

CHAPTER VI

AN EXAMPLE OF FAMILY THERAPY FOR ELIMINATING A DISHARMONIOUS DYNAMIC OF EDUCATING

1. FAMILY DIAGNOSTICS

1.1 Identifying particulars

The family consists of a thirty eight year old father, a thirty five year old mother and three sons. Riaan is nine years old, Andrew is seven and Marius, the youngest, is two.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Riaan had taken rings and bracelets from his grandmother to use at a class concert and after using them he hid them in the chicken coop. He is disobedient, he is reluctant to communicate with his parents and each afternoon he takes his bicycle and rides around until it is very late without telling them where he has gone. When he moves among his parents' friends and family he is a pleasant child.

1.3 Family dynamic

1.3.1 First conversation

The family members take their places in the following positions: the father, the mother, Andrew (the middle child), Riaan (the oldest) and Marius (the youngest). The position between the father and Marius was left open by the family and was taken by the therapist.

During the social phase of the family conversation the mother took the lead while she spoke very softly and slowly. Then the father joined in and briefly said something about himself. After this the children took turns and this led to more activity and a louder tone of voice.

During the phase of stating the problem, the mother stated the problem in a very uncertain way and with a murmuring tone of voice. She explained her own inability to handle her son and verbalized her own insecurity in this regard.

The father believes the problem is with the child himself, that he has less involvement with his sons than his wife and that so far he doesn't know how to get them to listen.

The boys did not understand the reason for their visit although their mother indeed had tried to explain what the conversation would entail.

During the father and mother's discussion about the problem it appears that the mother thinks neither of them can discipline their sons and that she is afraid that they, as parents, will damage their children. Thus, she cautiously proceeds to try to solve the problem.

The family interactions were observed to be as follows: the mother and father converse in a very matter-of-fact manner about the problem and try to analyze their own behavior; meanwhile, the two oldest boys mutually tease each other, but not in such a way that it disturbs the conversation between the parents.

In the conversation between the parents and the children, the mother speaks very softly when she asks them a question to which they only answer that they do not know, or they shrug their shoulders; then the mother thinks that she cannot communicate with them. When the father asks the children a question, the mother interferes in such a way that they do not need to answer it. If the father reprimands them for their silence, the mother provides a reason why they cannot answer. Then the parents enter into a conversation about their behavior and the mother explains to the therapist that they are helpless and cautious about their harmful involvement with their children. The father's lack of knowledge of how to deal with the children is emphasized by both parents. When they talk with Riaan, Andrew **tries** to answer or he makes a little joke that diverts attention away from the original question.

Based on these interactions it is hypothesized that the hierarchy within the family is obscure, the father is on the periphery and is presented as the person who does not have knowledge about dealing with the children. The boundary between the mother and children is diffuse and she does not assert her authority and gives instructions to the children via non-verbal communication. There is a lack of individuating with the two (younger) children, while the distance among family members indicates their non-involvement with each other: each member goes his own way in such a way that the others do not become involved.

The therapist tested this hypothesis by asking the father to speak with Riaan, the oldest son, about a matter in order to determine whether he could succeed in getting Riaan to listen to the question and answer it. The following interaction occurred:

The father asks Riaan a question whereupon Andrew begins to laugh; the father repeats the question very clearly and with seriousness; first Riaan begins to laugh, looks at Andrew and then at his mother; his mother first encourages him to answer and then helps him with possible answers; after that she turns to the father and says that Riaan most likely does not know; Andrew makes a little joke and the family laughs together and each proceeds as before.

Some of the essences of authority that progress inadequately are the following:

“Telling” and “being appealed to”: the mother says what is proper on a verbal level, but does not emphasize this with her non-verbal communication. For example she speaks so softly, unclearly or with a slight smile that disqualifies her words. Although the child is appealed to, it is unclear as to what end.

“Obedience” and “recognition of authority” do not occur. Andrew makes a little joke and the uneasiness that begins to arise is laughed away.

The father does not follow-up on his instructions and his [presumed] position in the hierarchy is not validated. Andrew holds

a high position in the hierarchy and the children define the relationship between parents and children.

If there is a need of family support for one of the members, they talk of a surrender to the subject or avoid it with the help of very quick humor.

The essences of the relationship of understanding that are not adequately realized are:

“Understanding otherness”: each child’s uniqueness is not emphasized and communicated. It seems that during the session especially Riaan and Andrew could not have the opportunity to each get the individual attention of their parents or their questions answered.

Because of the family’s dynamic, the children’s potentialities were not valued [“valuing of potentialities”]. The mother’s attitude of not expecting the children to make a meaningful contribution [“understanding proper effort”] and the father’s attitude to move to the periphery contributes to this situation.

“Understanding responsibility” and “understanding proper effort” are also realized inadequately.

From the observations of the family, it seems that the failed essences of trust are:

An intimate relationship between parents and children is not adequately realized during the session and further exploration of this is necessary.

The essences “being partners”, “being accompanied” and “being a participant” are realized inadequately. Riaan is not allowed to take an active role in valuable activities [“being a participant”] and is not supported with the aim that he must provide answers himself. The answers are given for him and he is deprived of the opportunity to do this together with his parents.

There is no mention of a personal closeness and an adequately heartfelt affection is not evident when something inconvenient arises.

During the first session the therapist restructures by asking the [two older] sons if they are twins who [are completely dependent on each other]. By means of humor, focus and intensity regarding this topic are maintained. The conversation is restructured such that Riaan must talk either with the therapist or his parents. When Andrew interferes, this is indicated in various ways, for example, by mentioning it or asking one of the boys if he is completely dependent on the others, etc.

