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Instructor’s Manual for Tools and Techniques for Family Therapy
with John T. Edwards, PhD

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Instructor’s Manual

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES
FOR FAMILY THERAPY

with John T. Edwards, PhD

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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 the video and post-viewing.

2. TECHNIQUE-FOCUSED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Pause the video after each technique presented to elicit viewers’ observations and reactions. The Discussion Questions provide ideas about key aspects of the therapeutic work that can stimulate rich discussions and learning.

3. LET IT FLOW
Allow the video to play out some so viewers can appreciate the work over time instead of stopping the video too often. It is best to watch the video in its entirety since issues untouched in earlier parts often play out later. Encourage the viewers to voice their opinions; no therapy is perfect! What do viewers think works and does not work in the sessions? We learn as much from our mistakes as our successes and it is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique this work as well as their own.

4. SUGGEST READINGS TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL
Assign readings from Suggestions for Further Readings and Websites prior to viewing. You can also time the video to coincide with other course or training materials on related topics.

5. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER
See suggestions in Reaction Paper section.

6. ROLE-PLAY IDEAS
After watching the video, organize participants into groups of four or more. Assign each group to role-play a session of family therapy, using one of the techniques presented. Each role-play shall consist of one therapist,
two or more family members, and one observer. After the role-plays, have the groups come together to discuss their experiences. First have the clients share what came up for them, then the therapists, and then ask for the comments from the observers. Open up a general discussion on what was learned about both the practical and the emotional aspects of using these various family therapy techniques.

Another alternative is to do all of this in front of the group with just one therapist and the family; the entire group can observe before discussing the interaction. After a while, another participant may jump in as the therapist if the therapist reaches an impasse. Follow up with a discussion that explores what works and does not work in doing therapy with families.

7. PERSPECTIVE ON VIDEOS AND THE PERSONALITY OF THE THERAPIST

Psychotherapy portrayed in videos is less off-the-cuff than therapy in practice. Therapists or clients in videos may be nervous, putting their best foot forward, or trying to show mistakes and how to deal with them. Therapists may also move more quickly than is typical in everyday practice to demonstrate a technique. The personal style of a therapist is often as important as their techniques and theories. Thus, while we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, participants must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.
Technique-Focused Group Discussion Questions

Professors, training directors, or facilitators may use a few or all of these discussion questions keyed to certain techniques or those issues most relevant to the viewers.

1. **Four Curative Factors**: What do you think about Edwards’ four factors to include in every family therapy session? Do you agree with them? Which of these factors come naturally to you as a person and which ones may you need to develop over time?

2. **Reframing**: Do you agree with Edwards’ statement that “for every negative thought, feeling or behavior, there is a positive intention being expressed?” What are some situations in which you would use reframing? How can you avoid sounding Pollyannaish?

3. **Segmenting**: What do you think of Edwards’ assertion that children need to see the results of the work, but they don’t need to see the entire process the parents go through to bring about change? During a family session, how do you decide what part of the parents’ process the children do and do not need to see?

4. **Enactments**: In an enactment, what is your role as the therapist? Are there times you would intervene? If so, how?

5. **Mapping**: How do you use a family map in the room with the family? Do you think this would be useful in defining themes for the therapy?

6. **Drawing**: What do you think of Edwards’ interpretation of the child’s dream drawing? If you were the therapist, would you talk about the dream drawing with parents? Would it be difficult for you to avoid making any interpretive comments when using the Circle Method?

7. **Colleague Teamwork**: Would you feel comfortable bringing an outside therapist expert into the session? Can you see yourself as the colleague, coming in to offer an outside interpretation? What reactions did you have to watching the therapists discuss the case in front of the family, instead of speaking directly to the family? Does this intervention seem effective?
8. **New Talk:** How did you feel sitting with the silent tension in the room as this father struggled to come up with something new? Did you find yourself impatient with the father? Working with this family, how would it be for you to keep bringing the father back to the task until he was able to find something new? Would you persist with this approach, or would you try something else?

9. **Guardrail:** Imagine you are the acting-out child in a family in therapy. Would pushing against your parents’ arms in this way make you feel safer? What do you think of Edwards’ idea about the importance of bringing tactile communication into family therapy?

10. **Sculpting:** How do you feel about Edwards touching the client while giving sculpting instructions? Can you imagine yourself touching clients in this way? What kind of boundary issues come up for you as you imagine using family sculpting in a session?

11. **Alter Ego:** How did you feel about how Edwards used Alter Ego in this family? If you were the therapist in this session, which client would you have spoken for? What would you have said? What are some risks of using Alter Ego in a family session?

12. **Conclusion:** If you were seeking family therapy, would Edwards be an effective therapist for you? Which of these techniques did you find most interesting? Which ones can you imagine yourself using, and which techniques felt uncomfortable?
Reaction Paper for Classrooms and Training

• **Assignment:** Complete this reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the professor or facilitator.

• **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards or use the questions as a way to approach discussion. 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 working with families? What stands out in how the therapist works?

