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Tips for Making the Best Use of the DVD

1. USE THE TRANSCRIPTS

Make notes in the video Transcript for future reference; the next time you show the video you will have them available. Highlight or notate key moments in the video to better facilitate discussion during and after the video.

2. FACILITATE DISCUSSION

Pause the video at different points to elicit viewers’ observations and reactions to the concepts presented. The Discussion Questions section provides ideas about key points that can stimulate rich discussions and learning.

3. ENCOURAGE SHARING OF OPINIONS

Encourage viewers to voice their opinions; no therapy is perfect! What are viewers’ impressions of what works and does not work in the sessions? We learn as much from our mistakes as our successes; it is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique this work as well as their own.

4. CONDUCT A ROLE-PLAY

The Role-Plays section guides you through exercises you can assign to your students in the classroom or training session.

5. SUGGEST READINGS TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL

Assign readings from Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading prior to or after viewing.

6. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER

See suggestions in the Reaction Paper section.

7. WATCH THE FAMILY THERAPY WITH THE EXPERTS SERIES

This video is one in a series portraying leading theories of psychotherapy and their application in work with families. Each video presents a master family therapist working with a real family who have real problems. By showing several of the videos in this Family Therapy with the Experts series, you can expose viewers to a variety of styles and approaches, allowing them an opportunity to see what fits best for them.
Perspective on Videos and the Personality of the Therapist

Psychotherapy portrayed in videos is less off-the-cuff than therapy in practice. Therapists may feel put on the spot to offer a good demonstration, and clients can be self-conscious in front of a camera. Therapists often move more quickly than they would in everyday practice to demonstrate a particular technique. Despite these factors, therapists and clients on video can engage in a realistic session that conveys a wealth of information not contained in books or therapy transcripts: body language, tone of voice, facial expression, rhythm of the interaction, quality of the alliance—all aspects of the therapeutic relationship that are unique to an interpersonal encounter.

Psychotherapy is an intensely private matter. Unlike the training in other professions, students and practitioners rarely have an opportunity to see their mentors at work. But watching therapy on video is the next best thing.

One more note: The personal style of therapists is often as important as their techniques and theories. Therapists are usually drawn to approaches that mesh well with their own personality. Thus, while we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, students and trainees must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Because this video contains actual therapy sessions, please take care to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the clients who have courageously shared their personal life with us.
Adlerian Family Therapy

Adlerian family therapy has evolved out of a model first developed by Alfred Adler in the early part of the 20th century. Adler, a contemporary of Sigmund Freud, was perhaps the first systemic therapist. His approach was both holistic and teleological or goal-oriented. Adler believed that individuals were best understood as socially-embedded entities who were moving through life toward a self-selected goal of completion, wholeness, or even perfection. Further, he believed that children started to form their life goals when they were very young, and once the goal was formed, each person’s personality would be unified: every thought, conviction, value, belief, trait, feeling, behavior or interaction could be understood as a movement toward the individual’s self-determined and self-defining goal. For over 100 years, Adlerian therapists have engaged individuals, couples, and families in an exploration and recognition of goals and systemic movements towards those goals.

In 1940, Rudolf Dreikurs, a student and colleague of Adler, began to systematize the concrete, but mostly unconscious goals of children’s misbehavior. Dreikurs believed that all children sought attention and that this was normal. Some children, however, sought what he called undue attention, and they could even turn useful behaviors into undue attention when they wanted to do so. So, let’s say that a child is asked to pick up his or her clothes, and the child begins to do it: how might this child use this useful behavior to get attention? One way would be for the child to come back to the parent to ask where every single piece of clothing should go. This would be getting undue attention. Dreikurs also noted that passive children often sought undue attention by being cute or charming or shy or quiet. Many people know that a child who is actually called “our little princess” or “our little prince,” is someone who gets attention by simply doing nothing. On the more useless side, we also know children who get attention by being a nuisance, a pest, or a class clown, or children who get attention by being deliberately slow or lazy, to name a few behaviors. Each of these behaviors are best understood as interactive attempts at getting undue attention. Dreikurs suggested that when parents respond to useless behaviors with punishments and scoldings, among other efforts to control the child, the
child would often respond in a manner that sought a second mistaken goal, a *power struggle*. Children who are defiant, who argue, who get stubborn are all examples of individual attempts to engage adults in a power struggle. While adults do not like to lose power struggles with children, Dreikurs noted that children always win just by engaging the parent in the battle. When the response to a power struggle is hurtful to children, they will often seek a third goal, *revenge*. Violence, vandalism, viciousness of word or deed are all examples of behaviors which seek revenge. When children become almost completely discouraged, many of them will seek Dreikurs’ fourth goal of *demonstrating inadequacy*. This is really the goal of becoming disabled or hopeless so that adults will leave the child alone.

Bitter (1991) identified three additional conscious goals of children’s misbehavior that he identified as the goals of self-elevation, the goal of getting, and the goal of avoidance. Telling a lie about something special about yourself is an example of the self-elevation goal; a young child stealing from a sibling is an example of the goal of getting; and procrastination is an example of the goal of avoidance.

Bitter (2009) also identified the mistaken goals of adults who raise or work consistently with children and noted that these adult goals were parallel to the mistaken goals of children’s misbehavior. Indeed, children often seek undue attention in a manner that directly challenges the adult’s sense of personal adequacy, and power struggles often result in a direct challenge to an adult’s attempt to control the child. Modern Adlerian family therapy is designed to recognize and disclose the mistaken goals involved in adult-child interactions. Starting with an interview process that delineates the phenomenological perceptions of the family system (that is, a description of what Adler called the family constellation), the counselor/therapist identifies areas of family interaction that the family wants to change, listens for mistaken goals, checks them as hypotheses (or guesses) with family members, looks for patterns and the family’s macro-processes through an investigation of a typical day, and then finally, helps the family to identify and implement more effective modes of interaction based on the use of encouragement and natural and logical consequences.
The Adlerian model does not ignore families that need structural changes in order to function better, especially when the children are mistakenly in charge of the family or there are elements of abuse, neglect, or clinical disorders. But when families are more or less functional and open to learning more effective processes, Adlerians incorporate an educational component in the therapy. This education can be both preventative and remedial, especially when families are seen in open-forum (public) family education centers—when a family is interviewed in front of other families, and both the family and the audience engage in mutual support and encouragement.
Bitter’s Reflections on the Session

I enjoyed my interactions with this family. By no means do I believe that this was a perfect, let alone an elegant session. It was somewhat of a normal session in which I made mistakes I wish I hadn’t made. Where possible, I tried to note these mistakes in the typescript of the session. Dreikurs used to tell us that we needed “the courage to be imperfect,” by which he meant that we had to learn to accept ourselves as merely human. My goal in therapy is not just to be merely human, but more fully human. By this, I mean that I want to be fully present with a family, to risk mistakes in the process of making contact, to engage people in humor and fun even while dealing with serious and often difficult issues.

The family seen in this session must face a lot of personal and systemic difficulties. They are struggling with unemployment, with raising children in a non-cooperative extended family, and with ineffective ways of interacting with each other. Still, they are a functional family, and I sense from the beginning that I can play with them and that they are open to learning. In this interview, we were able to identify the mistaken goals in the children and the relationship of these goals to each parent’s goal of demonstrating their adequacy as a parent. Carol has a high need to be right and to get her children to listen—and obey. Glenn has a high need to be the good guy, the one who helps out and who also has people like him. He may sometimes avoid conflict and other times jump in when he should leave another sub-system (e.g., mom and child) alone, but he is engaged in this family, and his model is especially important to Michael, their only son.

If I were to see this family further, I would want to see how the basic interactions in the family are going and if some success has been achieved when the parents learn to control their own behavior rather than trying to control that of their children. I would also want to encourage Glenn and Michael to have more time together to develop a father-son relationship that is special to them alone. I would want the same for the mother with each of her girls, starting with Andrea. At some point, it will also be useful to bring the extended family in to work out different interactions/relationships there. And finally, I
would like to encourage this family to practice in some later session, a process Dreikurs called a *family council*, a way for the whole family to meet once a week to encourage each other and to solve family problems cooperatively.
Reaction Paper for Classes and Training

Video: *Adlerian Family Therapy with James R. Bitter, Ed.D*

- **Assignment:** Complete this reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the facilitator.
- **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards. Respond to each question below.
- **Length and Style:** 2-4 pages double-spaced. Be brief and concise. Do NOT provide a full synopsis of the video. This is meant to be a brief reaction paper that you write soon after watching the video—we want your ideas and reactions.

**What to Write:** Respond to the following questions in your reaction paper:

1. **Key points:** What important points did you learn about Bitter’s approach to Adlerian Family Therapy? What stands out to you about how Bitter works?

2. **What I found most helpful:** As a therapist, what was most beneficial to you about the model presented? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work? What challenged you to think about something in a new way?

3. **What does not make sense:** What principles/techniques/interventions did not make sense to you? Did anything push your buttons or bring about a sense of resistance in you, or just not fit with your own style of working?

4. **How I would do it differently:** What might you have done differently from Bitter in the session in the video? Be specific about what different approaches, interventions and techniques you might have applied.

