

A Child Psychotherapy Primer

School

The graphic design features three overlapping rectangular blocks. The top block is a solid purple square. Below it, a larger olive green rectangle extends further to the right. At the bottom, a lime green rectangle overlaps the bottom right corner of the olive green one and extends to the right edge of the page.

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WHAT ARE THE DANGERS AND ADVANTAGES OF CONTACT BETWEEN THE CHILD'S THERAPIST AND PEOPLE AT THE CHILD'S SCHOOL?

A child's life is divided between home and school. In fact, from Monday through Friday the number of hours a child spends at school equals or exceeds the waking hours spent at home. Since the environment and expectations are often quite different in school, at home, and in the therapy room, the child's behavior may be quite different in these settings. The therapist may well need and want to get information from school and share information with school personnel, just as the therapist wants and needs to understand the child's behavior within the family. There are, however, some potential dangers in establishing a connection between the mental health system in which the child is being treated and the school system in which the child is being educated.

When the school personnel learn that the child is in psychotherapy, it is possible that the child will acquire a negative label: "mentally ill," "emotionally disturbed," "crazy," or worse. A possible negative consequence of such a label is the school personnel's expectation of "sick" behavior. They may expect manifestations of deviant behavior or problems with conformity or limited achievement. They may begin either to coddle or to fear the child or treat him/her in an unusual or "special" way, in order to keep the child stabilized or to avoid confronting emotional situations. The child in turn may just live up (or down) to these expectations of deviancy. Labeling the child may also lead to the school personnel's labeling of parents as "bad," "crazy," or "inadequate." Such labeling might then result in the school staff reacting differently toward the parents and even possibly toward other siblings in the family.

Another potential problem of therapist-school contact might be a child's confusion about two aspects of his/her life that are difficult to integrate. Sometimes child clients totally ignore the therapist during a school visit, not because they are embarrassed but because they simply do not know how to behave toward the therapist in the school setting.

An additional potential danger is that the child may feel intruded on. "So many people know about

my problem, are watching me, talking about and judging me. I wish they'd just get off my case and leave me alone—let me be like the other kids." All of this attention could cause the child to inflate a problem out of proportion to other aspects of his/her life that are going well.

The child also may question confidentiality of information the therapist and teacher have about him/her. For example, the child may wonder, "What will my therapist say about me to the teacher? Will the teacher know when I complain about school or that I wet my bed? What will the teacher say about me? Will she tell my therapist that I tore up my test or got in a fight at recess?"

Despite potential dangers, I believe the advantages of therapist-school contact generally outweigh the disadvantages. Contact through a school visit gives the therapist a valuable opportunity to learn about an important aspect of the child's life. The therapist will learn firsthand how the school people view the child. Specifically, the therapist can learn about the child's interpersonal relationships with peers and with authority figures, about the child's academic achievement, and about the child's coping styles.

Contact with the child's educational system serves to remind the therapist that the child functions in a total but varied world—that strengths and difficulties may be discovered in various settings. In a word, the child is viewed as a total person rather than fragments of symptoms or as exclusively in the child-client role. The contact between therapist and school also gives the message to the child and the child's family that the therapist does not view the child in isolation in the therapy room.

Teachers and other school staff might feel some sense of relief that someone with special skills is working with the child about whom they have been concerned—that they do not have the entire responsibility for the child's psychological welfare. They may also appreciate having a consultant to call on for help. If the child is misbehaving at school, e.g., fighting or stealing, the school people may hope that the therapist will change this unacceptable behavior. (It would be wise for the therapist not to encourage such expectations, however, unless changing the child's behavior at school is a primary goal of the psychotherapy.)

An additional advantage of therapist-school contact is that the teacher and others at school may learn of some psychological factor such as a deep and persistent feeling (e.g., anger, loneliness, negative

feeling about self), some unmet need, or an internal or external conflict that makes the child's behavior more understandable, more acceptable, and possibly more manageable.