2. **What I am resistant to.** What techniques/principles/strategies did you find yourself resisting, or what approaches made you feel uncomfortable? Did any of the techniques or interactions presented push your buttons? What interventions would you be least likely to apply in your work? Explore these questions.

3. **What I found most helpful.** What was most beneficial to you as a therapist about the interview? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work?

4. **How I would do it differently.** Where did you find yourself feeling that you would work differently than the therapists in the video? Describe these areas and explain why.

5. **Other Questions/Reactions:** What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the therapy in the video? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?
Suggestions for Further Readings, Websites and Videos

BOOKS


WEB RESOURCES

[www.psychotherapy.net](http://www.psychotherapy.net) An in-depth interview with Monica McGoldrick of the Multicultural Family Institute

[www.multiculturalfamily.org](http://www.multiculturalfamily.org) The Multicultural Family Institute

[www.avanta.net](http://www.avanta.net) Avanta: The Virginia Satir Network

[www.minuchincenter.org](http://www.minuchincenter.org) The Minuchin Center for the Family

[www.mri.org](http://www.mri.org) The Mental Research Institute
RELATED VIDEOS AVAILABLE
AT WWW.PSYCHOTHERAPY.NET

Adlerian Parent Consultation
   – Jon Carlson, PhD

Adolescent Family Therapy
   – Janet Sasson Edgette, PsyD

The Angry Couple: Conflict Focused Treatment
   – Susan Heitler, PhD

Family Secrets: Implications for Theory and Therapy
   – Evan Imber-Black, PhD

The Legacy of Unresolved Loss: A Family Therapy Approach
   – John Edwards, PhD

Making Divorce Work: A Clinical Approach to the Binuclear Family
   – Constance Ahrons, PhD

“I’d hear laughter”: Finding Solutions for the Family
   – Insoo Kim Berg, MSSW

Solution-Focused Child Therapy
   – John J. Murphy, PhD
INTRODUCTION

John Edwards, Ph.D., has dedicated his career to training and supervising professionals in family therapy. In this videotape, John discusses the goals of family therapy, and presents tools and techniques for enhancing your work with families. On this tape, you will see family techniques demonstrated by the therapist in short excerpts from role-play family sessions. To demonstrate techniques, it is necessary for the therapist, not the family, to be the focus of attention and activity. In actual family sessions, the opposite is true. The family is the focus of attention, with the therapist reacting to them. Techniques are best when they are used to respond to the family’s dynamics and concerns.

Edwards Commentary: I believe that during family sessions, there are about four curative factors that are very important, and I try to include all four factors in each session, regardless of the presenting problem and the setting for the work. These four goals are, first, help the family get in touch with its own discomfort. Families have a way, as we all do, of avoiding some of the things that are painful, and because they avoid it, the feelings are never worked through. So getting in touch with the discomfort, their reason for coming to therapy, is very important for the family. The second goal is to help them have a new experience. A new experience can be anything they don’t typically have in their family, such as trying something different, saying something different, saying it in a different way. In other words, something outside their custom patterns of behavior, individually and together. The third curative factor is new understanding. New understanding, which we call insight, can be achieved by them getting in touch with how each member thinks about something. It can be new understanding about oneself; it can be new understanding about how the family operates. So new understanding is something I want to include in every session. The fourth and final goal is hope. I would like for the family members to believe that they can extract
themselves from this problem, that they can change, that they are a family who love each other, and that they will get over this problem.

**POSITIVE REFRAMING**

**Edwards Commentary:** Positive reframing is one of my favorite ways of thinking and speaking in family sessions. It’s based on the assumption that for every negative thought, or feeling, or behavior a person has, there’s a positive intention or characteristic of the person being expressed.

**Edwards** [in class]: For every negative thought, feeling, or behavior that a human being has or does, there’s a positive intention or characteristic behind it. Someone name a negative behavior—anything. [No response] This is a very positive group; you can’t think of anything negative. Lying: positive intention or characteristic behind it?

**Student:** Not hurting someone’s feelings.

**Edwards:** Not hurting someone’s feelings? What else?

**Student:** Protecting?

**Edwards:** Who?

**Student:** Himself.

**Edwards:** Himself. Self-protection.

**Edwards Commentary:** A young child gets in a fight with a school kid. Fighting could be getting their emotions out, it could be defending themselves, it could be teaching a lesson to another child. Now, fighting is not a good way to do that. But it’s not the behavior we’re focused on. It’s the intention: what the child is trying to do.

**Edwards:** Now when you reframe, it doesn’t change people’s lives. They don’t look at you and say, “Well, I’ve never thought of that before. I’m going out and have a happy life. Thank you.” They’re more likely to look at you like a cow looking at a new fence. [Laughter] Where’d that come from?

