

FIT Science and Family Functioning

There has been a large increase in the number of children being diagnosed with some form of developmental disability such as Autism and Asperger Syndrome. A greater proportion of parents are also reporting difficulties in maintaining “normal” family life whilst caring for a child with “special needs”. In addition, many families appear to be dysfunctional, and children both more uncontrolled and uncontrollable, with all the social costs this implies. There is now a growing need for more understanding of family dysfunction, a greater need for parents and children to take more self-responsibility, and a need for professionals to provide families with support for the demands and constraints placed on family life by caring for a child with developmental difficulties.

Our understanding of normal and problematic family life is largely descriptive of the characteristics of healthy versus unhealthy families, telling us little of the processes that are involved in each. What seems clear is that families experiencing problems in day-to-day life have difficulty in changing their current ways of doing things in order to improve family functioning. Bad habits are responsible for more dysfunction, but people are becoming less able to respond to the demands of life, even within the family context. Even when offered support in the form of family therapies, most families return to their usual, unhealthy ways of doing things. Families experiencing problems are often trapped by their past ways of doing things - by their habits. Yet to cope with family and life events people need to adopt a more flexible approach that they are unable to do. Behavioural flexibility, coupled with making decisions on a sound footing is essential to be able to deal with on-going hassles and improve life.

Where do solutions lie? Perhaps FIT Science has something to offer both families and professionals who work with them. FIT Science suggests that in order for people to display appropriate flexibility of behaviour (Outer FITness), they need Inner FITness, (which is made up of five Constancies in FIT Science). Inner FITness allows us to perceive the demands of life accurately, to make the right decisions, and to select appropriate actions to deal with the wide range of situations we experience. Professor Fletcher takes the view that by increasing Behavioural Flexibility we can improve thinking patterns, or Inner FITness, through the new experiences the enhanced

behaviours provide. Inner FITness, coupled with FIT Behavioural Flexibility, is effectively an antidote to negative habits. This suggests that increasing Behavioural Flexibility amongst families could provide them with essential resources to deal with challenging events such as the stresses involved in caring for a child with special needs. The following report therefore explores the relationship between FITness, both Inner and Outer, and family functioning.

Participants

110 adults (79 females, 31 males) took part in this study. The most common age category of participants was 18-21, followed by 22-30, 41-50, and 31-40. The majority of participants classified themselves as White British (59.1%) and Indian (19.1%), with the other 14 ethnic categories accounting for 21.7% of participants. Most were the first or second born amongst their siblings (76.3%). They were recruited in a variety of ways, but some participants also volunteered themselves through an advertisement placed on the National Autistic Society's research web page.

Procedure

Participants completed the *Family Assessment Device* (FAD) which allows for the classification of one's perception of family life as healthy or unhealthy and *The FIT Profiler*.

Outcomes

High FIT scores are indicative of better levels of FITness. On the other hand, high scores in FAD or general family functioning signal problematic family life. The main correlational relationships are shown in Table 1. These show that there is a statistically significant negative relationship between Outer FITness and family functioning, indicating that individuals reporting healthier levels of general family functioning are more Behaviourally Flexible. Better levels of Overall FITness (incorporating both Inner and Outer FITness) were strongly associated with healthier reports of general family functioning.

Table 1: The relationship between FITness and general family functioning.

FIT Dimension	General Family Functioning Score
Overall FIT	-.28
Inner FITness (FIT Integrity)	-.18
Outer FITness (Behavioural Flexibility)	-.23

To further understand the relationship between FITness and overall family functioning, the FIT scores of individuals whose reports of family life were classified as either *healthy* or *unhealthy* were compared. With the *Family Assessment Device* a score of over 2 in general family functioning indicates *unhealthy* family life and this criterion was used to classify families within this study.

Table 2 displays statistics that help to show how important FIT was at distinguishing health from unhealthy family functioning. It shows numbers that show the size of the statistical link between FIT and functioning out of 100 (actually the percentage of variance in general family functioning scores that FIT variables were able to account for in individuals who perceived their families as healthy or unhealthy in overall functioning). Of course there are many factors that are likely to play a role in how well a family functions other than FIT factors, but Table 2 shows that being FITter is one important predictor for those who perceive their families as healthy in overall functioning, FIT variables play a significant role in perceptions of family life. This implies that FITness is an essential component of healthy family functioning

Table 2: Percentage of variance that FIT variables account for in reports of family functioning.

FIT Dimension	Perception of Overall Family Functioning	Percentage of variance explained by FIT factor (out of 100%)
Overall FIT	Healthy	20.9
	Unhealthy	6.4
Inner FITness	Healthy	15.4
	Unhealthy	3.0
Behavioural Flexibility	Healthy	15.9
	Unhealthy	7.1

Conclusions

This report has shown that FITness plays a significant role in the way people perceive their family life. In general, as FITness increases, individuals report healthier levels of general family functioning. This was true for both Outer and Inner FIT measures. It was also found that FITness has a pronounced role in determining perceptions of family life for those who report functional versus dysfunctional family life. This suggests that both Inner FITness and FIT Behavioural Flexibility may be key ingredients that shape family life. Specifically, it appears that those high in FITness deem family life as less challenging as they are able to adapt themselves to suit the needs of their changing circumstances.

Professor Fletcher suggests that FITness is essentially trainable by increasing the repertoire of behaviours people engage in. Over time, these changes in behaviours can serve to modify the inner cognitive FIT Constancies too. These increases in FITness allow people to better assess the particular needs of a given situation and respond more appropriately. In this way, family behaviours become appropriate as opposed to being dictated by habits. In this study we found that FIT was associated with fewer negative family habits and more positive ones (the way in which habits and FIT are related is discussed in another FIT Report).

These findings suggest that FIT-based training may benefit people in low functioning families, or those with particular problems on a day-to-day basis. Whilst all families

encounter stress-inducing events, it is the way these are dealt with that is important. The results from this study indicate the potential beneficial effect of FIT training to improve family functioning and to protect families with special needs from negative outcomes.

Drawing on the notions of FIT Science, this report has highlighted a possible means by which functional families are able to deal with day-to-day hassles. In doing so, we have also uncovered a way in which we may be able to train families experiencing problems to actively take control of their circumstances in order to improve family life. In the future we will be using FIT Science programmes in families struggling with aspects of family life in order to improve/ restore functionality. Professor Fletcher feels that this would be an effective tool allowing families facing problems to break away from their negative habits and explore more effective ways of dealing with the difficulties they encounter.