Finally, spending time in a school will help the beginning therapist keep a perspective on normal child behavior and development. The therapist can see other children the same age as the client to learn how they cope with school demands, how they develop physically, how they interact with peers, how they control their impulses, and so on. The therapist might discover, for example, that there are many 8-year-old boys who draw pictures of spaceships with laser guns destroying other ships and that this may not necessarily represent significant anger or pathological aggression when seen in his/her client.

HOW CAN YOU BE EFFECTIVE IN WORKING WITH THE PERSONNEL AT THE CHILD'S SCHOOL?

A systems view is helpful for the child psychotherapist who is interacting with the people at the client's school. The therapist who views the school as an entity with specialized parts (roles) for completing tasks and maintaining morale, with formal and informal channels of communication, and with a characteristic style of interacting with other agencies will be in a better position to judge the possibilities for effecting change in the child's school and to prevent potentially destructive relationships from developing.

The educational system and the mental health system have different goals, which could cause conflict between teacher and therapist. For example, a primary goal of the school system is to educate all of the children. A primary goal of the mental health system is to help individuals solve emotional and interpersonal problems. These goals do not necessarily conflict and may, in fact, be parallel. Nevertheless the child psychotherapist who forgets the primary goal of the school system will be facing frustration at not having everyone in the school system focused primarily on helping the child client resolve intra- and interpersonal problems.

A common example of systems conflict arises when the beginning child therapist encounters difficulty in trying to schedule therapy sessions during school hours. With the primary goal in the therapist's mind of helping the child resolve emotional problems, the new therapist might become upset at the teacher's reluctance to have the child miss an hour or two of academic instruction every week.

Since the primary goal of the education system is to educate the child, the teacher might justifiably feel that missing so much school is counterproductive. Actually most children who come to mental health centers have low self-esteem that is often made worse by academic failure, so scheduling psychotherapy appointments during school hours may indeed be contrary to mental health goals as well as to educational goals. The therapist can help resolve this situation by being aware of the conflicting goals of the mental health system and the school system and setting up a joint meeting with teacher and parents to work out a time for clinic visits that does not subvert either the educational or the mental health goals.

Although personnel in both the mental health system and the school system are highly invested in promoting growth in children, communication between therapist and teachers can be difficult for several reasons. Each profession has its special vocabulary. Generally, those outside a profession are confused and even “turned off” by that profession’s jargon. If child therapists use some of the education vocabulary, it might facilitate acceptance by school people. At the very least the therapist could avoid erecting barriers by not using mental health jargon with educators either orally or in psychological reports. Since most professionals use their special vocabulary automatically, it may facilitate a working relationship if the therapist acknowledges this with the other professional and asks for help in avoiding the use of jargon.

Communication may be distorted by issues involving expertise and/or power. I suggest that the best way to work well with teachers is to recognize them as fellow professionals. Teachers generally know a great deal about child behavior and development and certainly know far more than the usual child psychotherapist about how children learn and fail to learn academic material. With a respect for the teacher’s general professional knowledge and special knowledge of the therapist’s client, the therapist can establish a professional colleague relationship that will greatly facilitate exchange of information about the child. You can do a better job of understanding and helping your child client with information from the child’s teacher, and the teacher can likewise do a more effective educational job with information and understanding from you.

Communication can be improved by the therapist’s awareness of the teacher’s experience and frame of reference. I would recommend that every child therapist, early in his/her training, spend *at least* one full school day with a teacher. The benefits of this experience are that the therapist will realize how little he/she knows about educating children, the therapist will recapture some of what the child

experiences sitting in school all day, and finally, the teacher will appreciate the therapist for trying to learn all of the above.

There are other potential barriers to a professional working relationship between teacher and therapist. The therapist who is sensitive to these potential issues may be able to avoid some of the problems that can interfere with good professional collaboration. Some of the same preconceptions and jealousies that can interfere with the therapist-parent relationship can interfere with the therapist-teacher relationship.

