When I was about 4 or 5 years old, my parents owned a store in West Yellowstone, Montana. During the summer, the stores in West Yellowstone opened at eight in the morning and closed at ten at night. In the evenings, a relative who lived with us and helped take care of me would often drive us over to the store where she would watch tourists walk the sidewalks of West Yellowstone. Being a typical young boy, I thought this was quite a boring activity, so I spent my time flitting back and forth between the car and the store, where I could watch what my parents were doing. But while I was in the car, my relative would point out to me different characteristics of different people and comment about their families, their children, their marriages, and such. At the time, I found it difficult to understand why she liked to watch people so much. As the years passed, though, I also became an observer of the social interactions of human beings.

One of the observations I have made—both personally and professionally—has been that marriage and family relationships are much like a dance, and that if we think of patterns in family relationships as a dance, we might see the need to change a few of our steps—which, in turn, will improve relationships and the patterns of interaction within our families.

What happens when we dance? Dances require that partners follow patterns and attend to each other. The dancers give and receive feedback and engage in verbal and nonverbal behavior. Physiological linkages between dancers contribute to rhythm and synchrony as partners move together or complement each other as the dance progresses. All the while, you need to monitor yourself and your dance partner in order to have good rhythm and good synchrony.

What happens during the family dance? Again, you have
exchanges of verbal and nonverbal behavior. You have physiological changes and linkages between family members. Some of the patterns in family life involve time cycles, or rhythms. On weekends, for example, family behavior is often different than it is during the week. Patterns of conflict often recur, as do patterns of kindness. Children may tend to argue more during a long drive in the car, but then show compassion when a family member is sick.

Like dancers, family members monitor distance between themselves and other family members. As adults, we tend to be comfortable with the amount of emotional and physical distance we learned as children, and so we continue to regulate distance according to our comfort. When you ask families about their patterns of fighting, you find there is often some rhythm to them: they recur and they involve the regulation of distance.

Families, like dancers, have reciprocity, meaning they exchange similar behaviors. In a dance, reciprocity can be a problem if both partners put their feet forward at the same time. Likewise, in families, two people will sometimes trade anger for anger or criticism for criticism. Reciprocity is not necessarily a good pattern when bad is exchanged for bad, but when good is exchanged for good, like eye-gazing or comforting, it can be a positive part of a family pattern.

Interactional synchrony is usually a better pattern than reciprocity in families, and it occurs when each family member learns the rhythms of the others and modifies his or her behavior to fit those rhythms. A teenage daughter who knows her mother doesn't like to drive may offer to do the shopping with her or go to a movie together, and then do the driving. A mother who knows her toddler is difficult in the late afternoon may offer the child a healthy snack to combat low blood sugar.

The dance between infants and their parents begins at birth; in fact, children are neurologically wired to start this dance almost immediately. Research on cycles of attention/nonattention in infants shows that during the first 24 hours, newborns are in an attention cycle. They gather information from the world and try to make sense and meaning from it. Their ability to bond with their parents is especially enhanced during these attention cycles. When infants go into a period of nonattention, they assimilate information they have gathered during the attention phase and self-regulate; they learn to monitor and change their own behavior. Babies' attention cycles affect mothers' behavior. When babies are in a nonattention cycle, they are looking away; they are not particularly alert to gathering information from their world. If the relationship is synchronous, parents allow the baby to influence them by learning the baby's nonverbal language. They synchronize their own states of attention or nonattention to those of the baby, and these cycles help infants organize cognitive and emotional experience.

Mothers and fathers who aren't in a synchronous rhythm with their babies try to get their babies' attention. They may be trying to get their babies to look at them. Parents should try to synchronize their attention cycles with the baby's attention cycles and let the baby have nonattention cycles when the baby's nonverbal cues indicate that is what it wants to do. Then the infant learns to regulate its
internal state—physiology and emotions. All of this leads to self-regulation in the infant and greater understanding by the parents. A baby who cries even when the problem that triggered the crying (cold, for example) is no longer present (because the baby is now wrapped in a blanket) has not learned to self-regulate. A baby who allows itself to be comforted when its needs are met (and change from tears to satisfaction or sleep when it is no longer cold) is self-regulating—monitoring and changing ongoing behavior (crying).

