

The When and How of Parental Involvement: Turning Around Inadequacy

Michael S. Nystul

The following paper presents a simple Adlerian model for parent-child counseling. A case study will be provided to illustrate how the model was used to help a single mother with her 3½ year-old daughter.

The First Session

Ann was a 34 year-old Australian single mother who was concerned about her relationship with her youngest child Jill, age 3½. Jill had two older brothers—John, age 7 and Mark age 6, and her mother was expecting another child in 3 months.

Ann was a counseling student of mine and sought out my help for her daughter Jill. I suggested that Ann bring her daughter to the first counseling session. During the first session, the mother explained that from birth Jill had demanded to have constant physical contact with her. If the mother tried to leave the child (even for a moment), the child would make a shrieking noise that sounded like a strange animal. The mother was also worried about Jill's speech development. Ann mentioned that Jill almost never talked. When she did talk, she said only 4 or 5 words. Ann also wondered if her daughter would be able to start regular first grade when she was 5 years-old (Australians start first grade at age 5). The mother mentioned that a pediatrician had recently given Jill a physical examination and found the child to be physically healthy. The doctor noted that Jill did have psychological problems and encouraged the mother to seek psychiatric advice. I feel certain that a psychiatric evaluation would have resulted in a diagnosis of autism or childhood schizophrenia.

As I watched the mother and child interact during the first 30 minutes of their visit, her story came to life for me. Jill insisted on sitting on her mother's lap. When the mother put the child down, the child would make a high shrieking noise and pull on her mother's dress. After a few exasperated statements

Michael S. Nystul is a Clinical Psychologist with the Navajo Area Indian Health Service in Fort Defiance, Arizona 86504.

from mother, she would eventually relent and let Jill back upon her lap. I began to believe that this child truly did spend the entire day clinging to her mother. I wondered how mother could have lasted for 3½ years without losing her mind. I knew I would not have survived such demands.

After empathizing with the mother's plight, I began to try to win the child's confidence. I reached out to the child's curiosity with my "What's in the tennis ball can game?" This game has never failed to lure a child over to me. All you need to play the game is a tennis ball can with a lid and ball inside. First, I shake the can quietly and then gradually let it get louder. While I'm shaking the can, I hold it by my ear and say things like "What's in this?" Then as I hold the can in the direction of the child, I say "Can you hear that strange noise?" As I get the child's attention, I develop a story that would seem to interest the child such as "I think there is a monster in it . . . a monster and he is trying to get out . . . Oh no! What will become of us . . . I wonder what he looks like . . . I wonder . . . I wonder?" Eventually, Jill's curiosity drew her over to the can I was holding. I gave the can to her and she took it back to where she was standing by mother. As Jill opened the can, a big smile came over her face when she saw the tennis ball. The ball fell out of the can, and she ran after it and put it back in the can with the lid on. Now, she made her own monster noises and laughed.

I ended the first session by telling the mother that I enjoyed getting to know her and her child. I mentioned that I thought I could help her with her relationship with Jill but it would require several months of intensive work on her part. Once we agreed to work together, I finished the session by asking Ann to read chapters from *Children the Challenge* (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964) that dealt with the family constellation, the four goals of misbehavior, and encouragement.