The teacher may envy the therapist's luxury of working one-to-one with the child. "If I could devote my time exclusively to Billy, I could do great things with him too. But what am I supposed to do with the other 31 children in my class?" The teacher may think, "If that therapist is doing such a great job, how come Beth is not improving in her behavior? What good is therapy anyhow?" Some teachers may be defensive because of a fear that the therapist will blame them for causing, or at least perpetuating, the child's problem. The therapist, on the other hand, may be jealous of the teacher's extended contact. "If I worked with Mike five hours a day, five days a week, I could do wonders."

Unless the therapist has had classroom teaching experience, or at least has been married to a teacher, he/she rarely appreciates (emotionally, not just intellectually) the fact that the teacher cannot be a full-time child therapist and that he/she has responsibility for 31 other children. Also, while the effective teacher is sensitive to each child's emotional needs, he/she is primarily responsible for facilitating an increase of academic skills and knowledge in all of the children in his/her classroom, not just in one child. The teacher cannot give one child the kind of special attention, instruction, and emotional support that the therapist might wish, and it is unrealistic for the therapist to expect it.

The therapist can be alert to one other potential situation that often interferes with good teacher-therapist communication. If the child in therapy has the kind of problem that interferes with the learning process or disrupts the classroom procedure, the good teacher already has tried every professional skill available to help the child. Often the teacher has had consultation from fellow professionals. Nothing works. In desperation the teacher refers the child for outside mental health assistance. The feeling often is "I've tried everything possible and can't make any progress. Let someone else take the responsibility "

Some weeks later the child gets connected with a mental health system.

Several scenarios can develop at this point. You, as the child's new therapist, may come into the school full of ideas about what the teacher can do to improve the child's emotional adjustment. Resistance, even resentment, on the part of the teacher would be most understandable. Or the teacher may view you as the expert who will provide the "magical" answers, and he/she will attempt to get you to suggest immediate and specific solutions. While appealing to both the therapist's ego and his/her intentions, such a response is ultimately detrimental. Magical solutions seldom work, and the collegial role between therapist and teacher is undermined. At other times the teacher may view the conference as a cathartic opportunity, overwhelming the new therapist with everything that has been tried, the terribleness of the child, and the impossibility of any change. Such emotional release may be necessary for the frustrated teacher and will provide the therapist with specific information about the child's behavior and the response such behavior may elicit from others. However, little will be gained if the exchange between teacher and therapist does not move beyond this point. You are the child's therapist, not the teacher's therapist and the focus needs to shift back to the child.

Ideally, the first contact with the teacher would be a flow of information about the child from the teacher to you during which you appreciate what the teacher has experienced with the child, and then you both try to understand the child together. As the teacher slowly becomes engaged in puzzling out this child, he/she may come up with some new suggestions and be more ready to hear suggestions from you. The ideal relationship between you and the teacher is that of ongoing collaboration between professional equals in a common effort of helping the child client.

WHAT CAN YOU TELL THE CHILD ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL CONTACT?

I suggest that you be as open with the child as possible. Tell the child why you are going to call or visit the school, what you want to know from the teacher, and what you plan to say. Get the child's okay. If the child balks at the idea of your visit, find out why and alter what you will say at school to reduce his/her anxiety. If the child does not truly have final veto over your visit, he/she needs to know why it is in his/her interests that you are contacting the school. Perhaps you could discuss the child's preference regarding the time of the visit, i.e., before or after school when the child is not there or during class when

you could meet his/her teacher and the child could share his/her work with you. In any case, the important goal is to keep the child's trust in your special relationship. Disagreement about this issue would become, like any issue, a grist for your therapeutic work with the child.

If you are planning to visit the child's classroom during school hours, it is really helpful to ask the child how you should behave toward him/her when you are there. Does the child want you to ignore him/her? Does the child want to introduce you to the class? If you are introduced, what label does the child want to use for your relationship: friend, therapist, . . . ? At least one child in an elementary class can be counted on to ask, "Is that your Mom/Dad?" What should you say if the other children ask you who you are? You could avoid some awkward moments and possible embarrassment to the child if you and the child have worked out your answers and his/her answers to these questions before the visit. It might be helpful if the child identified for you the most important kids to him/her in the room. These could be both friends and enemies. You could then observe their interactions and also know to whom the child was referring in later therapy sessions.

