PARENTING GROUPS

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Parenting Groups

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Introduction

Being a parent is perhaps the hardest task facing adults today. And yet it's a task for which adults have little or no training. More and more parents are recognizing that child-rearing methods that apparently worked in the past are no longer successful. Neither repressive nor permissive strategies work. Children need structure, but it must be non-attacking and non-abusive.

Adler (1933) developed the concept of "social interest." He saw children as having an innate striving for connection. How this striving manifests itself depends on the child's understanding of the social context which, in turn, is influenced by parents.

Dreikurs (1964) applied Adler's concepts to the task of child-rearing, describing all children's behavior as being directed toward the goal of belonging. Misbehavior implies faulty beliefs about the means of achieving that goal.

Others (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1982, 1983; Nelson, 1981) have developed parenting training programs based on Dreikurs' principles.

Selection and Screening

In running parenting groups, it's preferable to have both members of the parenting couple participate. Obviously this isn't always possible. Often

one of the parents isn't interested in learning new parenting skills; sometimes the family has only one parent.

You should run separate groups for parents of teens and for those with younger children. Often parents of eleven- and twelve-year-olds ("pre-teens") are dealing with teen issues, and parents may benefit from participating in the parenting group for older children. Where to draw the line is a judgment call.

Meet with each applicant during the screening phase and assess for aggressive or disruptive potential. Carefully evaluate parents who have been referred by the courts as a result of child abuse allegations. Such applicants may be hostile and disruptive. Similarly, parents of kids who are involved in the juvenile justice system because of their misbehavior may have problems beyond the scope of this chapter.

Time and Duration

The group should run for an hour and a half, once a week, for eight weeks.

Structure

Since each new skill presented builds on previously learned skills, it's

important that participants attend all sessions, and that new participants not join part way through the series.

If possible, run the group with a co-therapist, preferably one of the opposite sex. Fathers are usually far outnumbered in parenting groups, and are more likely to actively participate when there's a male leader. Co-therapists can also model communication, problem solving, and other more specific parenting skills for the group. The optimal size for the group is between eight and sixteen parents.

By the time parents have sought a parenting group, they are usually feeling helpless and sometimes desperate. Most are already quite committed to learning anything that will improve their situation at home.

Goals

The group is aimed at helping parents elicit more appropriate behaviors from their children. If the group is successful, individuals will begin to feel better about themselves as parents, and to worry less about their children. Parents will begin to understand their children's behaviors from a new perspective. All behavior, whether manifested by a child or an adult, can be seen as an attempt to belong, to find a place in the world at large or, for children, in the smaller world of the family.

Parents will begin to recognize the systemic nature of families: that the most effective way to facilitate changes in their children's behavior is for the parents to make changes in their own behavior.

Behavioral goals of the group include learning and practicing specific skills in such areas as communication, problem solving, and limit setting. These skills can be used to develop specific strategies to help parents deal with the problems they bring to the group.

Ground Rules

There are several ground rules that must be established at the beginning of the group. One of the most important is that you describe the limits of confidentiality. Occasionally you may discover in the course of the group that a parent's disciplinary methods are abusive, and you will be obligated to report this to the appropriate authorities. Be sure that you are familiar with the current child-abuse reporting laws of your state.

Other ground rules include one person talking at a time (while ensuring that each person gets the opportunity to speak). Group meetings should begin and end on time, and participants are expected to arrive promptly and attend all sessions. There should be no aggressive or attacking criticism allowed, particularly criticism by parents of their children.

Description of Group Process

Each meeting consists of three parts: first, a brief check-in with each parent that includes a follow-up on specific strategies attempted during the week; second, a short review of the contents of the previous week, followed by the introduction of new concepts or skills, including their relevance to participants and the planning of specific strategies.

In the first meeting, the check-in is replaced by introductory exercises. Introduce yourself and describe the function of the group and the ground rules before having parents introduce themselves. You might say something like

"Hi. My name is Kim and this is Jerry. We'll be running this group together and we'd like to start by telling you something about the group. As you know, we'll be meeting for eight weeks, during which time you'll have the opportunity to learn and practice many new skills.

"There are a few guidelines that usually help groups run more smoothly. To get the most benefit from the eight sessions, we'd like to begin and end promptly, and hope that each of you will make it a priority to come to every meeting. While Jerry and I will try to ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak, it helps if only one person talks at a time. We'd also like to keep aggressive or attacking criticism out of the group. Being a parent is hard

enough on your self-esteem, and believe it or not, so is being a kid today."

Jerry might continue at this point with:

"You'll be able to teach the concepts and skills described in the sessions to any and all of your friends and acquaintances. However, it's important that material relating to any specific parent or child remain confidential. Can we have agreement on this?" Make sure you get an affirmative response from everyone. "The only possible exception to this rule is if Kim or I feel that someone in the group or at your home is abusive, being abused, or suicidal. Under those circumstances, we would have to contact the appropriate authorities. Are there any questions about anything we've said so far?

"Each week we'll be learning some new skills that we hope you'll take home and practice. Some of you may have very specific problems with one or more children that you'd like to resolve. You'll have the opportunity to develop, with the group's help, some strategies to address those problems.

"So, let's continue with some introductions from each of you."

Starting the Group

Most of the participants will feel somewhat anxious about being in the group. Although the meeting where the initial screening took place may have

relieved some of this anxiety, being in the group at all implies a perceived lack of success as a parent. In this frame of mind, parents feel isolated and focus on the negative traits and behaviors of their children. The introductory exercise helps parents see their problems with their children's behavior in the context of the problems of others, and refocuses parents on their children's more positive and promising qualities.

The exercise is in two parts. First, have each person say his or her name, the names of the other family members involved (including the ages of the children), and give a brief statement summarizing any significant parenting problems. The second time around, have members describe a behavior or incident that best illustrates what they like most about their problem child or children.

Main Concepts and Skills

A. Concept: Three Styles of Parenting

"There are three major styles of parenting: authoritarian, permissive, and one that emphasizes mutual respect."

Authoritarian

"Authoritarian parents exert strict control with rigid rules and

regulations. What their children want is rarely considered. The children obey out of fear of punishment and/or with considerable resentment. Their orientation toward rules and limits is to do whatever they can get away with."

Permissive

"Permissive parents basically allow their children to do whatever they want. Some hate to see their children unhappy; others simply want their children to have all the advantages they themselves never had. These parents often feel out of control and defeated. Their children's attitude is to do whatever they want, because someone else will always pick up the pieces or take the heat."

Mutual Respect

"The key to more effective parenting is mutual respect. For children to learn respect and responsibility, they must be treated with respect and given responsibility for appropriate aspects of their lives. Children's feelings, opinions, needs, and desires must be treated as equal in worth to those of adults; that is, listened to and considered. Equality as individuals doesn't imply equal decision-making power in every area. But often simply listening to a child's feelings or desires and validating them, as one would do for a friend, can defuse a potential battle. Mutual respect combines kindness and firmness, nurturing and limit setting."

