

# Application of Adlerian Theory to School Phobia

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The problem of children's phobia is one that continues to confront the parent, teacher, and helping professional. There are numerous theoretical and methodological contributions from the psychoanalytic (Finch, 1958; Kutash, 1965; Rachman & Costello, 1961), behavioral (Garvey & Hegrenes, 1966; Lazarus & Abramovitz, 1962), and family therapy (Koegler & Brill, 1967; Shaw, 1966) literature. Adlerian theory is also applicable to the treatment of phobia.

The system of personality theory and psychological treatment as derived from the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler has gained in recognition in recent years, especially in school settings. The following case study demonstrates the application of treatment strategies as derived from Adlerian psychology to a school-phobic child. Theory is linked to counseling procedure from inception to termination.

## Case History

Michael is a 13-year-old, white male who is enrolled in a private school in a moderate-size town. He has one sibling, Lisa, age 10. Mike was referred for counseling by the school psychologist for a severe phobic reaction to school.

Adler believed that the oldest child in the family is likely to be the more maladjusted among the children. For a time, the oldest is an only child and typically the center of the family's attention. Suddenly, a dethronement occurs with the birth of the second child. No longer is the first child the center of attention. The oldest child usually feels rejected and is resentful. At the same time, there are strong parental expectations that the oldest child should succeed and be very responsible. This lack of security (felt rejection) and high levels of expectation do not bode well for adjustment (Adler, 1956, p. 379).

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## Background

The family had lived in a large Southern city for many years, and Mike had gone to public schools until the age of 10. His “adjustment problems” of not getting along with peers (other kids would pick fights with him), being a loner, and maintaining very marginal grades became worse, until, finally, his parents decided that a private school might be better for him. He seemed happier at the new school, his grades improved some (Bs and mostly Cs), but his social adjustment always appeared marginal. He never really fit in with his peer group.

Typically, the first child is very pampered before the arrival of the second child. We would guess that Mike was pampered and subsequently suffered dethronement. He may also have been unprepared for the arrival of his sister. Proper preparation would include training Mike to cooperate in her care as well as the usual verbal explanations of a newborn’s arrival. If he had been properly prepared, the crisis created by the birth of the younger sister would probably have not left any negative residues (Adler, 1956, p. 378).

Pampering, dethronement, and lack of preparation for the arrival of a sibling often results in an attempt to pull the mother back with strong efforts to regain the favored position. These efforts can be more positive in the form of doing everything to please the parents (e.g., the “model child”). On the other hand, efforts can be in the direction of disability and demanding help.

When Mike was 10, his father was transferred to another city a month after the start of the school year. The family moved and Mike was enrolled in a public school. He immediately encountered difficulties in the form of fights with other children. Mike complained that the blacks were out to get him. He didn’t like the teachers and judged that the school was “inferior” to his former school. An “I’m better than the rest of these kids” attitude was apparent from Mike. His mother seemed to reinforce and support the notion that the other kids were at least partly responsible for Mike’s troubles.

So, despite economic hardships, his parents transferred Mike to a private school. He attended school a day and a half, then began expressing fears and anxieties about the new environment. From that point on, Mike resisted all efforts to get him to school.

For the next 5 days, Mother and Father tried every tactic from being nice, understanding, and sympathetic to being logical and rational to being firm and forceful; but nothing would work. Mike would, at times, have to be carried to the car, driven to school, and then pushed out onto the school grounds, as Dad sped away. Mike would go from the counselor’s office to the principal’s office, where he would share his fears and apprehensions to anyone who would listen. He would receive permission to call home and then, crying and

sobbing, he would convince Mom that he was too frightened, scared, unhappy, and confused to continue. Therefore (according to his logic), she would have to come rescue him. Mom would acquiesce. When she would try to be firm, he would accuse her of not loving him and would threaten to run away. After several days of this pattern, the school became increasingly impatient and initiated a referral for counseling.

