

Dreikurs' Four Goals: The Clarification of Some Misconceptions

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One of Dreikurs' major and finest contributions to Adlerian Psychology was the theory of the four goals. The conception was readily received and disseminated because it possessed several advantages. It was not, like many other theories, couched in esoteric jargon and embellished by allusions to mythical and mystical origins. It was not a theory designed solely to comprehend psychopathology. Nor was it completely within the domain of professional practitioners. Parents, teachers--anyone with a modicum of intelligence and understanding--could comprehend the theory and could apply it. It eliminated in many instances the necessity of referral of parents and children to professional therapists for the solution of problems. It relieved educators of that altogether common feeling that "nothing seems to work. I've tried everything!"

Now that a second generation is applying the four goals, we discover that many misconceptions have arisen with respect to this important formulation. It is the purpose of this paper to clarify some of these misconceptions.

1. The four goals do not encompass all of children's behavior. They are only the goals of children's misbehavior. The titles of several articles by Dreikurs (3, 4) confirm this. In Children: The Challenge (6:64), Dreikurs and Soltz write, "When we are aware of the four possible mistaken goals behind children's misbehavior, we have a basis for action." In The Challenge of Parenthood (2:190), he writes, "All disturbing behavior of the child is directed toward one of the four possible goals."
2. The theory of the four goals relates only to children. Efforts to apply them to adults are at the very least simplistic. That Dreikurs did not intend to describe adult behavior or misbehavior in terms of the four goals can be found in several writings. In Psychology In The Classroom (5:31-32), Dreikurs states, "These four goals of disturbing behavior can be observed in all young children up to the age of ten. . . ." He amplified this statement in discussing one of his television programs. "The four goals are exclusive only for young children until about age 10 because they depend for their status on adults. The goals also can be found in teenagers and adults but not exclusively. They find other means for having status and significance (7:87-88)."
3. The four goals are the immediate goals of misbehavior. They are not the long range goals found in the life style (8, 9). One cannot determine the life style from the knowledge of a child's dominant goals. Since the life style is continuous in the life cycle and the four goals are not (that is, they apply to the child but not to the adult), it is apparent that the life style goals and the four goals are not synonymous. The four goals are situational as Dreikurs points out: "A child's goal may occasionally vary with circum-

stance; he may act to attract attention at one moment, and assert power or seek revenge at another (2:190).”

While the life style goals and the four goals are not identical, there is a relationship between them. Dreikurs makes this connection in the following statement:

The relationship between the life style and the prevalent goals can be described through the example of two of the most frequently found personality patterns. A child who thinks he must be first to have any place in the group, because he was dethroned by a sibling and had to fight to maintain his superiority in the family, can try to establish his superiority first through an active-constructive AGM (Attention Getting Mechanism). If this avenue is blocked, he may try to steal attention by being tough, or silly, and so forth. These are active-destructive methods of getting attention. He may then turn to a display of destructive power; he can still be first in being bad. And if he turns to revenge, he may try to be first in viciousness, and he may succeed (5:31).

He further distinguished between life style goals and the four goals when he writes:

If a child under ten is approached in the proper fashion and informed about his goals, he will show the characteristic “recognition reflex” which indicates that he recognizes the correctness of the interpretation. But more than this: a child up to this age is able to give up a particular behavior as soon as he recognizes its purpose. (This refers only to distinct and special actions, not to his general life pattern) (5:34).

4. While the titles of Dreikurs’ papers seem to suggest that he intended his theory to explain the goals of the “disturbed” or “maladjusted” child, what he actually intended was to explain disturbing behavior, not disturbed children (Cf quotations in 1 and 2 above). All children---“disturbed,” “maladjusted,” or “normal”---choose misbehaviors in accordance with these goals.
5. Identifying a goal through naming it adds little to its understanding. When teachers of the theory present assessment problems to their students, it is not uncommon for students to shout out “power” or “AGM.” Fortunately, since Dreikurs described only four goals, the maximum error can only consist of three wrong guesses. In the many years of our association with Dreikurs we never heard him use these labels except in writing or teaching. Since he accepted the assumption that Adlerian psychology was a psychology of use, he described children in terms of their movement toward goals. Thus, instead of saying that the bad dreams of a child were an attention-getting device, he would declare that the child non-consciously creates bad dreams so that he can keep his parents busy with him 24 hours a day. Not every child who uses the AGM demonstrates so much creativity and to merely label his goal as attention-getting is to lose sight of the child’s uniqueness.

6. Dreikurs committed an error when he named the first goal the AGM. The term "mechanism" is not consistent with Adlerian assumptions. A mechanism is something machine-like which is set in motion.* Attention-getting is a free choice of the child.
7. Because of Dreikurs' enormous contribution to Adlerian psychology, many speak of Dreikursian psychology (e.g., 10) or describe him as a neo-Adlerian. Dreikurs maintained that while he added to Adlerian psychology the background for the four goals and the other topics to which Dreikurs addressed himself could be found in Adler's writings. He felt that his psychology was neither neo-Adlerian nor Dreikursian. He described himself as an Adlerian (1).

*Webster gives a second meaning: i.e., a process or technique for achieving a result.

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