

Counseling

Don Dinkmeyer, Sr.

Dorothy Bickling, Column Editors

This section is devoted to presenting Adlerian counseling cases, situations, or transcripts that will be evaluated/analyzed by the editors or guest reviewers. Counselors and therapists are invited to submit cases and transcripts of counseling that include the following information: (a) sex and age of counselee, (b) background information, (c) reasons for initiating counseling, and (d) actual incidents (preferably verbatim or descriptions of a situation). This material should be typed and double-spaced and not be longer than four pages. Send contributions or questions to: Don Dinkmeyer Sr., Communication and Motivation Training Institute, 4010 N.W. 99th Avenue, Coral Springs, Florida 33065.

The Case Of Tommy

Family Constellation: Tommy—10 Timmy—7

Tommy is a discouraged oldest feeling he can not do things well enough to please his parents, especially his Dad. He thinks of himself as “trouble” while the younger one is the “good” kid in the family.

Parents have been in parenting courses and are endeavoring to be more encouraging, offering choices to try to avoid the former power struggles, walking away from the arguments, etc. Mom has been more successful than Dad at being positive. Tommy is always testing the limits and Dad finds it difficult not to criticize, lose his temper and punish. The father has had a heart attack within the last year. Tommy has been threatened against causing another heart attack!

A brief school history: In the *3rd grade*, Tommy was always testing the teacher, acting out for attention and power. The teacher tried some encouragement, but found it difficult to ignore the disruptive behavior, so the inconsistency of encouragement brought little success. In the *4th grade* the teacher allowed for a great deal of freedom within the limits he set. He also challenged Tommy and helped him to know that he expected good work—and he got it, for the most part. During the fourth grade year, Tommy also went to an agency that worked with boys in small groups who were having peer relationship problems. Tommy did not play well with others, usually wanting things his way. He established a good relationship with one counselor, who left rather abruptly. Then he related to another counselor who let the family down with poor scheduling and management—so the boy felt “dumped” again.

In the 5th grade the teacher started out well for the first month then everything began going downhill. He began doing anything to disrupt the class. When the teacher would be teaching a lesson, he'd walk around the room, speak out, empty his desk, etc. The teacher attempted to make a contract with him—offering an opportunity to go to the library to work on extra and special projects of his interest. He would go to the library, but proceed to fool around, getting nothing done. The library option was discontinued. His work was not completed, papers were not being turned in. The teacher, wanting to hold him responsible for a certain amount of work, but without pressure, then gave him the option of doing his work when everyone else did, or take it home for homework. But the work, or much of it, was never brought in.

In a meeting in December with both Tommy and his Mother they agreed with the teacher that since Tommy decided to not do his work at school or at home, that he would then need to remain after school to complete it. This Tommy did 3 or 4 times. He seemed to enjoy this, but it soon became too much for the teacher.

The teacher then decided Tommy would just have to take the consequences of his not working. In his report card his Math went from a B to F. He received an A in Reading from another teacher (including book reports), but received an F in Conduct and a D in Effort from his regular teacher!

The next week, his behavior went from bad to worse! He did *anything* to disrupt, walked out of class when he pleased (15 times in one day). He told the counselor "when the teacher stops picking on me, I'll stop bugging him!" The behavior was distinctly revenge.

The counselor found that the teacher and parents were each blaming each other for what was happening and thus brought them all together for the purpose of better understanding and appreciating each other's position in an effort to try to work together. The counselor attempted to point out the revenge cycle that was operative at school and to some extent at home. But this was not accepted by the teacher. The need for control is primary to both the teacher and father. Mother admits the vacillating between power and revenge at home. The father's position is trying to force a control. What neither the teacher or Father can accept is that no one but Tommy will ever be in control of Tommy!

As has been obvious throughout this paper, the counselor's role has been ineffective and minor with the teacher and the father. For these reasons she has now gotten a commitment from both the father and mother for private family counseling.

In the meantime the teacher raises the following questions around these issues and the counselor requests comment on them by the editors.

(1) Liability. In a public school setting when a child refuses the limits set and chooses to do things that could be dangerous, i.e. walking and jumping on cafeteria tables, etc.. Who would be liable in the case of an accident? How can the teacher ignore this behavior even though ignoring it would be more appropriate as far as eliminating this inappropriate behavior? (He wants to be chased.)

(2) Academic. A teacher who is concerned about preparing all children for Junior High has rigid academic requirements. Though an elementary teacher might accept that individualized homework is ideal, on the basis of need, "this does not prepare the child for facing the 'system' in the Jr. High and Sr. High level."

(3) Control. The teacher and father feel that Tommy has *no* control and want to establish external controls over him. The counselor and mother recognize that Tommy is in the "driver's seat," and accept the premise that adults cannot demand or coerce cooperation. It must be won, but how can a student like Tommy be contained in the average classroom during the process of winning the child over?

Discussion

Tommy, a very discouraged child, obviously has defeated these four adults who are concerned about his welfare. He appears to be operating on the mistaken goals of power and/or revenge. He feels that he doesn't have a place in the classroom or at home unless he is showing others that they can't boss him. Tommy has decided that neither teacher nor father will control him. He is his own boss. The more father and teacher exert their external controls, the more Tommy will feel honor-bound to defeat them. Mother, too, is adding to the problem by her inconsistencies. Because of the inconsistent methods of the mother, Tommy continues to test her.

The counselor is to be commended for bringing together the parents and teacher to stop the mutual blaming that was taking place. Perhaps future sessions with parents and teacher could include Tommy so that he becomes part of the solution, not just the presenting problem.

To address the specific questions raised by the counselor:

1. *Liability*—When a student refuses the established limits, it is reasonable for the school administration to exclude a student from that particular area or activity. In this particular case, using logical consequences, a student who walks and jumps on cafeteria tables is endangering himself and other students. The student would be excluded from the cafeteria until he decides that he could comply with the rules of the school. Perhaps he could bring his lunch and eat in his classroom or the office. The teacher cannot ignore behavior which can be dangerous to the student and to others and which obviously defies the established rules of the school.

2. *Academic*—Yes, the teacher is concerned about the academic preparation of Tommy and the other students. Perhaps in this case the teacher is overly concerned about the academic preparation of Tommy. Tommy is willing to deprive himself of the academic achievement of which he is capable in order to defeat the teacher. Only when the battles between Tommy and the parents end, will Tommy assume responsibility for his academic progress. At the present time, the concern on the part of the teacher and parents about his school work keep the battle going. The parents seem to blame the teacher for Tommy's lack of progress while the teacher blames the parents. His academic progress should be Tommy's responsibility. Tommy might be helped through individual or group counseling to be aware of how he may be hurting his own skill development by continuing to fight with the teacher.

3. *Control*—Both father and teacher seem to long for the old days when students did as they were told without question. It seems that the more teacher and father try to control Tommy, the more honor-bound he is to defeat them. Their desires to apply additional external controls only escalates the battle. Father and teacher should admit their defeat and work to establish relationships with Tommy based on mutual respect. They should both encourage Tommy when he shows any indication of assuming responsibility for his school work, when he shows any form of cooperative behavior.

Mother should work at being more consistent in her relationship with Tommy. She and the counselor should continue their working together to aid Tommy. I have the feeling that both mother and the counselor can become easily discouraged by the demands of the teacher and the father. All four adults should work together to help Tommy assume responsibility for his school work and for his behavior.

“There is a Law that man should love his neighbor as himself. In a few hundred years it should be as natural to mankind as breathing or the upright gait; but if he does not learn it he must perish.”

—Alfred Adler
