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PARENT-COUNSELOR CONFERENCES: OBLIGATION OR OPPORTUNITY?

ABSTRACT: Many counselors avoid conferences with parents who at times can be quite defensive and aggressive. The authors give practical ideas for winning the cooperation of parents and making conferences with them an opportunity for growth rather than a dreaded obligation. Specific suggestions are given for helping parents understand their children and develop workable plans for positive change.

Many counselors look forward to parent conferences with mixed emotions. They usually like to meet the parents of children who are learning quickly, who are well behaved, and who are well integrated into the classroom group. They enjoy talking with parents who are cooperative and appreciate what is being done to help their children. However, many counselors would just as soon not face the parents of children who have learning or behavioral problems. Some may fear verbal attack from the parents or their implication that our professional competency may be challenged.

Parents also have mixed emotions when they think about conferences with counselors. They may look forward to talking with the counselor about their successful child, but may have rather uncomfortable feelings about hearing that another child in the family is not doing well at school. It is extremely difficult for many parents to face the fact that *their* child is not making satisfactory intellectual or social growth. All too often the child is an inseparable extension of the parents' own feeling of self-worth (Satir, 1964). If the child is not successful, the parents feel like failures and become discouraged. A discouraged parent further discourages the child, who in turn feels like giving up or turning to disruptive behavior. These feelings of mutual discouragement become a hopelessly self-defeating spiral of failure.

Parents quite naturally cover their feelings of defeat in some of the same ways that educators cover their sense of discouragement. Some parents may jump to the defense of their children in almost any situation whether or not the facts warrant this response. This reaction on the part of parents, or anyone else for that matter, is really a way of defending one's own feelings of value and self-worth. Some parents feel that the counselor is blaming them and holding them accountable for their child's difficulties. They may react to this feeling by casting blame on the counselor or school in an attempt to excuse themselves and shift responsibility to someone else.

No one wants to be blamed for a child's difficulty. However, if neither school nor home feels some sense of responsibility for constructive action, too often the child is relegated to one of a number of different "educational wastebaskets" by being labeled lazy, immature, mentally dull, educationally handicapped, disturbed by some emotionally charged event, or brain damaged.

A great deal of valuable time and emotional energy are unnecessarily expended in blaming or avoiding blame. Who is at fault matters very little. What can be done *now* to help the child is the important focus.

It is unfortunate that many counselors view parent conferences as a dreaded obligation. Perhaps one reason for their feelings of discomfort and defensiveness in talking with parents is that they have received little or no training in this process. Few counselor training institutions provide preparation for working with parents.

The purpose of this article is to provide some ideas about the parent conference process and content which can be used by counselors interested in improving their skills in relating with parents.

THE PROCESS OF PARENT CONFERENCES

First, it is important for the counselor to remember that a major purpose of the conference is to establish a relationship with the parent based on mutual confidence. It is necessary to realize that both the parent and the counselor have a common goal — the maximum growth and development of the child. This relationship facilitates the profitable exchange of information about the child's progress. We must convey a feeling of warmth, acceptance, and genuine interest in the parent's situation. These feelings are usually not genuine unless the counselor can accept himself as a valuable person and accept the parent as equally valuable. When this self-respect and respect for the other person are present, there is no need for the counselor to feel defensive or to feel like being critical (Harris, 1969). Many parents expect to be put on the defensive in a conference. Could we do the unexpected to win the cooperation of parents? Do we have the ego strength to openly admit that we have not been successful in our attempts to motivate the child? Parents who feel that they are accepted and respected will usually confide that they too have difficulties with the child at home. The stage may then be set for an atmosphere of mutual planning to find ways to encourage the child so that he may have constructive growth.

Secondly, we might spend more time listening to parents. We need

to be sensitive to the signals they are sending to us nonverbally as well as verbally. Very quickly we can learn a great deal from parents that will enable us to help the child. If we listen, in a few minutes we can get many clues about the family atmosphere, family attitudes toward school, the family's system of alliances and competition, and a better understanding of the purposes of the child's disturbing behavior (Dreikurs, 1964, 1968). If we approach parent conferences with the attitude of what *we* can learn, we avoid putting parents on the defensive. Only after the parent has vented his feelings can we hope that he will be able to listen to our report of the child's progress. What we have to say can then be put into the context of the child's total experience. Parents resent the counselor who gives them a "snow job," but they cannot emotionally accept a judgmental attack.