B. Concept: How Do Children Change?

"Family systems theory describes the family as so interdependent that altering any part of the system can result in the entire system changing. Accordingly, the most effective way to elicit different, more appropriate behaviors from your children is to act differently yourselves. Yelling at Tommy for forgetting his homework doesn't help him remember, but making his afternoon play activities contingent on his remembering might."

C. Concept: All Children Want To Belong

"All behavior, whether manifested by a child or an adult, can be seen as an attempt to belong, to find a place in the world at large or in the smaller world of the home. For children, a sense of belonging can result from feeling like an active participant in the family and a valued contributor to the household. In authoritarian households, children receive rewards only when their behavior conforms to their parents' rigid demands. In permissive homes, children receive rewards without having had to do anything for them. In neither case is the child's potential contribution looked upon."

Discouraged Children Misbehave

"When children don't feel able to participate in or contribute to the family in any valuable or constructive way, they become discouraged. They

still want to belong, so they attempt to find other ways to reach this goal. Faulty beliefs about how to do this result in misbehavior."

Four Mistaken Beliefs

"Discouraged children develop four mistaken beliefs about how to achieve the goal of belonging.

- •The first mistaken belief is that they can belong and feel worthy only by receiving complete parental attention. For these children, negative attention (scolding, yelling) is better than no attention at all. Their goal is simply to receive attention.

- •The second mistaken belief among children is that they can belong and feel worthy only by being powerful and by subjugating a parent. Interactions with these children are characterized by power struggles ('You can't make me!' 'Oh, can't I? We'll see about that.'). The goal resulting from this belief is power.

- •The third (less frequently occurring) belief among children is that they're totally unlovable. They feel so hurt themselves that their goal becomes one of hurting back, taking revenge.

- •The fourth faulty belief among children is that they lack the resources to be competent. They see anything short of perfection as being worthless. Thus, they display their inadequacy in order to avoid the pressure of others'

expectations."

D. Skill: Diagnosing Your Child's Misbehavior

"Your child's mistaken goals can be most easily identified from two observations: 1) how you feel in response to your child's behavior, and 2) what happens when you respond to the behavior. These are important cues from which you'll be able to diagnose which one of the mistaken beliefs is at the root of your child's misbehavior."

Attention

"When your child's goal is attention, the overriding feeling you'll experience is irritation. When you respond by scolding (giving some attention), the child stops misbehaving temporarily. But the same behavior, or something equally irritating, soon starts again. Tommy may play quietly as long as you are watching, but will become an impossible, whining nuisance as soon as you attempt to read the paper or talk on the phone. When you tell him to go away, the goal of getting attention is temporarily met, and Tommy will go away—temporarily. But before long he's back, pestering you again."

Power

"When your child's goal is power, the feeling you'll experience is anger

and a desire to control. When you attempt to set a limit, a power struggle ensues. When Tommy says his newly learned curse word, and you forbid him to use such language in the house, it will suddenly become his favorite word. The more you attempt to prevent his saying the word, the more attached to it he becomes."

Revenge

"When your child's goal is revenge, the feeling you'll experience is one of deep hurt and a desire to hurt back. Punishing your child results in further escalations of vengeful behavior. If you yell at Tommy and spank him for hitting his baby sister, he may try next time to tip her out of her crib."

Avoiding Expectations Through Inadequacy

"When your child's goal is to display inadequacy to avoid the pressure of expectations (yours and his own), your overriding feelings will be despair and helplessness. When you attempt to help improve the child's performance, he or she becomes even more discouraged. When Tommy complains that he's too dumb to do his homework, your assertions to the contrary only spur him to further statements of his inadequacy."

E. Skill: Increasing Positive Behavior

"Rewarding a behavior will increase its chances of being repeated. Of the many things that are rewarding for children, one of the most powerful is parental attention. This can be positive (a smile or caress) or negative (a sharp word, a slap).

"Parents will sometimes ask why they should reward children for 'what they should be doing anyway.' It's useless to argue about whether or not the child *should* be behaving in the desired way and therefore 'deserves' a reward. Rather, a more useful question is whether the child *is* behaving in the desired way. The answer is presumably no (or else the parents wouldn't be discussing the issue in a parenting group). Reinforcement works. Parents have the choice of using it or continuing to struggle with the problem behavior. Parents and children alike will benefit from knowing that their contributions to the family (even those that are considered ordinary responsibilities) are appreciated.

"It's important to be very specific about which behaviors you want to encourage. 'I want him to set the table when asked' is more specific than 'I want him to do what I tell him.'

"Identifying appropriate reinforcements for your child requires consideration of such factors as the child's age and the difficulty or magnitude of the behavior change being encouraged. With older children the

reinforcements can include future activities (a movie, a trip to the zoo), whereas with younger children the reinforcements must be more immediate. Rewards must also be proportionate to the task at hand. A new bicycle may be an appropriate reinforcement for a semester of hard work at school, but it would be an inappropriate reward for making the bed five mornings in a row.

"Timing is crucial. For the most part, whichever behavior directly precedes the reinforcement is the one that will be reinforced. Thus, the more immediate the reward, the greater its impact. When Tommy mows the lawn without being asked, an immediate expression of appreciation is a more effective reinforcement than mentioning it a day or two later. When he's to be rewarded with a trip to the zoo, telling him immediately is more effective than telling him on the day of the trip."

F. Skill: Other Ways To Increase the Positive and Decrease the Negative

Shaping

"Most of you don't want to sit around waiting for your children to randomly exhibit a desired behavior so that you can then reinforce it. Instead, you can 'shape' your children's behavior. Begin by reinforcing behavior even if it is only somewhat close to the desired behavior, and then gradually reinforce only those behaviors that are closer to the desired behavior."

Reinforcing an Incompatible Behavior

"If there's a particular behavior that you want to eliminate, teach another behavior that's incompatible. In other words, teach something pleasant that cannot physically occur if the other behavior is going on. Then consistently reward the new behavior."

Reinforcing Anything But Unwanted Behaviors

"Discourage a particularly undesirable behavior by reinforcing every other behavior. Later, reinforce only those behaviors that you'd like to see repeated."

G. Skill: A Misbehaving Child Is Still a Worthwhile Child

"It's important to separate the child from his or her behavior. The key concept for this group is that the intrinsic worth of children is not dependent on how they behave. All children misbehave at times. When the message they receive is that they are 'bad' when they behave badly, then they are liable at these times to become discouraged, and their rate of misbehavior is likely to increase. When they are told that it's simply their behavior that's unacceptable, their self-worth is not affected. Instead of calling Tommy a lazy slob, you could tell him how disappointed you were that he didn't mow the lawn when asked."

H. Skill: Encouraging Your Child

"Encouraging children involves helping them see their strengths and the value of their contributions, no matter how small. Encouragement can be nonverbal and implied rather than specific.