**Edwards Commentary:** With positive reframing, there are about four points to keep in mind. The first is, don’t overuse it. I think two or three times during a one-hour session is probably enough. If you use it too much,
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Edwards: If you reframe to somebody and say, “What do you mean by that? Can’t you see that the glass is half-full rather than half-empty?” and you go ahead and you talk to them about it, “Can’t you see you really want communication?” “No I don’t. If she ain’t going to talk to me it suits me just fine.” So you get into funny conversations, see? Don’t sell it. If they say… One teenager did this one time, “That was stupid.” I said, “I know. It just popped up. Excuse me,” and go right on. See? Just don’t defend it, argue about it, sell it. Don’t over say it. Three times is enough. And state it affirmatively and clearly. Show contribution. They don’t have to accept it. It’s not for sale. It’s just your… It’s an observation of the moment that you believe. I have to find a way to put a positive spin on their efforts, because to talk only about weaknesses and problems in a family is an error. They’ll feel like they haven’t done anything right all their lives. Of course, they have. If they weren’t partly successful and hadn’t ended up doing something right all those years, they wouldn’t be together as a family. They would have dissolved as a family a long time ago, and certainly wouldn’t be cohesive enough to be here together in counseling. So it’s an attempt to find the strengths behind the problems. Individuals have problems. Families have problems. It doesn’t mean they don’t have any strengths.

Edwards Commentary: Reframing—it has a lot of uses. You can use it with group therapy, you can use it with individual therapy, you can use it
in families. It’s very versatile. It’s a way of thinking more than a technique. It will change the way you think about human behavior. There’s always a positive intention behind what a person is doing or saying or feeling that is important. It reaches out to confirm the person. It helps them put their best foot forward. It shows that you are trying to confirm them and their good intentions or their character. You can’t mess up reframing. Just throw it out there. I mean, they’re not going to stop and say, “That wasn’t a very good reframe. Can you try that again?” The family doesn’t know what we’re doing. Just throw it out there. Don’t worry about it. And another point is, don’t think too hard. If you have to think about reframing, it takes you out of the room. It takes you out of the moment. And you skip some of the things your clients have said. So learn it well enough with practice—there are some things in the blue book to practice—so that it stays in the back of your mind, and when you need it, it comes up.

**SEGMENTING**

**Edwards Commentary:** Segmenting is when you’re working with a portion of the family at a time. That is, you get the parents’ permission for the children to leave the room so that you can have a private conversation with the parents. It’s important to get the parents’ permission. I don’t like to do anything with a child in the room without going through the parent. I don’t want to take charge as a parent, because I’m replacing somebody in the family—in this case parents—and I don’t like to do that. So to show respect and to dignify the parent-child relationship, I always get parents’ permission before doing anything with their children.

**Edwards** [in session]: May I ask if it’s okay if Jenny goes... I mean, if Hannah goes over there to our drawing and toy place and occupies herself for a few minutes while we talk?

**Jenny:** Sure.

**Edwards:** Is that okay with you? Hannah: Uh-hmm.

**Edwards:** Is that okay with you, daddy?

**David:** Yes, sir.

**Edwards Commentary:** I got the children out at that moment because I wanted the parents to have the opportunity to say what they needed to and
to work through the grievance they needed to make without the child being present. I think children need to see the result. They don’t have to see the entire process.

**ENACTMENTS**

**Edwards Commentary:** I also did something in a couple of these past sessions that we’ve shown that is called enactments; that is, getting family members to talk to each other rather than just to me. I want to see them be a family. I want to be a fly on the wall and I want to allow them to be themselves in their conversation with each other.

**Edwards** [in session]: Tell David under what conditions you will allow him to help you parent Hannah. Talk to David; I’ll listen. Jenny: Well, you know I don’t believe in spanking, right? Physically hurting a child? She can hear you, she can understand. If you just… If she gets annoying or is doing something she shouldn’t be doing and she keeps doing it, just put her in time out. She knows what that is.

**David:** Well, here’s my problem, Jenny. I know she can hear me and understand me, but she ignores me, you know? And the more she keeps ignoring me, the more angry I get. It makes me want to tell her how to do it. You know, if I raise my voice a bit, she might do it quicker. Jenny: Well, she won’t. Cause she’s trying to get to know you better, you know, living with you. I mean, she knew you—

**David:** Yeah, and I want to know her better, too.

**Edwards Commentary:** That’s an enactment, but it’s a real-life thing. It’s not role-playing. To decide together now what you will do if your son does this and that is a real-life decision. It’s something they’re working on.

