A Principal’s Guide to Applying Concepts From Family Therapy: Systemic Strategies to Create Change

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Relationship with a ‘challenge’

Descriptors: struggle, fight, grapple, tussle, Spar, etc, etc, etc.
Systemic perspective: dyads are inherently unstable

Diagram:

- Mother
- Father
- Child

- Parent 1
- ‘implied’ parent
- Child
Stable triads: numerous examples in relationship based endeavours

Diagram:

- Director
- Manager
- Staff

- CEO
- Board
- Staff
Stable triads: numerous examples in relationship based endeavours

![Diagram]

- **Headmaster**
- **Teaching staff**
- **Prime minister**
- **Back bench**
Natural systems have hierarchies
Inverted hierarchy......

1. Mother                                  Daughter with anorexia
   Dad
Inverted hierarchy…….

2.

Daughter

Mum & Dad

Anorexia
Natural systems have coalitions and alliances
Unnatural alliances …..

Not good

Mother Daughter

Dad

Doctor
Unnatural alliances …..

Really not good!!

Diagram:
- Mother
- Father
- Daughter
Natural systems have boundaries

Mother                         Father

Children
Child1  Child2  Child 3
boundaries may be overly rigid
Or boundaries are pathologically porous

Mother

Father no3

Father no1

Children
  Child bio1  Child bio1  Child bio2

Foster children (twins)

teen found on lawn
Systems are developmental & change over time e.g. boys with aggression

- Fetal
- Infant
- Child
- Adolescent
- Adult

- Competency
- Health
- Antisocial PD, violence
- Substance abuse
- Interaction: trait + antisocial peers
- Coercive parenting
Emma’s family
Kate’s family
Grouping around a problem to good effect

Systemic thinking including ‘triangulation’ around issues useful on multiple levels.

![Diagram showing treatment team, client parents, and anorexia]

- Treatment Team
- Client Parents
- Anorexia
Grouping around a problem with a bad outcome

Systemic thinking including ‘triangulation’ around issues useful on multiple levels.

Child with Anorexia  half treatment team

other half team
Challenging individuals: Interagency Forum

N = 19, average age 15 years:
**Families:** alcohol abuse (29%), drug abuse (14%) and DV (21%).
Sibling difficulties: hx. school suspensions (21%), learning difficulties (21%).
**Family hx:** physical (50%), emotional (50%), sexual abuse (21%).
Average 3 mental health diagnoses. 50% Disruptive behaviour disorders.
**Major functional impairment** in several domains; many (44%) experienced “gross” impairment.
Average no. **schools** attended 5, 3 more than 11 schools.
84% suspended: average 2.4 suspensions, 9 children excluded.
Supported **accommodation** (36%), other placements frequent (14%) 50% 11 or more residential placements, 28% 16 placements.

LEE, ENGLISH, DORRIES, BEECH, MCDERMOTT, 2004
Triangulation and large systems

Develop effective coalitions against the problem behaviour

Worker + system + parent
Challenging individual

Worker + system + parent
Challenging behaviour

Worker + system + adolescent + parent
Very, very dodgy

No coalition against the problem behaviour and no progress

System 1
& behaviour

adolescent

System 2:
• Feel undermined
• Degraded
• Dismissed
• May get dispirited, angry
• May act out
And behaviour will not improve.
May need to bring in senior decision makers and make ‘extraordinary’ responses.
Summary

* Individual ‘scraps’ with challenges can be very unstable, so too dyads.
* A three point system often very stable and can be described by:
  Hierarchy
  Coalitions and alliances
  Boundaries
  Developmental aspects
* Analysis and understanding of systems are a boon to effectively creating change and/or promoting stability.