"Treat your child *as if* he or she were responsible. This will go a long way toward encouraging the child to behave in accordance with that expectation. 'Never do for a child what she can do for herself' is a good rule of thumb for encouraging autonomy. Of course, it's essential to know the appropriate expectations for children of different ages. If your expectations exceed your child's capacities, this can be a setup for feelings of failure and discouragement.

"When appropriate, ask your children for their advice or opinions, and encourage them to participate in decision making.

"Show your children a different, more positive perception of themselves, based on past experience. When Tommy speaks disparagingly about himself, don't invalidate his feelings. Instead, remind him of the occasions when he displayed very different, positive characteristics."

I. Skill: Children Need To Be Heard

"Many children will escalate their misbehavior when they feel that they haven't been heard. They hope that if they scream louder or kick harder or even sulk more dramatically, someone will finally understand what they're trying to express. Unfortunately, these escalations usually elicit just the opposite reaction: an attempt to silence the child and/or stop the behavior. The child ends up feeling even less acknowledged or understood.

"Listen to and acknowledge the feelings your child is expressing. To do this adequately, you have to give your complete attention. As children develop the skill of verbalizing their feelings, they will need to act them out less. Giving your child's feelings a name will model this process. When Jenny tells you how much she hates the girl who only yesterday was her best friend, a response of 'Gee, you sound really mad at her' will let her know that you're listening and understanding."

Acknowledging Negative Feelings

"It's difficult to acknowledge your child's angry or painful feelings. But you don't have to agree with feelings to acknowledge them. The key is respect, not blanket agreement. 'I understand you're disappointed at not being included in the decision' doesn't imply that you agree that he should have been included.

"Instead of trying to solve your children's problems for them, ask the

children for solutions. Encourage them to use their own resources. 'What do you think you could do about it?' gives the encouraging message that you trust their ability to solve their own problems.

"Don't make children feel guilty for negative feelings. Tell them 'Everyone gets angry at times. Getting angry is fine. Yelling, screaming, and hitting aren't.'"

Expressing Your Own Feelings

"Sometimes you can engage cooperation by expressing how you feel about your child's behavior. Children don't usually want their parents to be unhappy."

I-Statements. "Make *I*-statements rather than *you*-statements. You-statements ('You make me so angry') tend to impart blame and are usually heard as an attack. The object of the t/o»-statement then gets defensive and often attacks back, *I*-statements acknowledge that the speaker owns the feeling or problem without blaming or attacking.

"An *I*-statement usually begins 'I feel....' and continues 'and I want ' Be careful not to turn *I*-statements into hidden *you*-statements: 'I feel that *you* are '

J. Skill: Solving Problems

"The most useful model of problem solving includes the following fours steps:

1. *Define the problem in specific terms.* This is the most important step, because if you don't accurately define the problem, you can't find an accurate solution.

2. *Brainstorm alternatives.* Be respectful of all alternatives, yours and your child's. List them before evaluating them.

3. *Eliminate alternatives.* Go through the list and eliminate alternatives that either you or your child don't want. Remaining alternatives must be acceptable to both of you. If none are left, either more alternatives must be created (step 2), or you must both reevaluate the alternatives that have been eliminated.

4. *Develop a plan to put the chosen alternative into practice, and evaluate its success.* If the first plan doesn't work, repeat steps 3 and 4."

K. Concept: Punishment Doesn't Work

"Punishment doesn't work for many reasons. It doesn't help children learn to be mature, responsible, or independent. It demonstrates to children that the best way to get what they want is coercion.

"Punishment does stop the undesired behavior temporarily. But usually the punishment is so unrelated to the crime—and the child is so angry and resentful for being punished—that the intended message about acting appropriately and responsibly goes unnoticed.

"Sometimes the punishment actually leaves a message that is totally contradictory to the one you want to convey. You can't expect a child to learn not to fight with siblings, for instance, if you punish him or her by spanking.

"The attention given during punishment can actually serve as reinforcement for the misbehavior, especially if the goal of the behavior was attention. When the behavior recurs, it's easy to assume that the punishment wasn't strong enough; but the use of stronger measures will only meet with a similar lack of success."

L. Skill: Give Your Child Choices

"For children to learn to act responsibly, they must learn that they have choices. Wherever possible, give your child a choice about what you want him or her to do. The choice can concern when the task is done, how the task is done, or with whom the task is done (but not whether the task is done). Children feel more in control of their lives—and therefore better about themselves—when they have choices. Given choices, they are less likely to engage in power struggles or to misbehave in order to feel worthwhile."

M. Skill: Setting Consequences

"Children must also learn that their choices have consequences. There are two kinds of consequences, natural and logical. Natural consequences occur without any kind of iIntervention from you. If Jenny forgets to take her lunch to school, the natural consequence is that she'll be hungry at lunch time. In the mistaken belief that they are being helpful, many parents would jump in their cars and deliver the forgotten lunch. In fact, this response prevents Jenny from experiencing the consequences of her actions. She doesn't learn to remember to take her lunch (to prevent being hungry). She doesn't have to learn the lesson offered by the situation. If she forgets her lunch, someone will always bring it to her. Despite all your nagging, threats, and punishment, the message that is retained is that remembering to take lunch to school is unnecessary. A healthy child won't suffer serious harm from missing lunch for a day or two, but the experience of being hungry as a direct result of his or her own choice (to remember or not remember) will have a profound learning impact on the child.

"Logical consequences are those that require your iIntervention. If a friend borrows something and returns it in significantly worse condition, chances are that you won't lend anything else to that friend. To withhold your property from a person who doesn't respect it is a logical consequence of that lack of respect. If the item were ruined, it would be logical to ask that it be

replaced or repaired at the other person's expense. No consequences would automatically present themselves to your friend without your iIntervention (refusal to lend next time, or request for payment): this is a *logical* rather than a *natural* consequence.

"Many parents tire of cajoling, nagging, and threatening their children to get ready to be taken to school in the morning. Instead, parents could calmly announce what time they'll be leaving: those children who aren't ready might need to dress in the car, skip breakfast, or (if safety permits) walk. Under these circumstances, children would learn that they can either be ready on time or suffer some potential hardships—and that the choice is theirs.

"There are several key issues to consider in designing logical consequences.

1. Make sure that the consequence is *related* to the behavior in question.

2. Once a consequence is designed, *follow through* with it. If what you say is going to happen doesn't, the message is that your child shouldn't believe what you say. Consistency is essential.

3. Present the consequence *without anger* or blame. Children are able to learn from consequences when choices are presented respectfully with the message that the children themselves are fully capable of making the best choice. The consequence of the choice they make must be presented neutrally. In this

way there is no one to blame for the result—it's simply the consequence of their choice. This is what differentiates consequences from punishment. If you present the consequences with anger or glee, or indulge in 'I told you so,' the lesson will again be lost in the child's anger and resentment.

"It may help to try and see yourself simply as an agent of your child's decisions and choices. Keeping this in mind, it may be easier to enforce consequences without anger."

N. Skill: Using Time Out

"*Time out* means just that: time away from whatever is going on. Usually this means that a child will go to his or her room for a specified amount of time (a few minutes for a young child is enough). This is not punishment; the child can go to the bedroom and play with whatever toys he or she chooses. It's a time for the child to reflect.