**MAPPING**

**Edwards Commentary:** Families are rather complex: all the players and who they are and what relationship they are to identify the patient to each other. We need a sort of visual tool to sort this thing out. I borrowed the idea of mapping from one of the books I read and I developed my own little symbols. And I want to draw a family for you. The first thing to do is draw the parent-child boundary. That’s the most important boundary in the
family. [Drawing] Right there. That means everyone above it is supposed to be functioning as a parenting adult or as an adult; everyone below it, a child. This is a case I worked with a few weeks ago. It’s a single mom—circles are females, squares are males—and she has three children: one is a 14-year-old boy who is very powerful, and he’s the identified patient. The other is a younger girl who’s 11, and then she had another girl who is about five, a preschooler. Now, I put the 14-year-old probably over the parent-child boundary, because he’s functioning probably as a parent. He sort of calls his own shots. This is the mother, so I’ll put an “M” here. Also involved in the case is a grandmother. Grandmother is very large; I drew her large because she’s a very powerful lady. As a matter of fact, the mother and children live with her. It’s her house. Now, the second dimension I want to put on my map is the relationship between the members in terms of closeness and distance. If I put one line, I think they’re close. Two is closer, and three is closer. One is sort of typical between family members. The mother is very close to both girls, and the grandmother is very close to, well, typically, connected to both girls. And so all of them are minimally connected with the boy. They have a little bit of a distant relationship; especially in the last couple of years. Also involved—one of the players—is a father who lives out of state and who the children only see occasionally; a biological father. They have been separated for about three years. He is only minimally connected with all of the children, but they get cards from him and they talk to him on the phone occasionally. They’re also minimally connected. I have one more dimension I want to put on my map. I have so far the size of the figure indicating big or little in terms of what I perceive the power of the member is; also, how close they are: one, two, or three lines. And now I want to put little crossbars on those lines to indicate the amount of conflict. For example, if I put a one line crossbar, that indicates a lot of conflict. Two is even more, and three is even more. I put two there. He has a good bit of conflict with his sister; not so much with his other sister, which is kind of a typical connection between him and his younger sister. There is a lot of conflict, too—even though there is not a lot of interaction—between grandmother and son. You’ll see that son is not really closely connected to anybody. He’s also very angry at his father, and he’ll tell you that in a minute. I think he was nine or so when the father left. Now, that gives me a picture that I can use to sort out my thoughts about how the family is put together to be a family. Rather than let it all rattle around in my head
as I get new information, I like to put it down so that I can sort out who’s close and who’s distant, who’s in conflict, who the players are, their ages. Ages of children should also always go in there. You don’t need the ages of the adults. It’s a way for me to begin… it’s a way to begin thinking about the family system. Also, I notice if I put it down I’m more inclusive. I include more people; I have a broader view of the family system. I can even put down—and I use triangles for them—agencies involved. For example, DSS has gotten in on this case some. The Mental Health Center is a little involved here. The mother is recovering from chemical dependency. She’s been recovering for two years. She has a treatment center and Narcotics Anonymous. She’s very connected there. And I’m going to put them… So it alerts me to the other inputs of outside systems into this family. Mental Health is very connected to the boy. So it gives me a total systemic picture of who the players are, and it’s a good beginning in trying to sort out what to do to help these people have a better family life. For example, you can glance at that and tell one thing: That 14-year-old’s too powerful, and there’s too much conflict between him and mom, and he’s too distant from his grandmother. So working toward that would be, certainly, of those things, would certainly be, at least, a beginning theme. I can use mapping also to communicate with colleagues about my picture of the family, but don’t ever take it as a fact. It’s just an impression. I can’t point to this and prove anything about the family because it’s not a fact. It’s just my impression about complex relationships between other people.

**DRAWINGS**

**Edwards Commentary:** I like to use drawings in family session. This is the way children express themselves. They won’t sit down and process their feelings eyeball-to-eyeball, but they will, sometimes, put their feelings on paper. In the case of the father with his 10-year-old son, I wanted to pin down the idea that the son is acting the way he is—with his psychosomatic stuff and with his acting up and his withdrawal—because of emotional upset. Not because he’s a bad kid or a lazy kid or an abnormal kid, but because he’s bothered by something. To do that, I like to use Draw a Dream, Now, notice the instructions are to draw a bad dream. I don’t want a good dream. And I drew the little child sleeping in bed on my picture, and put a balloon up there for the drawing, and asked the child to— tell the child—there’s a child sleeping in bed here and he’s having a bad dream. Draw the bad dream
the boy’s having. He did, and he drew someone trying to harm him, which I defined as the emotion of fear to the father, and started exploring with the father, what is the son afraid of?

Edwards [in session]: I think he’s about finished with his picture. Just hold it up for all to see. Why don’t you have a seat there, David, and kind of hold it in your lap. Tell us about your picture, David.

David: Well, here’s two robbers.

Edwards: Two robbers?

David: Yeah.

Edwards: Which are the two robbers?

David [pointing]: This one and this one.

Edwards Commentary: That gets into the emotional life of a child rather than just the behavioral life, which I like to do with parents. It’s especially useful when you’re trying to reframe the problem to the parents from bad or lazy child to upset child. That’s a big difference in the way the parents treat the children. They always treat a bad child differently than they would an upset child, and I want to create that reframe. To do it, I need some kind of tool or technique that gets inside the emotions of a child, because they won’t sit and talk about it very much. The drawings, I use for that purpose.

CIRCLE METHOD

Edwards Commentary: A drawing I like to use with families is very simple, is very quick, and is easy to do. You take a sheet of paper, one sheet for each family member, and on the paper you draw a circle that takes up about half the paper. You give each person a copy and you ask them to place their family on the paper. They can put them outside or inside the circle, they can make them big or make them little, they can put them close together or far apart. Show each family member with a smaller circle.

Edwards [to mother and son in session]: This is just a big circle, and the instructions are this: Place your family on the paper. You can put them outside or inside the circle, you can make them big or make them little.

