

# Restitution for Destruction: Family Council Involvement

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A common problem which arises when counseling families is what to do when a child is destructive of property. If the property is the child's, the natural consequence results in the child's partial or total loss of the item. But what does one do when the child damages or destroys another's belongings? The key to the solution to this situation is the family council as it is with most financial problems. The present paper will elucidate involvement through the use of the family council and present one method for dealing with property destruction.

## **Family Council as a Means of Involvement**

Dreikurs (1959) has outlined the principles and procedures for conducting the family council. The council is the basis for social equality, the main vehicle for family involvement, and the training ground for democratic living (Croake, 1971). Dreikurs (1958) suggests that the council be regular and follow parliamentary procedure. A specific time is set each week for the meeting with a rotating chairman allowing all members to share this responsibility. Soltz (1971) suggests that once the skill of conducting meetings is established then it is possible to bring up areas of strife. This implies that possibly the first few sessions be concerned with planning family fun or dealing with situations which are generally positive. When a specific problem is introduced, e.g., mother says, "I seem to find myself getting very upset when the coffee table is scratched by toys", the emphasis is always on what the family can do about a specific problem rather than singling out an individual.

If a decision cannot be reached by the entire group, any changes should wait until the next regular family council. The council is the only authority which takes the parents out of the autocratic role and enables the children to assume mutual responsibility and respect. This provides the equilibrium between equals which is the only foundation for social intercourse (Dreikurs, 1971).

As Dreikurs (1959) points out, the extent of cooperation from children is amazing in a detached discussion of family problems. It is only during conflict that children seem unreasonable as they do not want to lose a power struggle. The council discussions appeal to each member's good sense which is far more effective than the more common situation where the parent attempts to intellectually superimpose his values upon the child.

The importance of agreement rather than voting among family members is illuminated by Soltz (1971). Voting has become tied to our representative form of democratic government related to our bureaucratic structure. However, in a family voting is poor policy as there is a tendency to pit some members against others resulting in group factioning. Joint decisions when a problem is present is often the difference between an attitude of punishment and one of involvement with possible consequences. If the child feels that he is receiving punishment, he is likely to attempt retaliation. In the case of destroyed property, retaliation could

well be further acts of destruction by the child. An attitude of, "What can we do about the problem?" and unanimous decision making foster cooperation and feelings of belongingness.

## **Restitution**

A common solution to the destruction problem entails the child's forfeiting of rights to use similar equipment or to play in that particular area in the future. The family council can often come up with other appropriate solutions for their particular case. One possible method involves some form of replacement for the damaged or destroyed item. If the family members treat the problem of destruction as a matter of fact need for reimbursement and not as a punishment, then the child is going to profit from the experience.

When restitution is considered it is recommended that logical consequences be discussed at the family council previous to an actual act of destruction. This will lessen the possibility of the child feeling that he is being punitively singled out. Rather he will just be meeting the requirements of a family decision in which he was involved and had an equal say. The method is not disparaging to the child. It does not condemn or in any way say that one is less worthwhile as a human being because he has been destructive to another's property. It merely teaches responsibility for respecting another's goods.

A word of caution should be injected. If the family is cooperative in general, there should be little problem with the council agreeing which goods are acceptable. However, if the family members tend to be punitive, e.g., three "good children" and one "bad child", then the child will likely feel that he is being punished especially if he is the "bad one." This family may want the child to suffer and is less concerned with re-education.

In this regard, Bullard (1970) suggests that when a child is operating at one of the stronger goals of misbehavior (power, power with revenge, or display of inadequacy) one should exercise caution if logical consequences are applied at all since these power seeking children are not reasonable and tend to view logical consequences as punishment or revenge. The restitution must be seen as appropriate to the destructive act if it is to be effective. This logical consequence is applicable to all members of the family, including father.

Accidental destruction by the child can occur. If the child is not at one of the goals of misbehavior and is usually cooperative, then a pitch-in and help clean-up and help pay for the damage would be a friendly gesture. This type child does not need re-education; his attitudes already demonstrate concern for others.

