



How can you work with children without working with the family? Aren't you sending them right back to an often dysfunctional situation?

ANSWER

There was a time when most therapists would not work with a child unless they also worked with the family. Sometimes I felt that they did this because they really didn't know how to work with the child! Of course I work with the family whenever possible. However, here are my thoughts of this subject:

1. I have worked with many children who did not have families: children in foster homes, for example, especially where the foster parents acted merely as caretakers with not much bonding.
2. Even when I am able to work with the parents, I see the child as an individual, separate from the parents. The work is totally different. I have noticed that even if the parents respond to therapy and change their unhealthy ways, the child often pushes his or her feelings further down. As one boy put it, "My father is a lot nicer to me now and I'm glad, but I still have these bad feelings inside of me."
3. Many children have their own work to do based on early traumas and difficult experiences. If the family changes, the child does not automatically resolve his or her issues, learn to express feelings in healthy ways, or strengthen a fragile self esteem. The self nurturing work we do with children is particularly the child's own work.
4. Most families do not change. It takes a great deal of hard work, and most families are unwilling to commit themselves to the time, money and work involved. The therapist can help the child express feelings in safe ways, strengthen his or her sense of self, and learn how to cope with the family.

For two years I worked with a group of children whose fathers were in the Navy and in an alcoholic treatment program. The group met once a week and consisted of twelve children ages eight to sixteen including some siblings.. I never met the parents! The children in this group learned to cope with their situation and parents. They had many issues to deal with such as moving often to new cities and schools, losing friends, depressed mothers and prior violence (one father in an previous alcoholic rage threw a typewriter at his 14 year old son. Luckily he missed.)

One 12 year old boy told a dream: I was driving in a car with my father. The road had many turns and suddenly we were going down a steep hill. At the bottom was a lake. The brakes failed and we were speeding down toward the lake. I was so frightened! Just before we went into the lake I woke up.

Comment from a nine year old, "I have a road just like that in my life." These children were remarkable.

5. Some children go home and become a therapist to the parent. One 8 year old, referred by the school due to extreme acting out behavior, loved coming to therapy but his mother refused to see me. She would just drop him off. (There was no father.) As time went by, she softened toward me and often lingered to talk to me, though she was still not willing to come for a regular session. I wondered about her softening until she finally told me that after each session, her son had her do some of the activities such as The Safe Place. At one session this boy did a sand tray scene and the issue of his loneliness came out of his story. It seems that he went home and asked his mother if she was lonely. No one had ever asked her this before, and she began to weep. They shared their loneliness with one another and changes definitely took place.

Even when I worked with a child individually, I had a policy of seeing the parents or parent about once a month with the child, whenever possible. I rarely saw parents without the child present. (Of course there were exceptions.) Many times I would see the whole family for a few sessions as well.

If you would like more examples or have any further questions about any of the above material, please let me know. Remember, there are no bad questions.