

Child Focus in Family Systems

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND ANALYSIS



Monica Hedenbro
Annette Lidén



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and Analysis

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About the authors

Monica Hedenbro is a licensed psychotherapist and holds a master's in social work and a PhD in child psychiatry. She is an experienced clinician, teacher, and researcher, who works internationally. She has published books in Swedish and research papers in English.

Annette Lidén is a social worker and licensed psychotherapist. She is an experienced clinician and teacher. She is a published author in Swedish.

Foreword

In infant mental health, Monica Hedenbro is one of Sweden's leading pioneers with an internationally recognised research career. In collaboration with her distinguished colleague Annette Lidén, they have now written *Child Focus in Family Systems*, a book that impresses in breadth and depth.

The book provides an excellent overview of current knowledge about brain development and international research on various aspects of infant and child development, parenting, and family systems. A series of convincing case vignettes from the authors own research projects beautifully illustrate the importance of early interaction between infants and parents. This interaction is crucial for the development of emotional and social skills in children, a development that continues into adolescence. *Child Focus in Family Systems* explores the dyadic interaction between children and parents and the significance of the more complex interaction within the family system among family members.

I highly recommend Monica and Annette's book to anyone working in the field and other interested parties who want to deepen

their understanding of child development and receive a comprehensive account based on current findings from leading researchers in the field.

Kaija Puura, MD, PhD, family psychotherapist and professor of child psychiatry at the University of Tampere, Finland, and CEO of the World Association for Infant Mental Health

Introduction

More than twenty years ago, we completed the book *Building a Family* during a few summer months. In the introduction, we wrote: “The interweaving of research and clinical work has enabled us to, in addition to sharing the knowledge our work has given us, also verbally articulate the silent knowledge that exists” (Hedenbro & Lidén, 2002a, p. 9).

Much has happened since then, and there is now more extensive research on children’s development. The clinical work with various methods of interaction treatment has evolved and expanded (Hedenbro, 2019b). In our lives, our families have expanded with our children’s partners, and we have both become grandparents, which has enrichingly influenced the family systems and roles we have had and have. These changes have led us to reconsider the complexity of how a family is formed and developed.

The concept of family has also changed. The project we described in our previous book was the nuclear family we started with. Research still largely relies on nuclear families. Today, the concept of family is considerably more multifaceted. For those now forming families, there is increased freedom to create the family structure they desire. At the

same time, the complexity of how a family forms and how its interactions develop from the beginning and over time has increased.

We concluded *Building a Family* with the chapter “Thoughts for the future”, where we noted: “Research on viewing children’s development from a family perspective is still in its infancy. After meetings with these families over a long period, we cannot stress enough the importance of continuing this research.” Moreover, “The families we have met have both delighted and struggled with the complexity of building their family in a fascinating way. It is challenging for clinicians to address this complexity” (Hedenbro & Lidén, 2002a, p. 123). Here we are now, more than twenty years later, with more theory and research on the importance of having and clinically using a family perspective when supporting families early in family life and when we encounter them later.

The book’s focus

With this book, we aim to provide insight into the importance of the family perspective, where the family is viewed as a whole and together constitutes something more than the individuals involved. This means that what happens between family members is of great significance. Family life today is, in many ways, a complicated story. There are many variations in what a family looks like. Perceptions of what a family is and how one should parent have become more liberal and permissive in recent years. Social media and many contacts provide different advice. It is not like before when one either had a rule to adhere to or an older generation close by, serving as explicit models for women, men, and parenthood. Previous models can now be seen as outdated and have become more ambiguous. It can be challenging to find a gender role or parental role that feels right for oneself and fits into the family one lives in or envisions. Creating a model for shared parenthood requires a lot from the couple and their ability to communicate openly.

The importance of being able to give or receive support in communicating openly with one’s partner cannot be overstated. In her study *Regretting Motherhood* (2021), the Israeli sociologist Orna Donath addresses, among other things, that models of parenthood and family are deeply rooted in most societal structures. We professionals need to move towards a perspective where children’s development stems

not only from a dyadic perspective, often focused on mother–child, but also from a broader family perspective and a systemic perspective. The significance of the individual parental role should not be diminished, but there should also be room for the collective, coparenting, and the importance of the extended family system.

The context and system in which we grow up shape us and become the narrative we explore and tell ourselves and others throughout our lives. Family narratives can continue for generations and can be enriching but also limiting. The narratives can also be burdensome and hindering but need not be so if there is the will and resources for changing the heritage one is dissatisfied with and does not want to pass on. During a conversation, a prospective father wonders how to become angry with his future child without scaring them. He continues, “When my father got angry, he made me sit down and then stared into my eyes. His eyes became completely dark. He did not say anything, just stared into my eyes.” The prospective father continues that even today, he finds it challenging to look his father in the eyes without feeling a pain in his stomach. Later in the conversation, he openly considers alternative strategies for his impending parenthood. This man’s partner hears his concerns and his desire to change his family narrative and, in that moment, can convey to him that she has listened to his concerns, which opens the opportunity for them to continue this meaningful conversation at home so that the prospective father can seek and receive support from his partner when needed.

This book discusses family communication, which forms the foundation of complex family life. Communication also occurs far beyond words. The parent’s intonation, that is, directing attention to the outwardly visible communication and the feeling in the child’s inner world, is essential. This occurs in the dyadic relationship between a parent and child and when two parents interact with the child. It is equally important but more challenging to achieve because it must be coordinated with the other parent. It is essential to understand how the child is affected when coordination fails. How does coparenting function in conflict or moments of harmony and joy, and how does it affect the child? The knowledge that the child also contributes to family dynamics and individual parenthood and shared parenthood provides an essential key to a greater understanding of the development of family dynamics.

The book's structure

In the first part of this book, we write about family life and relationships, as well as the child and the interaction between two or more people. We discuss the complexity of communication in the interaction between the child and the parental and couple relationships. We also take a closer look at affects, emotions, and feelings. The child has a section in which we delve deeper into brain development. This first part provides a foundation and a basis for developing our more specific area, the importance of the family perspective for children's development. The triadic perspective is more thoroughly illuminated because it is based on our research studies. We write about family systems and how interaction looks in a triad: the development and significance of couple and parental relationships and the child's impact and involvement in family life and interaction. We return to coparenting at the end as a continued area to develop. To facilitate the language in the book, we primarily use mum and dad for parents but include all types of parenthood. Our examples are mainly taken from everyday life because it is in all these recurring moments that the child develops abilities and practices and repairs previous experiences in interaction when necessary.

As educational material, the book will enrich assessment and treatment work within social services, child psychiatry, health care, and preventive and supportive parenting work. We also aim to disseminate knowledge based on research to parents/the public, as well as personnel in preschools and schools. We endeavour to present theories concretely through several everyday examples. Previous research underpins the current research, so we have chosen to provide studies and references from a long time ago.

We also hope that the knowledge and focus we highlight will be helpful when we encounter children and families going through separation and divorce. These transitions can often be very complex and involve many adults, and a child-focused and coparenting approach becomes essential.