

The counselor is painfully aware of a parent's tendency to revert to methods that have not worked when the recommended approaches have failed to bring about immediate results. The counselor, too, frequently begins to question his diagnosis of the child's mistaken goals and the methods he has recommended for reorientation if results are not readily attainable. This is true especially if the mother questions the counselor to ascertain "if he knows what he is doing." The counselor in such cases may, in desperation, abandon sound psychological approaches and revert to symptomatic control.

We are publishing this concise paper by Raymond J. Corsini not only because it illustrates the application of many of the basic concepts of Individual Psychology, but because it demonstrates the professional knowledge, strength and convictions needed by a counselor. The counselor knew what was needed psychologically to help the mother but, most important, he had the conviction and courage to persist in the reeducation process in the face of an extended period of discouragement. The case presented by Dr. Corsini emphasizes not only essentials of family counseling on the Adlerian model, but illustrates how firmness and kindness applied simultaneously is essential to the counseling process.

The Editors

The Elbow and Feet Technique

Raymond J. Corsini

When volunteers were sought from a group of parents to present a family problem at the next session of the Family Counseling Center, among those who raised their hands was a woman about forty. She was distinguished visually by her frumpiness: her hair was straggling, her clothes looked like the Salvation Army would not even accept them, her legs were covered with insect bites. She obviously neglected personal cleanliness. She was interviewed by our receptionist, and an appointment was made with our social workers. She was also given a date for an interview at the next session of the Family Council.

The following week I looked over the social worker's notes, and learned the following:

The Smiths consist of a family of six. The father is a victim of infantile paralysis, and walks with two canes. Formerly, he was a gardener but has been unemployed for the past four years. The mother is a housewife. There are four children: Mike, 12, who is a model child and is considered by the parents to be another adult; Jon, 9, who fights a great deal with his sister; Elly, 6, who in turn

is termed a whiner and a complainer; and Milly, 3, who acts babyish and sucks her thumb. The mother has two major complaints: The children do not put things away and there is constant bickering between the children. Periodically, when the father is upset, he throws himself on his back, trying to get one of the children in a corner so that he can strike the child with his cane. The mother does a great deal of nagging and complaining.

In my thirty years as a social worker, I have made hundreds of home visits and I have never seen a house so dirty and disorganized. The floor of the whole house, excepting for the parents' bedroom was literally covered with clothes, toys, books, papers, magazines. In the children's rooms there were actually mounds of materials. Beds were unmade, sheets were dirty, the whole house smelled bad.

The mother was very embarrassed by the appearance of the house. She feels defeated and lost. The father is an elementary school graduate; mother is a graduate of Smith College. They are on public welfare.

At the next session, Mrs. Smith faced me for public counseling. She was quite unattractive in appearance. There was a look of defeat about her. I wondered how this graduate of a fine college had come to this situation: married to a crippled gardener, living in squalor, dirt.

I asked her my usual question in such circumstances: "Will you tell us why you are here tonight?" and I was surprised by her voice: pure, clear, distinguished, patrician, New Englishish, cultured—a strong contrast to her Apple Annie appearance. Her story was simple—she was completely unable to control anything. She was the only one in the family who did anything. Father smoked and just dropped matches, ashes and burning cigarettes on the floor, as well as clothes, newspapers, books and apple cores. "This is my house and I'll do what I please" was his philosophy as recounted by her. The children followed suit. When they came in, they dropped books, coats, hats on the floor, and would retrieve them on going out. The mother wanted dirty clothes to be put into the hamper, but no one ever did. No one ever hung up anything. No one ever put anything away. The only one who worked in the house was the mother. She periodically tried to put everything in order while everyone was away, but the father and the children soon brought everything back to the usual state. What could she do to educate them? Talk! She talked and talked. Sometimes she cried. She pleaded with them for consideration. They merely tolerated her and went their way. Yes, there were other problems too. Fighting was one of them. She begged and pleaded and cried when the children fought and quarreled, but to no avail. And then, the mother began to cry. She was a failure she told us. She was an idealist. Her family did not want her to marry this man who, they said, was a lout as well as a cripple, but she knew she would help him. And now, she was a failure. She could leave him but he needed her. And so forth and so on.