5. **Other questions/reactions:** What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the therapy session with Bitter? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?
Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading

WEB RESOURCES
Jim Bitter’s faculty page at East Tennessee State University
http://faculty.etsu.edu/bitterj/default.htm
North American Society of Adlerian Psychology
www.alfredadler.org
International Association of Individual Psychology
www.iaipwebsite.org

RELATED VIDEOS AVAILABLE AT
WWW.PSYCHOTHERAPY.NET
Adlerian Therapy, with Jon Carlson, PsyD, EdD
Adlerian Parent Consultation, with Jon Carlson, PsyD, EdD
Adlerian Play Therapy, with Terry Kottman, PhD
Satir Family Therapy, with Jean McLendon, LCSW
Structural Family therapy, with Harry J. Aponte, LCSW
Tools and Techniques for Family Therapy by John Edwards, PhD

RECOMMENDED READINGS


Discussion Questions

Professors, training directors and facilitators may use some or all of these discussion questions, depending on what aspects of the video are most relevant to the audience.

INTRODUCTION

1. Birth order: What did you think of the discussion about birth order? Do you pay attention to birth order when you’re working with families? What meaning have you made out of birth order in your own family of origin?

2. Adlerian principles: Bitter spoke about three areas of focus that Alderians are interested in: the family constellation; how people interact from a goal orientation; and how people build a sense of self and emotional well-being. What do you think of these areas of focus? What are you most interested in when you work with families?

FAMILY THERAPY SESSION

3. Starting the session: What did you think of how Bitter began the session by addressing Andrea first? What did you think of his question to her: “Andrea, how did you get roped into coming?” How do you tend to begin family therapy sessions? What factors do you consider when deciding who to start with and what to say or ask?

4. Relationship: One of Bitter’s initial goals was to form a relationship with the family based on friendliness, joining, and on human-to-human connection. Do you think this goal was achieved? What did you see Bitter say or do that you think facilitated this kind of relationship?

5. Parents as leaders: Bitter wanted to help the mother and father in this family to “feel and experience the leadership of this family again.” What do you think of that goal? What do you think your goals would have been if you were this family’s therapist?

6. Three adjectives: What did you think of how Bitter asked the parents to describe each of their children in three adjectives? What
do you think the benefits and risks of asking this question in front of the children might be? Is this something you can see yourself doing? Why or why not?

7. **Typical Day:** What did you think of Bitter’s “Typical Day” assessment with this family? Is this a technique you use or can see yourself using with your clients? What do you like and dislike about this technique?

8. **Alliance with dad:** How would you describe the therapeutic alliance between Bitter and Glenn (the father)? Do you think Bitter’s playfulness with Glenn contributed to or detracted from the therapeutic alliance? What did you think of how Bitter turned the focus to Glenn by asking, “Now just out of curiosity, how do you get out of the dirty work?” If you were the therapist, how do you think you would have related to Glenn differently?

9. **Regrets and mistakes:** Through the commentary in the transcript we learn that Bitter believes he made some mistakes in this session and regrets some things he said. He stated, for example, that he regrets his use of the word “pansy.” How did you react when Bitter referred to Glenn as a “pansy”? Can you think of an example of a time when you said something to a client that you later regretted? Talk about a time when you made a therapeutic mistake and how you handled it either in the session or afterwards.

10. **Alliance with mom:** How would you describe the therapeutic alliance between Bitter and Carol (the mother)? Do you think Bitter’s playfulness and use of humor with Carol contributed to or detracted from the therapeutic alliance? How did you react when he nudged her foot as he said, “You like to talk. It’s true, isn’t it? Tell the truth”? If you were the therapist, how do you think you would have related to Carol differently?

11. **Alliance with the children:** What did you think of how Bitter related to each of the children: Michael, Andrea, and Lauren? What did you like and dislike about how he related with each of them? If you were this family’s therapist, how might you relate to the children differently?
12. **Playfulness:** What did you think of Bitter’s style of relating with this family in general? Did his sarcastic comments, such as referring to Lauren as “God’s gift to motherhood” work for you? Why or why not? Do you think he should have been more serious? Do you incorporate playfulness into your work with clients? If so, in what ways?

13. **Self-disclosure:** What did you think of how Bitter talked about his own marriage contract in relation to the conversation about the dishes? Do you think his self-disclosure about his own life and family contributed to this family? Why or why not? What factors do you take into account when deciding whether and how much to self-disclose?

14. **Recommendations:** What did you think of Bitter’s recommendations to this family? For example, did you agree with his assessment of the children as “parent deaf” and his suggestion to Carol about “acting without talking”? What did you think of Bitter’s suggestion to stop getting the kids up in the morning and for Glenn to be more involved outside of the kitchen? How do you go about offering advice or recommendations to families with whom you work?

15. **Commit to change:** What did you think of how Bitter ended the session by checking in to see if each parent could do something differently? How optimistic are you feeling after watching the session that Glenn and Carol will do what Bitter suggested? How do you tend to end your family therapy sessions? What techniques do you use to support families in changing their behaviors?

**DISCUSSION**

16. **Enjoyment:** Bitter stated that he enjoyed the session and that it is essential for him to have a good time conducting therapy. Do you generally enjoy your sessions with clients? What contributes to your sense of enjoyment when you’re working with families?

17. **Interaction:** An audience member brought up how Bitter did not encourage the family members to interact with each other very much. Do you tend to facilitate or allow more family interaction in
your first sessions with families? Why or why not?

18. **Adlerian values:** Bitter stated that Adlerian therapy is a “heavily value-laden approach.” What do you think of the Adlerian values Bitter outlined in the discussion? Are there any that conflict with your own values? What do you think about the concept of the “social interest”? What values do you think you bring into your work with families? How have you handled it when your values conflict with the values of your clients?

19. **The model:** What are your overall thoughts about Bitter’s approach to Adlerian family therapy? What aspects of his approach can you see yourself incorporating into your work? Are there some components of this approach that seem incompatible with how you work? What in particular would you do differently from Bitter?

20. **Personal Reaction:** How would you feel about having Bitter as your therapist? Do you think he could build a solid therapeutic alliance with you? Would he be effective with you? Why or why not?
Role-Plays

After watching the video and reviewing *Adlerian Family Therapy* in this manual, assign groups to role-play a family therapy session following Bitter’s Adlerian Family Therapy model. Organize participants into groups of five or six, consisting of one psychotherapist and four or five family members. If time permits, rotate so each person has a chance to play the role of the therapist. The point here is not to try to resolve the family’s issues, but to use this role-play as an exercise in viewing the family through an Adlerian lens, focusing on conducting a *Typical Day* assessment and giving recommendations to the family.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR ROLE PLAYERS:**

One person will start out as the therapist and the other four or five group members will decide amongst themselves who will be what family member. One option is to base the role-play on the family in this video. If you do this, do not attempt to follow the sequence of interactions, but rather use the clients and situation in the video as a jumping off point, and allow the role play to develop spontaneously. Alternatively, come up with your own scenario, based on a family in which the parents are frustrated that the children don’t listen to them.

From the start, therapists should focus on forming a relationship with the family based on friendliness, joining, and on a sense of human-to-human connection. Find out what concerns the family has and ask about the last time the problem occurred. The bulk of the session should focus on conducting a *Typical Day* assessment, by asking about the interactions in a typical day, from when they wake up to when they go to sleep. Go through the whole day, asking about specific interactions, i.e. what the child does, and then what the parent does to correct it. When you have a suggestion to offer, try on a standard Adlerian intervention by saying, “I have an idea. Would you like to hear it?” Use your understanding of the family’s concerns and goals to try to create new possibilities in the family. Help the parents generate some ideas about changes they can make in how they relate to the
children. End with your recommendations for what the parents can do differently in order to experience the leadership of their family again.

After the role-plays, have the groups come together to discuss their experiences. Invite the clients to talk about what it was like to role-play this family and how they felt about the therapist’s interventions: Did clients experience the therapist as friendly? Did the people playing the parents feel supported? How did the people playing the children feel in relation to the therapist? Were the therapist’s recommendations helpful? Then, invite the therapists to talk about their experiences: How did it feel to conduct a family therapy session using an Adlerian approach? What were their impressions of this family? How was it to conduct a “Typical Day” assessment? What was it like to offer recommendations to the parents? How do they feel about how they related with the children? Finally, open up a general discussion of the strengths and the challenges in applying an Adlerian approach to working with families.

An alternative is to do this role-play in front of the whole group with one therapist and one family; the rest of the group can observe, acting as the advising team to the therapist. Before the end of the session, have the therapist take a break, get feedback from the observation team, and bring it back into the session with the family. Other observers might jump in if the therapist gets stuck. Follow up with a discussion on what participants learned about using Bitter’s Adlerian approach to working with families.
Complete Transcript of
Adlerian Family Therapy
with James R. Bitter, Ed.D.

Bitter: Well, we got a chance to meet a little bit before we started, but I think it would be good if we started by saying our names so that we all know who we are. I’m Jim Bitter. And…

Glenn: Glenn.

Bitter: Glenn.

Carol: Carol.

Bitter: And Carol.

Michael: Michael.

Bitter: Michael. And Lauren.

Andrea: Andrea.