Likewise, if dancers aren’t in sync or don’t know the signals that allow the man to lead, the results may be trod-upon feet, stumbling, and collisions with other dancers. If the cycles are out of rhythm between parents and child, it’s likely the child will have difficulty organizing how he or she belongs in the family and what sense to make out of emotional, physiological, and informational experiences. Synchronous cycles maintain regularity in an infant’s heart-beat, respiration, and temperature. There are physiological linkages between family members, even on the first day of life. These physiological links involve one or more family members sensing the physiology of a family member—increased heart rate, temperature, breathing rate, and the like—and reacting with his or her own similar physiological response. This physiological reactivity can be part of a positive or a negative family pattern.

Touching is another interesting family pattern. It is a message system between parents and child for quieting and for alerting and arousing. Slow patting motions are soothing to children as well as adults. Rapid patting is an alerting stimulus. When a distressed infant is picked up, a parent in synchrony can readily soothe the baby’s physiological arousal with the baby. As young parents, many of us were told to let fussy babies cry. The baby would learn that no one would come, we were told, and learn to self-comfort and stop “manipulating” the exhausted parents, rather like the style of dancing where partners don’t touch (a glance at MTV indicates that dancing can be a solitary pursuit without synchrony or togetherness between partners).

More recent research suggests that when babies are picked up, it helps them soothe their physiological systems. Holding them, rather than ignoring them, trains them to dampen their internal arousal of negative as well as intense emotions. Touch is important and is even related to developing a good, accurate body concept, with studies showing that parents who touch their children have children who have more accurate perceptions of their bodies.

Sight and touch are not the only senses involved in the family dance. Mothers’ voice patterns are synchronized with babies’ movements, an interesting phenomenon that has been documented for years. Although a baby moves in rhythm to its mother’s voice patterns, when the mother uses nonsense syllables instead of language, there is no such rhythm and synchrony. And children who later develop autism or schizophrenia or both show differences in this response to their mothers’ voices. They don’t have the same kinds of early rhythms. Developmental psychologist Jay Belsky writes that parents who are synchronous with infants soothe distress and influence how the child will respond to stressful situations. This contributes to the infant’s “emotional IQ,” or ability to understand its own emotional experience and later in life to be able to identify and express emotional experiences. Parents’ responsiveness to children in distress, providing stimulation and intimacy in the context of a warm, close relationship, contributes to the development of what we would call a “secure attachment style” in infants.

Researchers have identified three attachment styles. In a secure attachment style, the parent, father or mother, responds promptly to the baby’s stress. These parents provide moderate stimulation for the baby; they have warm involvement that’s
In a child who develops the second, avoidant attachment style, the parent’s behavior is such that he or she is controlling the interaction; there is excessive stimulation. For example, a parent with a baby in a nonattention state would work hard to get the baby to attend, trying to make eye contact when the baby isn’t ready. The parent intrudes into the child’s world; the child is not allowed to explore openly; the parent tries to control the child. The result is that they are asynchronous in rhythms. In the third, ambivalent attachment style, the parent responds slowly to the baby’s stress, provides low stimulation, and is fairly distant rather than involved with the baby.

Adults tend to exhibit the attachment styles of their parents. So as adults, if we have a secure style, we can be warm and affectionate, desire closeness, acknowledge stress, and modulate negative emotion. If we’re avoidant as adults, we’re cold or rejecting, we limit closeness and suppress emotion. If we’re ambivalent adults, we’re cautious around others; we want extreme closeness; we’re always trying to be close; we drive other people crazy because of it; and we dump anger and stress on other people rather than monitoring our own emotions.