Edwards Commentary: Now, those are the instructions that should be given just as they’re stated, because if you change the instructions you often
change what you get. Now it’s who the family members put on the paper that’s important: who they leave off, who they put on, who they put close together, and so forth. When each family member—and by the way, they should be doing it without looking at each other, because if they do they’ll get too many cues as to what they should be doing. You especially don’t want children to be seeing their parents drawing. So be sure the family can’t see each other’s drawing when they’re doing it. They can all do it at once. When they’ve finished take one at a time and sort of hold it up or put it on the floor where everyone can see it, and ask what the family members see.

**Edwards:** May I see it?

**Woman:** Sure.

**Edwards:** All right? Let’s see what we’ve got here. So this is Griffin right in the center, and this is you.

**Woman:** Uh-hmm.

**Edwards:** Okay. You and Griffin are the only two people on the paper touching. Woman: Oh, yeah.

**Edwards:** And this is your mom and dad—his grandparents—and this is your sister?

**Edwards Commentary:** They’ll make comments about who they put on the picture and who they left off, and who’s big and little and so forth. Our comments to prompt theirs are non-interpretive; we just comment that “I see you and mother are the largest figures on the paper;” or, “I notice that you put the grandmother outside the circle;” or, “I don’t see your father on the picture,” or whatever.

**Edwards:** I know it may not mean anything, but I’m just commenting on what I see.

**Woman:** Yeah.

**Edwards:** You have everyone inside the circle. No one is outside.

**Woman:** Yeah, they’re here in the circle, you know, but I didn’t think that they really belonged out here, you know. I mean, maybe dad, but not anybody else.

**Edwards:** You didn’t put his father on the paper.
Woman: No, I didn’t. I don’t know why, but—

Edwards: Or his stepmother.

Edwards Commentary: Objective comments—let the family make its own interpretation. You can’t interpret that someone is close to someone else because they’re drawn near each other on this picture. It doesn’t have that kind of validity. So we make objective comments on what we see—just the figures on the paper. They discuss it in a more subjective and personal way.

COLLEAGUE TEAMWORK

Edwards Commentary: You notice in the session with the father and his nine-year-old... ten-year-old son, I brought in what I call a colleague expert. This is one way to work with colleagues. I brought my colleague, Tab, in. He sat down; I defined him to the father as someone who has had experience in working with young boys.

Edwards [in session]: This is Lynwood Hancock, this is Tab Ballis, my colleague. This is—Lynwood and Tab: Nice to meet you.

Edwards Commentary: So with this expert, he leaves with the identified patient, in this case the ten-year-old boy, and sort of assesses him, and he comes back in and gives the parents the assessment results.

Edwards: They can just go out now.

Tab: Okay. David, would you like to come with me and we can talk, maybe, and you can play a game? Is that okay? [David nods]

Tab [to father]: Is that okay if David comes with me?

Lynwood: Sure, sure.

Tab: Okay.

Lynwood [to David]: You’re fine with that? [David nods]

Edwards Commentary: The important thing is to give the parents the assessment in a way that will include the parents in the therapy. In other words, we’re not going to just fix my kid, take the kid and treat him independently, but we need to give a reason for the parents to be involved.
And that’s what we attempted to do with the expert colleague. You’ll also notice that I did a little reflecting colleague in there; that is, me and Tab talked back and forth to each other while the father and son listened. This is a little technique that allows the family members to listen—and they’re always very interested in these conversations—and allows them to listen while we talk. Somehow, it gets through better. Some people listen better when they’re not being talked to.

**Edwards** [to Tab]: Here’s what I found so far. I found that there’s probably something fearful in the boy. He’s afraid of something. It appears to be more in the family situation than in school. With this age boy, it could be either one. And I’m a little puzzled as to what it is. He seems to be afraid of something. His behavior sounds like it’s more fear than grief.

**Tab**: I think sometimes boys are afraid of things. And sometimes they have a hard time talking about it.

**Edwards Commentary**: As I mentioned before, I think working with colleagues is important, although you don’t have to do co-therapy; that is, two therapists in the room with the family at all times. I can invite my colleague, as I did in this session, for… He can stay for the whole session and complete his work. So it’s only one session that I’m inviting him in. Also, you can do a reflecting colleague. When I sat and talked to Tab, I could bring a colleague in just for half an hour, and do it that way. But whatever case I have, whatever happens, I do have someone to talk to about the family and it gives more objectivity. It’s just better to have another set of eyes and ears. So I like to use colleagues that way—strategically and sporadically—rather than have two therapists in the room with the family at all times. When working with families, it’s very important to have the perspective of someone else oftentimes. That’s why training is important with a team behind a one-way mirror, the family in the room with the therapist, and the team, after the therapist finishes, processing what went on. It gives therapists insight and objectivity, and lets them stand back and get a new perspective. All of those are very important, and they help us learn much faster than trying to do family therapy entirely alone. If you do that very much, you’ll go home mumbling to yourself after work, because you’re trying to make sense of what happened. You’re trying to process it all yourself. I do believe in using our colleagues to improve our work and speed up our learning.
NEW TALK

Edwards Commentary: New talk is another technique I used with a mother and father and two teenagers. New talk is a way of getting family members to say something different to each other and get them more on a personal level. Now, I did it with a father this time because what he was saying to his 15-year-old daughter was sort of meaningless to her, I thought, and something he had said many times before.