If your relationship with the child is based on openness, then of course you would give feedback to the child after your school visit. It would be helpful to hear how the child experienced your visit, how teachers and peers might have acted differently toward the child during or after the visit, and whether the child wished for something to be different about the visit. On the other side, the child would want to know how you view the school, the teachers and staff, the physical setting, and the other children. Anticipate what you will choose to tell the child about your objective and subjective observations. In general, the school visit by the child's psychotherapist can open up a whole new area of common experience with the child and therefore lead to a better understanding of him/her.

DO YOU NEED THE PARENTS' PERMISSION BEFORE CONTACTING THE SCHOOL?

Almost certainly, yes. Many schools, in fact, can not speak about their pupils with people from outside agencies without written parental permission in their files. For both legal and ethical reasons your clinic must also have written consent to pass along any information to another person or agency. As with the child, complete openness with parents as to what you hope to accomplish by a school contact and what material you plan to pass along to the school personnel is suggested. After the contact you

might enhance your working relationship with the parents by sharing with them the results of your visit.

WHOM DO YOU CONTACT AT THE SCHOOL?

If you view the school from a systems perspective, then you would learn whom to contact in order to plug into the system most effectively. Schools these days generally have personnel who deal with special problems of their pupils: counselors, nurses, psychologists, social workers. You might make the first contact with the person in your own profession. If there is no such person on the school staff, the principal or assistant principal would know whom to call in order to set up a visit. One temptation therapists have is to call the child's teacher directly. This seems like a logical move but is often a bad idea. Most schools, in order to keep the wheels turning in some orderly manner, have procedures for dealing with outside agencies. The therapist who deliberately or innocently circumvents these procedures is off to a bad start in future dealings with the school personnel. Once you are in contact and have learned the protocol and personalities at that particular school, you can be more effective in exchanging information.

WHAT DO YOU ACTUALLY DO AT THE SCHOOL?

The answer depends, of course, on what you wish to accomplish in your contact with the school. If you wish to learn about the child's academic functioning, peer relationships, and classroom atmosphere and to exchange information with school personnel, then you might set up a visit that includes observing the child in the classroom and at recess (or other free time), with these activities adjacent to a time when the teacher(s) and other personnel directly involved with the child are free to talk with you. Sometimes a school counselor, social worker, or other designated staff person can set up a special meeting for you to exchange information with everyone who deals with the child at the school. It may be useful to include the child's parents at such a meeting. If such a formal staffing is set up, it would be helpful to have made a more informal prior visit just to have a feel for the school and the child's teachers and peers and some familiarity with the physical setup. Because of busy and conflicting schedules, it usually requires a great deal of effort to set up a formal meeting between all the concerned parties. Before trying to arrange such a meeting the therapist might ask, "Is a meeting the best way to exchange information and do the benefits of having everyone meet together outweigh the inconvenience inherent in setting up the meeting"?

The teacher has a wealth of information about your client because of his/her regular contact with the child and the informal norms in his/her head about age-expected behavior and adjustment. You will further your personal relationship with the teacher by acknowledging this fund of information. To obtain information about the child, whether in a formal staffing or in an informal conference with the teacher, you might have some specific, open-ended questions in mind, such as “ How is the child’s academic work?” “How does he/she organize work, focus on it, and follow through on projects?” “Is his/her impulse control at expected age level?” “How does the child relate to authority?” “ How does the child get along with peers?” Don’t forget to ask about the child’s strengths and areas of success and what the teacher likes about the child.

Once the first formal visit is made, you probably can keep in direct phone contact with the child’s main teacher or others who have continuous interaction with the child. Having continuous contact will enable you to maintain up-to-date information and understand the child as he/she functions in the real world.

HOW DO YOU KEEP FROM GETTING CAUGHT BETWEEN SCHOOL AND PARENTS?

