

## RE-STRUCTURING MISTAKEN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS<sup>1</sup>

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We service middle-income families who cannot afford long-term psychotherapy. On the basis of Adler's psychology, we have been able to devise a method of short therapy that takes an average of fourteen, one-hour, weekly interviews to rehabilitate mistaken relationships in these families (2).

Our guiding principle is that the individual, as a result of training and self-training, evolves during childhood a style of life. Once the life style is formed, it is difficult for the individual to invent new responses outside its pattern. To accomplish fast therapy, the old responses that are making trouble must be *disrupted* and re-conditioned rapidly along more productive lines. A character trait, fortunately, is not a static thing-in-itself to be exorcised or analyzed out of existence, it is only a description of how we relate habitually in situations. It can be changed by re-training.<sup>2</sup>

According to Adler, "Next to a timid child one will always find an over-protective adult;" one can not find a trait called "timidity" apart from this connection. Every stick has two ends; therefore, and in order to do fast therapy, we treat both ends simultaneously as a unified manifestation, rather than treating the child or the parents separately as in a vacuum. We operate on the policy that the mistaken over-all family relationship, that mis-led the child in the first place, has to be re-structured if the child is to be put on a more constructive path. If the child has not been brought into line with social demands for self-reliance and co-operation, there is a mistake in the *whole family gestalt*.

A family is like a jig-saw puzzle that fits in one frame; to change one piece, all others must be changed correspondingly. A problem individual is a burden to those around him and deprives them of their

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<sup>1</sup>Paper read at the Sixth Annual Meeting of the American Society of Adlerian Psychology, New York City, May 11, 1957.

<sup>2</sup>The recently proposed Interference Theory of psychotherapy of Phillips is strikingly in accordance with our views. According to Phillips: "Psychotherapy is, viewed from the theoretical standpoint, best described as an *interference* with ongoing behavior and attitudinal characteristics, rather than as a method that brings about change through extraction, uncovering, relieving (and re-living) repressed materials. Repression has no place in the present scheme of things" (5, p. 175).

fair share of the family situation. Many patient sheep can lie down in one stall, but one unfair, restless sheep starts all trampling each other. Once trampling has started, it is necessary to deal with all simultaneously. And so, we treat total-family relationships rather than deal with one "offending" member.

#### RE-STRUCTURING THE FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

One of us (Mrs. Beecher) works with the so-called "problem" child for forty-five minutes in one room, while the other (Mr. Beecher), in another room, works with the parents, siblings, and any other family members involved in the problem. During this time, each complains about the other; the child complains about the family, and the family complains about the child and about each other's handling of the child. No one blames himself for anything! Blaming others for our mistakes shows a leaning, dependent, irresponsible attitude. It is this attitude that we attack separately by "spitting in the soup" (Adler) of each about blaming all the others. We challenge each to correct his own mistakes and become more self-reliant instead of acting like "God's special agent" put on earth to criticize the others.

The last fifteen minutes of the appointment-hour, we come together in one room for what we call a Joint Conference. With all present, each is challenged to be personally responsible for his own behavior instead of trying to be a "Moses who writes the Ten Commandments" for the others. In these conferences, we work together to outline a family blueprint that guarantees fair play for all members. Families come to us dead-locked in mutual resentment. In the very first joint conference, we disrupt the whole family situation because we have learned that nothing constructive will grow while they are all locked in the struggle of their old, competitive jealousy and mutual sabotage. So, in joint assembly, we show all the members of the family the total picture and, thereby, put each of them on record in what might be called a "gold fish bowl." Thereafter, each member has to watch his own behavior. If he does not, he is quickly brought into line by the other members of the family, each time he reverts to his old exploitive behavior. Each member, then, holds the others to the new family blueprint or Magna Carta, structured for mutual advantage, instead of special privilege.

Such conscious re-structuring of family relationships grew out of a necessity to provide short therapy for middle-income families. We were delighted to discover that Margaret Mead described similar

deep, fundamental changes in the behavior of a whole tribe in New Guinea in a like manner (4). They consciously re-structured the blueprint of community relationships. The dynamics of change, as described, seem to be parallel or identical in both situations.

In re-structuring family relationships, we found that neither the parents nor the child are aware of the over-all, basic mistakes they make. They do not interpret their old familiar patterns as mistakes. Our role is to expose these to both the parents and the child, and most especially to expose the mistaken subsidies that are keeping the child infantile so that he falls behind other children who are learning to be more independent.

#### APPROACH TO THE CHILD

Each child, no matter what his age, is treated as a responsible person in his own right and not something precious out of *Peter Pan*. We discuss frankly with him what he is doing that is not helpful or useful and how it damages those around him. Regarding human relationships, we never underestimate a child's intelligence; we never talk down to him. In working with a child, we are, as Adlerians, concerned not so much with the child's emotions as with the uses he makes of them, especially the unfair uses to gain his own selfish ends within the family.

We assume that the child can not "see the forest for the trees," and, furthermore, that we must, as we go along, label each tree for what it is. We explain to him that we are starting an investigation together which will concern itself with a search for "clues" as to why he is dissatisfied, discouraged, or unhappy. He is told that these clues will be illustrated by pictures that will be drawn to show the larger mistakes he is making in life.

