

Getting Connected, Staying Connected

Families Across the Lifespan: The Normal, To-Be-Expected, Satisfactions and Challenges Couples and Families Experience

John D. DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development; Gail L. Brand, Extension Educator; Maureen H. Burson, Extension Educator; Ann M. Fenton, Extension Educator; Jeanette L. Friesen, Extension Educator; Janet S. Hanna, Extension Educator; Mary E. Nelson, Extension Educator; Cynthia R. Strasheim, Extension Educator; Dianne M. Swanson, Extension Educator; LaDonna A. Werth, Extension Educator

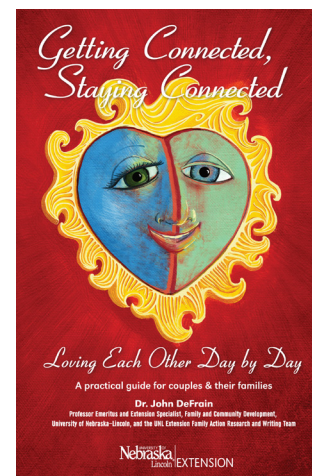
Families and couples have to learn to deal with various roles and developmental tasks as they move through the different stages in the family life cycle. This is No. 2 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

Depending on the scholar, there are between four and 24 different stages in the family life cycle.

We will focus here on the work of Evelyn Duvall, a major contributor to family development theory. Family

development theory looks at how couples and family members deal with various roles and developmental tasks within the marriage and the family as they move through each stage of the life cycle.

Duvall outlined eight major stages and eight family development tasks, as shown in *Table I*.



For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at amazon.com.

Table I. Eight major stages and eight family development tasks in the family life cycle.

<i>Stages of the Family Life Cycle</i>	<i>Positions in the Family</i>	<i>Family Developmental Tasks</i>
Stage 1. The married couple	Wife / Husband	Establishing a mutually satisfying marriage Adjusting to pregnancy Fitting into the kin network
Stage 2. Childbearing	Wife / mother Husband / father Infant(s)	Having and adjusting to an infant Establishing a satisfying home for parents and infant(s).

Stage 3. Preschool-aged children	Wife / mother Husband / father Daughter / sister Son / brother	Adapting to the needs of preschool children Coping with energy depletion and lack of privacy as parents
Stage 4. School-aged children	Wife / mother Husband / father Daughter / sister Son / brother	Fitting into the community Encouraging children's educational achievements
Stage 5. Teenage children	Wife / mother Husband / father Daughter / sister Son / brother	Balancing freedom with responsibility Establishing post-parental interests
Stage 6. Launching the children	Wife / mother / grandmother Husband / father / grandfather	Launching youth into adulthood Maintaining a supportive home base
Stage 7. Middle-aged parents	Wife / mother / grandmother Husband / father / grandfather	Refocusing on the marriage relationship Maintaining kin ties with older and younger generations
Stage 8. Aging family members	Widow / widower Wife / mother / grandmother Husband / father / grandfather	Coping with death and living alone Selling the family home Adjusting to retirement

Using Duvall's traditional framework as a springboard for our discussion, we will now look at very common satisfactions and challenges couples experience today in contemporary society as they go through the adventure of life together. We will construct this discussion simply by recounting stories husbands and wives have told us.

As you read this discussion of the various periods of couple and family life, think about your own experience and the experiences of other family members.

Stage 1. The Married Couple

Establishing a mutually satisfying marriage

We had lived together several years before we got married, so we understood each other pretty well. I knew what to expect and he knew what to expect. The roughest times were before we were married, when we were living together. That was the most difficult adjustment.

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We would not have ever even thought about living together before marriage. Besides, my father and her father would have killed me if I wanted to do that. So, I lived at home with my parents and she lived at home with her parents, and then we got married and moved in with each other. Though we had dated a long time before we got married, it was a big adjustment for both of us. Dating on Friday and Saturday nights is not the same as living together day after day after day.

Adjusting to pregnancy

A few weeks after our wedding, I started getting morning sickness. I had hoped that we would have five years together to get to know each other as a couple, then have children. That's certainly not how things worked out!

Fitting into the kin network

She came from a huge extended family. Everyone on earth seemed to be a cousin. I came from a small family and the few relatives we had were a long way off. Getting used to all her relatives and all these birthday parties and endless get-togethers was hard for me. We always seemed to get in an argument just about the time we were leaving for yet another family gathering.

Stage 2. Childbearing

Having and adjusting to an infant

Do I remember what our life was like before we had our first baby? Not really. Everything changed. Totally. Life was not a game anymore. It got very serious. But we liked the new responsibilities. We were mature and ready.

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We didn't have a clue about what we were getting into. We hadn't planned for this. It just happened. And then here we were: parents. Every day was a learning experience. Every day was an adventure. We had no clue how clueless we were.

Establishing a satisfying home for parents and infant(s)

It took quite awhile for me to get interested in sex again. I hadn't healed from the delivery and I was tired all the time.

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Our little boy changed every day. I didn't want to miss anything, so I spent countless hours with him. Just when I thought I had him figured out, he would change again and I had to refigure how to deal with him. What a wonderful challenge it all provided for me!

Stage 3. Preschool-Aged Children

Adapting to the needs of preschool children

For some reason I got it in my head that the minute we got Lindy potty trained that our job as parents would be pretty much done. Everything would be easy after we got through the smelly diapers. Not so!