Bitter: And Andrea.

Okay, good. Andrea, how did you get roped into coming?

Bitter Commentary: The family is sitting with the parents, Glenn and Carol, closest to me. Next come Michael and then his youngest sister, Lauren. Andrea, the middle child (a position that often feels left out), is way at the end. I start with her, because I want her to know that I see her and that I will not let her get lost in the process.

Andrea: I don’t know.

Bitter: You have no idea?

Andrea: Mm-hmm.

Bitter: You just agreed to because your mom and dad wanted to?

Andrea: Yeah.

Bitter: Well let’s start with them then. Why don’t one of you use three adjectives and describe your children to me. What would be three words that would describe Michael?
**Bitter commentary:** Because I believe that children develop misbehaviors in relation to the parental value system, I like to start an assessment by hearing what is important to the parent. In one sense, the parents are describing attributes of their children that have been the focus of the parents’ attention—and which were, therefore, reinforced in the children by years of repetitive interactions or routines. Most often, parents will signal in their descriptions of the children both what is important to them as leaders of the family and the ways in which children frustrate parental goals.

**Glenn:** Persistent.

**Bitter:** Persistent, okay.

**Carol:** A clown.

**Bitter:** A clown?

**Glenn:** Impatient.

**Bitter:** And impatient?

**Bitter commentary:** These three word/phrases, persistent, a clown, and impatient, provide data for a number of early hypotheses. The word **persistent** suggests a positive quality, but given the tone of Carol’s voice, I think she means that Michael can keep at her until he gets what he wants or that he is, in a less positive description, stubborn. Similarly, the word **impatient** suggests that Glenn and Carol see their son as demanding, as wanting what he wants right now. Apparently, Michael softens his demands with humor, being a clown, which makes the other two traits more tolerable.

**Carol:** He wants it right now. Lauren, too; she is persistent.

**Bitter:** Maybe it is a family value.

**Bitter commentary:** A family value is one on which both parents are in agreement. When both parents believe that education is important, that is a family value. When both parents attend and participate in a given religion on a weekly basis, being religious is a family value. When both parents like sports, or the arts, these activities become a family value. A family value means that each child must decide for her or himself whether to live up to that family value or not.
Carol: I think so.

Bitter: Are you guys persistent, too?

Glenn: I would think so. I’m very persistent.

Carol: And impatient.

Bitter: So besides persistent for Lauren, what?

Glenn: What is she persistent on… Well, she gets a little bit upset if—

Carol: If she can’t find something she is looking for.

00:26:00

Glenn: She can’t find something, yeah. “Where is it?” Or, “You told me it was here.”

Lauren: “It was just here.”

Bitter: So sometimes when, she wants something, she wants it right now, and she wants some help with it, too?

Carol: Right.

Glenn: Persistent when you ask for attention, too.

Bitter commentary: Lauren, too, has some demanding ways, but as a youngest child, she is more likely to become demanding through a display of helplessness.

Bitter: And how about Andrea?

Carol: Hyper.

Bitter: And when you say that, give me the last time so I can get a feel for what she was doing.

Carol: She is just so jumpy and she talks a lot. She talks and talks.

Bitter commentary: Hyper, jumpy, and talks a lot: Clearly, these are adjectives that describe more how she irritates her mother than traits that are ingrained in her personality. I am looking at Andrea, and she is not hyper or jumpy or even talking a lot in this session so far. I am most interested in this last description: She talks and talks. I have seldom seen a child get this description without having one or more of the parents who talks a lot too.
Bitter: And was she doing that a lot today? Maybe after school or something?

Carol: Yes, she was, nonstop.

Andrea: Yes.

Bitter: And what did you do when she did that?

Carol: I told her to stop talking so much.

Bitter: And did she?

Bitter: No, she still kept on.

Bitter commentary: This is a typical Adlerian sequence in our assessment process. I want to deal in concrete interactions, so I ask for the last time or a recent time in which the problem occurs. I want to know what the child does, and then what the parent does to correct it. If possible, I also want to know how the parent feels when the child is engaged with the parent. A child who keeps going when corrected is most often in a power struggle with the parent, especially if the parent feels angry, challenged, or defeated, and I think Carol is feeling a little of all three here.

Andrea: Yes.

Bitter: So she kept going, huh?

Andrea: I usually talk to my friends a lot.

Bitter: Do you?

Andrea: Yeah. My Aunt Lindsay talks a lot, too.

Bitter: So it is a family thing? Everybody—

Andrea: Yeah.

Bitter: Someone in your family talks a lot and you are just like that person?

Andrea: Oh, yeah.

Bitter: Okay. What else does she do?

Carol: That’s basically it. She bugs the dog a lot, too.

Bitter: The dog? And what kind of dog do we got?
Carol: German shepherd. She just persists to—

Bitter: And it is the only German shepherd in America that can’t take care of itself?

_Bitter commentary:_ This statement is way more sarcastic than I wanted it to come out. I was trying to make an early point that the dog can take care of itself, and the parents do not have to intervene at all. I am already sensing that Carol tries to stay on top of everything, and she can only become exhausted doing that.

Carol: Something like that.

Andrea: Its name is Princess.

Glenn: That dog puts up with a lot.

Bitter: Princess?

Andrea: Princess

Bitter: Wow. And how do you bug the dog?

Carol: Oh, you don’t want to know.

Andrea: Well…

Carol: She pulls its ears and—

Andrea: I pull her tail, pull its collar.

Michael: Kisses it on the nose.

Bitter: Kisses it on the nose?

Michael: And her mouth.

Bitter: Yeah? That will be good news for whoever dates you later on.

_Bitter commentary:_ This is a poor attempt at humor.

00:27:58

Okay, let’s start with something important, then.

_Bitter commentary:_ I can use this episode with the dog to see what goal Andrea may have in relation to her parents. And I do believe that this is all about Mom and Dad, not the dog.

Andrea: Sports
Bitter: What does the dog do when you do all of that?

Andrea: She probably yelps or something. She runs away.

Bitter: Do you have any idea why you do that?

Andrea: I don’t know.

Lauren: She probably just loves her.

Bitter: Because she just loves her a lot?

Andrea: Maybe because she does bad things sometimes.

Bitter: The dog does?

Andrea: Yeah.

Bitter: What bad things does the dog do sometimes?

Bitter commentary: This is really a mistake: I should have gone directly to goal disclosure, but I have now opened up an opportunity for Andrea and the other children to talk about the dog. I am in danger of losing an opportunity for goal disclosure, and I would really like to get a sense of what goals the children are seeking.

Andrea: She—

Lauren: I could name some things. When she was a puppy she used to, when we weren’t around her and she wanted attention, she went in the bathroom and pulled the toilet paper and she ripped it up and left it on the floor.

Bitter: That’s a favorite thing of dogs, boy, when they are puppies.

Lauren: And she drips the water on the floor.

Andrea: Yeah, when she drinks water. And sometimes, when she is eating, she will spit it out and leave it out on the floor and she won’t eat it.

Bitter: Pretty good stuff. I’m more interested in the ones where you get to do some stuff to the dog and then it yelps. And your idea about that is that maybe it is because sometimes the dog does something wrong. And other times it is for something else; I have another idea about why that happens. Would you like to hear it?
Andrea: Yes.

**Bitter commentary:** Okay, we are now back on track: I can tentatively suggest mistaken goals and see how Andrea responds.

Bitter: Could it be that you sometimes fool with the dog to see how many times you can get your mom to tell you to stop?

Andrea: Yeah.

**Bitter commentary:** And Andrea is smiling, so I believe I have what Dreikurs called a recognition reflex, and I can now be sure that the goal of undue attention-getting fits for her.

Bitter: And why would that be fun?

Andrea: I don’t know.

Bitter: I have another idea. Let me try this one. Could it be that sometimes you do it to demonstrate to your mom that she can’t make you stop?

Andrea: Mm-hmm. Sometimes.

**Bitter commentary:** There is no smile here, so I don’t believe a power struggle is involved when she is messing around with the dog, at least.

Bitter: Sometimes, okay. That’s another possibility. Let me try one third one.

**00:29:58**

Does the dog happen to be something that, a pet that your mother is really fond of?

Lauren: No.

Andrea: She doesn’t like the dog.

Bitter: She doesn’t like the dog?

Lauren: She never touches her.

Andrea: She sometimes calls her a “stupid dog.”

Carol: Andrea!

Bitter: Okay, so it doesn’t have anything to do with possibly doing something so you can get even with Mom.
Andrea: No.

**Bitter commentary:** It is definitely not a revenge goal.

Bitter: That’s helpful. So, if there is anything that the two of you would like to see going better at home, what would it be?

Carol: For the kids to listen more.

**Bitter commentary:** This is parent short-hand for “I can’t get the kids to mind; I can’t get the kids to do what I want them to do.” When kids won’t listen, they almost always are interacting with a parent who talks too much, who hopes against hope that she can give an order and have it immediately carried out. Dreikurs used to say of such children that they were parent-deaf. They let whatever the parents said go in one ear and out the other.

Glenn: Yeah.

Bitter: And is that something for you with all three of them, or is it something with one or more in particular?

Carol: Well, mostly Andrea and Michael.