Edwards [in session]: You know, I noticed that when you talk to Beckett, it seems sometimes to go in one ear and out the other. It’s like she hears you but she doesn’t pay... The words don’t register.

Edwards Commentary: I set it up by guaranteeing, if you noticed, that she will listen. That’s just a little attention-getter, sets the stage and motivates the father to attempt to say something new to his daughter. Anything’s okay, as long as he hasn’t said it before.

Edwards: I’d like for you to try something with me, Fred. I will guarantee you she will hear you this time. And I don’t make many guarantees in this business, but this is one of them. You willing to try something with me? I guarantee she’ll hear you.

Fred: Okay.

Edwards: All right? Say something to Beckett that you’ve never said to her before. Anything’s okay, as long as it’s new.

Fred: I know that you can be so very, very good at anything you do. And that’s what surprises me.

Edwards: Have you heard this before, Beckett?

Beckett: Sort of.

Edwards Commentary: Notice that parents, when you get them to do this with children, will sometimes squirm a little and wait awhile, because it’s kind of difficult. So when they look at me and say, “Oh, this is too difficult. I’ve told her everything,” I say, “Take your time.” So I keep the silence and the pressure there because I want them to reach a new and more personal level.

Edwards: Then say something to her you haven’t said before. She said she’s sort of heard that. Say something else. Anything’s okay.
Fred: It works both ways.

Edwards: Have you heard that before, Beckett?

Beckett: Yeah.

Edwards: Then try again, Fred.

Fred: Your actions don’t exactly tell me that you care about how I feel about you.

Edwards: Have you heard that before, Beckett?

Beckett: Yeah. But you’re the parent.

Edwards: Excuse me. You’ve got to say something new. Something she hasn’t heard before.

Edwards Commentary: He did this with the daughter, but I had to squeeze it out of him, and he had to make several attempts before he did it. And after each thing he said to his daughter, I interrupted and asked the daughter if she’d heard this before. If they’ve heard it before, get them to try something else. So it’s very important to keep the spotlight on this interaction until a more personal level is reached, to which it eventually was in this family.

Fred: All I ask is that I don’t have to come home and find the problem to get in the way of that.

Edwards: So your new thing is… What are you saying to your daughter?

Fred: Give me a chance to tell you that. Don’t give me negatives as I come through the door.

Edwards: Tell you what?

Fred: That I love her.

Edwards: Say it to her.

Fred: I love you.

Beckett: Sometimes actions speak louder than words.

Edwards Commentary: The purpose of this interview is simply to interrupt repetitive talk, particularly lecture-type talk from parent to child about how they should do right. So that’s when I use it, and I’ve found that family members do two things, neither of which I ask them to do: The first thing they
do is they say something personal. And the second thing is they usually say something positive. I don’t ask them to do either one, but they usually do. If they say something negative, I would like to say that’s fine, you did it, now try again. This time say something more positive. So if they say a negative to begin with, we can turn that around and get them to say a positive, if we need to say that.

GUARDRAIL

Edwards Commentary: Guardrail is one of the ways to help parents work better as a team, and it makes a point that when parents come together to set appropriate limits with their children and give clear, consistent messages—that is, when they speak with one voice they’re far more powerful. One-plus-one is equal to about four in terms of influence with a child. So guardrail helps them see that they can set limits together on the child—appropriate, good parenting limits—and that they won’t allow their child to go beyond that.

Edwards [in session]: Very much the way Beckett was talking about you overseeing her? Sometimes they need to feel the safety of the limits, like the limits that are imposed by a guardrail on a bridge that you’re crossing in a car. You’re glad those guardrails are there, even though you plan never to go near them as you cross the bridge. It just makes you feel safer. Matthew, can you swap chairs for a second? I want to do something with your parents. It’s like holding hands to create a guardrail. This would be a safety rail for your daughter. She can’t go beyond that. It’s like a guardrail on a bridge. You can make it even stronger by holding each other’s forearm. You hold her forearm and you hold his. There you go. Oh, that doesn’t look comfortable.

Fred: No.

Edwards: That’s the guardrail right there, okay? It’s even stronger since you’re holding... Those are limits you impose, like if you say to Beckett, “I will not allow you to skip any more school this semester, and if you do, these are the consequences.” Or, “Beckett, if you bring home two Bs in math and social studies, we will allow you to have more time with your friends,” or whatever. So the consequences, the limits, the limits can be positive or negative. But she can’t go beyond... you won’t let her go beyond that. If she pushes up to that guardrail, you’re going to take some action.
Edwards Commentary: Now, it makes the point in a touching, tactile kind of way. It’s important to make communication in family work in various ways: through your voice, through vision, through touch, through movement, and that’s what guardrail is for. I also want the teenagers to see mom and dad coming together to agree on their parenting approach to the child. This cuts down on the child splitting one parent against the other, or joining one against the other.