"Time out can be useful in two ways. You can present it as one of two alternatives to your child, and let the decision be his or hers. You can also present time out as a logical consequence of behaving inappropriately around others. In both cases, the choice is essentially the child's."

O. Skill: Putting It All Together

"Determining what response is most appropriate for a particular situation involves the question 'Whose problem is it?' The answer depends on the answer to another question: 'Whose rights are being affected?' If your child wants to sleep in his T-shirt and shorts instead of his pajamas for a night, is it really worth a fight? Are your rights really being violated? If your child doesn't want to finish everything on her dinner plate, are your rights affected? What if your teenager wants to shave his head and wear a Mohawk, spray-painted hot pink? This is a difficult issue, especially for those of you who desire some measure of control over your children's lives.

"Some of you may want your children to be just like you—in behavior, tastes, and opinions. You may feel personally affronted when they differentiate themselves in these areas. However, children must develop a sense of their separateness in order to become autonomous and independent. This separateness is usually manifested by flaunting differences in just those areas that are dear to parents: dress, hairstyle, political opinions. Treating children with respect means accepting their differences and allowing them to make their own decisions, *providing their health or safety isn't at risk.*

"Try to let go of issues that are ultimately your child's responsibility. Telling your teenager that she can't wear makeup when she goes out may simply teach her to be sneaky, waiting until she's out of the house to put the makeup on. Your opposition may even enhance the attraction of the behavior

you're trying to stop.

"Depending on the answer to the question, 'Whose problem is it?' there are certain steps to take in responding appropriately."

> 1. *The Child's Problem.* "When the child owns the problem, the appropriate responses are
>
>   a. to listen and validate the child's feelings
>
>   b. to encourage problem solving'

"Don't be pushy in offering help—after all, it's their problem."

> 2. *The Parent's Problem.* "When your rights are being affected, then it *is* your problem and your responsibility to take action. When you lie awake at night worrying about the safety of your child who consistently breaks curfew, then your rights are being violated. The appropriate steps are to
>
>   a. express your feelings in an /-statement
>
>   b. engage your child in problem solving
>
>   c. determine consequences

When Ownership of the Problem Is Unclear. "Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish who owns the problem, because both persons' rights are affected. If your teenager is unhappy over the break-up of a relationship, it's his or her

problem. But if he or she behaves aggressively at home as a result of the unhappiness, it may become your problem as well.

"In these cases, start with the child's problem. When that is resolved, your problem might get resolved in the process. So the appropriate responses are to

> a. listen and validate feelings
>
> b. encourage problem solving

"If that doesn't resolve the problem for you, go on to

> c. express your feelings in an /-statement
>
> d. engage your child in problem solving
>
> e. set consequences

"The steps you choose in dealing with different situations will reflect your own values. If your fifteen-year-old is skipping school, some of you may decide that your child owns the problem, and allow him or her to repeat the year. Others may choose to set some logical consequences (T'm happy to support you while you're attending school. I'm not willing to support you if you're just playing around. If you choose not to attend school, you'll have to find a job or somewhere else to live.')."

P. Concept: Have Fun

"When the conflict level in a family is high, the enjoyment level is low. It's hard to have fun in an atmosphere of tension and resentment, where every interaction becomes a power struggle. It's important, therefore, while working on decreasing the conflict, to try and increase the frequency of pleasurable activities.

"Special alone time with each child can be incorporated into bedtime rituals (reading a story, reviewing the day).

"Set aside a 'family day' each week for the entire family to do something fun together. Ensure that the whole family participates in planning this event, and that everyone shares in the preparatory activities."

Main Interventions

Week 1

Introduction

See Starting the Group.

A. Concept: Three Styles of Parenting

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Intervention 2: Role-plays

Example 1

Parents can role-play interactions which they perceive as typical of the parenting styles just described. Most will recognize their own styles as being either authoritarian or permissive.

> James: (role-playing a ten-year-old) Mom, can I watch TV?
>
> Pamela: (role-playing James' mother) Have you finished your homework yet?
>
> James: Not quite, but —
>
> Pamela: No but! Get in your room and finish it right now.
>
> James: But why can't I just watch one program?
>
> Pamela: Because I said so. And if I hear one more peep out of you, you'll be very sorry. Now go!

Example 2

> *Catherine: (role-playing a fifteen-year-old)* Dad, Jenny's having a party at her house on Saturday. May I go?
>
> *Fred: (role-playing Catherine's father)* Well, I don't know. Who's going to be there?
>
> *Catherine:* Everyone's going to be there. Don't be so stuffy, it's just a party.

Fred: Well, I'd like to think that Jenny's parents were going to be there.

Catherine: Jesus! What do you think, we're all babies? Don't you trust me? No one else's parents give them such trouble about a simple party.

Fred: Okay, okay! Go! Just leave me alone!

Concept: How Do Children Change?

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Intervention 3: Group Discussion

Example

"What do you think about the idea that if you want your kids to change, you have to change first?"

Note to therapists: No matter how bad things have been at home, they will improve if parents follow the guidelines presented in the context of this group. However, at this point we can safely predict that things may get worse before they get better. Children will be suspicious at first when their parents begin responding to them differently. They may interpret unfamiliar signs of respect as sarcasm and reject invitations to talk or solve problems. Even though children might be unhappy with things as they are, their situation is at least predictable and they can therefore feel comfortable and familiar with it. When faced with unfamiliar, unpredictable behavior from their parents,

children will attempt to elicit the old, familiar responses: they'll increase their levels of acting up or acting out to provoke their parents' old controlling behaviors. It will feel to parents as if things are getting worse. But if they can remember and anticipate this reaction, they will be able to persevere with the skills they're learning, and eventually things will improve.

Week 2

Check-in

Solicit reactions to the previous meeting.

C. Concept: All Children Want To Belong

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

D. Skill: Diagnosing Your Child's Misbehavior

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Most parents will easily be able to identify their child's mistaken goal in any particular interaction. Although the goal may differ from time to time, one will probably—though not always—be more in evidence than the others. The two most common goals are attention and power. Avoiding others' expectations through displays of inadequacy is also frequently seen, while

revenge is rare as a general theme.

Intervention 4: Soliciting Examples From Parents

Example

"Think about your own children for a minute. What are the goals of their misbehavior, and what are the cues that enable you to recognize those goals?"

> *Gloria:* Paul's goal is definitely attention. He constantly bugs me when we're home alone—for something to eat, something to drink, to answer his questions, to tell me he's bored. It drives me crazy. And he'll go away for about two minutes when I yell at him...and then we'll start again.

> *Therapist:* And the cues?

> *Gloria:* Well, I guess that I feel frustrated, and that when I yell at him, he goes away —temporarily. I suppose I gave him the attention he wanted at that point.

Homework

Observe (a) your feelings and (b) what happens when you intervene, to practice diagnosing your children's misbehavior.