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We had our children when we were young. There are considerable disadvantages to that, of course. You don't know what you are doing. You don't know who you are. You haven't really established yourself as an individual and as a couple. You don't have any money. But, I see couples having children in their 30s and 40s and even becoming a dad after age 50 and I think, "How do they possibly have all the energy they need to chase kids around all day?"

Coping with energy depletion and lack of privacy as parents

We were making love one night, about an hour after we got Cole in bed. We were getting really intimate. I happened to look down at the end of the bed and there were these two little eyes, open wide, peering at us in the semi-darkness: "Daddy, what are you doing?" "Hi, Cole!" I said while Cindy covered up really fast. I whisked him up in my arms and carried him back to his room and popped him back in his crib. Cole is 20 now and he hasn't ever mentioned what he remembers from that night.

Stage 4. School-Aged Children

Fitting into the community

You've been trying to be so responsible and trying so hard to do the right thing. And now you have to let them go into the world and hope that there are other good people who will care for them and love them just even a tiny bit as much as you have.

Encouraging children's educational achievements

It's such an amazing milestone when they go to school for the first time. It's the day you've been waiting for. An end to round-the-clock, 365-days-a-year child care. A breather! And yet, it then hits you: "So, what do I do with my life now? I can't do anything. I'm just a momma."

Stage 5. Teenage Children

Balancing freedom with responsibility

The kids were all in countless activities in middle school and high school. It was really kind of nuts, but they had all kinds of energy and in a lot of ways it was better than having them banging around the house all the time. However, it seemed as if our lives as parents were reduced to going to work and driving in the kids' carpools.

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We were pretty open about sex, I think. We always answered the kids' questions and we brought up sexual issues regularly at the dinner table. When sex was in the news, when sex was a subject of political discussion, when there was a sex scene in the movies, when they talked about a friend who was wondering if she was gay, whatever ...

Establishing post-parental interests

As I think back, the teenage years were a time of transition for all of us in the family. The kids were trying to establish themselves in the world outside our home, and toward the end of this time Sharon and I were puzzling over what would come next when the parade came to an end. It was an exciting time, a frustrating time in many ways, a good time in life.

Stage 6. Launching the Children

Launching youth into adulthood

Once he found a job after high school, he rented an apartment with five other boys — a horrible dump of a place that they all loved — and we rarely saw him again for several years. Until the Sunday afternoon he brought home a beautiful girl who seemed as if she had the ability to tame him. We looked at each other when they went out the door and said, "Yes."

Maintaining a supportive home base

We've got many friends whose kids came home again for a while, for one reason or another. We didn't think it would happen to us, but when she left her husband who was drinking and chasing around, we knew she didn't have a penny and didn't have anywhere to go. And we loved our grandson and knew it wouldn't last forever.

Sometimes it felt like forever though, because it took her over a year to find a decent job. And her husband had hid a lot of debts from her that surfaced after the separation. She got stuck with a big chunk of his bills.

But she finally got back on her feet, and when she and Chad moved out we were genuinely sad to see them go and happy that we had risen to the occasion.

Stage 7. Middle-Aged Parents

Refocusing on the marriage relationship

All of a sudden we had time for each other again. We were a couple. It had been so long ago when we had some privacy and a bit of extra money and time for each other. The phone wasn't always ringing off the hook for the kids. We started to get to know each other after being separated by life for so many years. It has been wonderful.

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Do you know what it's like to find your sex life again at age 48?

Maintaining kin ties with older and younger generations

When our granddaughter was born, we saw how well our daughter and her husband cared for this new baby. It was miraculous. And we looked at each other and said, "Well, we raised our daughter to be a good mother and we probably influenced her good decision in choosing a husband. Maybe we didn't do so bad as parents after all."

Stage 8. Aging Family Members

Coping with death and living alone

When Bill died, a part of me died with him. Society says you should have a funeral, feel sad for two weeks, and start living again. To hell with society! You don't love someone for 54 years and "get over it" immediately. My life will never be the same.

Selling the family home

It took six months to clean out and clean up the house and another year to sell it.

But we were rattling around in a four-bedroom house with the children gone and no grandchildren in sight at the moment. We bought a condo in Florida. We'll stay two years for tax purposes and maybe stay longer. Who knows? This is the first time in our life when nobody's telling us all the time what to do.

Adjusting to retirement

I'm quite happy that we're now 55 years down the road together and still married to each other. The experiences we shared together, I wouldn't sell them for a million dollars. And, at the same time, I wouldn't want to go through all that again. I wouldn't want to be 19 again. No way. I'm happy being 75. She's still a babe to me, even though we still have our disagreements.

The Grand Procession of Life

Every human life is unique. However, there are common patterns in life that many couples and families experience, and that is why family development theory today remains useful to discuss. It helps us see that we are not alone in the world — many people are facing the same challenges we are facing. In sum, most of us seek a long-term, satisfying relationship with a partner.

For those couples who do not have children, most will find meaning in life through their partnership, their work, and their friendships.

For greater understanding of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFrain and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

Resource

Duvall, E. M., and Miller, B. C. (1985). *Marriage and family development* (6th ed.). New York: Harper & Row.

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**Index: Families
Family Life**

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