SUGGESTED CONTENT OF PARENT CONFERENCES

Any child who is having learning or behavior difficulties is most likely sending us the loud and clear message that he is badly discouraged with his ability to function adequately or to feel that he is an acceptable part of his reference group at school or at home (Dreikurs, 1964, 1968; Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1971). In order to help the discouraged child we should use the parent conference to get a better understanding of the child's social situation and the motivation or purposes behind his behavior.

Understanding the Family Constellation

As a beginning we can discuss the family system in which the child operates. Many parents feel much less defensive when they understand how the child's relationships with his brothers and sisters may affect his actions and reactions. In a real sense the behavior of a child is influenced by his perception of his place in the family constellation. Adler (1931), Dreikurs (1968), and Hillman (1972) describe typical behaviors of children according to their place in the family constellation, and explain how systems of alliance and competition between siblings affect their life-style development. For example, if an under-achieving, firstborn child is followed by another child who achieves well, we could discuss with the parents why oldest children in similar situations often are discouraged. Firstborn children frequently are the center of attention, and are placed in an exalted position. Upon the arrival of a second child, the firstborn finds himself "dethroned." To maintain his position as a king on a throne he may overenact those behaviors which have won him a place in the sun. Failing to retain his position of being first and best, he may resort to less constructive behavior. He will not go unnoticed! In any case, his style of life may have been established as a result of his interpretation of this second-born intruder.

In a similar manner a second born child who feels outclassed by the high scholastic achievement of an older sibling may give up the race for academic stardom and turn to another area in which to excel — perhaps as a star athlete or as the star disturber of an otherwise peaceful classroom. A middle child who is squeezed by two quite

adequate siblings may be "turned off" to being the hero and instead become the family or classroom villain. The youngest child in the family may have become so accustomed to putting other people in his service that he can't be bothered to do for himself such mundane tasks as school assignments. Much of the responsibility can be taken off of the parents if they can understand how children establish roles in their competitive attempts to find a place of significance in the family constellation.

Understanding the Purpose of the Child's Behavior

Next, the counselor can help parents to understand the sometimes subtle motives or purposes for the child's disturbing behavior.

Dreikurs (1964, 1968) indicated that there are a number of possible purposes for a child's active or passive behavior which is disturbing to adults. Some children express their discouragement by seeking attention or service from others. They are saying in effect, "I don't really count unless people notice me. If I can't be noticed for constructive actions then I will be noticed in negative ways." The discouragement of other children is expressed by their stubbornness or rebellion. These children are saying "I don't count as a person unless I am boss or keep you from being boss." Other children are so deeply discouraged and entrenched in a power struggle with adults that they become revengeful. They are saying by their behavior "I feel so hurt by others (for real or unreal reasons) that I have license to get even by hurting them in some way." Finally, there are some children who are so profoundly discouraged that they have given up hope of success and display an assumed disability. Children at this deep level of discouragement are saying passively "I've had it — I've given up trying to succeed at the level I want — leave me alone." This way of conceptualizing the purposes of children's behaviors is not an attempt to classify or pigeon-hole them, but rather it is intended as a tool which the counselor can use to help parents understand the behavior of their children so that positive change will be possible.

Developing a Plan of Action

After the counselor has established a respectful relationship with the parent and there is a cooperative understanding of the child, it is possible to develop a workable plan of action at school and at home to encourage the child toward growth. When the atmosphere is safe and accepting, most parents will enthusiastically work *with* us to help their child.

For example, consider the child who is a dawdler. The purpose of dawdling should be explored by the counselor and the parent. What does the child accomplish with this behavior? What response does it bring from both the teacher and the parents? Perhaps he lures us into a trap by getting us to nag at him to complete his job. Nagging results in a negative satisfaction gained from the interaction with the adult. We need to remember that children must have involvement with significant adults in one of two ways — positive or negative. It has been said that children would rather be beaten than be ignored. The

child needs to have this negative involvement replaced with positive involvement or further discouragement will result.