Week 3

Check-in

Include success and problems with homework.

E. Skill: Increasing Positive Behavior

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Parents sometimes complain that reinforcement sounds like bribery. This concern arises from the belief that bribery is always bad. In fact, people are always making agreements about appropriate rewards for desired behaviors. Bosses pay salaries only if their employees turn up for work and perform adequately. There is nothing inherently wrong with a clear agreement between parents and their children. Preferably, however, reinforcements are unsolicited responses to desired behavior. They are aimed less at increasing the contents of the child's money box than increasing the child's pride in his or her accomplishments and, therefore, self-esteem.

Intervention 4: Soliciting Examples From Parents

Example 1

"What have you found to be effective reinforcement with your own kids?"

> *Julie:* Certainly attention, just like you said. Sometimes when Justin comes home from school and starts to tell me about his day, I'm tired and sort of only half-listen. Usually he disappears after a few sentences. And it's true, when I

really pay attention to him, he's much more enthusiastic about talking to me.

Chris: The only thing that seems to work with Robert these days is supplementing his pocket money.

Margaret: I agree with Julie. My daughter's teacher began giving the kids stickers every time they got their homework right. My daughter suddenly became much more conscientious about doing her homework. I guess getting the stickers was like being noticed—getting attention.

Example 2

"What about negative attention?"

Gloria: When we're home alone and Paul bugs me. Yelling at him to go away and play gives him attention. That's why he's back again after two minutes.

F. Skill: Other Ways To Increase the Positive and Decrease the Negative

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Intervention 5: Case Presentation With Problem Solving

Example 1

"Let's take a specific case and see how with shaping we might increase positive behavior."

Claire: I'd really love my four-year-old Ben to get himself dressed in the morning. None of my nagging or badgering has helped.

Therapist: Okay. What specifically does getting dressed entail?

Claire: Well, putting on his underpants, a T-shirt, jeans or sweatpants, socks and shoes. And maybe a sweater. I'm happy to lay them out for him the night before, but it's a pain to have to dress him and he's old enough to be able to do it himself.

Therapist: So what might the first step be?

Darryl: Reward even a small step toward getting himself ready.

Therapist: Good. Claire, what small step could you reward, and how could you reward it?

Claire: Well, usually he lifts up his feet one at a time to step into his underpants, and then again to get into his jeans. I don't have to ask him to do that. Maybe I could make a fuss over that as a first step.

Therapist: Okay. What could the next step be?

Claire: Maybe seeing if he could pull them up by himself once I've helped him step into them.

Therapist: So once the foot lifting is well established, you'd begin reinforcing him only for doing the next step: both lifting his feet and then pulling up the pants. What next?

Claire: I guess the same thing with pulling on his T-shirt. When he's got the underpants routine, I could add the step of his lifting up his arms for me, and then add pulling the shirt down over his head. I think I'm getting the picture.

Darryl: Won't it take forever at that pace?

Therapist: It won't happen in one day, it's true, but it *will* happen. And it'll be a lot faster than the pace at which he's currently going, with the nagging and

badgering.

Example 2

"What about another example to see how reinforcing incompatible behavior might work to decrease negative behavior?"

> *Pamela*: Great! My two kids are a nightmare in the car. I hate having to drive them anywhere because they're so rowdy.

> *Therapist*: What specifically do they do in the car?

> *Pamela*: Fight. Actually, they do that everywhere. It's just that in the confines of the car, it's intolerable. And it's not just fighting, it's fighting at the top of their lungs.

> *Therapist*: How are you currently reinforcing that behavior?

> *Pamela*: I guess I've been giving them lots of attention for it.

> *Therapist*: So the first step would be to stop reinforcing the fighting. Okay. What behavior would be incompatible with fighting?

> *Dave*: What about singing? If they were singing, they couldn't be fighting.

> *Therapist:* Great Idea! Pamela, do the kids know any songs?

> *Pamela:* It's weird, but I don't really know. I suppose I could find out. And if they don't, I could teach them some. I used to play the guitar, so I'm sure I have a collection of songbooks somewhere. Maybe I'll even pull out my guitar again!

> *Therapist:* And then, of course, you'd have to reinforce their singing. But what if they sing at the top of their lungs?

Pamela: That'd be fine—it's the loud fighting that's so distracting.

Example 3

"Let's explore an example of how reinforcing anything but unwanted behavior can decrease that behavior."

Peter: My daughter Penny tears up my books and magazines whenever she can get her hands on them. Sometimes it seems as if she does it deliberately to provoke me—she looks straight at me then toddles right over to the bookcase.

Therapist: What's her goal and how are you currently reinforcing it?

Peter: Well, it drives me crazy and it hasn't stopped, so I guess it's attention...and I really give it to her, going on and on about how books are for reading, not tearing up etc., etc.

Therapist: So what's the first step?

Peter: Stop reinforcing the tearing...but what can I do when she tears the books?

Therapist: Good question—any suggestions?

Peter: I guess I could temporarily move the books from the bottom shelf of the bookcase so she couldn't get at them at all. Or make sure that they're ones that I don't care much about.

Therapist: Both those suggestions seem reasonable. So what's the next step?

Margaret: Finding other things to reinforce—I suppose things like playing with other toys, talking, running around. Maybe even little things like smiling?

Therapist: Yes. The task is to pay close attention in order to observe all the other

things that Penny does—and to reinforce them. Once again, it's important to be specific with the behaviors you choose to reinforce, and to reward them promptly. Once she's stopped tearing books, you can decide which of all the alternative behaviors you want to continue reinforcing, and which not.

Homework

Choose one specific behavior and attempt to either increase or decrease its frequency, using the reinforcement skills learned this session.

Week 4

Check-in

Include success and problems with homework.

G. Skill: A Misbehaving Child Is Still a Worthwhile Child

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Intervention 4: Soliciting Examples From Parents

Example 1

"Let's say your child just set the table for you—how might you respond to him?"

Fred: My automatic response would be to say, "Good boy!"—but I realize that's just

the opposite of what you're talking about.

Therapist: You're right. "Good boy" suggests that his worth as a person results from setting the table. What really has resulted from him setting the table?

Fred: He's really helped me out. Maybe a better response would be: "Thanks for setting the table, it's a real help."

Example 2

"What about when your daughter mows the lawn?"

James: To not imply that her worth depends on her behavior, I would say something like "You did a great job mowing the lawn. I really appreciate it."

Therapist: Good. Why is it better to say "great job" than "good girl?"

James: Because "great job" is simply a comment on the behavior, not on the person.

H. Skill: Encouraging Your Child

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Many parents think that encouragement means pushing their children to greater heights of achievement. It's important to stress that, in fact, it refers to helping children feel better about themselves, their role in the family, and the value of their contributions.

Intervention 4: Soliciting Examples From Parents

Example 1

"What's an example of a behavior that suggests discouragement?"

> *Dave:* Molly won't practice her guitar anymore. Ever since her younger sister started playing, Molly seems to have just given up.

> *Therapist:* Okay, how have you tried to encourage her to continue practicing?