Freud would explain Mike's desire to cling to his mother as clear evidence of the unresolved Oedipal complex. Adler, on the other hand, would see Mike's behavior as an all-out attempt to regain center stage and the lost servitude of his mother. Mike is putting forth an extreme effort to regain his favored position and the exclusive services of his mother.

Mike displayed paranoid-type behavior with his sensitivity to the loss of his desired special position by feeling other were "out to get him." This is the pattern he had repeated since his sister's birth: "People are unfair to me." It was accompanied by an exaggerated sense of his importance. Hence, he simultaneously felt that he was special and didn't belong: "I don't fit with the other kids." Teachers, principals, secretaries, and counselors were all very involved with him, which confirmed his importance. This was a sign of discouragement. Mike was not part of the regular group. Rather, he behaved as the pampered child who must have continual reassurance that he is special and worthy of attention.

In the sibling relationship, a state of warfare existed between Mike and his sister as they competed for their parents' attention and affection. Both children operated from a "passive" style, behaviorally. Mike was a devious, manipulative, inward, and socially awkward youngster. The parents reported quite a lot of fighting between the children, with most of it being of the verbal type—critical comments, putdowns, tattling on each other.

Lisa was very much of a pleaser and a good student. She was conscientious about her homework and grades (whereas Mike was a poor student, although he was an excellent and voracious reader; he would spend a lot of time by himself reading). Lisa was small, frail, sickly, and suffered from asthma. The parents didn't expect anything of her (by way of chores around the house), and Mike resented this strongly. Mike projected a pessimistic, sour, resentful, and unfair attitude about life. He suffered "dethronement" at the birth of his sister, as well as when she entered school and began to excel.

When dethronement occurs at age 3 or older, personality is quite firmly established, and the birth of the next child is merely reacted to in keeping with one's typical behavior. However, if the next child follows within 3 or fewer years, the impact is likely to be strong. It usually occurs without words and

concepts and is, therefore, highly resistant to later experiences which might correct misconceptions (Adler, 1956, p. 377).

An exploration of the parent-child relationships revealed a number of issues which would seem to have had a significant bearing on the presenting problem. Mike's father was suffering from terminal multiple sclerosis and had little enthusiasm or energy to give to either child. He was preoccupied about his own health. It became apparent that he was never very involved with the children or with the child-rearing enterprise. Mother "made up" for father's lack of interest by devoting herself to the kids. In an effort to compensate for the inattention of Father, she was overly lenient, permissive, and held few expectations for either child. She reported feeling sorry for the children, especially Mike, because Father wouldn't take an interest.

In this way, Mother evidences the "good mother" behavior and attitude. This is the feeling of parents, including many fathers, that they must continually be watching out for and taking care of their children. This results in pampering, and pampering is the major cause of maladjustment in children today (Dreikurs, 1958, p. 5). Pampering is defined as doing for the child that which he can do for himself. Adlerians believe strongly that the child's opportunity for self-confidence is tenuated when the parent expects too little, overindulges, or gives into the demands of the child. This is the pampering process.

Adlerians believe that the competition between rival siblings results in contrasting lifestyles (Croake & Olson, 1977). The parents set the stage for competition when they compete rather than cooperate as husband and wife. The competition between Mike's parents is revealed in a past history of separation. However, even within a competitive family, there are typically family lifestyles which result from the parents holding identical values in a given behavior. In this case the passive approach to life is a family value revealed in all four of the family members.

### **The Reported Fears**

With regard to the presenting problem of school phobia, Mike reported anxiety about the following issues: his relationship with the new children, acceptance by the new teachers, possible punishments in school (detention), not being as smart as the others, failing on tests and quizzes, fear of the principal, and looking foolish because he didn't know where things were in the new school. Mike's underlying attitude toward school seems best paraphrased as: "How can anyone expect me to go to school and concentrate when I'm worried by so many things?"