These findings seem to be related to clinical psychologist John Gottman’s research about parenting and children’s responses. He identified two types of parents in relation to their children’s emotions. One type is the emotionally coaching parent. That parent helps children learn to dampen emotions when they’re aroused, helps children understand their experiences, and supplies words to label emotions. The emotionally coaching parent is not threatened by expression of emotion in the family, but encourages it. Children with emotionally coaching parents are better able to soothe themselves and restore their baseline physiology more quickly; they are less psychologically reactive to other family members.

The other type of parent is emotionally dismissive. He or she has difficulty helping children learn to soothe their emotions. In fact, the parent often does things that escalate the child’s emotions. Generally, they don’t understand emotions themselves. They often don’t help their children understand their experiences, and they rarely give them labels for their emotions.

What are some other patterns in the family dance? I’ve been interested for years in what are called family process rules. These rules are understood, but not usually talked about. They are not things like who does the chores or what the curfew is on school nights. These are rules that develop over time because of redundancy and social interaction. The particular type of interaction becomes a pattern. For example, a process rule can come from a couple’s dating pattern. When he comes to pick her up, he’s 15 minutes late on the first date. She doesn’t say much. Second date, he’s 15 minutes late; she doesn’t say much. He continues the pattern several times. Finally about the seventh time she’s fairly upset, and so she confronts him when he arrives and says you’ve been late now seven times; what’s going on? He becomes angry. Why? He has indeed been late seven times, but the redundancy in the interaction had become an unspoken rule. It seemed as if it was okay with her if he was late. Suddenly she is changing the rules.

If we return to the dance, your regular partner might know that you refuse to “dance” the clutch-and-sway two-step that ends up in a close hug for the duration of the song. Perhaps you’ve always gone for punch and cookies during those songs. Suddenly, he or she is leading you toward the dance floor and she puts both arms around your neck or he takes your right arm and puts it around his neck. The rules have apparently changed, and you need to talk about it.

Families operate on such implicit rules. A few years ago, now-retired marriage and family therapist Margaret Hoopes and I were particularly interested in negative family rules. Margaret and I brainstormed some of the rules that we thought would be true for alcoholic family systems. We eventually ended up with fifteen. Here are some examples:
Don’t feel or talk about feelings. Rather than be who you are, act good, right, strong, or perfect. Don’t have fun, be silly, or enjoy life. Don’t trust yourself, your feelings, or your conclusions.

We used the rules in a survey, and marriage and family therapist Jeffry Larson became interested and has also done several studies about implicit family rules. We’ve found that adults from alcoholic families reported using the negative rules to a greater extent than adults in from non-alcoholic families. Also, young adults from families with negative rules reported more problems with cohesion, emotional expressiveness, and overall family functioning. We’ve now developed a scale that includes positive rules, as well, and we’ll begin studies using that. Some examples of positive rules are:

- Encourage others to share their feelings.
- Play and have fun together.
- Be gentle.
- Don’t blame others unfairly.

Why would a family therapist be interested in a family’s unspoken rules? Because, if you can change the rules—the steps of the dance—you can sometimes change the whole dance festival—the family—perhaps for generations.

So how do you change the pattern? Well, you have to somehow get education and information, and you have to practice. If you desire you can get counseling, but education will do it for most families. Can I entice you to consider some new dance steps?

Self-soothing and self-regulation are fulfilling family dance steps. You can teach people that when they’re aware that they’re emotionally aroused, they can say things in a relationship like “relax, she still loves me. It’s not always like this. We really do love each other.” Some of those things can help. If you teach them to step back from the problem, to deep-breathe, to do relaxation techniques, they can dampen this problematic emotional arousal in about 20 minutes. If arguing family members return to the problem before that, they’re often not able to continue in any kind of a productive manner because they haven’t taken care of the self-regulation. The opposite of self-soothing is emotional or physiological escalation. Family members who have that problem may work themselves up to a dangerous point, as though each one danced faster as the other danced even faster, to the point of competing to see who could outlast the other, watch the other be injured or exhausted first, or “win.” If only one person in the family dance “wins,” then no one really wins.