> *Dave:* First we reminded her of how much her lessons were costing us. I know, I know, that didn't work. Then we tried telling her that if she didn't practice, Judy would soon be as good as her. That was even worse. She just about stopped altogether. So we gave up saying anything to her about it.

> *Therapist:* You got discouraged, too. Sounds like Molly saw herself as unable to compete with her sister. To avoid your expectations, she demonstrated her inadequacy. How might you be encouraging in a way that makes Molly feel good about herself?

> *Dave:* I could remind her how much we enjoyed the times when she played to us, how special it was to share her enjoyment of music. [Show your children a different perception of themselves, based on your experience of them.]

Example 2

"What are other examples suggesting discouragement?"

> *Gloria:* My older son used to just drag around the house all the time with a face as long as a horse. He wasn't interested in anything we suggested doing; didn't really even want to talk to us. He must have been discouraged, because I felt discouraged, and all our attempts to cheer him up failed miserably.

> *Therapist:* How did you try to encourage him?

Gloria: A million different ways that didn't work. Then recently, my husband and I decided to buy a new car. We asked Robbie if he'd be responsible for doing some research and coming up with a few recommendations. We simply told him what our price ceiling was, and a few other requirements. He loved it! He seemed like a new person! I guess it fits with your suggestions about treating him as if he were responsible. [Treat your children as if they're competent. Where appropriate, ask their advice, opinions, and encourage problem solving.]

Intervention 2: Role-plays

Parents can practice being encouraging by role-playing in parent-child dyads. First, the parent can make an automatic response, and get feedback from the "child" about how it feels to hear that response. Then the response can be amended to be truly encouraging.

Example

Julie: (role-playing a child) I can't do this math. I'm so stupid!

Ted: (role-playing Julie's father) No you're not—don't say that!

Julie: I am so. I can never get it right. I can't get anything right.

Ted: If you tried harder instead of just complaining, you'd do better.

Therapist: Julie, how did it feel to have Ted respond that way?

Julie: Horrible. I felt like he didn't understand or care how I was feeling. That he just wanted me to do well so he wouldn't be embarrassed by having a stupid child. Then I got angry.

Therapist: Okay, Ted, try giving a more encouraging response.

Ted: Math is a tough subject. I had difficulty with it when I was in school, too. But I remember when we couldn't find what was wrong with the heater and you worked it out on your own. That doesn't sound like stupid to me. And last night when I forgot where my keys were, you remembered where I'd left them. That doesn't spell stupid either. [Show your children a different perception of themselves, based on your experience.]

Julie: Well, maybe if you would give me a hand getting started, I might be able to do it.

Ted: Okay. Let's look at problem number one. What do you think the first step might be? [Never do for children what they can do for themselves.]

Homework

Practice responding to your children in ways that separate their worth as people from their behavior. Also practice encouraging your children, whether or not they seem discouraged.

Check-in

Include success and problems with homework.

Skill: Children Need To Be Heard

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Intervention 2: Role-plays

Role-plays of parent-child dyads can be used to practice listening to and validating feelings without blaming (using *I* messages).

Example 1

Chris: (role-playing an eight-year-old) I hate Mommy!

Bill: (role-playing parent) You do not—you love Mommy! [an invalidating response]

Chris: I don't—I hate her! I hate her! I hate her!

Therapist: Now try really listening to Chris' feelings.

Bill: You're really furious at her? [listening]

Chris: Yes! She wouldn't let me play on the swing while you were out.

Bill: And I know how much you really like playing on the swing. No wonder you're angry! [validating]

Chris: Yes. [pause] Maybe tomorrow it won't rain and Mommy will let me swing.

Example 2

Margaret: (role-playing parent) Kate, how many times do I have to tell you to do the dishes when you get home from school? Why don't you listen? [blaming]

Kate: (role-playing fourteen-year-old) All right! All right! [under her breath] Bitch!

Therapist: Okay now try again, using an *I*-statement.

Margaret: Kate, when I come home from work I'm tired. When I see the dishes not

done, I feel even more tired and disappointed at the thought of having to do extra work, [*I*-statement]

Kate: Sorry, Mom, I was on the phone with Angie all afternoon. I'll do them now.

J. Skill: Solving Problems

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Intervention 2: Role-plays

Example 1: Define the Problem

Tony: (role-playing parent) Darryl, when I see your dog staring hungrily at her empty bowl, I get upset that she's not being taken care of properly.

Darryl: (role-playing child) Okay, okay, I'll feed her now.

Tony: I'm sure she'll appreciate it. Darryl, I'm concerned that it's so hard for you to remember to feed her and that she isn't getting the kind of care that she deserves. Do you see it as a problem?

Darryl: Not really—she always gets fed in the end.

Tony: Yes, but often only because I remind you. And sometimes she's waited hours past her usual feeding time.

Darryl: Well, I guess that's true sometimes.

Tony: So we have a problem: Goldie isn't getting fed on time.

Example 2: Brainstorm Alternatives

Tony: What can we do about it? Let's brainstorm. I'll write our suggestions down. Let's not evaluate them, just list them.

Darryl: (teasing) Well, you could feed her for me!

Tony: (writing it down) That's one idea. I have one, too — that we find Goldie a home where she'll be better cared for.

Darryl: I could get her a huge bucket and fill it with food and let her eat out of it all week.

Tony: If you forget to feed her in the morning, you won't watch TV or do any other fun thing that you have planned when you get home from school that day.

Darryl: Maybe I could feed her in the afternoon instead of in the morning? I'd be less rushed then, and I could take her for a walk, too.

Example 3: Eliminate Alternatives

Tony: If neither of us has any more suggestions, let's go through our list and evaluate. I'll read out each suggestion, and if either of us doesn't want it, then I'll cross it out. The first one is, I could feed Goldie for you. I'm not willing to keep that as an alternative. She's not my dog, so I don't want that responsibility, [crosses it off the list] The next one is, we find Goldie a home where she'll be better cared for.

Darryl: No! I don't want that!

Tony: Okay. You could fill a big bucket with food and let her eat out of it all week. I don't think you'd like it if I left a big bowl of oatmeal on the table for you to eat out of all week.

Darryl: Yuck! Okay, cross that off.

Tony: If you forget to feed her in the morning, you don't watch TV or do any other fun thing planned for that day.

Darryl: I guess that would be okay. But I like my next suggestion better.

Tony: That you feed her in the afternoon when you get home from school? That would be okay with me, too. So we have two possible solutions.

Example 4: Develop a Plan

Tony: Which would work best?

Darryl: I want to try feeding her in the afternoon when I get home from school. If I still forget, then I won't watch TV or do whatever else I planned for that day.

Tony: Okay. That sounds good to me. When shall we start, and when should we evaluate how it's working?

Darryl: Tomorrow. If I haven't fed her by the time you get home, I won't watch TV. Let's do it for a week and talk about it again.

Tony: Great. I'm really glad you were willing to solve this problem with me. I know how much you love Goldie. [Reinforce the problem-solving behavior that you'd like to see.]

