

“Birth of a Family”: A Technique For Staging Life-Styles

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The Adlerian concepts of “birth order” and “family constellation” play an important part in educating parents to gain an understanding of how children actively search for their place in the family. In working with parents of teenagers in consultation groups, I have stressed the importance of childhood years, as being essential to understanding the behaviors and intentions of this same child, who, during adolescence, strives to establish a place in the community at large.

Commonly held “mistaken beliefs” regarding the child’s passive role in the development of their own personality, have led many parents to the unfortunate conclusion that it is they who hold the ultimate power and responsibility in securing their child’s success in life. Such conclusions, while rarely contested openly by the child during early childhood, set the stage for troubled parent-teen relationships as the adolescent asserts an increasingly greater desire to be recognized as a self-determining individual.

Where attitudes and beliefs have been firmly maintained for many years, it is difficult to present any meaningful confrontation through literature presentation and discussion alone. It was for this reason, that I devised the roleplaying exercise: “Birth of a Family,” to involve parents of teens in an near-real experience of the Adlerian model of personality formation.

“Birth of a Family” Procedure

Setting the Scene — In introducing the “Birth of a Family” roleplaying exercise to a group of parents, I provide them with the following instructions:

Rudolf Dreikurs once noted that the newborn child finds themselves being born into the second act of a play. Every play has a setting, a time, and a place. Each character has their own unique movements during the course of

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events which exert an influence over the other characters in the drama. The plot of the drama takes many twists and turns as a result of the spontaneous decisions made by each of the characters as they pursue a way to fit into the story.

And so, the newborn child must consider the events of the first act, examine the ways in which the various characters in the family are striving to find their place, and then, in a trial and error process, write themselves into this family drama.

Your group's task is to develop the setting and characters for a family drama which the group will later act out. Together, develop answers to the following questions and write these answers on the blackboard:

1. What is the father's name in this family? List three adjectives to describe him.
2. What is the mother's name? List three adjectives to describe her.
3. List three family values that mom and dad share for all family members.
4. Are there any other people in the house at the time that the first child is born (relatives, etc.)? If so, describe this person(s) using three adjectives.
5. Does father want the first child to be a male or female?
6. Does mother want the first child to be a male or a female?
7. List three adjectives to describe father's values for what *males* should be like; for what *females* should be like.
8. List three adjectives to describe mother's values for what *males* should be like; for what *females* should be like.
9. Describe the type of neighborhood that mom and dad live in at the time the first child is born (house size, appearance, ethnicity, character of neighbors, socio-economic status, etc.).
10. What is mom and dad's relationship like when the first child is about to be born?
11. Draw a chart showing how many children will be born in this family.

Indicate each child's sex, age and indicate whether or not they will have any noticeable physical handicaps or illnesses at birth.

The Drama Begins — Once the group has completed the task of developing a cast of characters and a setting for the drama, volunteers from the group are recruited to play the various family characters. Recently, at a large workshop, I split participants into two groups, where one group acted out the drama that the other group had developed and vice versa. Those participants who had not volunteered to play a role in the drama were asked to closely observe the “antagonist” of the drama (a role that I assume the first time that a group is involved in this exercise), and were encouraged to step in and assist this person in confronting each of the family members with the actions and apparent intentions of the other family characters in the drama.

The characters who are living in the house just prior to the birth of the first child in the family are assembled in a space where the drama is to be acted out. The “unborn child(ren) are sent out of the room, or to a space where they won't be noticed by anyone in the room. At this point, the drama is ready to begin.

The antagonist first introduces the mother, father and other household members in the pre-child era to their characters as they appear on the blackboard. They are instructed to study the information regarding their characters and the family setting completely. In preparing for the birth of the first child, the following discussion might then take place between the “antagonist” and the existing family members:

Anatagonist (A): Well Dad, I see that you would like your first child to be a boy.

Father (F): That's right!

Antagonist (A): Mom, you want a boy, too. How do you feel about having a child right now? Are you ready?

Mother (M): Well, we weren't sure for a time, but I think that we're ready now.

(A): Dad, money has been tight, I see. Do you think that you'll be able to handle it?

(F): Mom and I are going to sacrifice a little, but we're really looking forward to this.

(A): Okay. Here we go!

At this point, the antagonist goes outside of the room to “deliver” the first born child. Leading the child in by the hand, the antagonist might say:

(A): Hi Tommy! Welcome to your family. As you can see (pointing to the blackboard), you mom and dad both wanted you to be a boy. What do you think about your family?

