



The Institute of Family Living

"FOR THE GOOD OF THE CHILD"

The current emphasis on "the best interest of the child" greatly influences how I work with young clients. My approach to clients can be described as collaborative and problem-solving.

Everyone has problems in life. However, like some adults, many young persons define their whole existence by their "problem." They may describe themselves with a label such as "ADHD" (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) "sad", "learning-disabled," "nervous," or even "a kid from a broken family."

For example, a 15-year-old was referred to me for therapy for depression and underachievement in school. She told me, "There's no use talking to my school of my parents. What can they do? I'm ADD and nobody is going to do anything anyway."

This young person was defining herself by a diagnosis that, for her, became a label. She neglected to say, however, that she wrote songs, or that she could play any musical instrument that she picked up. Her mother added that she could be very persuasive in her dealing with people.

This young woman and I subsequently worked together to re-frame her life story. By expanding on areas of her life that were already successful, she was eventually able to see that she was much more than just + "ADD" or "broken."

Sometimes young people don't see themselves as having a problem. They claim that their parents and school are the ones with the problem. When I asked an 8-year-old why his parents brought him to see me, he stated, "There's nothing wrong with me. Everybody keeps bugging me." The task, as he saw it, was how to get everybody off his back. So together we explored actions he could take that might lead to this result.

I believe that a problem-solving approach implies teaching coping strategies for dealing with similar issues that may arise in the future. This often involves working with the child's community (i.e., his or her parent(s), siblings, and school). Parents and school personnel are invaluable resources. They can help a child acquire the skills he or she needs for long-term adaptation to life changes, as opposed to short-term band-aid solutions. That's why I endeavor to involve all elements of the system within which the child lives.

Sometimes individual work is indicated; often young person's environment may need restructuring so that the problem does not perpetuate itself. For example, if a child is described as being "explosive" during transitional times, the environment can be restructured so as to offset potential explosive behavior.

Teachers may see a young person as capable of achieving well, but his or her performance doesn't measure up. No two children learn identically. Some need the curriculum adapted to meet their needs, while others need the expectations that others have of them adjusted to be more realistic.

Because not everybody is created with the same hard wiring in the brain, some children feel overwhelmed more easily than do others. Here, accommodation may be the answer. A child may need more sleep than others, or may need to eat small frequent meals rather than the traditional three squares a day, or may need to receive instructions one at a time. These are all small, achievable changes in the child's environment that can reduce stress for the entire system.

Sometimes what we see as an abnormal behavioral or emotional expression is a child's most adaptive way to deal with an abnormal situation. Labeling, then treating them as if they were the label and nothing more, is counter-productive. "The good of the child" -any child- requires a more comprehensive approach.

IFL gets many referrals of children and adolescents from doctors, clergy, schools, social workers, and parents, Cheryl Noble-Macgregor, who specializes in working with young people, attempts to see things from her clients' perspective. In keeping with IFL's holistic "family systems" approach to psychotherapy, Cheryl often works collaboratively with IFL colleagues who may be treating adult members of the child's family



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