change the way that families interact with each other. Although the Internet has the capacity to strengthen family relationships through e-mail, it also has the capacity to isolate family members for long periods of time in individual activity. Parents and children may have more conflicts over access time. In addition, the constant availability of goods also creates tensions between what kids see and want and what parents are able and willing to buy.

By the end of the 20th century, people, especially parents, became more aware of the risks as well as advantages of being online. Hughes and Campbell (1998) identified six parental concerns for Internet use and children: (a) distribution of pornography, (b) sexual predators, (c) misinformation and hidden messages, (d) loss of privacy, (e) unscrupulous vendors, and (f) development of childhood behavior disorders including social isolation and Internet Addiction Disorder. In 1998, Congress responded to these concerns by passing the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPRA), which regulated data collection for children under age 13.

Family structure, race, and income influence computer ownership, which contributes to what is known as the *digital divide*. Two-parent families are more likely to own computers and be connected to the Internet than single-parent households (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1998). The same study found that Euro-American households were three times more likely to have access to the

Internet as African Americans or Hispanics, although Atwell (2001) suggests that the gap in access is more likely due to income and education differences than to race. Households with incomes over \$75,000 are twice as likely to have Internet access than households with incomes of less than \$40,000 (Grunwald Associates, 2000). Although the number of public schools with Internet access has increased, schools that serve the poorest populations have less computers and slower web access (Williams, 2000).

Beginning with the radio, mass media has been a part of the home. As each new technology was introduced into the family setting, a debate about the impact of that media on the family began. Wartella and Jennings (2001) predict that, whatever media platforms are available in the future, our debate should be less about media use and more about how families educate, entertain, and communicate.

## Application to Family Decision-Making

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For thousands of years, the family has been the primary organization for managing property, distributing resources, and setting the division of labor. An understanding of the basic communication process and mitigating problems prepares group members for stronger and more positive communication of needs and problem solving.

Communication plays a principal role in how families make decisions and solve problems. The verbal and nonverbal messages, the meaning of those messages, the use of power, and the process of conflict resolution all contribute to the family's ability to effectively manage the decisions of life.

Although the adults assume primary responsibility for family maintenance, children's voices and those of elderly members must be addressed. Empathy and patience are necessary. The ability to listen to other members is crucial. Miscommunication within the family can often be traced to:

- inability to listen
- refusal to listen
- unwillingness to share feelings
- lack of understanding and multiple viewpoints
- refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of another's point
- lack of time
- existence of and reliance on assumptions
- need for self above others (selfishness)
- weak self-esteem of members

Listening skills must be learned and practiced to facilitate a positive family communication process and good decision-making.

### Summary

Communication is essential for good decision-making and interaction within the family. The process of communication involves senders, receivers, and messages, having mutual impact on the members of the family. Family communication involves both intersubjectivity and interactivity. The way that messages are sent and received can lead to misunderstandings, as well as differences in gender and worldview. Families follow and develop unique communication patterns and standards. Within the process of family communication, power structures present challenges and opportunities. Communication can be both negative and positive. The negotiation of conflict resolution is necessary and healthy, moving the family toward a positive goal. Information technology can be an advantage and a disadvantage for families. Communication plays a major role in how families make decisions and solve problems.

### Questions for Review and Discussion

1. Describe the theoretical framework that explains the communication process.
2. What is the difference between the elements of intersubjectivity and interactivity in family communication?
3. What role do filters and distorters play in misunderstandings?
4. What are the two types of communications orientations that families follow?
5. How do communications standards affect family communication?
6. How does power affect family communication?
7. Why is conflict necessary?
8. Explain how information technology can be both positive and negative for families.