With restructuring the therapist began with individualizing the two [older] boys because the primary focus should be on the children who were high in the hierarchy.

In this way the focus is not placed on the parent's inabilities. Humor is used because the boys continually use it, it can reduce tension and at the same time the family members can get involved with a matter. Since the parents also presented their sons as a problem, the focus on them has the additional aim of the therapist respecting the family system.

The session is ended with a therapeutic contract in which the time and number of sessions is discussed. It is proposed to the parents that the problem within the family be worked on since it involves the entire family and that an evaluation of progress will be discussed during the sixth session.

1.3.2 Second session

During the second session the restructuring continued by allowing the father and Riaan to talk about the latter's interests. The conversation must be structured in such a way that Riaan himself can have the opportunity to tell his father about his interests. Andrew and the mother are deterred from interfering in the conversation. A change in distance is brought about, i.e., the family members' positions with each other are changed: the father and Riaan are directed to each other and consequently their distance

and position are changed. By means of limiting, participation of the mother and Andrew in the conversation is changed. Hence, the family's structure is thrown into doubt. The therapist has affiliated with the father, his position is strengthened by his support and this disturbed the balance. The father's position is readjusted in the hierarchy and from his higher position he can exercise authority such that Riaan answers his questions. Through the change in the distance between the father and Riaan, along with the limiting technique, the relationships of trust and understanding also are readjusted. The father has discovered his child's potentialities, while the therapist, by means of focus and intensity, has directed the conversation in such a way that the father's position is strengthened and the child is allowed to participate with a greater degree of independence. The complementary aspect of the relationships is also used by the therapist by focusing on the contributions his son has made to the relationships.

The restructuring is further confirmed by a change in the duration of the transactions because the therapist, when the tension and conflict between father and son had begun to escalate, maintained the focus and intensity by letting the transaction progress and by giving them the opportunity to successfully solve the problem themselves without the others interfering. After this successful interaction of the father and Riaan they are asked to shake each other's hand whereupon the father drew nearer to Riaan and hugged him tightly. This action of the father is an indication that the distance between father and son has decreased.

Then the father is asked to repeat the same transaction with Andrew in order to bring about individuation between Riaan and Andrew. Andrew has continually attempted to neutralize his father's demands with a joke. However, since the father's position of authority has been readjusted, he can successfully deal with this.

During the subsequent conversation between father and mother about the just completed transactions, the mother acknowledges that she did not expect that the boys would be able to answer their fathers questions and she was amazed about them being able to do so.

As an assignment for the next two weeks, the father and sons are requested to each devote separate time to pursuing their interests or hobbies as determined earlier in the session. The aim is to promote the independence of the children and also to promote the father's position and interest in his children. The mother is excluded from this activity so that she does not undermine his authority.

1.3.3 Third session

During the third session attention is given to the change in the distance between the mother and her children.

Because of her doubts about exercising authority and the general handling of her children, the parent subsystem is investigated to develop acceptable concrete ways for her to exercise authority.

The mother must apply these new measures to her children in such a way that her authority can be established. The therapist supports her with the aim of strengthening her position and the fact that her sons' actions, and her lack of effectively exercising authority complement each other is stressed, in order to eliminate her own experience of impotence.

These measures must be used at home for the following two weeks so that the mother can deal successfully with the children without the father's intervention.

1.3.4 Fourth session

At the beginning of the fourth session the family spontaneously acknowledged that the change in the family was so successful that they will end the therapy with the understanding that, as a family, they can return if they consider it to be necessary. Also, the therapist should make telephone contact to verify the results.

The remainder of the fourth session is used to plan a family activity. The aim of this activity is to reduce the distance among family members in order to bring about greater mutual support.

1.3.5 Follow-up conversations

Two follow-up conversations indicated that the family indeed has undergone a meaningful change and that everybody looks forward to the arrival of a new baby in the family. Riaan's symptoms have disappeared and no new problems have emerged.

2. VERIFICATION OF THE FAMILY DIAGNOSTICS BY MEANS OF ORTHOPEDAGOGIC MEDIA

2.1 Intellectual ability

On the New South African Individual Scale (NSAIS) Riaan obtained a total score of 112, a verbal score of 109 and a non-verbal score of 113.

2.2 Unfavorable meanings

From the projective and expressive media, it seems that Riaan views his father as not being accessible, as being at a distance and as someone who is unable to make personal contact (See T.A.T. and drawings). He sees his mother as someone who is passive and over-submissive (See T.A.T.). He sees himself as insecure, unable to achieve and as someone unable to meet all demands and expectations. He sees himself as being blocked in his situation, and his family situation as uninvolved and unsupportive (See T.A.T.).

The nature and quality of his Rorschach responses refer to an inability to deal with the demands of an unstructured situation in creative ways and to make use of his potential. There are indications of a need for structure.

Riaan's affective restraints contribute to an unordered cognitive attunement (fluctuation of attending and quality of answers to the NSAIS).

2.3 Summary

From observing the interactions of the family the particular family structure and the disharmonious dynamic of educating are identified. During the therapy this family dynamic and

disharmonious dynamic of educating are eliminated and new meanings and structure are given to the family members.

3. REFERENCES

1. DU TOIT, S. I. and PIEK, J. P.: Die Tematiese Appersepsie-Toets. Academica, Pretoria, 1974.
2. MADGE, E. M. and VAN DER WESTHUIZEN, J. G.: Die nuwe Suid-Afrikaanse individuele skaal as kliniese hulmiddel.
3. VAN NIEKERK, P. A.: Ortopedagogiese Diagnostiek. University Publishers and Booksellers, Stellenbosch, 1978.
English translation: <http://www.georgeyonge.net/node96>