

Strategic Family Therapy for Dysfunctional Parents

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Abstract

A rationale for involving the uninvolved parent in family therapy is outlined. Involving the uninvolved parent creates a needed change in the family structure and hierarchy. A review of the theory of Strategic Family Therapy reveals how a change in the hierarchy of the family structure accomplishes change in the family system. Seven successful case examples are given. The first six are from the case files of the author, while the seventh case is from a counselor that the author supervises. The therapeutic intervention strategy given here shows how success in family therapy requires a change in the family system.

A common scenario in counseling today is that of a mother who is desperate for help with her children. The mother is often at her wit's end and everything she has tried is not working. The mother is often overwhelmed and when counselors ask the parents to come in for a family session, only the mother shows up. Even then, counselors are lucky to have the mother come in for a few sessions. The more we work with children and adolescents and their serious mental health problems, the more we realize that unless we intervene with the family, we are not getting to the root of the problem.

Henry David Thoreau said, "For every thousand hacking at the leaves of evil, there is one striking at the root." Today is my attempt to strike at one of the roots of some of our clients' serious problems.

Before doing so, I would like to review some principles from *Strategic Family Therapy* by Haley and Madanes. Madanes (1981, p. 89) writes:

Disturbed or disturbing behavior in children is the result of the incongruity in the hierarchical organization of the family. The parents are in a superior position to the child by the fact of being parents, and yet the child is in a superior position to the parents by protecting them through symptomatic behavior that often expresses metaphorically the parents' difficulties.

Madanes (1981, p. 118-119) further explains it is important to assess the family hierarchy by asking such questions as:

Who is in charge of what in the family? Who has to ask permission of whom and about what? What are the rules in the house? What are the consequences if the rules are disobeyed?

If the child's symptomatic behavior is "grabbing power" in the family hierarchy, that very behavior may be the glue holding the couple together.

Haley (1986, p. 32) observes:

In a clinic the most typical arrangement with a child problem in an intact family is a mother quite concerned about the child and the father more peripheral. It is best to ask him about the problem first because one wishes to define him as involved in the therapy and also to find out how much responsibility he is willing to take when action is required. If the involved parent is ineffectual in dealing with the child's problem, then the uninvolved parent is asked to get involved. The uninvolved parent is usually the father. When a father is not available, sometimes an uncle or grandfather is brought into the situation and is able to get positive results from the child with the problem.

Case # 1:

Thirty years ago while serving as a high school counselor, I called for a staffing of teachers, administrators, and parents for a student who was failing all his classes. The mother had asked for help and was desperate. She did not know what to do. The teachers expressed their concern and were also at a loss about how to motivate their student. The mother came by herself, so I inquired about the father to see if he could help us. I asked if the boy had a relationship with his father. When she began to weep, I knew I had hit a raw nerve. She reported that the father was a long-haul truck driver and had little to do with the boy when he was at home. Since we could not come up with any new ideas on how to encourage or motivate this student, I asked the vice-principal to provide a career-exploration field trip for him. We had a career education project in field placements going on at the high school at that time. I suggested this boy might benefit from a field trip with his father who drives a truck where the boy would keep a journal. He would not be considered absent because he was on an extended educational field trip. The vice principal gave permission because he realized the student was failing all his classes up to that point anyway. The field trip was planned which included a weekend where the boy enjoyed going with his father to learn all about truck driving. More importantly, he had time with his father and could learn from him and enjoy their interaction. We were all amazed at the transformation that took place. He pulled all his grades up to a passing level by the end of the school term. Neither his mother, teachers, administrator, nor I had the ability to motivate this boy, but the time building a relationship with his father produced amazing results. What happened? What did the father have that none of us had? What helped him change his behavior?

Jay Haley of Strategic Family Therapy says that the hierarchy of the family needs to be changed to help a child to change. This often means that the uninvolved parent becomes involved. There is a direct correlation between a child's sense of responsibility and identification (time spent) with the same sex parent. Haley states the counselor needs to give a directive to engage the uninvolved parent. This will create new interactions within the family and will produce different results.

Case #2:

The classic example from Strategic Family Therapy is this approach's success with fire starters. The directive is to get the uninvolved parent (usually the father) to set at least three safe fires with the child for the purpose of proper fire safety instruction for a period of two weeks. One of these times, the father must get off of work during the day to set fires with his son. One boy called to ask the therapist if he could stop setting fires and just spend time with his father. The therapist said, "No, you need to continue setting fires until two weeks are up." By the end of two weeks, the newly establish hierarchy had changed the pattern of interaction in the family. The directive to get the uninvolved parent involved with the fire setter produces legendary positive results.

Case # 3:

Educators are aware of the positive effects of a male teacher in the elementary school. A grade-school boy with severe oppositional defiance was being raised by his mother, grandmother and aunt. He was too much to handle for the female schoolteacher and administrator. They had noticed during playground duty the one male teacher could achieve compliance to the rules with this boy when no one else could. One day a female substitute teacher was having serious problems with this boy and went to the principal asking for her assistance. The principal asked the male teacher if this child could stay in his classroom for the rest of the day since his regular teacher was not present. Checking with the male teacher at the end of the day, the principal asked if he had any problems with the student. He said he did not experience any problems and actually enjoyed him. The principal changed the hierarchy which changed the interaction pattern of the boy.