Bitter: Andrea and Michael, the two older ones?

Carol: Yeah.

Glenn: Lauren seems to be a little less—

Carol: Yeah.


Carol: She begs me to go to bed, you know, take her to bed. These two, they will stay up all night if you let them. And I try to get them to bed early, and it doesn’t seem to work. When I say they are going to go to bed at this time, it doesn’t work.

And then, he comes into the picture and starts telling me to stop yelling at them. And that doesn’t do any bit of good, when he jumps into the picture and I am trying to get them to bed.

**Bitter commentary:** Parents often fail to see that their children work as a team. In this case, I can almost see Carol focusing on getting one of the older ones to bed while the other one fools around. When the child of
focus starts to move, Carol shifts to the other of the older children while the first one undoes everything Carol achieved in moving the child toward bedtime. Meanwhile, Lauren is hanging out somewhere, because she is quieter, doesn’t fight with her parents, but has convinced them that they must do everything for her. Under these conditions, it should take the parents two hours to get the children in bed each night.

There is another goal, however, for the children’s process: If they can get Mom and Dad in a fight, then they can extend their own activities even longer. Adlerians believe that children do not waste energy. We canascertain the goals of children from what they do and what results.

Bitter: Sure. How do you feel when that happens?

Bitter commentary: Carol doesn’t answer this question, because she is on a roll, and she doesn’t really even hear the question. If she had told me what is obvious, that she is angry, then we can start to see how she winds up in power struggles with her children and ultimately with her husband.

Carol: Well, I tell him to stay out, you know?

Bitter: I don’t know.

Carol: I don’t think it is right that he gets—interferes.

Bitter: Right. You would like him to just let you handle it?

Carol: Exactly.

Bitter: You are in the middle of it and…

Carol: Right. And then he butts in, and he starts telling me that I am yelling at them. And I wish that it was just—it should have been already implemented in their mind that when I say to go to bed, it is time, or when they come home from school to wash their hands.

00:32:05

Bitter: Sure. So a lot of it is a hard time kind of getting things to take place that you know need to happen?

Carol: Right. Like getting here…

Bitter: Today?

Carol: Right. I wanted to leave early and they were stalling.
Glenn: The snow.

Bitter: And who was the best at stalling?

**Bitter commentary:** The wording of this question both seeks information from the parents at a concrete level (who stalls the most) and sends a message to the family, especially the children, that I suspect this problem is intentional and has a purpose.

Carol: This one here.

Bitter: Michael?

Carol: Yeah.

Glenn: Yeah.

Bitter: Okay.

Glenn: They are in their own little world.

Bitter: I’m sorry, I missed that.

Glenn: They go into their own little world.

Bitter: Okay, so is this something, Michael, that you know about, the ability to stall well?

**Bitter commentary:** The phrasing of this question is important, because it is designed to suggest that Michael is doing something well, and he is. Unfortunately, the thing he is doing well is a useless behavior. It is a passive stance that suggests to his parents that they can’t make him get going. Because I phrase it as an accomplishment, I have a better chance that Michael will clarify his goal for me.

Michael: I like to just test my dad.

**Bitter commentary:** There it is: Power.

Bitter: You do?

Michael: Yeah.

Bitter: And what do you do to do that?

Michael: I say, “What if I say no?”

Bitter: And what is his answer?
Michael: It’s, “You do it.”

Bitter: And do you?

Michael: Yeah.

Glenn: Sometimes.

Michael: Sometimes.

Bitter: How about with Mom?

Michael: Well, I guess with Mom you better do it or else she will give you an earful.

Bitter: And what do you do when you start to get an earful?

Michael: I start to walk away and go do it.

Bitter: You escape. Yeah. [to Carol] Okay, I know that in talking earlier that you have—whose mother is it that is close to you?

Carol: Mine.

Bitter: It’s Michael and Andrea and Lauren’s grandmother and it is your mother?

Carol: Right.

Bitter: Okay. And how does that relationship go with Grandma and with you as a family?

Bitter commentary: Carol indicated to me earlier that her family is often overly involved in her nuclear family. I also know that Michael and Grandma have a special relationship, so I think this is the time to assess all of it.

Carol: Well, okay, except she wants to act like she is the mother, like she just tries to do it like that.

00:34:09

Bitter: So you actually, if I am hearing correctly, you actually have two people who try to take over for you.

Bitter commentary: I have already heard that Glenn steps in when he is not wanted, and I am suggesting that maybe Grandmother does too.

Carol: No, actually three.
Bitter: Three? Grandma and Dad are two…
Carol: No, well, actually my sister, too, gets involved.
Bitter: And your sister, too. Wow.
Carol: Yeah.
Bitter: Do you ever feel like Custer with all of the…

_Bitter commentary:_ This is an old line from a Bill Cosby routine: I am about to say, “Do you ever feel like Custer with all the Indians of the world coming down on top of you? I feel like Carol is surrounded on all sides with lots of people telling her what to do, but no one really helping her. In actuality, I never get the line out, and it probably would have lost something in translation anyway.

Carol: Well, we are not on speaking terms right now.
Bitter: You and your sister?
Carol: Exactly.
Bitter: Because of what?
Carol: Well, she likes to butt in too much, like she is the mother. And for that reason, we got into big time one day, and since then, we haven’t spoken.
Bitter: That’s been it.
Carol: Mm-hmm.
Bitter: Okay. What do you think about all of that?
Glenn: Well, not too good. I don’t agree that the in-laws should get involved to a point. To a point. I mean Grandmother should be Grandmother when it is Grandmother’s turn. Aunt should be involved, like if they are at her house, and that is when she can lay her laws down, but when she comes into our home or domain and starts, “Well this and that, and this and that,” and I don’t agree with that. I don’t agree with that at all. I don’t think that is the proper way—they don’t know who to listen to.
Carol: Right, exactly.
Glenn: They are confused, and then they are going to start bouncing
off the walls.

**Carol:** So they don’t listen to us at all.

**Bitter:** And have the two of you talked with her about it? I’m certain you have tried to talk to your sister, and that didn’t go very well, apparently.

**Carol:** You can’t tell her nothing, actually, because she is just going to do what she wants.

**00:36:00**

**Bitter:** So how about Grandma?

**Carol:** She does what she wants when they are at her house.

**Bitter:** Okay, but have you talked to her about when she comes to your house?

**Carol:** Mm-hmm.

**Bitter:** How did that go?

**Carol:** It doesn’t do no bit of good.

**Bitter:** It doesn’t?

**Carol:** Nope.

**Bitter:** Okay, so that could be very difficult to deal with.

**Carol:** Right.

**Glenn:** It’s caused a lot of havoc. And we have sort of come to a point where we just about gave up.

**Carol:** Right.

**Glenn:** And it’s like there’s no sense to this anymore.

**Carol:** Well the thing was that he was working, and I was working downtown, like when I had Michael, she had him all the time, like every day. And that’s why.

**Bitter:** It’s the devil’s trade-off.

**Carol:** Right. [Carol laughs.]

**Bitter:** So she has a certain sense that Michael is almost hers.
Carol: Exactly.

Bitter: And it hasn’t been lost on Michael. Michael knows that he can use that.

Carol: Right.

Glenn: It’s been told to him verbally that their home is his home.

Carol: Right.

Bitter: Anytime?

Glenn: Anytime we want to sign the papers over, go right ahead.

Bitter: Okay, now I get the sense that this is true, but we might as well say it out loud: the two of you actually like your children.

Glenn: Yes.

Carol: We do, but not the way they act. I wish it was…

Bitter: So if we could help the behavior improve somewhat, that would be a good thing?

Glenn: Lighten the load.

Carol: Right.

Bitter: And secondly, do they know that you really like them?

Bitter commentary: I am always concerned about the messages that children receive from their parents. It may be true that Grandma would take Michael into her home and raise him as her own, but I want to emphasize in a way that the children can hear that they are wanted by their parents, that their home will always be with their parents.

Glenn: Oh, yeah.

Bitter: Does Michael know that you actually would prefer to have him with you?

Carol: Yes. When he calls home from Grandma’s, he calls us from his grandma’s and lets us know where he is at, and he is home. And then we always tell him to come home, or “When are you coming home?” So he knows.

Bitter: And he does some pretty good stuff around that. He keeps you
informed?
Carol: Right.

00:37:59

Bitter: But when he wants to go, he goes.
Carol: Right.
Glenn: Oh, yeah.

Bitter: Now, how do each of the kids do in school?

Bitter commentary: I often ask about school, because if the problems at home are getting to be too much for the children, one or more will usually start to have difficulties at school too. I agree with the structural-strategic therapists: sometimes, a problem in one arena is a way to solve a problem in another arena. For example, a child may develop school problems as a means of keeping the parents together and focused on the child rather than their own relationship.

Carol: Well.

Glenn: Fairly well.

Carol: He made the honor roll.

Bitter: Congratulations.

Michael: Thank you.

Bitter: Do you like to do school?

Michael: The only thing I don’t like about it is getting up in the morning. I hate that, because you feel—

Carol: He’s tired.

Bitter commentary: One sign of an overly intrusive, usually controlling parent is when the parent finishes the sentence for the child or does not let the child answer at all.