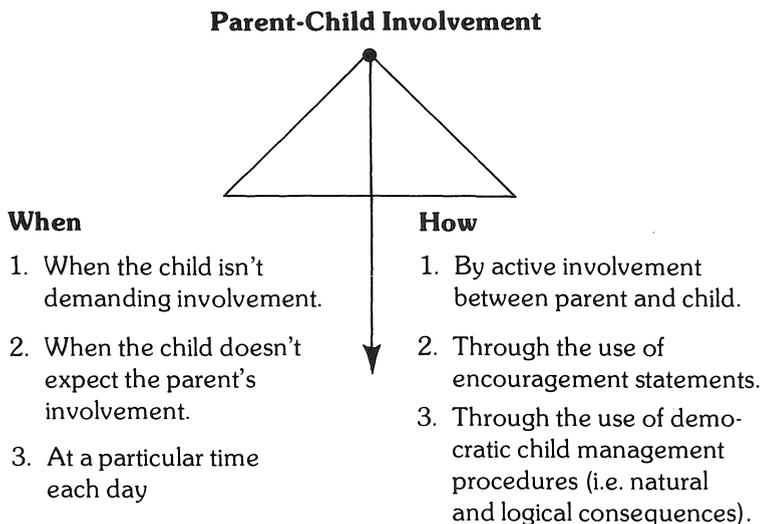
Session Two

A week later Ann and Jill arrived for their second counseling session. Ann immediately commented that she found *Children the Challenge* very readable and helpful—especially the parts that related to the four goals of misbehavior and encouragement. To help Ann discover what goal Jill tended to move towards, I asked Ann how she felt when Jill was clinging to her. She said that she often didn't know what to do. She felt that her situation was hopeless. From mother's reaction, we hypothesized that Jill's goal was a display of inadequacy. I checked out the accuracy of our hypothesis by talking with Jill. First, I got her attention by shaking my "monster can." I told Jill she could play with the can after I asked her a question. The question was—"Could it be that you only feel important when others are taking care of you?" Jill pretended not to be listening to me, but her eyes and forehead provided me with a strong positive recognition reflex. Apparently, display of inadequacy was Jill's goal. I went on to tell Jill that "It seems as though you

feel that holding on to mother is the only way you can be special.” (Again the recognition reflex appeared.) “But this is not so, and it is making you and your mother feel sad most of the time.”

As I talked, Jill’s eyes slowly began to make eye contact with mine. Helping her understand the hidden reasons for her behavior seemed to win the child’s respect, thereby modifying her motivation for involvement in counseling. I told her I could help her find other ways to be special which would be more fun. I shook the “monster can” and she came over to me. This time she sat on my lap for a while and played with the can.

Towards the end of the second session, I described a procedure to Ann that she could use to help improve her relationship with Jill. The approach was called “The When and How of Parent-Child Involvement.” I showed her the following illustration which provided an overview of the model:



First, we discussed *when* it was appropriate to be involved with Jill. I mentioned that if she got involved with Jill when Jill was demanding involvement, then she would be reinforcing demanding behavior. Since Ann was a psychology student, she realized I was expressing one of the principles of operant conditioning. After some discussion, Ann began to realize that even scolding remarks could act as reinforcers and increase the frequency of demanding behavior.

My second recommendation was borrowed from the operant conditioning procedure of shaping. I instructed Ann to look for any undemanding behavior and reinforce it by giving her positive involvement (a definition of positive involvement will be provided later in the “How of Involvement”).

Next, Ann should reinforce behavior that resembled independent life movement (e.g., getting off her lap without being asked to get down). Gradually, she should reinforce only behavior that was obviously independent behavior (e.g., playing by herself or with a friend). I explained that the shaping procedure would teach her child that she could be special by *not* being helpless. The child would also learn that being special through independent behavior can be more fun.

My third suggestion was that Ann should try to get involved with Jill for 15-30 minutes after each meal. A 3½ year-old like Jill can't tell time, but she can sense when the next meal is coming by using her inner clock. Once Jill learned to predict that her mother would be getting positively involved with her, she would be less inclined to demand her involvement.

As Ann and I discussed when mother should get involved with Jill, Jill pretended to be playing with the "monster can." I felt certain that she was also listening intently to our conversation. I mentioned to Jill that "You probably don't like what we are talking about." Her recognition reflex told me I was right. I went on to explain to Jill that she might not be as happy for the next few days—but things would get better for her. Soon, she would be happier than ever. Jill heard me but probably didn't believe me. I've learned that children and adults usually only believe what they experience.

Ann commented that she felt that she understood when to get involved and was ready to explore how to get involved with Jill. I referred back to my "When and How" diagram and pointed to the how side of the model saying there are three steps towards positive involvement. These three steps would contribute towards behavior in Jill that would be respectful, independent, and responsible.

The first step towards positive involvement was creating active involvement between parent and child. I defined passive involvement as activities that required little input from the child (e.g., reading a story to the child before bed). Active involvement was defined as activities similar to existential I-thou encounters with both parties taking a responsibility for making an input (e.g., playing games with Creative Playthings and so forth). Communicating a respect for children's ability to get actively involved helps them respect themselves and others.

I then related to another aspect of active involvement which emphasized touch. I suggested that Ann try to involve herself in activities that required physical contact with Jill (e.g., hide and seek with hugging and tickling when you find the person and horse rides on mom's back). I emphasized the importance of touch because it communicates love and acceptance so much more powerfully than words. Children as discouraged as Jill need an intensive communication of love if they are to be reoriented to the useful side of life.

A graphic illustration comparing passive to active involvers is as follows:

Passive Involvers	Active Involvers
1. Reading a bedtime story	1. Playing games with Creative Playthings
2. Watching T.V.	2. Hide and seek with hugging and tickling
3. Listening to records	3. Horse rides on mother or father

The second step towards positive involvement related to *how* the mother talked with Jill. I recommended that her verbal remarks should relate more to the process of Jill's activities than final product. Encouragement statements such as "You can make it" or "I think you're getting there" can help children work independently and develop confidence in themselves. Focusing on the process is important even if the child has finished a task such as painting a picture. If the child brings the parents a picture they have finished, they can encourage the child to think about the process by saying "You seemed to enjoy using bright colors." Such comments will encourage the child to think back through the process that lead to their finished product (e.g., "I had to clean the paints to make them nice and bright, and that really did make my picture cheerful"). The parents' encouragement statement therefore acts as a catalyst for the child's internal evaluation and self-reinforcement, thereby creating an increased internal locus of control.