Homework

Practice the four problem-solving steps.

Week 6

Check-in

Include success and problems with homework.

K. Concept: Punishment Doesn't Work

Intervention 4: Soliciting Examples From Parents

Example

"How many of you have tried punishment as a way of getting your children to cooperate? Everyone? Well, who's found it to be really effective? [Usually no one.] Let's hear from some of you who haven't found it to work very well."

> *Pamela:* When Brian talks back to me, I've tried slapping his face, sending him to his room, and grounding him. Nothing seems to work. Once I extended his grounding to six months before I realized how ridiculous that was. Half the time he's still muttering under his breath, and I leave because I'm afraid I'll really blow my stack.

> *Margaret:* I have that trouble, too. I send Sue to her room, she slams the door, yells something I can't quite hear, and I'm ready to kill her.

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

It's important not to argue with parents about whether their children "deserve" to be punished for their misbehavior. The key issue is whether punishment works to teach responsibility and cooperation.

L. Skill: Give Your Child Choices

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Intervention 2: Role-plays

Role-plays in parent-child dyads can give parents the opportunity to practice avoiding power struggles by offering choices.

Example 1

> *Claire: (role-playing parent)* Peter, it's time for your bath.
>
> *Peter:* No! I don't want a bath!
>
> *Claire:* Come on—you love baths.
>
> *Peter:* I hate baths! I'm not having one.
>
> *Therapist:* Now try giving Peter a choice.
>
> *Claire:* Peter, would you like your bath before or after dinner?
>
> *Peter:* After.
>
> *Claire:* Okay. Would you like your boats or your ducks in the bath with you?
>
> *Peter:* My ducks.

Sometimes the situation is more difficult and requires perseverance in giving choices.

Example 2

> *Pamela: (role-playing parent)* Gloria, I know you're angry, but it's not okay for you to scream at me like that. You can either talk to me quietly or go to your

room till you calm down.

Gloria: (still screaming) I hate you! I wish I had another mother!

Pamela: I see you've decided to go to your room till you calm down. Do you want to go there yourself or do you want me to carry you?

Gloria: I won't go!

Pamela: I see you've decided to have me carry you. Would you like me to come and tell you when ten minutes is up, or shall I set the timer?

Gloria: Set the timer.

M. Skill: Setting Consequences

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

The key points to stress are that logical consequences must be 1) *related* to the misbehavior, 2) *consistent* (with respect to follow-through), and 3) *presented without anger.*

Intervention 5: Case Presentation With Problem Solving

Example

"Let's practice setting consequences. What's a problem we can use?"

Peter: How about when Andrew fights with other kids at the playground?

Therapist: Okay. Are there natural consequences that would teach Andrew about

his behavior?

Judy: Well, if the other kids don't like fighting, they might stop playing with him.

Peter: But I don't like him hitting people.

Therapist: That's a good point, Peter. Sometimes there are natural consequences that might work, but it's inappropriate for some reason to use them. In this case, someone might get hurt. What about logical consequences. What are the logical consequences of not knowing how to behave properly on a playground?

Peter: Not being allowed to go to the playground?

Therapist: Okay. What would you say to Andrew?

Judy: Well, I'd want to give him a choice first. I might say: People aren't for hitting. You can play with the other kids in the playground and work out your conflicts without hitting, or you can play alone at home. It's your choice.

Therapist: And then if he hits?

Peter: You blew it! Let's go. Now!

Therapist: What about the rule of no anger? The idea is not to punish, but to let Andrew learn something about his choices and their consequences.

Peter: Okay. What about: I guess you've decided to play alone at home.

Therapist: Good. Now, what if Andrew throws a temper tantrum, screaming that he doesn't want to go home?

Gloria: That's when I get so embarrassed I want to disappear. Sometimes I just drop the issue to avoid the scene.

Therapist: And what would Andrew learn?

Gloria: That he can do what he wants.

Therapist: And even more, that you don't mean what you say. It's difficult when your children misbehave in public. It's hard not to feel that they're reflections of you. But if you want to teach them responsibility, it's important to persevere and follow through with the consequence that's been set. What are some things that could be said at that point?

Judy: Maybe to acknowledge that he doesn't like it much, but to remind him that it was his choice.

Dave: And to continue giving him choices. You could ask him if he would like to walk to the car or have you carry him.

Peter: What about the next time? We usually go almost every day.

Therapist: There's no reason not to give him another chance the next day. Remind him of his choices, and maybe encourage him by telling him that you're sure he can make the best choice for himself.

Peter: And if he hits again, go home again? I guess when I look at it like that, it makes it easier not to feel angry at him—or guilty about depriving him of the playground.

Homework

Practice developing and setting logical consequences (or letting natural consequences have their impact) as alternatives to punishment.

Week 7

Check-in

Include success and problems with homework.

N. Skill: Using Time Out

Intervention I: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Intervention 3: Group Discussion

Parents can benefit from a brief discussion of when *time out* would be an appropriate alternative to their current disciplinary methods.

O. Skill: Putting It All Together

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Parents sometimes have difficulty determining whose rights are being affected in a particular situation, and therefore who owns the problem. Differentiating between what parents would like versus what their rights are is often helpful.

Intervention 5: Case Presentation With Problem Solving

Example 1: The Child's Problem

"Let's do some problem solving. Who'd like to present a situation?"

Chris: My sixteen-year-old son, Jeffery, just found out that he failed three of his subjects at school. He's been told that he either has to go to summer school or repeat the year. He's furious, says the teachers are discriminating against him, and wants me to somehow intervene.

Therapist: Whose problem is it?

Chris: I feel like it's my problem. I know he didn't work hard enough last semester, didn't do his homework, skipped some classes, but I hate to see him fall behind. All his friends have passed and will be going on ahead.

Therapist: Are your rights being affected by the situation?

Chris: I guess not...no.

Therapist: So who owns the problem?

Chris: Jeffrey.

Therapist: So what are the appropriate steps in responding to a problem that your son owns?

Chris: Acknowledge his feelings, and encourage problem solving.

Therapist: Good. How could you do that? What feelings is he expressing?

Chris: He's furious, and I'm sure he's really disappointed as well.

Therapist: So what might you say?

Fred: How about: "I can imagine how disappointing it must be to have failed. And a tough choice to either give up your summer or miss out on being with your friends next year."

Therapist: That's an excellent example. There's no blame or "I told you so" implied. Simply an acknowledgment that he feels pretty awful.

Chris: But what about when he comes to me telling me I have to do something?

Claire: What if you were to say what Fred suggested, but follow it with: "I know that you'll make the best decision for yourself, and I'm certainly willing to help you in the process." [encourage problem solving]

Fred: He must know on some level that he didn't do the necessary work and that's why he failed. You could always add, "I'm not willing to intervene at school," if he pushes.

Therapist: And continue to acknowledge his feelings, for example, frustration at your unwillingness to intervene. It's difficult to know that you're not helping Jeffrey in the way he wants to be helped. But it's essential to remember that, in fact, you're helping him much more by teaching him to be responsible for his choices and their consequences.