Michael: —you feel so tired, and you feel so cozy in the bed, and you just don’t want to get out.

Bitter: I know.

Carol: Well, see, they start at 7:20 in the morning.
Michael: It’s funny because on the weekend I get up…

Bitter commentary: Michael just opened an avenue to goal disclosure, and I am going to take it.

Bitter: Like that, huh?

Glenn: Cartoons, he wakes up.

Michael: But then when school comes, I don’t get up on time.

Bitter: That only means one thing.

Michael: Go to bed early.

Bitter: No. An interest.

Michael: Oh.

Lauren: Get up on time.

Michael: If you really want to go to school bad enough, you will do that.

Bitter: No.

Michael: I give up.

Bitter: You do? Because I was worried that you weren’t going to give up. Well, here is what I think it means. I think it means that you have somebody calling you in the morning to get up.

Michael: Yeah.

Bitter commentary: He is smiling. We can now have a discussion about the purpose of delaying things in the morning.

Bitter: And who is that person?

Michael: Well, if I sleep at their house, him, and my grandma at her house.

Carol: She has a hard time getting up.

Bitter: Right, well, let’s talk about each place separately. How many times can you get Dad to call you in the morning?

Bitter commentary: By asking the question in this way, I suggest that the behavior is purposeful, and that he is a smart kid who really knows what he is doing.
Bitter: Well, how many is he good for?

Michael: 10.

Bitter commentary: And Michael gets it: he can tell me what his goal is, because we are sharing this secret information. We are sharing it out loud, and there is no secret anymore, but so what? He is accomplished in his goal, and that is more important than whether it is secret. It is a trade-off, and he won’t be able to do this tactic again without remembering that we all know what he is doing.

Bitter: Ten times, yeah. That means on the eleventh he explodes, huh?

Michael: Yeah.

Bitter: Now some days does he explode earlier, like maybe on the fifth or sixth time?

Michael: Yeah.

Bitter: And you have to be careful of that stuff.

00:40:00

Now let’s see. If you are doing this with real art, and I think you are an artful person—I mean I think you really have it in you—when you get up, the next thing you should do is drag your feet. Be slow to get dressed and not eat your breakfast and can’t find your homework. Any of that stuff work for you?

Michael: No, I always have my stuff ready.

Bitter commentary: So this isn’t just for the purpose of keeping people busy with him or getting them into a power struggle. Michael doesn’t like to be told what to do. He likes to make up his own mind. He may not get up on time, but he is not going to sacrifice his school life.

Bitter: Oh, you do? So once you get up, you kind of get going.

Michael: Right.

Bitter: So it must be Andrea that is good about not finding stuff.

Michael: Yup.

Andrea: No.

Glenn: She will be in bed with her clothes on.
Bitter: She will go to bed with her clothes on? She is ready for the next day.

Glenn: “I’m ready.”

Carol: It’s just so she won’t have to get up so early.

Glenn: I tuck her in, I’m like, “What are you doing?”

Bitter: Now does anyone else have Mom or Dad calling them in the morning?

Lauren: Me.

Bitter: You do? And how many times can you get Mom to do it?

Lauren: 15.

Bitter commentary: Just like a little sister: If her brother says, “10,” she has to come up with a bigger number.

Bitter: A lot. Okay, let’s try Grandma, because I think Grandma must be a little bit different. How does morning go with her?

Michael: Well, there are many different ways. Well, she says, “If you don’t get up,” when she gets up, she says, “If you don’t get up I’m going to call your father to come and pick you up.”

Bitter: Oh, now there is a threat, huh? So do you get up then?

Michael: Yeah, I get up then.

Bitter: Okay, now, as far as I can tell, as a couple, the two of you only made one mistake.

Carol: What’s that?

Bitter: You had more children than you. And therefore, you have let them outnumber you. But there is nothing we can do about it. You got them, so we are going to have to figure out some ways to handle the whole crew all at once. Tell me how a typical day goes at your house. Just start at the very beginning and work all the way through to the end for me.

Bitter commentary: I lead into the “Typical Day” assessment by suggesting two things to the parents: one, the children work as a team. They actually cooperate in their efforts to get attention or service, or to
engage in power struggles. And two, the best way to disrupt the team effort is to put them all in the same boat, to treat them as a unit rather than as individuals. I often introduce ideas like this into the conversation long before I want to address them more fully. If the family hears my orientation early, it does not surprise them later.

**Carol:** Oh, god.

**Michael:** That will be hard.

**Bitter:** Who gets up first?

[Andrea raises her hand.]

**00:42:00**

**Carol:** Usually, well, because then the alarm comes on, I will get up. No, he will get up first, and then I will get out. And then we will go get the girls up, and then they give us a hard time getting up, and then they will finally get up at the last minute. She will get out of bed first.

**Lauren:** When you call me.

**Bitter:** Now is Dad still in bed at this point or are both of you up?

**Carol:** He will be up.

**Glenn:** When the clock goes off, I’m up. I’m the one who sets the clock.

**Carol:** And then I will get them ready.

**Bitter:** And you will get them ready. Now what do you have to do to get them ready?

**Carol:** Well, I have to just keep calling them and calling them. And then Andrea won’t get up.

**Bitter commentary:** Ah, that last great hope of parenthood: If they would only listen to me . . .

**Andrea:** Yeah, ‘cause I’m really tired.

**Carol:** Because she goes to bed late, and she…

**Bitter:** It’s interesting, isn’t it? You can’t get them to bed at night, and they are in a coma in the morning.
**Bitter commentary:** My friend Frank Main uses the term “coma” children to refer to children who are masters at staying up late and impossible to wake in the morning.

**Carol:** Right.

**Andrea:** And I usually tell my mom, “Stop yelling, stop saying that,” and she is like, “Well, you gotta get up.” And we went to school today at 8 o’clock.

**Lauren:** Real late.

**Bitter:** And what time does school start?

**Michael:** 7:20 am.

**Bitter:** 7:20 in the morning.

**Andrea:** The school is St. Agnes.

**Bitter:** So once you get them up, do they eat breakfast?

**Glenn:** Go downstairs, make breakfast, make lunches for them.

**Michael:** Sometimes I don’t really eat.

**Glenn:** He’s still getting ready.

**Bitter:** Now just out of curiosity, how do you get out of the dirty work?

**Bitter commentary:** I am about to introduce an intervention that will deal with the boundary issues that Glenn and Carol share when she is getting the children ready. As we will see, Glenn goes to work in the kitchen, and he leaves the hard work of moving the children along to Carol. Then, when the noise level gets to be too much for him, he comes to yell at Carol, which does nothing to solve the problem, gets the two of them in a fight, and lets the children off the hook.

**Glenn:** It’s not easy.

**Bitter:** It’s not.

**Glenn:** I’m always in the dirty work.

**Bitter:** Really? Because it seems to me, between making lunches and getting these three up, dressed and going, you have got the easier job.

**Michael:** He’s Mr. Mom.
Glenn: Well, I take the kitchen over.

Carol: Yeah, he does.

Glenn: I run the kitchen and sometimes run them off to school or something.

Bitter: Okay. How do they get to school, by the way?

Carol: We drive them.

Bitter: You drive them, okay.

Carol: School isn’t far.

Bitter: And they all go to the same place, or?

Lauren: Yeah, St. Agnes.

Carol: Yeah.

00:44:04

Bitter: St. Agnes, okay. Now, what happens after that? Do the two of you go off to do other things during the day, or what happens?

Glenn: Usually.

Carol: Usually.

Glenn: Go back home, and then wait till everything opens up so you can go out and run your errands and shop and do everything that needs to be done. Clean the house. Whatever.

Bitter: All right, so that is what we call peace and quiet?

Carol: Right.

Bitter: And then what happens after school?

Carol: It’s loud. They go running for the TV.

Michael: I do my homework first.

Lauren: I do my homework, too.

Glenn: Sometimes.

Carol: Sometimes.

Michael: But I do get to it.
**Bitter commentary:** Michael is again noting that school is important to him. This means that his parents really don’t have to stay on him about school. He will do what he needs to do. They may still get on him about school anyway, but in my mind, I believe that if they left him alone, he would still do quite well.

Carol: But then, well, I just recently lost my job. But when I was working, I told him, because she didn’t bring her homework home, I would tell him not to put the TV on, because she didn’t do her homework from the day before.

Bitter: And how did that go?

Carol: It didn’t do so good. He went ahead and let her watch TV.

Bitter: Has he always been a pansy?

**Bitter commentary:** I have to say that I regret the use of the word *pansy* here. When I was growing up, the word was used to indicate someone who was afraid to stand up for themselves, which is what I meant, but I have since learned that the word *pansy* has also been used as a derogatory code-word for gay men. Since I never want to use language that is offensive to anyone, especially those groups who have experienced painful discrimination, I have since eliminated this word from my conversations, unless I am really referring to the flower (which amazingly enough is one heck of a strong flower)!

Glenn: I try to work this two ways. “Okay, I understand watching TV is bad, okay, but how about if you do your homework and watch TV?” We will try and do that. Maybe that will be an incentive.

Bitter: How did it go?

Glenn: It kind of went all right, because they would do their homework and watch TV both.