From an Adlerian perspective, all behavior is purposive and goal directed (Shulman & Mosak, 1967). It may be speculated that Mike's fears served as

an excuse to retreat from a new challenge, that he obviously did not feel prepared to handle. Behaviorally, he was saying: "I can't handle it." As with all pampering, the result was a lack of preparation for accomplishing life's tasks—work, friendship, and love (Adler, 1956, p. 104).

Father reacted with impatience, anger, and ridicule to Mike's fears. In contrast, Mother felt sympathy, pity, but also exasperation. When confronted by Mike's sobbing calls from school, Mother reported: "My heart would just break for him." When he stayed home from school or came home early, Mike would spend the day being Mother's little companion. They would go shopping together, bake cookies and pies, have lunch together. Then Mike would settle down in front of the television until 3:30 p.m. when the other children would return home from school.

Mike's problem, school phobia, is specific and designed to protect his self-image. Adler (1963) states that the symptoms "must hit the bullseye." Mike's school phobia protects him from the life task (work-school) for which he feels least prepared. Success in school requires skill at problem solving. The pampered child has continued to manipulate those about him in a manner so they solve his problems for him. In that way, he is spared the manner so they solve his problems for him. In that way, he is spared the humiliation of possible failure. Mike's phobia removed him from school and placed him back in the desired, favored position with his mother. Once again he could press her into his service as they spent their day together.

## **Dynamics**

Dreikurs has classified all childhood misbehavior (e.g., school phobia) into four broad categories: attention-getting, power, revenge, and display of inadequacy (Dreikurs, 1958, p. 190). Mike's goals were, most typically, attention-getting and power.

Given an understanding of Mike's school phobia, an intervention plan based on Adlerian theory was implemented.

## **Design**

In order to evaluate the outcomes of the present case, an intensive single-case study approach with repeated measures was applied. Hersen and Barlow (1976) discuss the appropriateness of using the quasi-experimental, A-B design in private practice settings where the repeated introduction and withdrawal of treatment variables are not feasible.

## **Measure**

The ultimate outcome of therapy for this particular youngster was

defined as the frequency and regularity of school attendance. For the purpose of assessment, three separate attendance categories were developed. They are as follows: (a) nonattendance (did not attend classes during any part of the school day); (b) partial attendance (attended classes for some fraction of the school day); and (c) full attendance (attended all classes for the full day).

## **Procedures**

The 6 days before the initiation of therapy were identified as the base line. A record of Mike's school attendance during that period was readily available from the school's administrative office. Subsequent data on Mike's school attendance was collected on a continuous basis over the following 4 weeks of the treatment period.

The first session of therapy was initiated on the evening of the seventh day of the experimental period. The initial interview was spent talking with Mike regarding his fears and interviewing Mike's parents. At that point, it was determined that the most productive and efficacious approach to dealing with Mike's school phobia was through intervening with his parents. Subsequent sessions, on a twice a week basis, were conducted over the next 4 weeks and then once a week for the 3 weeks following. During these sessions, the therapist attempted to help the parents understand the dynamics of Mike's behavior, understand their role in maintaining that behavior, and respond to Mike in a more constructive fashion.

The attention-getting and power dynamics of Mike's phobic behavior were explained to the parents. It was pointed out that the fearfulness brought him sympathy and short-term nurturance from Mother, as well as much attention from school personnel. Mike's fears served as a passive means of defeating his parents in their attempts to force school attendance. The more power and force that they exerted, the more power resistance he would display. Consequently, the first recommendation was for the parents to withdraw from the power struggle. Increased pressure would result in additional and more intense fears and, possibly, more pathological behavior.

In carrying out this withdrawal strategy, the parents would allow Mike to decide for himself each morning by 8:30 a.m. whether he would go to school that day. Parents were instructed to act "disinterested" and to avoid all prodding. If he chose to stay home, however, Mike would have to remain in his room without any contact with Mother until 3:30 p.m. It was to be explained to Mike that Mother needed "her" time to cook, wash, do errands, and clean the house. This was her job, and she needed the day for it. His "job" was to go to school. But, if he chose not to, then he could not interfere with Mom's day. Mike could sleep, play in his room, read, or do his school work. Watching television and interacting with Mother were to be off-limits. If Mike were to come out of his room and engage her, Mother was instructed to go to her

room, take a walk outside, or get into her car and go shopping. She was instructed not to coax or force him back into his room.