Example 2: The Parent's Problem "Let's take another example."

Pamela: My fifteen-year-old daughter, Sherry, consistently breaks curfew—not by much, but even after twenty minutes I'm worried and can't sleep.

Therapist: Whose problem is it?

Pamela: Well, I think I have the right to not have to lie awake and worry about her safety. It seems to me that whenever there's an issue of safety, my rights are involved.

Therapist: Yes. So if it's your problem, what's the first step?

Pamela: Express my feelings. I've done a ton of that. Just about every time she's late I tell her how pissed off I am that she's so thoughtless and irresponsible. She doesn't care—just gets furious at me.

Therapist: Can you see how, although you started with an *I*-statement, you turned it into a blaming yon-statement? What do you really feel when Sherry's late? Is there something underneath the anger?

Pamela: Yes, I'm scared stiff.... Okay, I see. So I should say "Sherry, I get really scared when you don't come home on time. I can't sleep so I just lie awake worrying"?

Therapist: That'll probably feel less like an attack to Sherry, and it might make her more open to the next step—engaging in problem solving. What could you say to get her cooperation?

Dave: What about, "Since I don't want to continue worrying about you at night, let's see if we can come up with a solution that would work for us both"?

Pamela: She'd probably say that I should just stop worrying.

Therapist: Well, that's one suggestion, and it should be listed along with all the others the two of you come up with. You can always eliminate the unacceptable alternatives in step 3 of the problem-solving procedure. But you may come up with something that you're both willing to try.

Pamela: I could suggest that she call me if she's going to be late—but I'm afraid that she'd call every time, and I still wouldn't know when to expect her.

Therapist: So if you can't come up with a mutually acceptable solution, or if the solution you agree on doesn't work, what's next?

Margaret: Setting consequences.

Therapist: Are there natural consequences that would be appropriate here?

Margaret: No. Nothing automatically happens when Sherry's late. I'd want to set some logical consequences, like if she's not home by curfew this time, then she doesn't get to go next time. Her choice.

Therapist: Okay. So the message is that if you want to be trusted to be responsible and go out at night, then you have to behave like a responsible, trustworthy person. That means respecting agreements. If Sherry chooses to be irresponsible this Saturday night, then next Saturday night she'll have to be

treated accordingly and stay home. The following Saturday she could try again.

Example 3: When Ownership of the Problem Is Unclear

"We've explored situations in which the problem belongs to the child and those in which it belongs to the parent. What about a situation in which it's hard to tell who owns the problem?"

James: Brian is my step-son, nine years old. Most of the time he's just a great kid. But every time he comes home from spending the weekend with his dad, he treats me with such contempt I could kill him.

Therapist: What exactly does he do?

James: He ignores my existence. He doesn't talk to me and doesn't respond when I talk to him or ask him questions about the weekend.

Therapist: Sounds like Brian has a hard time when he leaves his dad. Seeing you must remind him of just how much he misses him.

James: That's what my wife says. I know it's true, and I guess that's his part of the problem. But I have the right to be treated with respect.

Therapist: Yes, you do. In situations in which both the child and parent own part of the problem, what's the best response?

Ted: Start with the child's problem. That means acknowledging Brian's feelings. We had the same problem, but it was my wife who was getting the silent treatment from my son. She told him that she knew he had a mother whom he missed and loved very much. She also told him that she imagined he would be sad coming home and seeing her because it smashed his dream of his mom and dad getting back together. That seemed to do the trick with Pete. Could you say something similar to Brian?

James: I suppose so. Maybe I could tell him at a time when we're getting along okay.

Therapist: That's a good idea. And the second part of addressing the child's problem is encouraging problem solving. In this case, perhaps it would help to ask Brian if there's something that would make it easier for him when he gets home. If that all works, great. But what if it doesn't?

Gloria: Deal with the parent's problem: express feelings, problem solve, and set consequences. Something like "When I talk to you and you don't respond, my feelings get hurt," followed by "What do you think we could do about it?"

Ted: In our case, my wife greeted Pete when he first got home, but then gave him an hour or so without trying to interact with him, so that he could adjust to being back with us. Pete actually came up with that suggestion!

Therapist: And if problem solving doesn't work?

James: Set consequences. I'd be willing to offer him the choice of talking with me politely, or if he needs time to adjust, doing it in his room. I guess that fits under *time out.*

Homework

Practice using the skills of determining who owns the problem and responding accordingly.

Week 8

Check-in

Include success and problems with homework.

P. Concept: Have Fun

Intervention 1: Didactic Presentation (See Concepts and Skills section)

Most of this last session should be spent planning strategies with parents which address specific problems or concerns.

Intervention 5: Case Presentation With Problem Solving

Criteria for Measuring Change

There is one main behavioral criterion for measuring change. This is to demonstrate in the group (for instance, in role-plays and case presentations) the concepts and skills being taught: the ability to listen, make *I*-statements, solve problems, determine whose rights are being affected by particular behaviors, and create appropriate consequences. Parents' reports of their children responding in new and positive ways also will indicate successful use of the parenting tools.

Problems Specific to the Group

The most common problem is that of the dominating participant. Parents who continue to speak without letting others contribute will have to be gently silenced ("Let's hear from some others," "I'm glad you feel comfortable enough in the group to participate so freely; I'd like to encourage

some of the others to speak up, too," "I know Johnny is a problem, but we need to give everyone a chance to deal with their children's problems as well"). Parents who speak very little can be encouraged by ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate in role-plays and other activities.

Sometimes it becomes apparent after a few sessions that a participant has more severe problems than can be appropriately dealt with in the group. Meeting privately with the parent(s) and recommending (and, if desired, making a referral to) either individual or family therapy may be necessary.

Similarly, sometimes the children's problems presented by the parents may be beyond the scope of the group and require more individualized attention. For example, if a parent suspects drug abuse or serious depression, an appropriate referral is essential.

Relapse Prevention

As with all new skills, parenting skills require practice. And time. Parents are going to make mistakes. At times of peak stress, they're going to forget the skills. One of the tools to prevent relapse is to encourage parents to take time before responding. It's better to not respond immediately than to respond inappropriately.

Another very effective strategy is to have parents exchange a list of their

names and phone numbers. When parents feel stuck, they can call someone from the class for help in solving problems more objectively.

Resistance

Resistance is not usually a big problem if there are no parents who are participating as a result of a court mandate. The occasional parent who comes to the group hoping to find a brand-new punishment strategy usually doesn't return after the first session.

The major challenges arise in the form of resistance to the idea of giving up control: *Why can't I tell my fifteen-year-old daughter she can't wear makeup?* The best answer is that, of course, the parent *can* tell her. But does it work? Is the parent's life easier when he or she tries to enforce what is ultimately the daughter's choice? The fact is, the strategies that parents have been using haven't been working, or the parents wouldn't be in the group. The strategies presented here work. It's the parent's choice.

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