

Counseling

Dorothy Bickling
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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: Dr. Dorothy Bickling, 26 Minot Avenue, Acton, Massachusetts 01720.

Contributor: Lynn Lott

I was invited to sit in on a session as a consultant to another counselor in town. He called me in frustration, feeling totally defeated by a family he had been seeing for six months. This family had a history of jumping from counselor to counselor with little progress in changing their situation. The family consists of mother (approximate age, late 50's), a teenage daughter— 16 and a son— age 14. Susie (the 16-year old) and Billie (14) were both present at the session. The initial problem that brought this family to counseling was the arguments and fighting between mother and Billie.

I started the session by asking what would need to be different so the family could be happy. Mom quickly informed me that we just had to make Billie stop fighting and do as he is told like Susie does. How this family could have stumped counselor after counselor with such a familiar, simple problem, is beyond me. I gave a sigh of relief for my Adlerian training and proceeded.

A quick goal disclosure revealed there was a power struggle that often moved into revenge between Mom and Billie. I immediately realized that *no one* was going to tell Mom how to behave or change her. She had a notion

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that her son (adopted at birth) has always been a screamer and a problem and that she had nothing to do with the problem. Rather than fight with her, I decided an experience might be worth a thousand words. I invited Mom to role play with me and pretend she was Billie. I told her I would ask her to do something and all she had to do was say "no." I had her place her palms on mine and asked that each time she said "no," she push on my hands. The struggle ensued and she was able to experience the power and frustration of the struggle from her son's position.

Then, we replayed the scene, only this time, instead of pushing and fighting with her, I said, "I don't want to fight with you, but I'd sure like your cooperation. Let me know when we can work this out." I then turned and walked out the door of the counseling room.

When I returned a good minute later, Mom, the two kids and the therapist who had invited me, were all sitting with open mouths and grins. I asked Mom if she thought this would work for her. She closed her mouth long enough to say, "Of course not!" At which point her son jumped in and said, "It sure would. I hate fighting with Mom and I hate it when she yells at me. If she'd ask me in this way, I'd do the job, but when she yells at me, I just want to get her." From the mouths of babes! So I said to Mom, "Well, I suppose this might not work for you, but would you be willing to practice it just in case you ever decide to use the idea?" She agreed readily and we role played how she could walk away from the fight. She had a hard time learning to do this, which helped her kids and the counselor see how much she fed the problem and kept it going. When she had the plan pat, she practiced with her son, and both Mom and son had smiles of relief.

I complimented Mom on her academy award performance and told her to take a break after all the hard work so I could work with the kids for awhile. I asked the kids if they'd be interested in hearing how we do jobs in our family, and they said, "yes." I explained about our job chart, rotation system and how we divide chores at a family meeting each week. I asked if they'd like to try this out in their family and they agreed, so I asked what they would like to do to help the family this week. Each of them picked two jobs they would do for a week. We borrowed paper and colored pens from their counselor and they each made a job chart to hang in the kitchen. I asked them to personalize the charts, which gave me opportunities for many words of encouragement.

After the charts were done, I asked Susie if I could ask her a really hard and serious question that she would answer if she liked or just think about. When she said OK, I asked if she thought a family could have two helpful, good kids or just one. She thought for a long time and then said, "one!" This time Mom

came to my rescue. She explained how she had been the “hard worker” when she was a kid until some cousins moved in with the family. Then one of the cousins wanted to be helpful, too, and Mom learned how nice it was to share the work and to have two helpful people in the same house. I know her daughter “heard” her.

I asked the kids to role play with me just for a minute and show me what they do when Mom asks for help. I said, “Billie, will you take out the garbage?” He answered, “just a minute.” Then I asked Susie the same question and she said, “sure.” I asked the kids if they’d be willing to play a trick on Mom just this week. They liked that idea, so I suggested that when asked to help, this week Billie should say “sure” and Susie should say, “just a minute.” They agreed.

I also suggested to pick a time of day their chores would be done and asked Mom if she’d be willing to flip the kids dinner plates upside down if the chores weren’t done by dinner. I explained the non-verbal reminder could build a lot of harmony in the family. Mom agreed and her kids said that would be more fun than getting yelled at.

Near the end of the interview, Mom piped in again to explain that Billie would probably ruin all the plans we had made. I looked her square in the eye and said, “even though you’re discouraged and have a history of failures, I feel sad and angry when you say things like that. It hurts me to hear you talk that way in front of your son and I hardly know you. Think how he must feel. Please find some other way to deal with those feelings — you could write them down or just think them but don’t say anything. When you say things like that, it almost forces Billie to be bad to hurt you back.”

I’m sure Mom got the message, and I knew that Billie knew I understood and that he had an advocate. His handshake was firm and long. Susie lowered her eyelashes and reached out to shake hands. Mom began to ask me how to handle several other problems they had never gotten help with, so I knew that she learned a lot in the session.

Discussion — Column Editors

Role of the Consultant — Interestingly enough, the reaction to this case would be different if this case was presented by a counselor who had proceeded to use the effective techniques demonstrated by this consultant. There is concern here, however, about the counselor-consultant relationship. What were the expectations of each? If the goal for the session was to have the

consultant model effective counselor behavior, it was reached. However, if the goal was to help the counselor deal more effectively with the family, then this session did not measure up. In a consulting case such as this, the counselor is in effect the client, the one seeking help. The consultant's role is an instructive one working with the counselor. A collaborative relationship between counselor and consultant is recommended.

As the relationship presently stands, it would appear that the consultant has taken over for the counselor. Even the mother at the end of the session wants to continue with other concerns with the consultant. How will the consultant phase-in the counselor? Perhaps by modeling effective counselor behavior for several sessions while instructing the counselor in new techniques, the consultant could gradually recede into the background with the counselor resuming the active relationship with the family. A consultant would not often be called upon if the net result of that consultation was that the client entered therapy with the consultant. Ethically, this becomes a complex issue and can best be answered by noting who is the consultant's client and what is the role of this consultant.

Counseling Techniques — The consultant was able to model effective counseling techniques. The consultant in this case was successful where the counselor had failed because the consultant used action techniques rather than talk. It is clear that this discouraged parent uses talk to avoid behavior changes and she seems to be more concerned about changing others' behavior rather than her own. The consultant, by setting up an experiential learning situation, was able to have a greater impact because both mother and son could feel the effects of behaving in a different way. Although it may have been difficult for the mother to change her behavior, by being able to practice the new behavior the mother was certainly further along in the change process than if she had merely talked about what she would do. This technique also avoided the "what if" questions that can often sabotage well set plans that are only talked about.

The consultant showed creativity in helping change the family dynamics by having Billie and Susan change responses and thus trying to break up the good child vs. bad child labeling that has taken place within this family unit.

Mother's extreme discouragement came through loud and strong at the end of the session. The consultant confronted this directly by indicating immediate reaction to such a discouraging, negative comment. With the mother expressing this much discouragement, it is likely that she may have difficulty carrying through with this plan.