Case # 4:

A female school counseling intern was struggling with a very disruptive male student. She tried unsuccessfully to counsel the boy and found she was not getting anywhere. She had talked to the teacher and the mother. They were at their wit's end with the boy. I purchased candy stress pills as a gag for my internship class. The name of the pills was "Damitol," and in the little pack of play pills there were dispensing instructions and an RX prescription pad with the name of the play pills, "Damitol," on it. When the intern said that she was stuck and nothing worked with this client, and that she was stressed out, I got out my little bag of stress pills and gave her Damitol stress pills for the mother, teacher, and herself. I thought of a good use for the RX pad and put the name of the father on the RX prescription, crossed out Damitol and wrote, "Spend 1/2 hour a day with Robert, without fail and report back in two weeks!" Then I signed it, Dr. R. Blair Olson. Much to the delightful excitement of this counseling intern, she reported, "You will not believe what has happened. This boy is doing well in school. He is following the rules, and his mother and teacher are both pleased and surprised." The father had taken my little RX pad prescription seriously, and the boy was doing well and had seemingly made a complete turnaround in effort and performance in his school work and his behavior was much better. The interaction with the uninvolved father had produced a major change in the child.

Case # 5:

A mother could not do anything with her seven-year-old daughter who was surly, defiant and rude to her mother. She called a Strategic Family Therapist in her city and requested an appointment. The therapist was overbooked and said he could not work the little girl and her father in until the next Friday. The mother said the appointment would be with her and the child, for the father was busy at work. He said, "No, the appointment will be with the father and daughter and have her father call for instructions." The mother convinced the father to call, even though he did not understand why the mother could not handle this particular doctor's appointment. He called the therapist and was told that the only way that the therapist would see him was if he took his daughter to McDonalds for a Happy Meal. He was to bring the surprise toy and Happy Meal box as proof that they had complied with his directive. He was also asked to rent a bunny suit and go to McDonalds in this suit with his daughter, and also to come to the appointment with his daughter, wearing the suit. The father was very reluctant but complied with the directive. When the child arrived with her father at the therapist's office, she was bopping around like a little bunny herself. She exhibited no defiance or bad temper whatsoever. This was the beginning of a major change in the seven-year-old girl. Once again, the involvement of the uninvolved parent resulted in a change in the hierarchy of the family and had been an effective counseling intervention strategy.

Case # 6:

A boy repeated Kindergarten because he did not do well in his first year. He and his two older brothers kept their mom very involved in their school work, but he was not doing well his second year. Mom worked at the school cafeteria during the morning meal and she was constantly checking on her son in his Kindergarten class (where he was not getting his work done). The school requested the involvement of a family counselor, and I offered my services on a limited basis. I met with the mother, teacher, and special education coordinator to do a family therapy interview. Dad was at work and not at the interview. I asked the mother what the problem was, and she said it was probably her because she had spoken to her own mother that morning and asked her if she could see what the problem was. Her mother told her that the boys did not mind their mother, but only their father and grandmother. I asked if she thought the father would be willing to be more involved with the boys, and she said he might, but that he drank beer some and she was not sure she trusted him with the boys' school work. The family lived in a rather small mobile home and was fixing up a larger place but had run out of money; the project was going slowly. She said she had left the father and boys for six months, contemplating divorce, but had reconciled. She felt guilty for abandoning the boys for that period of time and admitted that she was now over-involved with them. The boys were "mother-deaf," meaning they did not listen to her scold and threaten. Knowing that I could not commit a lot of time to this case for family therapy, I opted to involve the uninvolved parent. I asked her if she was willing to put dad in charge of all communication with the school. All homework checks would all be done by dad. He would be the "go to guy" on all concerns about school. She agreed to try this option because we agreed that her three boys, especially her

youngest son in his second year of Kindergarten, were not getting their school work done. Her coaxing and reminding were not helping.

At a follow up visit three weeks later, I was again amazed at what had happened in the family. The father had risen to the challenge, and the mother gave complete school responsibilities to the boys and the father. The boys were getting their homework done, and the youngest child had made a major turnaround by being responsible and staying on task in class. He found he could not manipulate his father like he had his mother. The mother reported that the father had not been drinking at all since she asked him to be in charge of the children's school work and discipline.

Jay Haley (1987, p. 113) describes a typical repeating cycle that was occurring in Case # 6:

- Step 1. Father – incompetent. The father behaves in an upset or depressed way not functioning to his capacity.
- Step 2. Child – misbehaving. The child begins to get out of control or express symptoms.
- Step 3. Mother – incompetent. The mother ineffectually tries to deal with the child and cannot, and the father becomes involved.
- Step 4. Father – competent. The father deals with the child effectively and recovers from his incompetency.
- Step 5. Child –behaving. The child regains his composure and behaves properly, or is defined as normal.
- Step 6. Mother – competent. The mother becomes more capable and deals with the child and father in a more competent way, expecting more from them.

Case # 7:

I reported the success of case #6 to the Licensed Associate Counselors I was supervising. I related all the previous cases, and they welcomed the challenge to try to change the hierarchy in the families with whom they were working. One of these counselors was working with a family in school based mental health counseling. The mother was not making progress with the oldest child in discipline and school work. The counselor negotiated an agreement with the family that the father would take over the discipline of the oldest child and monitors the schoolwork of this child. The mother had her hands full with the other children in the family and welcomed this recommendation by the counselor. The counselor reports that the oldest child is much improved in school work and behavior.

References

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Biographical Sketch

R. Blair Olson is Professor and Chair of the Department of Counselor Education at Henderson State University. He is a Licensed Professional Counselor and a Marriage and Family Therapist. He is a National Certified Family Therapist and Clinical Member and Approved Supervisor of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. He is in his 28th year at Henderson State. Blair Served in the Arkansas Counseling Association for 20 years as Executive Secretary, and as Newsletter Editor for 15 of those years. The Arkansas Counseling Association voted recently to name its Distinguished Professional Service Award in honor of Dr. R. Blair Olson. The Award will be called the R. Blair Olson Distinguished Professional Service Award. Blair and his wife Shirley have four children and 12 grandchildren.