What are some other good dance steps? A soft start is a good one for families. Parents, don’t go to your children and say, “You never take out the garbage. I’ve about had it with you!” That’s not a soft start. Soft starts are important in the same way that you wouldn’t begin a dance by throwing your partner in the air and trying to catch her or by jumping off a table and expecting him to catch you. Take
let fondness for your partner or children become rare. Praise and validate. The opposite of those things would be demanding, dwelling on bad times, criticizing, or showing resentment. When women make demands on men, the men usually withdraw. That’s what observational research shows. That’s because women tend to make more demands about relationship issues. There’s another piece of research that says if men get mad and make demands, women also withdraw. It’s just that men don’t make demands on relationships as much. Demand followed by withdrawal is not a good dance step. On the dance floor, it’s like one partner pulling the other too close and the other partner pushing away. The partners are sending mixed, opposing signals. There are more graceful and less exhausting ways to dance.

A third step, good in dancing and for families, is flexibility. It’s better than rigidity. Let me give you an example. I started changing my behavior as a result of my own research on the negative consequences of rigid thinking in relationships. I started realizing that there were multiple views of a certain situation, that my view wasn’t necessarily the correct one, and that I could entertain multiple views. Certainly as a family therapist, I had seen multiple views of what the damage was all about. The pattern looked similar, but each person had a different—yet rigid—explanation, usually indicating a highly distressed family.

There are many good dance steps: be more affectionate, eye-gaze more. Let your spouse and children influence you. Everyone who’s been dancing knows that it’s fun to suggest new dance steps and essential to signal a partner that he or she is about to collide with other dancers. If you accept family members’ influence on you, it’ll make your dance much better.

Learn conflict resolution processes. Most of us solve conflict in the same ways that our families did. Gottman’s research on marriage indicates that if you don’t learn different kinds of conflict resolution, you’re going to try to resolve everything in the same way.

Learn conflict resolution processes, and get the conflict out of the way. Happy family members may have intense conflicts, but they get them over with because they get the issue resolved. It doesn’t go on and on. You wouldn’t want to keep dancing if your partner reminded you every time you missed a step. Practice, take lessons, discuss why it’s important; but don’t continue to exchange the same old criticisms unless you want to be left on an empty dance floor. Get the problems resolved so you can get back to the joy of
dancing together.
Learn skills for nondefensiveness. When you’re defensive, you come up with an excuse for your behavior. Or you just counterattack. The message to your spouse or child is always, “I’m not to blame for this, you are; don’t try to put it on me.” I learned long ago that it was a great strategy just to defer to my wife when she was saying something about me. Say, “You’re right, dear. I really am a klutz; I probably learned it from my mother.” If you can’t self-soothe, you can’t be nondefensive. If you can become aware of your physiology rising, if you have to go away, you deep breathe, you do relaxation exercises, you tell yourself she really doesn’t hate me, she’s trying to give me feedback, she’s trying to work on this. It could be a new family dance step and I could become a better dancer. These are great things to learn.

Last, learn the lost art of listening. Responsive listening is important. The opposite of that is stonewalling, where somebody just stops listening, turns his or her head, and looks the other way. Stonewalling causes problems on top of problems. Responsive listening, where you listen (rather than planning your defense) and respond with expressions of your feelings, is a better step in the family dance. The family dance can be fast or slow, routine or exciting, a dance of mourning or a dance of happiness—or all those things at different times. Every family goes through cycles. The families that learn to soothe themselves and each other, to be nondefensive, and to be flexible will find great rewards. Most important, the father and mother must learn to bring healthy patterns to their marriage and family life, leaving unhealthy patterns behind. The family dance is not a matter of luck or fate; rather, we can learn new steps and then practice those steps as we join with our families in a dance of joy.

James M. Harper, MFT, Ph.D., is Director of BYU’s School of Family Life. This article is a companion to “The Marriage Dance,” Marriage & Families, Jan. 2001. (Visit www.marriageandfamilies.byu.edu for a copy of the earlier article.)

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