In Adlerian family counseling, our concern is to teach parents certain basic principles of democratic family living as well as to try to help the counseled family. In this particular case the woman was so crushed that it was difficult not to console her. But the order of the day was to give her some specific advice relative to her problem. However, my problem was her prolixity. Once she got the floor, she talked, talked, talked. She went into many details of what she tried to do and how she had failed. About the only brightness in her story was her twelve-year old son, Mike, who was the good one, who kept the younger kids in line and so forth. But even Mike was messy. Life was complicated and discouraging.

The mother was asked to leave the counseling room and the children came in. They were all dirty, their clothes seemed to have come from the same rag heap as their mother's. They were apparently healthy, intelligent, and good humored. They didn't think they had any problems. Everything at home was fine. Yes, they did fight a bit, but it was "the other one" who always started things. Yes, the house was messy, but it was alright. Father, well, sometimes he got mad. Mother, well, sometimes she did cry and yell. But everything, overall, was fine. And so the children went out.

The mother was recalled, and asked flatly whether she was bankrupt, a technique I had first observed used by Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, and whether she would agree to follow any directions given her. She readily agreed and started to talk again, but I abruptly cut her off. Then I gave her three suggestions.

1. Have a meeting with the whole family (if the father would agree) and inform them that she would put the decision up to them: either they could continue as before with her nagging and her cleaning, or else she would do nothing any more in the house, but also no nagging. She would only wash clothes if they were put in the hamper.
2. Anything that wasn't where it should be, she would knock off with her elbow and kick out of the way into a closet or out on the street.
3. Under no circumstances should she make any remark of any kind relative to the condition of the house. She should only keep her own bedroom as clean as possible.

The mother wasn't too keen on these three suggestions, but they were repeated several times until there was no question in her mind or anyone else's exactly what she was to do. The counselor refused to discuss the logic behind the various suggestions, because the mother was very verbal and essentially argumentative. It was an all-or-nothing deal. She just had to follow directions and follow them one hundred percent.

Mrs. Smith was seen the following week and told this story. First, she discussed the suggestions with her husband and he agreed to go along. Next, she discussed the new procedures with the children, and a family vote was taken. It was five for, one against. "And," she said, "who didn't agree with the new plan?"

I told her it was obvious: Mike, the good boy, the adult child, the one who kept the kids in line.

Her face fell in surprise. Yes, it was Mike, so unlike him, so unexpected. After the vote he ran to his room, jumped into bed with muddy shoes, covered his head with blankets, and refused to come out for dinner, and from that point on he had been glum and speechless. As for the family, all was the same: confusion and disorder, things piling up even higher, nothing in the hamper. She felt she was going out of her mind, but was told to keep up the good work and report again the following week.

On the next week her distress was even greater. The children were crying. They had nothing clean. They couldn't even put on their stockings because they were so stiff with sweat and dirt. Their underwear was stinking and stained. There wasn't a clean shirt for the boys, nor a clean dress for the girls. The hamper was empty. She felt she was going out of her mind, and wondered if I knew what I was doing? When she approached a table with her elbows to shove something off on to the floor, the kids applauded her, nothing mattered. Only Jon had complained of her kicking his school books out of the way. There was more quarreling and fighting. No, she wasn't talking, she was singing. . .

Singing? Such as what? And, Mrs. Smith sang us a song in a lovely lilting voice that went as follows:

Oh, what pigs have I
Mike, and Jon, and Elly and Milly,
They leave things on the floor
Throwing down what they just wore
They are filthy and dirty and cruel
Where, where in the whole wide world
Were there kids like hers,
Those pigs of hers,
Those pigs of hers,
Those filthy pigs. . .