## **Young Children**

Younger children even when they receive an allowance often do not have the monetary funds to make restitution, but they do possess goods of monetary value which could be sold in order to raise the money necessary for replacement. At an early age one is not cognizant of the exact worth of goods; therefore, equal payment for replacement is not necessary, but the property given up by the child as payment should be significant or the logical consequence is not meaningful. For example, suppose a four-year-old is throwing his ball in the living room and breaks a lamp. The lamp may be worth \$25.00. It is not

necessary that \$25.00 worth of the child's toys be sold as payment for the lamp. Instead some lesser priced toy(s) which is of value can be the contribution in this instance.

Since it is an excellent idea that even the very young child be given an allowance, this may be a possible source. The child can be asked what he is able to contribute. It is not a good idea for future allowances to be assessed. One of the main purposes of an allowance is to help the child learn the responsibility of money management. If future monies are withheld from him he has no opportunity to practice this management.

When the child has no money and he does not raise funds through his own labor or has an insufficient amount that he is in a position to contribute and some of his goods are to be sold, it is important to discuss with the youngster which of his possessions he is going to put up for sale. Of course, it is necessary that he agrees to sell a significant item and not one that has no financial return. The parent or other family members have the right to object to insignificant objects when they constitute an insufficient contribution.

### **Older Children**

With the older child, coming closer to the exact worth of the destroyed article is of greater importance. The child who understands monetary value realizes that if restitution is made a comparable sum of money must be raised.

### **A Case Study of Principles in Practice**

An actual case study may point up the worth of this method of discipline. A mother of a goal three child (power with revenge) had been receiving family counseling. Over a three-month period tremendous changes had occurred in the family from a situation of continual struggle to one of relative harmony in which both members were now having fun together. The mother had been most successful in extricating herself from the child's attempts of drawing her into power contests. Then on a trip in the family camper the five-year-old boy, Ben, punched a hole in one of the window screens. Up to this time mother had tactfully learned to control her first impulses when Ben misbehaved. Destruction of property was something that she had always had a difficult time tolerating. Mother immediately showed her anger and disappointment in Ben with a verbal discharge.

Ben realized that he now had a method in which he could draw mother into a struggle and elicit hurtful feelings within her. Later that evening Ben was misbehaving so mother withdrew to the bathroom as she had successfully done during the previous weeks. This time Ben took a hammer and began beating upon the wall and announced that he was going to break several things in the room. For the first time in recent weeks mother once again felt defeated.

During the next counseling session, it was suggested that Ben should make restitution for the damaged property. It was agreed at the next family council that a cowboy suit, which was a favorite of Ben's but now nearly outgrown, would be sold as payment replacement. In this case Ben had begun receiving a weekly allowance of five cents which he promptly spent in the local gum machine. He thus had no money which he could contribute and was unwilling to

add the five cents which he was to receive again that day. His initial response to the idea of selling his goods was willfully offering several items of little value, a used coloring book, an incomplete and badly damaged set of tinker toys to mention two. These were, of course, quickly rejected by mother as they were of little value. The cowboy suit, although a felt loss to Ben, was mutually agreed upon.

The next time that mother withdrew to the bathroom Ben once again began banging upon the walls with a block of wood (the hammer had been put away previously since he had obviously not learned to use it properly). At the next family council it was agreed that a noise maker was the object of restitution for the damage done to the walls when Ben was stiking them with the block of wood.

After this, mother reported no further acts of destruction. She had acted wisely by regaining her composure even during the acts of destruction. She was able to matter-of-factly discuss at the family council with Ben the necessity of reimbursement and the two of them were able to mutually work through the problem.

Selling a child's goods can be a positive method of re-educating the destructive child. When the family council is utilized as a platform for mutual respect between family members, it is an effective place for deciding what contribution the child is willing to make toward payment of damaged property. This form of payment, not punishment, will uphold the child's sense of dignity, help to keep parents out of struggles with their child, and aid the child in learning self responsibility and respect for others.

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