

Use and Misuse of Dreikursian Principles in Parent Education

Amy Lew

Dreikursian principles, i.e., the use of natural and logical consequences, are such useful tools in dealing with the “challenge of children” that we must guard against the pitfall of using them merely as solutions to our conflicts with our children, instead of using them for their intended purpose: to help us guide and direct our children to the path of social responsibility and caring. What so often seems to happen is that we treat the symptom, in this case misbehavior, and forget about curing the disease, “undeveloped social interest.” The result of this oversight is that new symptoms keep cropping up, and we spend our time and energy applying bandages and doing cosmetic surgery.

This situation presents a problem for beginning counselors, study group leaders, and parents alike. Counselors and leaders often fall into the trap of wanting to provide solutions for parents. While it is true that the parents are usually asking “What should I do when . . .,” by providing answers, we deprive the parents of the chance to learn how to deal more effectively with their children themselves. It is as if we have a bag of tricks from which we keep pulling out handy answers to the parents’ problems.

There are several reasons why a counselor might get caught up in giving answers. Of course, it feels good to help somebody out; but we should also consider the idea that we may be enjoying the position of being “all-knowing” of the “fixer.” Whatever the reasons for our actions, the effect is that we are in danger of passing onto the parent the feeling that we have some “secret tricks.” The parent is then likely to reach one of two conclusions: that he or she must keep coming back for “professional help” because there are some mysterious answers or, perhaps even more unsatisfactory, that he or she can learn these new tricks to better enable him or herself to “get his or her own way” or to “outsmart the child.”

What can be done to avoid this problem? I believe that the answer lies in focusing on the purpose of the behavior. When the counselor helps the parent

Amy Lew, BSC, is currently completing her master’s degree in counseling psychology at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

Table 1
Identifying the Four Mistaken Goals of Children

Child's response to correction	My feeling	Likely goal
Stops for a while	Annoyance	Attention-getting
Continues	Anger	Power
Continues with a vengeance	Hurt; outrage	Revenge
Gives up	Hopelessness	Assumed disability

understand the child's goals, along with learning Dreikursian principles such as mutual respect, encouragement, and logical consequences, the parent is more likely to be able to decide on more effective ways of dealing with the specific situations. The parents can apply their new knowledge and concepts themselves. Perhaps more important, parents who understand why a child is behaving in a certain manner are more likely to look beyond the specific situations to their child's discouragement and faulty conclusions about life. The parents can then begin to provide a more encouraging atmosphere in order to guide their children and help develop their social interest. Thus, they not only cure the ills but also foster growth.

Counselors and leaders are used to changing the focus of attention from the general misbehavior to the specific incident in order to discover the child's mistaken goals. They ask the parents: (a) to tell them exactly what they did to try to stop the unacceptable behavior, (b) how the child reacted to correction, and (c) how the parents felt about the child's response. Counselors could, at the same time, share with the parents information about the four mistaken goals and perhaps a chart such as Table 1. With this information, along with the counselor's demonstration, parents can learn to identify their child's goal themselves.¹

After identifying the child's goal, parents still need to decide how to improve the situation. Instead of offering solutions, the counselor can, by asking leading questions, guide the parents to their own answers. For example:

Johnny constantly follows Mom around asking questions and wanting help with simple tasks. Mom figures that, since he does stop for a while when she gets annoyed with him, his probable goal is attention getting. She knows, however, "how important it is for a child to get enough at-

1. There may, of course, be some parents who are unwilling or unable to look beyond the discomfort of the immediate problem situation. And, in these cases, the counselor may be forced to, at least at first, supply solutions.

tion” and worries that Johnny might feel “deprived,” so she stops what she is doing each time he approaches and explains that she loves him very much but is just too busy now to pay attention to him.

The counselor begins by asking Mom what she is actually doing each time she stops to tell Johnny that she is too busy. By rephrasing the question several times and perhaps even gently teasing—“why should he stop if he is getting what he wants”—the counselor helps Mom to see how she is satisfying the child’s goal of gaining undue attention.

