

# A Family Management Training Program

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Raising a family is a complex, challenging, and anxiety-provoking process. The process by which one learns to be a parent can be no less complex. Unfortunately, parents are not taught their role of being a parent and generally resort to the family system they know best—their own, for better or worse. The problem is that these earlier methods focused heavily on autocratic procedures for raising children. Dictatorial, autocratic methods have proven to be ineffective and fail to raise responsible children. The autocratic relationship of superior-inferior of dominance—submission is obsolete. Psychologists, sociologists, and educators recognize the need for democratic relationships, which emphasize freedom and responsibility, and its implications for the family. Dreikurs (1964) aptly described the spirit of the democratic relationship by stating, “Freedom is part of democracy; but the subtle point that we cannot have freedom unless we respect the freedom of others is seldom recognized. No one can enjoy freedom unless his neighbor has it too. In order for everyone to have freedom, we must have order. And order bears with it certain restrictions and obligations” (p. 9). Out of this environment comes the basis for a new order and set of principles based upon freedom and responsibility. Children must be motivated and encouraged to maintain family order. Families need to learn new techniques and skills to live and grow in a democratic environment.

Parents can learn appropriate and effective procedures and skills for raising children. It is the necessary role of counselors to provide creative, effective parent education programs to fill a void left by our educational institutions.

The major purpose of this article is to introduce an innovative, educational skill-building program entitled “Family Management Training.” This program stimulates family interpersonal growth and self-management utilizing democratic principles. The article describes the nature of the program, the procedures employed, and a case study illustration.

The authors have had experience working with Adlerian techniques in family systems. Unhappy with the didactic approach of imparting Adlerian concepts to parents, the authors set upon designing a program that was

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based on experiential learning. In this process, the parent and child are provided with activities to stimulate emotional involvement and an opportunity to express feelings about old behaviors.

As a result of several planning meetings, the framework for the Family Management Training (FMT) Program was developed. The format consisted of lecturettes, warm-up exercises, video-tape role-play and feedback, and weekly contracts to try out new behaviors. The purpose of the program is educational, not therapeutic, and to benefit both the parents and the children. Stating it simply, the FMT program focuses on the understanding of the child's misbehaving goals, the parent's feelings related to those goals, and a chance to do something positive about the situation.

The FMT program was developed at the California State University, Sacramento Counseling Center. The facilitators utilized a group room which was furnished with a comfortable couch, pillows, and wall-to-wall carpeting. This informal atmosphere minimized distractions and provided adequate space to facilitate a group of six parents and nine children. The room was equipped with video-tape camera and monitor, chalkboard, and adjustable lighting.

To initiate the program, publicity flyers were designed and disseminated throughout the campus. The publicity flyers stated the nature of the group, that it was to be held for six meetings, two hours in duration, and the time and place to meet. The publicity did not draw many people. Follow-up publicity via the campus radio and newspaper did not increase the membership. It appeared that the student population linked this activity with other therapy-oriented groups administered by the Counseling Center, and the public interest diminished. The facilitators set out on a speaking tour to explain that this was an educational skill-building program, not a therapeutic group. This strategy worked, as the participation began to increase. This enabled the facilitators to begin initiating the first phase of the FMT program.

There are two phases to the FMT program: (a) a parent orientation, whereby parents receive skills, techniques, and understanding of their role, in a supportive atmosphere, and (b) total involvement of the family members. The general format for each phase is as follows:

Phase 1—Group meetings one through three

- A. Orientation. The FMT program orientation concentrates on an understanding of the children's misbehaving goals, the use of encouragement, the influence of the family constellation and using communication skills to reduce conflicts. Each theme is discussed in the form of a lecturette, and illustrated through role-play exercises.
- B. Developing skills. Utilizing the concepts in the lecturette, parents identify three specific situations they have had difficulty with to role-play and receive feedback. The scenario is re-played with coaching to experience the new skills. Contractual agreements are established

between parents and children to work on specific techniques during the week. Sharing of what took place during the week is available at the beginning of the next meeting.

#### Phase 2—Group meetings four through six

The children are invited into the group so that the parent/child interaction can be observed on video-tape. Feedback from the group is utilized to formulate new sets of behavior.

It is important at this point to understand how the program works with an actual family. Since all the material and interpersonal dynamics that took place over a six-week period of training can not be covered, the following case example focuses on a specific problem area—discouragement.

