

FEATURED ARTICLE

How DO You Hook Them? (Or: Doing Consultation with Parents of Play Therapy Clients, Adlerian Style)

by

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You are working with Sally Jordan, a 5 year old that has 2 or 3 temper tantrums at home every day. You have established a good relationship with Sally in your playroom, but you have never seen a tantrum. If truth were told, her behavior is delightful in your play therapy sessions. You spend a lot of time tracking her behavior, restating her content, encouraging her pro-social behavior and problem-solving skills, but the tantrums continue at home. She likes coming to see you and seems to enjoy being in the playroom, but her parents are getting impatient because she is "not making the progress they were expecting."

You have had several brief conversations with Mr. and Mrs. Jordan when they drop her off at your office and when they pick her up, but you are getting the nonverbal message, "Fix our kid, but don't mess with us." In the waiting room of your office, you have made several casual suggestions about things the family could do differently to handle the tantrums, but Sally's parents have not had a positive reaction to any of the suggestions and have not followed through with any of them. You believe that these parents mean well, love their child, and are doing the best job they know how in parenting Sally, but you are feeling frustrated by your inability to get them to participate more actively in helping to solve this problem. You know that research studies of child counseling and play therapy (LeBlanc, 1998; Ritchie & Partin, 1994; Sheridan, 1993; Stone & Bradley, 1994; Strother & Jacobs, 1986) lend empirical support to the idea that therapy with children accompanied by par-

ent consultation or other conjoint therapeutic interventions with parents can result in an enhanced rate of successful outcomes with the children. Yet you still hesitate to enter into a formal consultation process with Sally's parents in order to enlist their cooperation in taking a more active role in helping Sally with this behavior. As you think about what keeps you from being more direct with Mr. and Mrs. Jordan, you realize that you are nervous about your ability to successfully overcome parents' resistance to the consultation process. You want to find a method for effectively communicating with and influencing parents and disarming any resistance they might have to the consultation process.

One strategy that many play therapists have found helpful in lowering their own anxiety about the consultation process and in helping them make positive connections with parents is A model of parent consultation based on the Adlerian principle of personality priorities (Kottman & Ashby, 1999). This approach allows you to custom-design your explanation of the play therapy process, the consultation process, and your parenting suggestions based on your understanding of parents' way of approaching life and problems. Following this model can frequently minimize the defensive reactions of parents and improve the chance that they will positively respond to your suggestions.

Adlerian personality priorities (Kefir, 1981; Pew, 1974) can provide a framework for you to conceptualize parents' lifestyles. You can learn to recognize parents' personality priorities based on your interactions with parents and their descriptions of the problem. Using your understanding of the personality priority of the parent, you can plan interventions for all of your interactions with parents. Personality priority is a behavior pattern based on the individual's convictions about how he or she acquires belonging, significance, and a sense of mastery (Kefir, 1981); it is the person's usual mode of thinking about situations and conducting

relationships with other people (Pew, 1974). The four priorities are labeled: control, pleasing, superiority, and comfort.

Since personality priorities are manifested in every aspect of an individual's life, they will be reflected in parenting styles. When parent's first talk to you, they frequently express their personality priorities in the way they describe their own lives and the way they describe any problems experienced or exhibited by their children. In order to recognize a parent's personality priority, you must (a) listen closely to the parent's story and (b) monitor your own feelings in the interactions with the parent(s).

You can adjust your interaction with parents depending on your assessment of their parent's personality priority. By introducing the idea of parent consultation and explaining the process of play therapy in a form that is compatible with parents' style of interacting, you can frequently avoid evoking a defensive reaction. You can also keep parents' personality priorities in mind as you formulate your recommendations about developing new parenting strategies and determine the type of parenting strategies that would most likely be helpful for the family. The personality priority of the parent will also often affect the approach you would use if you wanted to make suggestions for parents working on personal issues that might interfere with their optimal functioning as a parent.

To learn more about this process make plans now to attend the Georgia Association for Play Therapy Conference, March 2-3, 2001 at the Gwinnett Civic Center.

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