Tommy (T): Well, it looks great!

(A): Mom and dad, what do you think of your boy Tommy?

(M): He's just wonderful!

(F): That's my boy!

(A): Now Tommy, your dad thinks that boys should be athletic, independent and smart. Your mom thinks boys should be smart, helpful and good-looking. How are you going to find your place in the family?

(T): That's easy. I'll show dad how good I can be with athletics and I'll be helpful to mom.

(A): But you're only one year old. How will they see this?

(T): Gee, I guess I can learn to walk early, get toilet trained quick and sleep peacefully all through the night. That will make them both happy.

(A): Mom and dad, Tommy has begun to walk early. He's already toilet trained and he doesn't seem to disturb you very much at night. What do you think about that?

(M) & (F): He's wonderful.

(A): By the way mom, I've noticed that your belly is swelling again. You're not pregnant again are you?

(M): Oh, yes I am.

(A): Have you told Tommy yet?

(M): No, he might not understand. I'll wait.

(A): Tommy, have you seen your mother's stomach lately?

(T): Yeah. She's getting fat there.

(A): I wonder what it is.

(T): I don't know.

(A): Well, here comes baby number two.

The antagonist goes out of the room again, and re-enters with Linda, the next child born into the family. Linda has a breathing difficulty at birth. The antagonist points this out to her while having her study the rest of the information on the blackboard:

(A): Hi Linda. Welcome to your family. Your brother Tommy is two years older than you and he's really got a good thing going with mom and dad. Do you think you'll find a place here?

Linda (L): I think so. Mom likes good girls and I've noticed that she really gives me a lot of attention whenever I have a hard time breathing.

(A): Tommy, what do you think about your new sister?

(T): Well, she's cute, but mom and dad sure pay a lot of attention to her, 'cause she's sick all the time.

(A): How are you going to keep your place? Are you going to give it up?
(T): I'll just try harder with mom and dad. I'll get dad to take me outside to play a lot, and I'll have mom listen to me read.
(A): Mom and dad, how do you like Linda?
(M): She's so cute, but the poor little darling has a terrible asthma problem. I'll have to give her some special care.
(F): She's certainly is cute.
(A): How's Tommy doing?
(M): Oh, he's a good boy, but he certainly asks for a lot of attention. I wish he wasn't so annoying sometimes.

The drama continues like this, with the rest of the characters being born into the family. The "antagonist" continues to confront each character to appraise the success of their attempts to find or make a place in the family drama.

Once all the characters have been born, and have indicated the initial directions in which their personality will develop, the drama is halted and group members process through discussion what has occurred. Some questions which help to focus the discussion are:

1. How realistic is this? Are children really faced with such decisions at an early age?
2. What role do siblings play in affecting each other's personality development? What seems to be the parent's role? The environment? Organic inferiorities at birth?
3. Did this roleplaying exercise give you insight into the way in which you and your siblings found places in the family?
4. What about your teenagers? How did they find their place? How does the way they found their place affect the way in which they go about finding their place as members of their peer group today?

Parents who have taken part in the "Birth of a Family" exercise have gained profound insights into the development of their own life styles, as well as better understanding that of their child's. One parent, while playing out the drama of a child with a limp, suddenly realized how she, too, had been able to use her own childhood illness as a way to get attention.

Parent attitudes regarding children's capabilities also seem to be affected by involvement in the "Birth of a Family" exercise. A woman who played the

pregnant mother of a two-year-old, stopped the drama to inform the antagonist that she really didn't believe that such a young child would have any understanding of what was going on. She continued the drama, and then observed another group perform a different family drama. During the discussion which ensued, she told the group that she was no longer sure about her beliefs in regards to what young children are able to understand.

The "Birth of a Family" exercise is an effective technique for use with parents of teenagers in demonstrating the Adlerian model of personality development. It might also carry greater implications for use in group therapy, where group members can assist an individual in playing out their "birth drama," in an effort to help this person gain a better understanding of their life style.

But the very success of the project (Viking project which put two landers on Mars in 1976) points up the sharply dangerous paradox that the human species must now face: intellectually we seem able to tackle the most challenging problem with confidence, whereas we find ourselves at the same time, in dealing with basic human issues, pathetically inept. It is perverse in the extreme that hatred, prejudice and conflict should thrive in a world made materially sophisticated through the almost limitless inventiveness of the human mind.

— Richard E. Leakey, *Origins*