Carol: But it took them how long, too? Because they were paying more attention to the TV.

Lauren: Yeah, but what about first doing your homework and then eating and then doing TV?

Bitter: Mm-hmm. You have a plan for it, huh?
Andrea: Yeah, usually I try to plan something in the morning, but it doesn’t work. Like on the first day when we went to this other school, we got up first thing really, really early in the morning, and my mom and dad were still sleeping. And we ate breakfast by ourselves and stuff. And my mom was…

Carol: That was the first day of school.

Andrea: She was surprised.

Glenn: They were up at 6 o’clock in the morning.

Bitter: So you got up? You got ready?

Andrea: Yeah, me and my sister. My brother was still sleeping.

Carol: But the next day that didn’t happen.

00:46:18

Bitter: Right.

Lauren: It was the first day of school, and we were excited. And then the next day...

Bitter: Sure. And then the next day your mom made a mistake. She got up.

Michael: Today, I did the same thing you are talking about—you know, watch TV while I was doing my homework.

Bitter: And you really could concentrate and everything?

Michael: I had to lower the TV a little bit. I can do it.

Bitter: Okay. How does dinnertime go?

Carol: Well…

Glenn: As far as getting together?

Bitter: Is that what you do?

Carol: Yeah, we all eat together.

Glenn: Usually we try to eat together.

Bitter: Doesn’t always happen, but you try to.

Glenn: Yeah, we try to get everybody in and eat at the same time.
Bitter: Who fixes dinner?

Glenn: I do.

Carol: He does. He is the cook.

Bitter: The kitchen is your place, isn’t it?

Bitter commentary: Now, I am playing with him, but I am also laying the ground work for suggesting that he get more directly involved in the family routines with the children and give Carol a break.

Glenn: KP.

Carol: He is the one that cooks.

Bitter: Get there. Stay there. Don’t get out. That’s good.

Glenn: That’s the room of the house that I am in all the time.

Carol: He cooks more.

Bitter: Does he do the dishes, too?

Glenn: Occasionally.

Carol: Well we take turns.

Bitter: Yeah? That is what my wife and I do, too. That was our only major marriage contract. I now think 15 years later we should have had a few others, but major one was that whoever did the cooking, the other person did the dishes. And it has worked out fine.

Bitter commentary: Social equality has practical applications to it. It is important that the concept does not come to mean that everyone does the same thing: social equality means that everyone feels an equal right to be valued and respected. Still, there are many things that have to be done to run a family, and real equality means that both partners come into family situations with a determination to see what needs to be done and to achieve a division of labor that does not overload one and let the other have a more or less free ride.

Carol: Right.

Bitter: And then, we’ve already heard a hint of it, but bedtime is a struggle.
Carol: Yeah.
Bitter: And you get started trying to get them there about what time?
Carol: 8 o’clock.
Bitter: 8 o’clock. And they actually make it?
Carol: Nope. It takes two hours to get…
Andrea: I usually can’t sleep.
Glenn: The story, the tucking in.
Carol: “You didn’t tuck me in.”
Glenn: You have to do this, you have to do that.
Michael: I don’t do that.

00:48:05
Carol: And then she stands there and stalls.
Bitter: What do you do?
Michael: They tell me to go to bed. Sometimes I do it. And there is none of this “tuck me in, tuck me in,” because if I am tired, I will eventually go to bed. But it is none of this “tuck me in; do this,” because that is just a waste of time.

Bitter commentary: You can almost hear Michael saying, “I am a man! I need to be treated like a man, not a baby.”
Bitter: It’s a waste of time. And you like to be efficient? Yeah.
Lauren: Of course, because he is older.
Bitter: Yup, he is older.
Michael: I don’t see any ghosts.
Bitter: How often do you and your dad just get to do something on your own?

Bitter commentary: I am beginning to feel that both Glenn and Michael would benefit from spending more time together on their own, without the rest of the family. Michael is already learning from his dad: his escape to Grandma’s house is not much different than Glenn’s escape to the kitchen. But Glenn has a lot more to teach his son: how to live with
integrity, how to contribute, how to make a difference in life that really is a difference. They both laugh. They share a similar sense of humor, I am thinking that they need time and space to exercise that sense of humor together.

Michael: Very...well...
Carol: They have been doing stuff recently.

Michael: On the weekends. Sometimes. Barely. Because they have to go with us most of the time. And that is a major drag.

Bitter: You won’t believe this, but I’m actually starting to feel sorry for you.

Michael: Thank you.
Bitter: You are welcome. I’m probably the only one here who does, but nonetheless, I actually do. You have somehow managed to get yourself surrounded by all of these women. And you have no idea what to do with them.

Michael: Nope.
Bitter: Well, that’s okay. You might try your dad’s method, which is go to the kitchen and stay there, but I don’t know.

[Turning to Carol] Can I ask you something about your mom?
Carol: Okay, sure.
Bitter: How hard is it to say no to her?
Carol: Well, it’s pretty hard.
Bitter: Pretty hard, yeah? And it almost brings some tears to your eyes just thinking about it.
Carol: Not really.
Bitter: Not really. I’ve mistaken that then.

Bitter commentary: I thought I heard or saw some sadness in Carol when she spoke, but I was mistaken. I often am. When I am, I think I need to own my mistake immediately.

00:50:00
So part of this stuff, as I’m hearing it, is that you have a tremendous
amount of responsibility in all of this. And if it goes right, it seems to you that you think it is a miracle. And if it doesn’t go right, you expect that that is the way it was going to be, and you feel defeated. Am I getting that correct?

**Bitter commentary:** I purposely use the word “right” here, because in everything Carol says, it is important to her to be right. So this is language that resonates with her. She instantly attaches her special meaning to these words.

**Carol:** Yeah.

**Bitter:** Yeah. Okay. Let’s see if we can think through this, okay? What purpose do you think your kids have for not listening to you?

**Carol:** Well, I have been trying to figure that out. I really don’t know. I’ve been trying to…I don’t know.

**Bitter:** No idea?

**Carol:** No idea.

**Bitter:** Okay. Well, I have an idea. Would you like to hear it?

**Bitter commentary:** This question, “Would you like to hear it,” is relatively standard for Adlerian interventions, but it is especially important with Carol. Carol likes to talk, but she does not often listen carefully. By telling her “I have an idea,” and asking her if she would like to hear it, I get her full attention for a short period of time.

**Carol:** Sure.

**Bitter:** I think that they have figured something out. They have figured out that it is very important to you to have everything done exactly right.

**Carol:** Okay.

**Bitter:** And Michael, for one, when he is listening to you, makes one quick determination—can he do it exactly right and earn your pleasure, or should he get out of the way? And those are the only two decisions he makes. Stay, or run.

**Carol:** Right.

**Bitter commentary:** Notice the word she uses in response. We are on the
same wavelength now.

**Bitter:** Andrea listens to you, because you are actually the single biggest help she has. She wouldn’t know what to oppose if you didn’t say exactly what the right thing was, and then she does exactly the opposite.

**Carol:** Right.

**Andrea:** That’s kind of true.

**Michael:** That’s right. That’s what I keep telling my grandfather.

**00:51:55**

**Bitter:** And Lauren—Lauren has this urge to be your baby the rest of her natural life. And she would do anything to keep you happy with her. My guess is that out of that she gets a tremendous amount of service. Perhaps—do you still bathe her, by any chance?

**Carol:** Yeah, I do.

**Andrea:** Yes.

**Bitter:** Just a guess.

**Bitter commentary:** But an educated guess. Like many youngest children, Lauren is an expert at putting other people in her service. To paraphrase John Steinbeck, Lauren is the strongest of them all, for she gets the most done with the least amount of effort.

**Carol:** I mean Andrea by now, at her age, she would have already done it.

**Bitter:** But see, Lauren can do it, too. It’s just that Lauren has decided, “Why should I?”

**Glenn:** She won’t go upstairs by herself.

**Carol:** “I have Mom.”

**Bitter:** “I have my mom.”

**Andrea:** That is true.

**Glenn:** She won’t go upstairs by herself.

**Bitter:** She won’t?
Carol: No.

Glenn: She wants one of us to take her, because it is scary up there.

Bitter: Oh, it’s scary? Now, which of the kids is good at getting up in the middle of the night?

Glenn: In the middle of the night?

Carol: Lauren.

Bitter: Lauren? And she will come in?

Carol: Yeah.

Glenn: She’ll stare at me and shock me.

Bitter: Now, does she come to your side of the bed?

**Bitter commentary:** Children who interrupt their parents’ sleep to get attention, to get special treatment, almost always go to the side of the bed that has the parent most likely to give in. This is true for even very young children of two or three years old.

Glenn: Yeah.

Bitter: And she stares at you? So she is kind of polite about it?

Glenn: Yeah, until for some reason I wake up, and I’m like, “Ah!” Sort of a nightmare.

Bitter: And what do you say to her?

Glenn: I tell her to “go get your pillow and blanket and just park it right here.”

Bitter: Oh my, goodness gracious. And how long does it take her to get from the “park it here” to the place where I know she ends up, which is in the bed between the two of you?

Carol: Usually in the morning.

Glenn: In the morning she will jump in with us. But as long as she is next to us she seems to be secure.