Edwards: If you set limits with Beckett, who would let go first?

Irene: I don’t think he would consciously let go. It’s just he’s not there, so not being there is almost like letting go, because he’s not part of the guardrail.

Edwards Commentary: So while they were in place, this mother and father with the two teenagers, I asked them who would let go first, and I talked to them about it a little bit. I got the teenage daughter to push on the guardrail to see what would happen. I like that. Some teenagers won’t do that. They’ll say, “I ain’t going to do that. That’s stupid.” And I say, “Okay.”

Edwards: Beckett, that’s the limits, whatever your parents agree to. They won’t let you go beyond that. They won’t let you skip school. You must be in at a certain time. There are certain limits, so you can only go so far, and then they’ll stop you like a guardrail. Push on the guardrail and see what happens. [Beckett pushes on her parents’ arms]

Edwards: See? It’s strong but flexible. It moved, but it came back. So that shows your daughter your determination as a team: to speak with one voice, give her one message, be consistent and support each other in the limits you have set, the limits you set for your daughter. Whatever they are. You all agree on that because you’re the parents.

Irene: We’ve got some talking to do.

Edwards: You’ve got some talking to do.

Edwards Commentary: So, some parents will hold hands after that, and that’s a nice parental unity, too, and I like that. That’s all a guardrail is for: it’s to anchor down the point that when the parents speak and act together jointly, they have a lot more influence on their children than they do separately.
SCULPTING

Edwards Commentary: With this family of mother, father, and 18-year-old son and 15-year-old daughter, I used sculpting because I wanted to see each member’s picture of the family, and I also knew that it would get them in touch with some of their feelings about each other, particularly the father’s distancing from the family and the mother’s anxiety about that, and the daughter’s resentment about it.

Edwards [in session]: This is called sculpting, and it’s like… You know what a sculptor is, Matthew?

Matthew: Uh-hmm.

Edwards: A sculptor is someone who makes things out of clay.

Matthew: Yeah, yeah.

Edwards: I want you to pretend like you’re a sculptor and your family’s made of clay. You can put them into any position you want. It can be turned around, it can be way over here, it can be down low or up high. Their arms can be up, they can be doing things with their hands. I want you to just show me your picture of the family, pretending you’re the sculptor. Now, clay has to stay where it’s put, so you sculpt everybody, including yourself and how you see the family right now.

Matthew: Okay. Let’s see… I’m putting… there… [Matthew puts his father in the doorway, as if entering the room. He then tries to figure out where to place his mother, Irene.]

Edwards Commentary: Families like sculpting. It’s active. It’s something that gives them new understanding. It’s something that gives them new experiences. It gets them in touch with their feelings. And, as we saw in the end of this family session, it also gives them hope. And when you’re sculpting, there are a few small points to keep in mind: the first is when you give instructions to a family member for sculpting. And I like to start with a child, although you don’t have to. If you start with a child they’re more likely to play and add some energy and sort of warm the adults up. You can start with anybody. When I have a choice, I usually start with a child. When you explain the instructions, you need to touch them. You need to put your hands on them. If you want to ask permission if you can touch their arm, go ahead
and do it. But you must touch them because if you don’t, when you explain the instructions, they won’t touch each other. They’re likely to say, “Well, you get over there, and you sit over there.” And it’s a little bit sterile and distant, and I don’t like that. I think touching is an important part of sculpting, and it begins with what you’re modeling when you give the instructions. The second thing to remember is, get off the stage. When you let the family sculpt, you back up a few feet, if you can, if you have the room. I don’t want to be in the middle of their picture. I want to get off their family stage and let them do it. Another thing to keep in mind is give everyone a chance to do it. It doesn’t matter so much who you start with, but be sure everyone gets a chance. Another thing you noticed I did was, when they’re in place, I ask each person how it is for them in this picture. You can ask how they feel in this picture; you can ask if this is comfortable. Any response from the family member which shows some qualitative experiences—good or bad—is the continuum I’m trying to get them to express.

Edwards: Irene, how about you? What’s it like for you?

Irene: It’s a little more positive, because at least now she can see me if she wants to. But again I’m stuck in the middle. I feel like I’m a mediator here, again, comparing. I’m not where I want to be.

Edwards: I see. You’re still between Beckett and Fred.

Irene: Yeah, still connected to him.

Edwards: Uh-hmm. And Beckett, how does it feel for you in this picture? Is it better than the last time?

Beckett: That I tried?

Edwards Commentary: When you finish, when everyone has had their turn, I like to ask the parents to show me the way you want it to be, rather than the way it is now. Start with one parent. Let them construct their picture. And then ask if the other parent wants to change that in any way.

Edwards: Uh, show me the way you’d like it to be, Irene. Not the way it is now, but the way you would like for it to be. [Irene places Beckett next to her father, Fred. She then places Matthew next to Beckett.]

Edwards: Hmm. Beckett, how is this for you?