At this point it is common for parents to worry about the “universally known psychological need for enough love and attention.” This concern of the parents provides the counselor with the perfect opportunity to guide them to distinguish between just stopping misbehavior and influencing positive social growth. The counselor asks Mom whether she wants to teach her child that he is only important when she is paying attention to him, or that he is always important, even when Mom is busy with other things. By helping Mom crystallize these two choices, the counselor aids Mom in seeing that she has two jobs to do: she must stop giving Johnny undue attention, thereby taking away the payoff for misbehavior, and she must think of ways to encourage more acceptable behavior, to show him, when he isn’t expecting or demanding it, that he is important. The counselor can help Mom think of several ways she might stimulate better behavior.

As parents are led through several problem-solving situations, they can begin to ask themselves the following questions:

1. Is what I am doing effective?
2. What is the child’s goal (Table 1), and does my behavior satisfy it?
3. What do I want to teach my child? (my broader social value)
4. What am I teaching him/her by what I am saying and doing?
5. How can I stop reinforcing this misbehavior and encourage a more constructive behavior?

Another example of how parents could use these questions might prove helpful: In this case, a father finds it very difficult to stay out of his children’s fights. He knows he shouldn’t get involved, yet he worries about the younger child. What will happen to him, who will stand up for his rights? Won’t his big sister push him around?

When Dad begins to analyze the situation in light of the above questions, he begins to reach a whole new viewpoint:

1. Am I effective? No, because they continue to fight frequently.
2. What is the goal? To get me involved (attention getting) and they certainly do.
3. What do I want to teach my children? Cooperation and mutual respect.
4. What am I teaching them? That I have little faith in their ability to get along. That I have to solve their problems for them.
5. What can I do? (a) I can stop interfering in their arguments. I can tell them that I am confident that they can handle it themselves. (b) I can start a family project which requires cooperation. Perhaps we could build something together. We could talk about why people need to cooperate and what happens if we don't. We would take walks, see movies, read books, and try to pick out ways that people cooperate.

When a counselor or leader follows this route of teaching parents to investigate the dynamics of the situation through an understanding of the child's mistaken goals, he or she encourages the parents to do two things: to create their own solutions to their problems and to develop a program of child rearing that enables them to influence the development of their child's social interest.

A review of the above reveals that what is actually being recommended is that counselors and parent study leaders show parents as much respect as the parents are encouraged to show their children. Sadly, it seems that counselors, in their attempt to solve problems for the parents, all too often forget to follow their own suggested process of problem-solving.

Dreikurs (1970) described four essential principles of conflict solving: mutual respect; pinpointing the problem, finding the underlying issues; reaching a new agreement—agreeing to stop fighting and look for other ways of resolution; and participation in decision making and responsibility. Dinkmeyer and McKay (1973) applied these principles to child raising; Pew and Pew (1972) applied them to problem solving in a marriage. Should they not also be applied to the process of helping parents?

One way to show mutual respect, Dreikurs (1964) suggests, is to "never do for the child what he can do for himself" (p. 193). Doing otherwise suggests to the child that we have little faith in his ability to handle his or her own problems. By giving solutions to parents, counselors show a similar lack of respect for the parents' ability to apply their own new knowledge themselves.

The second principle, pinpointing the issue, has been the focus of the previous paragraphs. The counselor must help the parent look beyond the obvious misbehavior to the underlying issues, the child's mistaken goals, and how the parents feed into them.

Reaching a new agreement follows logically from pinpointing the issue. Dreikurs says that the focus must be changed from what the other person should do to improve the situation to what I can do to make it better. By refraining from telling the parents what they should do (giving solutions), we allow the parents to decide what they will do for themselves. In addition, it is easier for parents who are aware of the underlying issues to switch from thinking about ways to force their child to change what he is doing to ways that they can change what they are doing in order to improve the situation.

By reflective listening, alternative exploration, and asking leading questions, counselors not only guide the parents to their own insights, but also allow them full involvement in the decision-making process.

By following this process, counselors are able to model the very principles and techniques that they are trying to teach.

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