In this case, the following plan of action might be appropriate. The counselor could have the teacher avoid nagging by placing the responsibility for completing tasks upon the child. For example, limits could be established when the child is asked to make a commitment regarding a math assignment. The child would be given the freedom to decide how many problems he could work in a given time period. If the child fails to keep his commitment, the teacher instead of nagging would merely ask *the child* when and where he would fulfill *his* agreement. No further assignments would be given until these problems were worked. The focus is kept on the *commitment* rather than the nagging.

The parents might note that they nag the child to eat. The parents could agree to establish some limits by preparing and serving meals on time. Then the responsibility for eating would be placed with the child. The child would be given the freedom to choose not to eat. However, if he gets hungry, he must wait until the next meal. The natural consequence of hunger would replace the need for nagging (Dreikurs & Grey, 1968).

The teacher and the parents each could work to avoid the discouraging influence of negative interaction. In addition, the significant adults would plan to replace the negative interactions with positive ones. Each would agree to pay attention to the child a few times each day *when the child is not expecting it*. This plan of avoiding the negative and introducing the positive eventually builds the child's feelings of inner strength. When this happens he may feel more like learning and behaving appropriately (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963).

Some further elaboration of this general encouragement plan may be needed. The authors, in counseling with parents, have found the importance of attempting *only one small bit of change at a time* (Hillman, 1968, Hillman & Perry, in press). The somewhat oversimplified plan is as follows:

Step I. One recurring negative adult-child interaction is located. Then the parent and teacher plan a way to extricate themselves successfully from this discouraging encounter.

Step II. A suggestion is given for daily involvement with the child in a positive way in which unconditional warmth is extended to the child when he is not asking for it.

To implement Step I, the counselor can review an average day with the parents to locate a recurring negative interaction. Typical friction points are getting up in the morning, bathroom routine, meal time, getting off to school, snacks, T.V., bedroom neatness, sibling arguments, and bedtime.

To increase the chances of the parent's initial success, the first friction point which is chosen for modification should be one that is reasonably easy to change. For example, one parent of an eight-year-old boy realized that each morning she was calling the boy four times. Each call had increasing volume. Both the child and the parent admitted that this encounter was irritating and discouraging. The child was given an alarm clock and *he* was given the responsibility for getting up in

the morning. Invariably the child will test the new limits by sleeping in the first or second morning as was the case with this boy. Because the new plan had been explained to the child ahead of time, the parents wisely did not call the boy or make any comment about the reason why he was not called. *He* had to face the responsibility for being late for school. He was given the freedom to make his own choice and was allowed to experience the logical consequences of a poor choice. He was not late thereafter.

Because bickering interactions with discouraged children tend to become the family's style of communication, it is necessary to implement Step II. It may be suggested that attention and warmth be extended to the child when he is not asking for it. This gives him security — he doesn't have to be an attention beggar. This also frees him to devote more time to his peers. A child who is overly involved with parents on a negative basis usually has little time and energy left for friends and constructive activities.

Finally, if we have the courage to open Pandora's box with the parents, we need to have two or three follow-up interviews. Setbacks or regressions are a necessary concomitant of growth. Both the counselor and parents for a time need to review progress at weekly intervals and to institute another small bit of change. The experience reported by counselors, teachers, and parents is that one small change yields large dividends — the total daily interaction tends to decrease its negative tendency.

As the counselor and the parent experience success, they will both feel encouraged and will in turn encourage the discouraged child. When parents and counselors work together without blaming each other, parent conferences can be a pleasant opportunity rather than a dreaded obligation.

RESUME: Plusieurs conseillers évitent de rencontrer les parents qui peuvent parfois être défensifs et agressifs. Les auteurs font des suggestions pratiques sur la façon d'amener les parents à coopérer et sur la façon de faire en sorte que ces rencontres soient des occasions de développement plutôt qu'une obligation onéreuse. On propose des moyens spécifiques pour aider les parents à comprendre leurs enfants et pour développer des stratégies pratiques de changement positif.

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