

Olson Circumplex Family Model

Adapted from Olson Circumplex Family Model: A Systemic Approach to Couple and Family Relationships, by Catherine Sanders MAPS and Dr Jordan Bell MAPS
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Modelling family dynamics

The Olson Circumplex Model (Olson, 2000) conceptualises flexibility, cohesion and communication skills as three central variables that define family interactions.

Flexibility - between chaos and rigidity

Olson's model addresses flexibility through examining the amount of change that is possible in leadership, role relationships and family rules. Both stability and change are necessary in healthy family and couple relationships, and the ability to allow change when it is needed distinguishes functional from dysfunctional families.

Too little flexibility leads to *rigidity*, with the family or couple relationship unable to shift or evolve in response to change, whether it arises internally through individual members' development or is imposed by the environment. Too much flexibility results in *chaos*, with family members unable to create shared agreements that govern their actions and inter-relationships, providing no firm base on which to stand. In between these two extremes lies the balanced options of *flexible* or *structured* families, where the balance between rigidity and chaos is negotiated from a strong base of shared understanding of rules and roles within the relationship.

Dimensions of Flexibility (after Olsen, 2000)

Chaotic	Flexible	Structured	Rigid
Lack of leadership	Shared leadership	Leadership sometimes shared	Authoritarian leadership
Erratic discipline	Democratic discipline	Somewhat democratic discipline	Strict discipline
Dramatic role shifts	Role-sharing change	Roles stable	Roles seldom change
Too much change	Change when necessary	Change when demanded	Too little change
Unbalanced	Balanced	Balanced	Unbalanced

Cohesion - not disengaged, not enmeshed

The level of emotional bonding between family members is measured through the degree of cohesion - the extent and nature of connections, boundaries and shared interests within the family. Cohesion refers to the balance between family members' independence and their togetherness. Once again, both appropriate levels of connection to, and independence from, family are important for maintaining healthy relationships.

Too much closeness results in *enmeshment* - families exhibit extreme amounts of emotional closeness and may be dependent on, and reactive to, one another. High levels of family loyalty and consensus are required and there is little tolerance for private space or relationships outside the family. Too much separateness causes *disengagement*, where families exhibit little emotional closeness, instead remaining focussed on individual experiences and activities. There is limited commitment to family interests, and members are often unable to turn to one another for emotional or practical support or assistance. The balance is found for *separated* or *connected* families, where a balance between individual and group interests supports optimal family functioning.

Dimensions of Cohesion (after Olsen, 2000)

Disengaged	Separated	Connected	Enmeshed
'I'	'I - We'	'I - We'	'We'
Little closeness	Low-moderate closeness	Moderate-high closeness	Very high closeness
Little loyalty	Some loyalty	High loyalty	Very high loyalty
High independence	Interdependent (more independence)	Interdependent (more dependence)	High dependency
Unbalanced	Balanced	Balanced	Unbalanced

Communication - a facilitating skill

Olson's model regards communication as a 'facilitating' skill - one which has the potential to support families and couples to move to more functional levels of flexibility and cohesion. Families which show balanced levels of engagement and openness to change tend to score higher on measures of listening skills, self-disclosure, and demonstrating respect and regard in communication.

Integrating the model

Olson views flexibility and cohesion as two dimensions on a grid (see Figure 1), so that families can be, for example, *flexibly connected*, or *structurally separated*, or *chaotically enmeshed*, or *rigidly disengaged*. Families and couples which are characterised by more balanced characteristics tend to be more functional over the developmental cycle, and tend to have better communications skills and habits (white boxes in Figure 1). Families and couples who possess more unbalanced tendencies find it challenging to deal with the pressures caused by changes in working arrangements, illness and injury, infidelity, challenging child behaviours, or the intersecting developmental arcs of different family members (black boxes in Figure 1). They tend to have poor communications skills. Families with a mixture of balanced and unbalanced styles (grey boxes in Figure 1) will find it challenging to deal with pressures and changes, but have a stronger foundation on which to base a move to a more balanced mode of interaction, especially if they can also develop their communications skills.

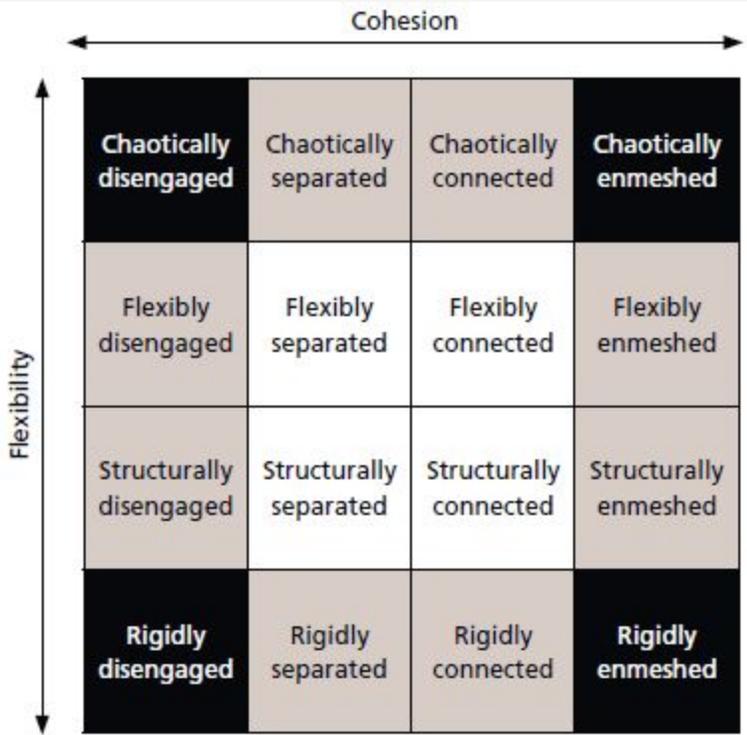


Figure 1. The Circumplex Model (after Olson, 2000)