Billy was the youngest (16 years old) of three children and the only child currently at home with his parents, Ruth and John. His parents seemed calm but apprehensive during the first meeting. Ruth was more verbal and indicated some resistance to our Family Management Training program. Both parents felt they had to protect their son and be totally responsible for all his actions. Billy's response was rebellion; stealing the family car and subsequently burglarizing his own home. The parents felt emotionally bankrupt.

After a lecturette, the parents were encouraged to identify specific situations at home that caused them difficulty. They were able to list three specific instances, which they rank ordered as to degree of difficulty. The first incident occurred when John asked Ruth to go to a basketball game and when she refused asked Billy as a second choice. Billy said he preferred watching TV. The entire scene was role-played with one co-facilitator playing Billy. John observed his behavior on video-tape and saw himself as powerful while he ejected feelings of guilt upon his son. John shared his hurt feelings with the group. After the replay, John was coached by the second facilitator utilizing techniques of encouragement and logical consequences. A second video-tape playback showed John more confident and capable of more rational purposive behavior toward his son.

At the next group meeting, Ruth and John seemed to have begun to understand more clearly their mistaken interpretation of Billy's goal to gain importance within the family. The more the parents criticized Billy's behavior, the more Billy had to show his importance, even if it meant doing so in a negative manner.

The second specific incident concentrated on Billy's discouragement over his art work. John was talented and expected his son to do as well. Once again, the video replay showed how important the father had made it for his son to paint as competently as he did. Both parents became more expressive as the meetings progressed. After observing their own behavior and sharing their feelings, they realized how unimportant Billy must have felt in their family.

The third specific situation involved conflict over Billy getting his own transportation to play a game of pool. He wanted to get a friend's bicycle and by the time he joined his father one and a half hours later, John no longer wanted to play. This situation produced hostility and hurt feelings for both. The pattern of power and conflict needed to be resolved.

Due to parental demands to perform in specific ways, Billy felt many constraints on his personal freedom and that he had no real choices available. On one hand to assert himself meant disrespect to his parents, on the other submitting to their needs left Billy feeling unimportant and discouraged. John and Ruth realized through the group feedback segment of the meeting that their over-responsibility for Billy fostered his discouragement. They needed to practice encouraging Billy whenever possible and giving him clear-cut choices on a consistent basis. The facilitators worked with them on the setting of limits and sharing that process with Billy. The entire group discussed alternative strategies for implementing limit-setting skills.

At the fourth meeting the children of all the parents joined the group. Billy appeared withdrawn and unwilling to participate. Even after coaxing by his parents he remained quiet and uncooperative. Although he began to participate in a warm-up exercise that required verbalizing negative feelings, he then got quiet and sat passively through the rest of the meeting.

Billy ran away from home prior to the fifth meeting. This confirmed the facilitators, observations of Billy's needs for independence and a sense of recognition. Ruth was extremely upset and blamed the facilitators for aggravating her. It appeared that Ruth was really hurt by her son's leaving and through her vulnerability struck out at anyone within reach.

After reviewing the video-tape and some group discussion, Ruth recognized for the first time what she was doing to contribute to Billy's problem. In effect, her role as "super mom" denied Billy the opportunity to succeed in obtaining his goals; increased personal responsibility, and a sense of personal worth.

Billy returned for the last session, much to the delight of his parents. The group responded positively to his return and this stimulated the family to share their positive feelings toward each other.

At the end of this emotional high, John stood in the middle of the group and embraced his son. Ruth joined them for a family hug. The parents established a contract with Billy to: (a) express positive feelings to each other on a consistent basis, (b) communicate in an honest, genuine, and leveling manner, and (c) practice encouraging Billy to initiate responsible actions.

The Family Management Training program as outlined in this article, has been a helpful strategy for parents and children to better understand their roles. By no means is our work complete, we have touched the tip of the iceberg. Further refinement of the program is needed and some alteration is being attempted presently, as the facilitators begin working with the children and their parents in two separate groups prior to bringing them together.

It is the author's hope by describing this pilot program that others may assist us in strengthening our attempts to improve our efforts in the future.

Family education is a complex, sensitive, and difficult job. Once we provide parents and children with the opportunity to let their shields down and allow them to express feelings honestly, openly, and genuinely to each other, then successful management of the family can come about. That is our challenge as counselors.

### **References**

Dreikurs, R., & Soltz, V. *Children: The challenge*. New York: Meredith Press, 1964.