

Parenting - Boundary Violations

I like to talk about three family subgroups: **Grandparents**, **Parents** and **Siblings**. When I talk to families I stress that each subgroup should have **1)** a deep, unique emotional connection; **2)** its own private information exchange; and **3)** its own sphere of authority or influence. If a subgroup is lacking in any one of the three above areas, boundary violations will occur. For example, if a **Parent** has not emotionally separated from the **Grandparents** and is at their beckon call, receives money from them, often allows them to influence major decisions, or allows them to disparage his/her spouse, this violates the boundaries of both the **Parent** and **Grandparent** subgroups (for until a proper separation occurs, no one in either subgroup will be fully emotionally available to his/her spouse). Or, if the **Parent** subgroup lacks emotional intimacy, one or both parents may seek out companionship in a child, which violates the boundaries of the **Parent** and **Sibling** subgroups. In such a family, the child will have too much information about the marriage, or may be consulted about a job/housing issue or the discipline of another sibling (e.g., "I just don't know what to do about Johnny..."). A third example of boundary violations would be when one or both **Parents** are confused about their sphere of authority. Thus, they may make too few rules (resulting in **Sibling** behavior problems) or make too many rules and violate the **Sibling** sphere of personal authority (such as telling them what to eat/not to eat; making comments about bodies; or telling them what to do with their possessions). The good news is that boundary violations can be put to a stop. It is never too late to admit to other people in the family (although you may need the supportive environment of family therapy to do it) that you have felt violated or believe you have crossed others' boundaries. Families who take the risk to begin shoring up their boundaries find that they feel much more emotionally connected to one another!