The objectives of the strategy were: (a) to move away from the power struggle and minimize attention paid to the maladaptive behavior, (b) to place choice and responsibility with Mike, (c) to display a positive attitude toward the work task and its importance (i.e., Mother went about her chores during the day rather than attending to Mike), and (d) to employ logical consequences as a form of discipline (i.e., if Mike chose to stay home he must suffer the boredom that inactivity would probably bring). Dreikurs (1958) replaced punishment with logical consequences when the child misbehaves. Such a consequence logically follows from a given misbehavior. For example, if a child stays out beyond his agreed upon bedtime, it is logical that the next evening he will not be allowed to go out. It would not be logical to spank the child since spanking has no relationship to the misbehavior.

It was hypothesized that the challenge of school, even with its uncertainties, would eventually begin to look positive and interesting as compared to boredom and nonattention at home. The assumption that staying home from school would no longer seem as attractive to Mike is based on the "wind/sales" philosophy. Dreikurs (1958) assumed that the child misbehaves principally to involve the parents. If the parents refuse to pay attention, get into a power struggle, display hurt feelings as a result of the child's actions, or to give up on the child as a lost cause in response to the child's misbehavior, the child no longer has the wind power provided by the parents' involvement in attempting to correct the misbehavior. When the parent fails to aid the child in his misbehavior, the misbehavior ceases.

In addition to the construction of a set of logical consequences, it was determined that the parents needed to be attentive and encouraging to their son at designated appropriate times. Mother and Father were instructed to be receptive, warm, and communicative to their son from 3:30 p.m. until bedtime. However, it was suggested that they retreat from Mike's verbal remarks about the consequence or his statements about feeling unloved.

Another intervention strategy, considered to be a form of encouragement, was a "special time" between Mike and his father, who would be available for a designated period of a half hour each evening. During this time, Mike could decide on an activity of his choice. By providing a special time, the parent is showing that Mike is loved and accepted as he is. He does not have to misbehave or achieve in order to receive his parents' concern.

The parents were warned not to expect immediate results, that it might take several days before Mike would make the decision to return to school. Simultaneously, cooperation of the school authorities was secured in order to avoid school attendance pressure on the parents or Mike.