Probably the best way to learn to recognize and handle the situation where you are in the middle of a power struggle between parents and school is to get caught there once. The second time this begins to develop you will be gun-shy. If you view the situation as a conflict between two systems, family and educational, then it might help you to be a bit more objective, that is, not get caught up on a personal level. As an outsider, from a third system, you can be certain that taking sides will most often be disastrous because it results in either the school or the family becoming the “odd-man-out.”

Both the parents and the school people know that you have the child’s best interests at heart and will make an appeal to you on the ground that the other system is doing something detrimental to the child. If you see this developing, you can take a neutral stand, which is easier said than done. Perhaps you could turn the best-interest-of-the-child argument around to convince both the school people and the parents that it would be in the best interest of the child if they solved this between them. If you feel really brave (and skilled) you might volunteer to mediate a session between the two systems. Otherwise, you might back off on the grounds that the mental health system you are in is not in a position to side with the

family or the school in their dispute. Such a stand might divert some of the heat from you to the agency where you are working.

WHAT DO YOU DO IF YOU JUDGE THE TEACHER TO BE HARMFUL TO THE CHILD?

In spite of all the above discussion about teamwork between professional colleagues, there will undoubtedly be some time during your career when you encounter what you consider a bad teacher—someone who is harmful to the child. (No doubt, too, there are situations where the teacher judges the psychotherapist to be harmful to the child, but I shall let someone from the education establishment write about that.) The situation of the “bad” teacher may have developed because of a mismatch between the child’s personality or needs and the teacher’s personality and teaching style. At other times the behavior of either the child or the teacher may evoke such strong negative reactions in the other that the resolution of these feelings may be almost impossible.

As the child’s therapist, you have a responsibility to advocate for the child. It would be well to remember that you are not part of the school system and that you need to increase your familiarity with the particular school. Knowledge of both the school and of the individual teacher is vital. If you have formed a close working relationship with another person in the school, such as a social worker, nurse, psychologist, or another teacher, it would be helpful to consult with this trusted professional as to what is going on with the child’s teacher and how you might best proceed with the problem. This is tricky because, for ethical reasons, you would not want to reveal specifics about your concerns, and you certainly do not want to inject rumor and turmoil into the school. Yet you need information and advice about what to do. The phrase “proceed with caution” comes to mind. Lacking a confidant in the school, you might consider the following steps.

First, be sure of your facts. If possible, gather some firsthand information, or at least information from more than one source. If you rely entirely on the child’s report or the parent’s complaints, you might be getting drawn into a position of taking sides in a family-school struggle.

Second, discuss your concerns with the teacher. This is a difficult step because the teacher, who is likely already aware of his/her uncomfortable relationship with the child, may justifiably feel attacked

and become quite defensive. A conference with the teacher around his/her interaction with the child could have some negative consequences if the teacher then picks on the child or refuses to have further contact with the therapist. On the other hand, the conference may have the opposite effect, namely, that the teacher feels on the spot and is careful not to interact with the child in a destructive way. Change in the teacher-child interaction is most likely to occur if the difficulties have arisen because of a teacher's reaction to a child's unique behavior. Change is least likely to occur if the teacher's style of teaching and his/her personal philosophy of class management is at odds with your child client's individual needs.

Third, if discussion with the teacher has not resolved your concerns, then a conference with the school principal might be helpful for the child. One solution is for the child to be transferred to another teacher. If that is not possible, at least your concerns (with concrete information) will be on record with the school administration, so if there is a general pattern of behavior for this teacher, someone responsible in the system knows about it.

Fourth, you need to help the child cope with the teacher. It probably will not be helpful to encourage the child's rebellion since that sabotages adults' authority and rarely solves the problem. I have found it helpful to teach the child ways of indirectly coping with the teacher, such as fantasy, suppression, or keeping an eye to the future when the child will be out of the room that day and that year. It is helpful to point out to the child that he/she will *always* encounter some authority person in his/her life who is a "bad number," and in the child's best interest this person needs to be coped with indirectly and not taken on directly.