Beckett: This is uncomfortable.
Edwards: In what way?

Beckett: It just feels unnatural.

Edwards: Uh-hmm. Okay. Would you change this picture, Fred? How would you like for it to be?

Fred: Well, it’s interesting. I think this is just a negative of what I do; just on the other side.

Edwards: Oh. So you see this as very similar to what you do.

Fred: Yeah. I mean, the only difference is the order; if we just reverse the order here.

Edwards: I see.

Edwards Commentary: Now, I don’t usually do that with children, although I believe I did in this session. I asked the daughter how she wanted it to be. It’s okay to ask children. But I do keep parents in the responsible, central, decision-making role concerning their children. So I’m going to keep them the architects of the family, and by asking them to show me the way they want it to be, I focus on that role for parents.

ALTER EGO

Edwards Commentary: Alter ego is a tool or technique that I’ve found very useful. It’s powerful and you need to be sort of careful with it. It’s when the therapist sits behind a family member and talks for them. You’ll notice that I used this in the family session and sat behind the 18-year-old son. He was the quietest member, the one least involved, and I picked him because I can give them a voice because they’re careful observers.

Edwards [in session]: I’m going to… I’m going to try something. I want to speak for one of you, and if I say something you don’t agree with, you can correct me. I want to sit behind you and speak for you. I want to give you a voice so that the family believes that whatever I say is coming directly from you, unless you correct me. If you correct me, then you say what you want to say. Matthew, I’d like to speak for you. Could I do that?

Matthew: Sure.

Edwards: I’m going to put my chair behind you and give you a voice.
Matthew: Okay. [Edwards places his chair behind Matthew]

Edwards [as Matthew]: Well, I’m glad we finally looked at this a little bit, because I’ve been a little worried about… I’ve been worried about Beckett. What made you all decide to do something about this problem, Mom and Dad?

Irene: It was out of hand. We had no control anymore. We needed help.

Edwards [as Matthew]: Well, I’ve known for some time that Beckett was very angry and unhappy.

Irene: Then why didn’t you tell us so we could help her?

Edwards [as Matthew]: I guess I didn’t say anything because I felt like it would be betraying her.

Edwards Commentary: So I got his permission to sit behind him and speak for him. I like to disappear when I sit down. That is, get behind him and lean over, so that when the family member is talking to their, in this case, son, they’re seeing the son’s face, not mine. So I lean over. It’s important to start in a non-threatening way. It’s important not to jump into the heavy stuff right away. Start with a few sessions and let people warm up to the game. You can also talk for more than one member. You can move from one member to another. I think 10 or 15 minutes is long enough to do alter ego, because it is rather intense for the family, and I don’t think that staying with that too long is a good idea. I think they need a break and a rest from that.

Edwards [as Matthew]: And Beckett, I want to say to you, if you do anything that I think puts you in danger, I’m not going to keep it a secret. I’m going to tell somebody, probably Mom and Dad, because I don’t want you to get hurt.

Edwards Commentary: The most important thing, I suppose, is to start in a non-threatening way. Start slowly. The power in alter ego is not in role-playing the family member: saying only what they would say. The power is saying what they will not say, and bringing new information, new understanding, new experiences into the room. But it gives you total control—the therapist total control—so be careful with it and not blow the family out of the room, which I’ve done a couple of times inadvertently. With alter ego, be sure to get their permission before doing it. “Is it okay if I speak
for you? If I say anything you don’t agree with, please stop me. Just raise your hand or something and stop me, and say what you want to say.” So it’s important that they correct you. And the implication there is, if the family member that you are being the alter ego for does not correct you, they are responsible for the statement. So check in with them and make sure—you know, every two, three, or four minutes—and make sure they’re okay with what’s being said and if they want to add anything. Once they start talking on their own and correcting you a lot, I like to move out of the alter ego spot and go sit back down, the message being you don’t need me to talk. You can start.

Edwards: You can speak for yourself, Matthew, now, if you want to. Anything you want to say to your dad?

Matthew: Just to… I don’t know, I guess you’ve got to listen to her more. You know I’ll be okay. You’re always there for me and, you know, hanging out and everything. Maybe, you know, it’s time for you two.

Fred [to Beckett]: You ain’t got nothing to tell him? You’re not going to get off that easy.

Beckett [to Matthew]: I wish that’s how it always was.

Edwards Commentary: So it can warm people up. It can warm the family up to a deeper level of feelings.

CONCLUSION

Edwards Commentary: Experience is not only the best teacher, it could be the only teacher. Everything else is a preparation for the learning that you get sitting with families in the room, helping them work through difficulties they’re having. A repetition is important in these skills to review them occasionally and to keep them on your mind so that they’ll pop up at the right times. I believe that repetition is the core of learning, so let me encourage you as therapists to continue your learning by repeating some things or going back over some things you thought you already knew, to keep them fresh in your mind so they’re useful when they’re needed. Without doing this, these ideas and tools are likely to fade. Before the first golden leaf will fall, dances through the chilly autumn air, and rest for its final place on the sacred earth. You will have forgotten these tools unless you practice them.
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