Praise comments focus on the finished product and contribute towards the child developing an external locus of control. For example, the child finishes a painting and holds it up to the parents who respond "Good job, Johnny." From this, children learn to look outside of themselves for a locus of control and evaluation. I believe that some praise can be appropriate. It feels good to be stroked and also it supplies some external assessment of a finished task. Many parents must learn to expand their verbal comments to include encouragement if they want their children to be able to function independently.

The third step towards positive involvement related to *how* Ann disciplined Jill. I explained how natural and logical consequences could provide a democratic means of maintaining order in the family. After some discussion, Ann began to understand that allowing Jill to experience the consequence of her behavior would help her become more responsible. Ann liked the idea of using consequences, because she disliked punishment and found her *laissez-faire* approach ineffective.

At the end of the second session, I privately warned Ann that Jill might have some temper tantrums for a couple of weeks while she was being reoriented to the useful side of life. If this occurred, it might be advisable to “childproof” her house (i.e., move items of value out of Jill’s reach). I mentioned that she should avoid taking Jill into public for a while and leave her with a friend if she had to go to the store. That would allow her to remain as consistent as possible with Jill. It would also help avoid the intermittent reinforcement schedule that would inhibit Jill’s reorientation to more positive behavior and life movements. I finished the session by suggesting that Ann read the chapters from *Children the Challenge* that deal with natural and logical consequences, mutual respect, and having fun together.

Session Three

Ann and Jill came into my office for this third counseling session walking together hand and hand—both were smiling. Ann mentioned that she had spent a very intensive week with Jill using the when and how model. When she did need to go to the store, she left Jill with a friend. Ann reported that Jill did not have any major temper tantrums during the week. Mother felt Jill was happier than she had been in a long time. Jill even played alone for 15 minutes while mother was doing the laundry.

I then talked with Jill to get her opinion of how things had been. I asked her if she liked her new way of being with mother. Her recognition reflex told us that progress was being made. I then asked mother if there was any part of the when and how program that she didn’t know how to apply. Ann said she wasn’t clear on what I meant by active involvement. Rather than try to describe it again, I decided to model my conception of active involvement. First, I used my “monster can” to draw Jill over to me. Then I dropped down on all fours and acted like a horse. I begged Jill to get on for a horsey ride. I changed my voice and acted like a sad horse who desperately wanted Jill to get on for a ride. After a minute of assessing the horse, Jill cautiously climbed on for a ride. First, we started slow and then gradually picked up speed and left my office. After a few minutes, I won her confidence and we were off. I stood up with her on my back and galloped down the hall—making loud horse noises. Jill’s face was one big smile. Soon her laughter was as loud as my horse noises. Together, I’m sure we must have made an unusual sight to my Australian university colleagues that dared open their doors to investigate. Mother began to understand that active involvement could be fun for all.

After we finished our horse ride, Jill and I returned to my office. Ann said she felt she could use the when and how approach confidently with Jill. We decided that formal counseling sessions were no longer necessary. We agreed to get together every couple of weeks to follow-up on how things were going. I also suggested that she enroll in one of the many Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976) parent education groups that were being offered in our community. She was eager to enroll.

Follow-up Sessions

Ann and Jill dropped by my office every two weeks for two months and then about every other month for a year to report how things were going. Ann just couldn't believe the miraculous change that was occurring with Jill. Jill was playing on her own and with other children every day. She could wait her turn and was developing some solid friendships. Her speech and vocabulary had also improved dramatically. Frankly, I was also amazed at how much Jill had changed. I was also very honored when Ann told me that Jill would sometimes ask her if she would take her to see "the man." Ann said that I was "the man" and Jill really enjoyed seeing me.

Conclusion

The present paper illustrated how Adlerian/Dreikursian concepts can be used to develop a simple model for parent-child counseling. The model is educationally oriented. It provides counselors and parents with simple, practical concepts they can use to help encourage a discouraged child.

References

- Dinkmeyer, D., & McKay, G. *Systematic training for effective parenting (STEP)*. Circle Pines, Minn.: American Guidance Service, 1976.
- Dreikurs, R., & Soltz, V. *Children: The challenge*. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964.

A thought transfixed me: For the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: the salvation of man is through love and in love.

—Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*