Bitter: And how many nightmares per week does she have?

**Bitter commentary:** If this happens on a regular basis, I can point out to the parents that the child is generating more nightmares (or excuses...
to wake them up) **in a month** than the parents have had **in their lives**. In this case, Lauren does not come into their room all that often. She has learned to do it just often enough, but not so much that it gets on her parents’ nerves.

**Glenn:** Not many. Unless she has seen a bad movie or somebody told her a bad story.

**Bitter:** It’s not a lot?

**Glenn:** They both share the same bedroom.

**Michael:** Usually we’ve heard about it all night.

**Bitter:** You do, huh?

**Andrea:** One day my friend, Carol, she was telling my sister some ghost stories about her house, and at night she got really scared and she started to go by my parents—my mom—and my dad was downstairs with my brother watching TV at night. And she was really scared and she kept telling my parents, and my parents kept telling her to go to bed—there was nothing to be afraid of, because she is faking it.

**00:54:13**

And I kind of believed her when I was there. We were kind of getting scared and stuff, but I didn’t even believe it when I came home.

**Lauren:** But one night I grabbed all of my stuff, and when my father woke up, he said he thought I was a ghost.

**Bitter:** A ghost?

**Lauren:** Yeah, because I had blankets on top of my head so they wouldn’t see me.

**Andrea:** Well, parents aren’t supposed to be afraid of ghosts.

**Bitter:** And that?

**Glenn:** Sure, if I see one I’ll tell you. I’m hoping you will catch me running.

**Bitter:** Let’s see if we can make a difference with the few minutes that we have left.
Carol: Okay.

Bitter: Okay. Now I want you to first of all know something that you may not know. I’m just going to tell you this from 20 years of experience with families. You have a perfectly normal family.

Bitter commentary: For me, encouragement starts with normalizing family experiences. As you can tell from Carol’s response, she is not so sure that they are a normal family, but that is because her version of normal is when all the kids do what they are told, something like a 1950s family sit-com: Remember Ozzie and Harriet or the Donna Reed Show?

Carol: Oh my god.

Bitter: It may feel to you at times like all of this is getting out of hand. But any family with three kids who have started with the same value system that your family has are going to have pretty much the same difficulties, because children learn to read parents, and then they figure out what to do.

So the only thing left is to figure out how to correct what we are doing, so that it goes a little more smoothly.

Carol: Right.

Bitter: Okay, now I have a couple of recommendations for dad, and I—Well, actually, they will be the two hardest recommendations that I give. The first is, no matter what your wife is doing at any moment in time, once she has started, I want you to stay out of it.

Glenn: Butt out. Yeah, I agree.

00:56:00

Bitter: The reason for that is that sometimes children actually mistakenly get their parents into fights.

Carol: Yeah, we do. We end up fighting.

Bitter: And it has nothing to do with what they want or what you want. It is just that…[talking to Glenn] and it probably comes, because you are listening. And you are sitting there, and you have some noise threshold that you just can’t stand. And at that point, you want to do something. Okay, the thing to do is when you start to get
that urge to do something, go even farther away, not closer.

**Glenn:** I’ll go in the garage.

**Bitter:** Now, here is the second piece. The second piece is that I would like you to work out something with your wife where you have about the same arrangement as the dinner time; that is, if one of you is taking care of the morning and getting them going, the other person takes care of the night, and getting them down and vice versa. You can talk that over and kind of work that out.

Because I think that there is a part of you that really does have a slightly different way of parenting. And both of them are different, but they are both valid. So you just want to have some time to do it. [Turning to Carol] And that will give you some free time. You can just—

**Carol:** Exactly.

**Bitter:** —go do something else at that point in time. Okay, now I’m going back to my days when I used to walk around the southern hills of Idaho. And out there, there is a danger, every now and then, of running into rattlesnakes.

**Bitter commentary:** I want to make sure that Carol listens to the part where I am about to tell her a basic Adlerian principle for raising children. The principle is *Act, Don’t Talk*. To make sure I have her interest in what I have to say, I start with a metaphor, and not just a metaphor, but an outlandish metaphor, one where she has to be saying, “What is he getting at?”

**Carol:** Okay.

**Bitter:** Now, when you do, one of the best things that you can do is kind of freeze and see if there is a way to get out of the way, and if not, don’t disturb it too much. The first time I went out, and somebody told me about this warning, I said, “Yeah, well what will be happening?” And the man looked at me and said, “As long as it is rattling, you don’t have to worry about it. It’s when it stops rattling that you have to get concerned.”
And what the problem is, here, in this particular situation with you and your children is that you have become their rattlesnake. As long as you are talking and rattling, they figure, no problem. It is when you actually stop and take some action that they pay attention to you. They have become parent-deaf. They just kind of let it go in one ear, out the other—

Carol: Right.

Bitter: —as long as you are talking. So we are going to think of some ways, you and I, that you can accomplish the same stuff by acting without talking. Now, that doesn’t mean I want you to become mute forever. I just want you to talk when you are feeling good, when you are feeling happy. Like I might ask Lauren some day when she gets home from school, “How is school going?” And if she is willing to talk to me about it, great.

But that is a different thing than talking to them when things aren’t going well. So let’s start in early morning. How does Dad get up?

Carol: With the alarm he gets up.

Bitter: Now does Michael have an alarm?

Glenn: They all have clocks.

Carol: Yeah, they do.

Bitter: And are they brain damaged, or do they actually know how to set them?

Glenn: They refuse to set them.

Bitter: So what I want you to do is just tell the kids that you are going to stop calling them in the morning, and so is Dad. From now on, if they get up, it is their business. And if they don’t get up, it’s their business. But it is up to them. You are not going to call them anymore.

Carol: Right.

Bitter: And if one of you is down doing the breakfast, I want you to tell them— Well, you can decide what it is going to be. You can decide this at like a year at a time: What time will breakfast be served? And
then, if they are there for breakfast, they eat. If they are not there for breakfast, it gets put away and it is done.

01:00:05

Carol: Right, and that is what I have told him. Because he thinks—

Bitter: See the problem is that you and I are the only ones here that really know the right way to do things.

Carol [laughing]: Because I told him, “If they eat they eat, otherwise…”

Bitter: Because otherwise, he is in danger of becoming a short order cook.

Glenn: The restaurant has to close sometimes.

Bitter: Exactly.

Glenn: My mother’s words exactly. “The restaurant is closed.”

Bitter: Set a time and do it. Now, let’s say the worst happens and one or more of them is in bed five minutes before it is time to go to school. What could you do about that?

Glenn: Warning. Warning! Get up!

Bitter: See, warnings are rattling.

Carol: Get them up then?

Glenn: They won’t hear it.

Bitter: They won’t hear it.

Glenn: Where’s he at, he’s not—

Bitter: Did you see your son earlier? He absolutely delights in the possibility of getting you to call him—

Glenn: The attention span.

Bitter: So what else could we do? Warnings aren’t going to do it.

Carol: Physically pick them up.

Bitter: These kids don’t listen to warnings anymore than—

Glenn: They are over it.
Bitter: It’s gone.

Glenn: Let ‘em sleep.

Bitter: You could decide to do that. What would happen then?

Glenn: They would never get up.

Bitter: And then what would happen?

Carol: They would never make it to school.

Bitter: And, now, is it your experience that your kids just absolutely hate school?

Andrea: Oh, yeah.

Bitter: They don’t have any friends, nobody they want to see? Nothing?

Michael: I have friends.

Bitter commentary: There is no chance that Michael will miss school, but that is his parents’ worry, so I will not fight it.

Carol: No, not really. Just a couple.

Bitter: So you actually think if you decided to stay out of that, they just would be pleased as punch to stay home the rest of their natural life.

Carol: That’s right.

Bitter: Okay, so that’s out. It was a good idea, but not going to work in this family. So what else?

Andrea: I know.

Bitter: What do you think?

01:02:00

Andrea: I think if they are like sleeping and stuff you should like carry them out of bed and say, “Wake up.” Like one day when I was sleeping, my dad he picked me up and he said, “Wake up, it’s time to go to school.” And I got all ready, and when I went to school, I felt really miserable, because I had to get up really early.

Michael: That’s what I feel, really.
**Bitter:** You know something? I think she has got a good idea.

**Bitter commentary:** I will often take something one of the children says and expand it. Sometimes, children actually have an idea that is new and workable, and if it is implemented, the children are more likely to go along with it. Sometimes with a little embellishment, the idea can be transformed into a fairly standard Adlerian parenting process, and this is the case here.

**Carol:** Physically pick her out of bed. Put her on her feet.

**Bitter:** No, much better than that. I think carrying her to her feet is just such a low level of service. I think what we ought to do is, maybe one of you could put whatever clothes they are going to need in a bag, and throw it in the backseat, and the other of you could just pick them up sleeping and throw them into the backseat too, and then just take them to school. They would either be dressed or undressed when you deposit them, but they’d figure it out, I guess. What do you think about Andrea’s idea?