Mrs. Smith was told to stop this song, and merely smile, use her elbows and knees, and wait.

"But how long?" she asked.

"From now on," she was told. From now on. . .

Well, on the third week she looked even shabbier, more discouraged, more defeated and more desperate than ever. She informed us that neighbors were making remarks. The school had called her (she told them, as she was told by me, that she was following doctor's orders and if the school didn't want the kids in their condition, to send them home) and tried to get her to clean up the kids. They hadn't taken a bath for three weeks either. She was sure that they weren't even aware of their condition and if they were it didn't bother them. She was sure they would never change. She was positive, absolutely positive, our procedure would not work.

And, for a while I faltered; perhaps she was right. I was especially shaken when I re-interviewed the kids. They were dirtier than ever, but smilingly they denied there was much difference in the family. Yes, mother knocked off things with her elbows and kicked with her feet. It was funny.

When she returned, she was told once again to keep it up from now on.

On the fourth interview she was, if one can believe it, even more desperate. However, Elly, the six-year-old, was starting to hang things up. But what had the mother done? She had congratulated the child, and pointed out her virtues to the rest of the children. Elly put away her coat! Mother was told to stop it, not to compliment a child for doing what she should do. No rewards for normal expected behavior. Mother was baffled and again wanted to argue, discussing behavior modification and the effect of reward on conditioned behavior. She had studied psychology at Smith it turned out. But she was told to keep on doing just what she was doing, even though the kids were going to school now without stockings, even though they stunk and were filthy. The kids were seen briefly and they were now practically black with dirt.

On the fifth interview Mrs. Smith informed us that the kids went on a weekend cleaning bee; that the washing machine ran for two days practically without a stop. Every little thing was taken off the floor. The closets were all put in order. The floors were washed—all by the kids. The house now was spotless. The kids came in and were clean. They admitted cleaning up the house, but they didn't think that this called for much discussion. After all, doesn't everyone every once in a while clean up a house? What was all the fuss about, anyway?

On the next week, the mother casually mentioned that fighting had practically stopped between the children and Jon and Elly had completely stopped bedwetting, and Milly was skipping once in a while.

Bedwetting? There was nothing mentioned about this either in the social worker's report or in the various interviews. What was all this about? Well, Mrs. Smith said sheepishly, she knew there were so many things wrong with her family that this was just the last additional blow she was too ashamed to mention. The three younger children had bed wet from infancy: so Jon had wet for nine years, Elly for six years and Milly for three years. No, she couldn't explain why they had stopped, but in her disgust she had stopped changing their sheets and fighting with them about not drinking water before going to bed. She had decided to let everything go, and let them drown in their own urine—and so, unwittingly—and for wrong reasons—anger at me and at the kids and at the group—had stopped her nagging about the bedwetting, whereupon, to her surprise, it had all cleared up.

There were a few more minor problems to be cleared up. At the end of our counseling season, the social worker made another home visit and reported that things had improved a great deal. The children were seen again and once again, as usual, reported that everything was "fine." Mother was much more cheerful and was deeply appreciative of our work. When asked what she had learned, she reported, "Not to talk so much, and to act in a sensible manner."

The interaction between cases and theory should be an intimate one. We learn what to do from both. In this case, despite all the mother's attitudes and expressions, as well as some ideas given by members of the counseling group, I insisted that the mother operate as I thought she should—and this came from theory. The results were favorable, which confirm the theory.

What is of interest is this: while we went after only one thing, using logical consequences relative to the clothes (if you don't put the clothes in the hamper, I won't wash them; if you leave your things in my way I will knock them off and kick them out of sight), we made at least two other important changes in that family. First, we helped cut down on the fights and second, we improved the bed-wetting situation. Involved with these was the fact that Mike was no longer treated as an adult, and mother learned to talk less and to act in a more sensible and mature fashion.