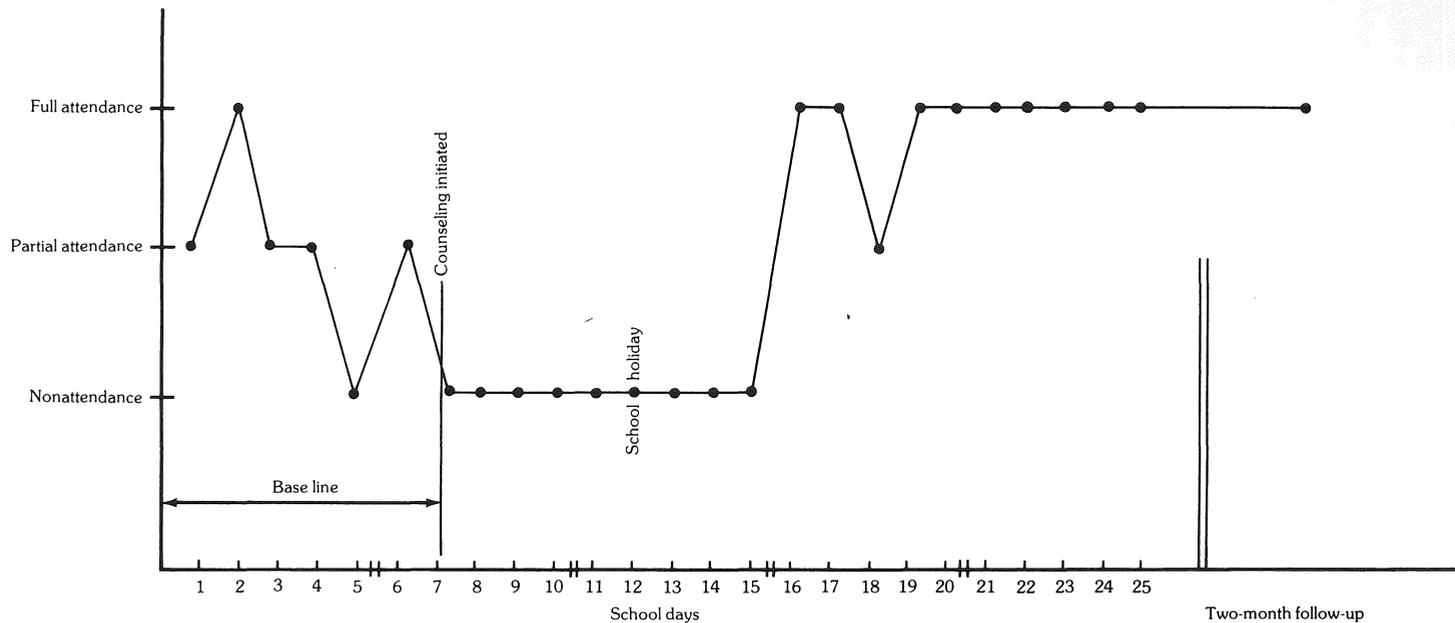
## Results

The results of the present study are presented graphically in Figure 1. Base-line data reflect the struggle over forcing Mike's school attendance. Sometimes parents won, sometimes he won, and sometimes it was a stand-off. Even on the days Mike went to school, most of his time was spent in the counselor's or principal's office bidding for sympathy, or on the telephone trying to call home. Once counseling was initiated, the choice of attending school was immediately given to Mike. The 9 consecutive days of total absence, as indicated from 8 to 15 in the graph (Figure 1), represented a testing period for Mike. During that time he sought sympathy, threatened to run away, and accused his parents of not loving him. During that time Mike experienced the boredom of staying home day after day, but he also learned that his parents, Mother in particular, would not be impressed with his fears nor manipulated by his threats. The parents withdrew from the power struggle. Mike's "hold-out" was longer than anticipated, therefore, a great deal of encouragement was necessary for the parents as well as for Mike.

On the sixteenth day, Mike decided to go to school. He had come close on previous days, but changed his mind at the last minute. It can be speculated that his ambivalence may have been a subtle test of his parents' reaction, possibly to see if he could elicit prodding and coaxing. On the eighteenth day of the experimental period, Mike was caught misbehaving and was given a detention (to stay after school). He left school at midday, however, returned the next day, and served his detention. School attendance since that incident was found to be regular and consistent for the duration of the experimental period.

A 2-month follow-up of this case showed a maintenance of regular school attendance; in addition, the parents reported a significant reduction in Mike's verbal expression of fears and anxieties. This anecdotal evidence supports the results of a pre- and posttherapy testing of Mike using the Croake-Hinkle fear scale (Croake & Hinkle, 1976). Mike's score on this self-report instrument was 2+ standard deviations above the mean at pretesting and in the average range at posttesting. The instrument was first completed on the eighth day of the experimental period and again at the 2-month follow-up. This change suggests a change in internal state (i.e., fears) which correlates with changes in external behavior. Finally, additional anecdotal evidence regarding school achievement showed that Mike had earned a position on the school honor roll. This was an accomplishment that he had never achieved before.

The results of this naturalistic case study seem to indicate, rather unequivocally, the efficacy of using an Adlerian-oriented intervention program with a school phobic youngster. The combined impact of logical consequences paired with encouragement seems to have contributed to a



**Figure 1**  
**A Record of School Attendance During a 5-Week Experimental Period**

remediation of the problem behaviors as well as a stimulation toward constructive, adaptive behavior.

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