**Carol:** I don’t know.

**Michael:** I have one.

**Bitter:** I will tell you, if you decided to do that, it would only work if you decided not to talk.

**Glenn:** Just do it.

**Carol:** Just do it.

**Bitter:** Just do it.

**Carol:** Right. I thought about that, too.

**Bitter:** Now, here is what is going to be hard for you. You are not sure you, I mean you have the same thing that Andrea has—you like to talk. It’s true, isn’t it? Tell the truth; shame the devil.

**Bitter commentary:** I actually am playing with Carol at this point. I want her to see that we can approach this with lightness of heart. Most parenting works better if the parent relaxes and does not worry so much about how life will turn out.

**Carol [laughing]:** Sort of.
Bitter: And so sometimes you might find that you don’t know what to do if you are not really—

Carol: Talking to somebody.

Bitter: Yeah. So what could you and Glenn be doing early in the morning just to leave them to get ready to go?

Glenn: Don’t say a word.

Bitter: What else could you do? Do you guys read papers?

Glenn: Leave the house.

Bitter: You could leave the house. You could go for a walk. You could do anything else that you wanted.

Let’s talk about bedtime. What could you do there? Again, talking…

01:04:00

Carol: Well, what I usually do is I go upstairs. I will go upstairs and then eventually they’ll, she’ll come up. Because this one here [referring to Lauren] will tell me to put her to bed, to take her up.

Bitter: And where will she be if you don’t do that?

Carol: Watching TV.

Bitter: Okay. So part of the problem is TV.

Carol: Right.

Bitter: Okay, what time do you want the TV to go off and stay off?

Carol: 8.

Bitter: 8 o’clock. So if you turn it off, what will happen?

Carol: They will just turn it back on and give me a hard time.

Bitter: What could you do next?

Glenn: Unplug it.

Bitter: What do you think of that idea?

Michael: I’ll plug it back up.

Carol: We have thought about doing that.

Bitter: And what would they do then?
Carol: Usually…or I could turn off all the lights, too.

Bitter: You could do that, but we are just going to work on the TV for a moment. See that is one of the problems with parenting, is that we try to do too much at a given time. So let’s just see what would happen if we talked about it from the point of view of TV. If you turn the TV off the first time, they turn it back on, next time you pull the plug. And you haven’t talked yet, have you?

Carol: Right.

Bitter: So what is the next thing?

Carol: Turn the lights off.

Bitter: Won’t work.

Michael: Put the plug back in.

Glenn: Grab them?

Bitter: Can you afford $1.98?

Glenn: Sure.

Carol: Yeah.

Bitter: Can you take a recommendation from me?

Carol: Sure.

Bitter: The third time, pull the plug, take a pair of scissors and right down next to the socket, but the cord. It will cost you $1.98 at Kmart to buy a new plug to put it on when they have decided that they can handle this thing. And this way you will be acting without talking. You will just say to the kids, look, at 8 o’clock it is going off. If we are going to fight about it, it is not going to be me that does the fighting. I am going to just act and it is going to be done.

Bitter commentary: Aside from the fact that the cost of replacement plugs has gone up, my goal here is to push a logical consequence to a point where the children cannot impose their will, but the parents can set limits and follow through without talking.

Carol: Right.

Bitter: Is it okay with you if she cries?
Carol: Yeah.

Bitter: How about Lauren, God’s gift to motherhood? Can you stand it if she cries?

01:06:00
Carol: Yeah.

Bitter: And Michael?

Michael: I don’t cry.

Carol: He doesn’t.

Bitter: Are you kidding? Who are we talking about here. Arnold Schwarzenegger?

Carol: Right, exactly.

Bitter: Okay, so if you can stand that they would feel upset, then you will get the point across, won’t you?

Carol: Right.

Bitter: Okay. Now here is the next one, because I know Lauren is good at this: “I can’t make it up the stairs; I’m just not going to be able to do it.”

Carol: “Pick me up.”

Michael: Well, you get worried about that.

Glenn: I have heard that many times.

Bitter: What could you do?


Carol: Usually, I just put her around my arms and then—

Bitter: Of course. And help her up like the poor helpless child she is. How about just letting her sleep on the floor downstairs if she doesn’t come up?

Michael: That would be cool.

Carol: We have done that, too. We have left them.

Bitter: Why not? You have a nice house.
Michael: I don’t go up.

Bitter: These are the ways that we can think through it. It has nothing to do with what you say, because saying doesn’t work anymore, anymore than, when Grandma comes over, telling her to stop works. So in fact when Grandma comes over and is handling something with the kids, even if it is different than you would do it, let her handle it and stay out of it. And when you are doing it, if she tries to step in, I want to show you my favorite hand movement. Are you ready? I got this from the Supremes.

Carol: The Supremes.

Bitter: Yes, it goes like this.

Carol: Oh, yeah.

Bitter: Just put your hand up and say, “Mom, I’ve got it. Thanks.” You can be calm. Just, “Mom, I’ve got it.” And you handle it. Could you do that?

Carol: Yeah.

Bitter: Even with your mom?

Carol: Yeah, I could.

Bitter: Good for you.

Carol: Yeah, I could.

Bitter: I think there is a lot of strength in you. And I think you can do this. Now, I will tell you something. Not all of the stuff that we talked about is easy to implement all at once. Is there anything that we have talked about that you think you could try one thing to implement?

Bitter commentary: I think it is important to start with one or two small things, have some success, and then see what, if anything, there is to do about the bigger issues. The one thing I wish I had said instead of “... you think you could try...” is to have said “... you think you could do...” because I am interested in people succeeding, not trying.

Glenn: Yes, the switching off, like you said. Switching off—one puts them to bed, one gets up.
01:08:10
Bitter: Anything, one thing you would like to work on?
Carol: No, just what he said. So basically, yeah, same thing.
Bitter: That, and one other thing I am going to ask you to try.

Bitter commentary: Again that word try: What was I thinking?
Carol: What’s that?

Bitter: One week only. Say goodnight at 8 o’clock, and don’t say another word to any of the kids no matter what they do. Could you do that for a week?
Carol: I could try.
Bitter: No, don’t try. If you try it, it means you don’t think you could do it. So you shouldn’t try that one. See if maybe you can think of one of the things in addition to switching off, something about maybe school in the morning. Okay?

Now how has this been for you?
Carol: Pretty rough.
Bitter: Pretty rough.
Carol: Yeah.
Bitter: Being here? Or you mean at home?
Glenn: At home.
Carol: At home.
Bitter: How has it been for you being here at the counseling session?
Glenn: Good.
Carol: Real good. Okay.

Glenn: I think maybe it is opening up some eyes over here on how things really are. I don’t think they ever really looked at themselves to see what they were really doing. And I have known all the time it is dysfunctional.

Bitter: No, not dysfunctional, just normal with kids who have figured out a way to handle their parents.
Glenn: They have a plan.

Carol: Exactly.

Glenn: And we have bottomed out.

Bitter: Michael, thank you very much for coming.

Michael: You are welcome.

Bitter: You were a big help. Thank you. Lauren, nice to have seen you. And Andrea, my favorite rebel, thanks for being here. Okay, well, we are done for the night. Thanks a lot.

Glenn: Thank you. Thanks very much.
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Special Thanks to:

The clients for their time and their courage to share their personal stories so that others may learn.

Graduate students, Barbara Milton and Teresa Hannon, for their dedication to the success of this project.

The faculty and students in the Division of Psychology and Counseling of the College of Education at Governors State University for their participation. Addison Woodward, Chair, Division of Psychology and Counseling, and Larry Freeman, Acting Dean of the College of Education at the Governors State University for their support, participation and encouragement.

A very special thank you to Judy Fifer, Editor, Allyn & Bacon, for her courage and vision.
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About the Contributors

VIDEO PARTICIPANTS

James R. Bitter, EdD, is a Diplomate in Adlerian Psychology and professor in the Counseling Department at East Tennessee State University. He has authored numerous publications and conducts seminars across the country and internationally. His teaching, publications and training have focused on marriage and family and Adlerian therapy.

Jon Carlson, PsyD, EdD, Host, is Professor of Psychology and Counseling at Governors State University and a practicing clinical psychologist. He has authored 40 books and 150 journal articles, and developed over 200 videos featuring leading experts in psychotherapy, substance abuse treatment, and parenting and couples education.

Diane Kjos, PhD, Host, now retired, was a professor at Governors State University in Illinois for 22 years, and past president of both the Illinois Counseling Association and the National Career Development Association. She is co-author, with John Carlson, of two textbooks—Theories of Family Therapy and Becoming an Effective Therapist—and co-host of the video series Psychotherapy with the Experts, Family Therapy with the Experts, and Brief Therapy Inside-out.

MANUAL AUTHORS

Ali Miller, MA, MFT, is a psychotherapist in private practice in San Francisco and Berkeley, CA. She works with individuals and couples and facilitates therapy groups for women. You can learn more about her practice at www.AliMillerMFT.com.

James R. Bitter, EdD, is a Diplomate in Adlerian Psychology and professor in the Counseling Department at East Tennessee State University. He has authored numerous publications and conducts seminars across the country and internationally. His teaching, publications and training have focused on marriage and family and Adlerian therapy.
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Experts
Ellyn Bader
Judith Beck
Insoo Kim Berg
James Bugental
Albert Ellis
Kenneth Hardy
Sue Johnson
Jeffrey Kottler
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