

# THE THIRD CLASS



As the first week of classes ended and the syllabus and expectations had been communicated to my students in the family communication course, I could not help but panic over how to teach and illustrate the definition of family, communication, and family communication during the next class period. This anxiety resulted from a conversation I had with a colleague as we noticed that no one reads the same books or watches the same shows.

“Well maybe focus on something you watch and/or read.”

“Seriously?” I responded. “I watch Disney Jr. and PBS Kids. My reading is all chick-lit. I doubt that would help.”

“Then I can’t help ya,” my colleague responded.

Our conversation floated across my mind as I lay in bed, unable to sleep, staring at the ceiling. As an assistant professor, I teach and study family communication. Family communication is my passion, the thing other than my children and husband, that gets my blood pumping in the morning and adds to the excitement of going to work.

“Okay,” I thought, “I need to figure out how I could teach college students what family is and show them different examples. I need them to move beyond the 2.5 kids with a white picket fence. But how?” I contemplated this dilemma as my body succumbed to sleep.

When my alarm went off, I rolled over, hit snooze, and then it hit me. I decided to teach “what is family” by using Daniel Tiger (Santomero, 2018). I was excited to put this plan into motion and family communication could not come quick enough.

“For today, you had to read the first chapter of your family communication text. By the end of today’s class, I want you to be able to define family, define communication, and define family communication.”

The class broke into their small groups to discuss the reading and the questions they derived to spark discussion amongst them. I walked amongst the groups, occasionally playing devil’s advocate, asking a question to have them think deeper, or even challenging them on their responses. As I picked up bits and pieces of their conversations, I would take notes and then head to the white board to jot down key words and phrases I overheard.

“Now that you had time to discuss the reading in your small groups, let’s come together and discuss today’s three questions.”

I pause, point to the white board, and ask “What is family?” Answers started flying at me so fast that I had a hard time keeping up with the writing.

“Come together”

“Close, trust, care”

“Maintain relationships”

“Support system”

“Constant, go-to”

“Self-defined”

“Voluntary”

I stop, examine the list, turned to the class and ask, “Do these terms define family or do they represent family?”

Silence. Slowly one hand shot up.

“Yes, Josh.”

“Most of the terms represent what families should do. The last two terms, self-defined and voluntary, I would argue go more towards the definition of family.”

“Who agrees with Josh?” I glance at some of the hands that have come up. “Why, Margaret?”

“Because the definition of family is foggy, according to our reading today.”

“Okay, so why is the definition of family foggy, to use the term Margaret used?”

Some may argue that even communication scholars can’t agree on the definition of family. Thomas-Maddax and Blau (2013) use the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of family. The Census Bureau (2010) defines family as “a group of two people or more related by birth, marriage, or adoption, and residing together.” Turner and West (2018) define family as

A self-defined group of intimates who create and maintain themselves through their own interactions and their interactions with others; a family may include both voluntary and involuntary relationships; it creates both literal and symbolic internal and external boundaries; and it evolves through time: it has a history, a present, and a future (p. 4).

“Anyone?” Silence fills the classroom. “Do you think we define family differently because of how we see or perceive family?”

“What do you mean?” Phyllis asked from the front row.

I turn back to the board and write: nuclear, extended, immediate, adopted, and step.

“What do these words have in common?”

“They are all families,” Phyllis declared.

“That’s right, but do these types define family? Think of it this way, as a mother of a couple of preschoolers who love PBS, I watch a lot of Daniel Tiger.” I pause as I flash a picture

of Daniel Tiger's family on the board. Daniel is a member of an immediate or nuclear family. He has Dad Tiger, Mom Tiger, and baby Margaret. Sometimes his Grandpere visits. The Grandpere would be extended family."

"But we could argue that they are an immediate family or nuclear family because they are all related by blood," a student shouts out from the back.

"That's true. But then, one of Daniel's friends is Oh the Owl," I say as the next picture comes on the screen. "Oh lives with his uncle, who is his primary guardian. How do they fulfill the Bureau's definition of family? Josh?"

"Well," Josh begins. "They are related by blood, but they are not immediate. Enough information isn't given to determine if the uncle adopted Oh. They are a family because they reside together?" he asks hesitantly.