One of these illustrated clues, called "the limping figure," has been described and discussed elsewhere (3, pp. 180-184). Such stick-figure representations of the child's habitual behavior traits are limitless in their possibilities and can vary to meet the demands or the needs of the situation. They are an impersonal as well as a very powerful technique for capturing a child's immediate attention and for throwing him off the defensive. They are also a way of under-mining his persisting, infantile dependence and of preparing him to re-orient himself toward a more grown-up goal in life than the one he has been using. They give him a point of reference for appraising human behavior in general, and specifically furnish him a way to estimate for

himself the degree of his own mistaken manner of perceiving and behaving.

Since every stick has two ends, we know that it is a rare child indeed who will make use of this new "behavior yard-stick" until or unless the adults in his environment are willing concurrently to alter their inadequate behavior. Some astute wit said: "Children are natural mimics; they act just like their parents despite every effort to teach them good manners!" When and if a child's parents mend their own "bad manners" and begin to operate on a more common-sense, realistic basis, we have found that these clues take on significant meaning for a child, and make it less possible or urgent for him to continue in his old, mistaken direction with any kind of a clear conscience.

#### THE CASE OF A "RETARDED" GIRL

Mary's case illustrates how we work with a child and what a first Joint Conference is like. When she was four years old, Mary was labelled "mentally retarded" by a pediatrician. When we first saw her at the age of eight, the school was coming to the same conclusion.

The first day Mary came to our Center, we concluded, on the basis of her responses to questions and the manner in which she conducted herself, that she was not retarded but only an excessively dependent child. We saw her as an "intelligent little trickster" who used the pretence or appearance of helplessness so that she might live "as a worm in an apple" (1, p. 778). Our observation was verified when we found out how Mary habitually behaved at home. She would, for example, purposely button her clothes up wrong to attract attention and get some member of the family to re-button them. She would leave all the food on her plate untouched until everyone at the table had begged her to eat it. She frowned continuously as if she were a "queen" whose disfavor had been courted by everyone. She used fear of thunder, or the doctor, or anything else she could dream up as an excuse to make a "big deal." Each member of the family waited on Mary hand and foot. In addition to other services, her parents did her school work for her. The grandmother, who lived in the home, anticipated her every wish. A brother and sister, several years her senior, pampered her too. In short, the whole household pivoted around Mary. Daily frustration and hostility were the hall-mark of this home. The older brother and sister were locked in a jealous competition to grab-off whatever little attention they could attract by

trying on their own to out-baby their baby sister. It was, in reality, a three-way competition among all three children to see which could get the biggest slice of attention.

During the forty-five minutes of the first interview Mary frowned and pretended not to understand what it was all about. These emotional efforts of hers were ignored, and she was treated with solemnity as if she were Senator Margaret Chase Smith! Explanations were made in the form of stick-figure drawings to illustrate for Mary how she used tricks to hold the center of attention and get others to do things for her that she should, at eight, be doing for herself.

In the Joint Conference that followed, the last fifteen minutes of the appointment hour, it was explained to all—parents, grandmother, brother and sister—in Mary's hearing, that they lived with a very intelligent little girl, who had trapped them all into doing her bidding by using "apparent helplessness," appearing not to understand, and frowning as if she were a "queen" and they her "disloyal subjects." They were told that Mary had put the "whammy" on them all and forced them to be her captive audience. They were urged to become more clever than Mary, to escape the traps she set for them. At this point everyone laughed in recognition of the situation, including Mary. Mother and father were asked not to do Mary's home work for her, and not to beg her to eat, but simply remove her plate at meal's end even if she hadn't taken a bite. They were told that if Mary wanted to button her clothes all wrong, they should be gracious enough to allow her this privilege and wear "dark glasses" so they would not see her frowns. Grandmother was urged to look the other way and run to the nearest exit so she would no longer be tempted to play the role of Mary's mind reader. Brother and sister were instructed to "mend their own fences"—which should keep them so busy they wouldn't have time to fix things up for Mary. All were assured that if they did these things, Mary would move full steam ahead because "no actress plays to an empty house." And Mary? She was challenged to "be a help and not a burden" (Adler). This is a sample of the way we disrupt the mistaken equilibrium of a family in the first Joint Conference and is typical of all other subsequent conferences. We check off the dependency problems that are presented as they arise and are solved.

Whereas Mary's whole family had previously been a hot-bed of utter frustration, hostility and sibling rivalry, it is today operating on a well-running, satisfactory and acceptable family blueprint. And

Mary is now a very happy, relaxed fourth grader, doing her home work without help, getting excellent marks in school, being personally self-reliant and, in addition, doing many chores that are helpful around the house.

To summarize: We do not treat individual symptoms shown by a child, for they are only a barometer of his condition vis-a-vis the outside world. Instead, we strike directly at the family situation which mistakenly supports the child's leaning, dependent attitude. Our target is to stand him and each member of the family on their own feet. When the child has learned to stand alone, his symptoms evaporate.

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