"But what if the uncle isn't related by blood? What if Oh's parents are incarcerated or incapable of fulfilling their parental roles? Just because they reside together shouldn't make them a family. Having the uncle volunteer to take Oh in would make them more of a family for me," MaryJane inserts.

"But why, MaryJane?"

"It goes back to Turner and West's definition. We have voluntary kin, such as parents having children. Parents are not required to have children but rather they volunteer to," MaryJane begins. "The uncle volunteers to take Oh in. Oh is a voluntary member of his family. Now if Oh had a sibling, that would be an involuntary family member."

"Now we are getting somewhere," I continue. "Families are made up of involuntary and voluntary family members. But also, we could assume that Oh and his uncle share a past and are working through the present. Now, let's look at Daniel's friend, Prince Wednesday. Now Wednesday has an older brother, an involuntary member of the family from Wednesday's perspective. But what is also unique about Wednesday is that his parents, King Friday and Queen Sara Sunrise are older parents." The third picture appears.

"Wait. If they are older parents, couldn't we assume that both Wednesday and his older brother were adopted? Then that would add another type of family into the neighborhood," Beatrice contributes.

"We could assume, Beatrice, but we don't really know. What is interesting about Prince Wednesday's family is that the show also introduced his cousin, Chrissie, who has braces on her legs. This introduction highlights how some families have members with disabilities."

"Do you think the viewers get this, though?" Judy asked from the front row. "I mean you have studied this, but do the three- to five-year-old viewers who watch this understand the types of families that are present? And are their other types present in this neighborhood?"

"To your first question, I hope that I can use this information to teach diversity to my children and don't expect them to see all these examples. To your second question, yes, other family types are present. The neighborhood also has a single-parent family (Katerina the Cat)

and a biracial family (Miss Elena's family). Interracial marriages only became legal in 1967 in our country. Most recently, the creators introduced Jodi, a platypus whose family is multigenerational and without a father. Jodi lives with her mom, her grandmother, and a pair of twin brothers. What else is unique about Jodi is that her mother works fulltime as a doctor, so her grandmother is the primary caregiver during the day."

"But that's becoming less unique," Josh points out. "My cousins watch Doc McStuffins (Nee, 2012–2019) and her mother works also as a doctor, and the father stays home."

"That is true, as that is another favorite show of my children. What both of these shows, Daniel Tiger and Doc McStuffins, can teach young children is how they may encounter different family types or structures. But given that there are different types of structures, how does this impact communication? Lindsay, how did your group define communication?"

"We said," Lindsay began, "communication is an exchange between two or more people."

"Well technically," I began, "communication can also take place within yourself and that is intrapersonal communication. But, yes, communication is the exchange between two or more people. But what is exchanged and how? Judy?"

"We exchange information or messages through nonverbal and verbal signals," she replied.

"Thomas-Maddox and Blau (2013) define communication as "the process of generating meaning in the mind of another" (p. 4). Turner and West (2018) define it as "the process of meaning-making between people" (p. 12). But as you discussed in your groups, communication is also the exchange of symbols, signs, and words."

"But communication is also dependent on the context, right?" Beatrice asks.

"Yes, if we go back to the models of communication, what we say and how we say it is dependent on the context. For example, I will say 'we need to use our indoor voices' to my children when they are yelling in public, but when we are at home, I am more likely to say 'take it down a notch' or 'stop yelling'. The meaning of the messages are the same but different symbols are used depending on the context. This leads to our last question: what is family communication? Josh?"

"We said family communication is how families are formed and kept together."

"But it is more than that," Margaret begins to argue. "Family communication is organized, and we use it to inform or warn."

"Okay, wait a minute, both of your groups are correct. But what would happen if we combine our two definitions from family and communication?"

"It is the exchange of information through verbal and nonverbal means between individuals who self-define as family," Josh states.

"Good start, Josh," I begin. "What we need to remember is that there is no one strict definition of family communication, because each family is different. Throughout the next 14 weeks, we will look at factors that impact the exchange of information between those who define themselves as a family. But before we go there, first we will discuss theories. See you next time."



## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

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1. How do you define family?
2. How has the evolution of family types impacted the definition of family?
3. How do you define communication? How does your membership in a family impact how you define communication?
4. What is family communication?

## REFERENCES

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