

# **WORKING WITH INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR FAMILIES: CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHILD AND YOUTH CARE WORKERS**

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Residential treatment facilities for children increasingly have shifted to being residential treatment facilities for children and families. This shift has resulted partly from the evolution of family systems theory and therapy which has become popular in many countries over the past 15-20 years. There are two critical training and supervisory implications for child and youth care workers who once worked only with individual children/youth and now also work with families: the first is that they need to have a way of thinking about individual and family behavior, and the second is that they require a way of thinking about the process of working with individuals and families.

## **Theoretical Framework for Family Behavior**

An understanding of individual and family behavior and how behaviors develop is the foundation for explaining behavior and behavior change. It influences and dictates how the worker proceeds to bring about change in children and families. In other words, sound theoretical perspective gives workers a way of thinking about individuals and families, a language for discussing what happens with individuals and families, and in turn a way to proceed in working with the individual and family.

When workers don't have a way to think about what is happening, they have to react with different responses without clearly understanding what is happening. There are many theories for family systems behavior and behavior change which can be adopted by or adapted for child and youth care workers. Structural family therapists (Kerr, 1988; Mandanes, 1981; Minuchin, 1984; Minuchin and Fishman, 1981) theorize that family functioning is attributed to the absence and presence of rules that dictate who participates and how, whereas communication systems specialists (Watzlawick, Bevin & Jackson, 1967; Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, 1974) argue that family functioning depends on

communication patterns. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1985) have captured many different perspectives on working with families and have described how these theoretical perspectives are manifest when working with families. More recently, Kerr (1988) has reminded us of our theoretical roots going back to Bowen (1966) and has nicely recaptured the essence of family therapy compared to individual work.

While it is important for child and youth care workers to have a theoretical perspective, it is less important which one they have! What is most important is to understand their perspective and how to put it into action to change families. Child and youth care workers who are unclear about their theoretical perspective may want to consider the above and other references.

### **The Therapeutic Process Model**

Child and youth care workers who are new at working with families often ask, "But how do you know what to do when? How do you keep everything straight and clear in your mind?" While a theoretical perspective is useful in understanding family functioning, or how the family came to operate the way it does, child and youth care workers also need a way to think about what is happening relative to what should be happening during the family work process.

The process of working with families is simply a sequence of behaviors the worker chooses, either alone or in concert with another worker, which has a direction: in family work that direction is change. The following conceptual framework is one way to think about and organize the family work experience. It is designed to organize and track several aspects of the family sessions at one time, and to think and plan in the present situation or moment while considering both immediate and long-term goals.

The model (see figure 1) identifies two critical factors of the family encounter: level and process. Level refers to time and space conditions of working with families and includes overall family work, sessional family work, and in-the-moment family work. In other words, the worker views, experiences, and works with the family across sessions or globally, within a particular session, and at an immediate point in time concurrently!

Level A	Overall Family Work
Level B	Sessional Family Work
Level C	In-the-Moment Family Work

At every point in the above time/space continuum, the worker also

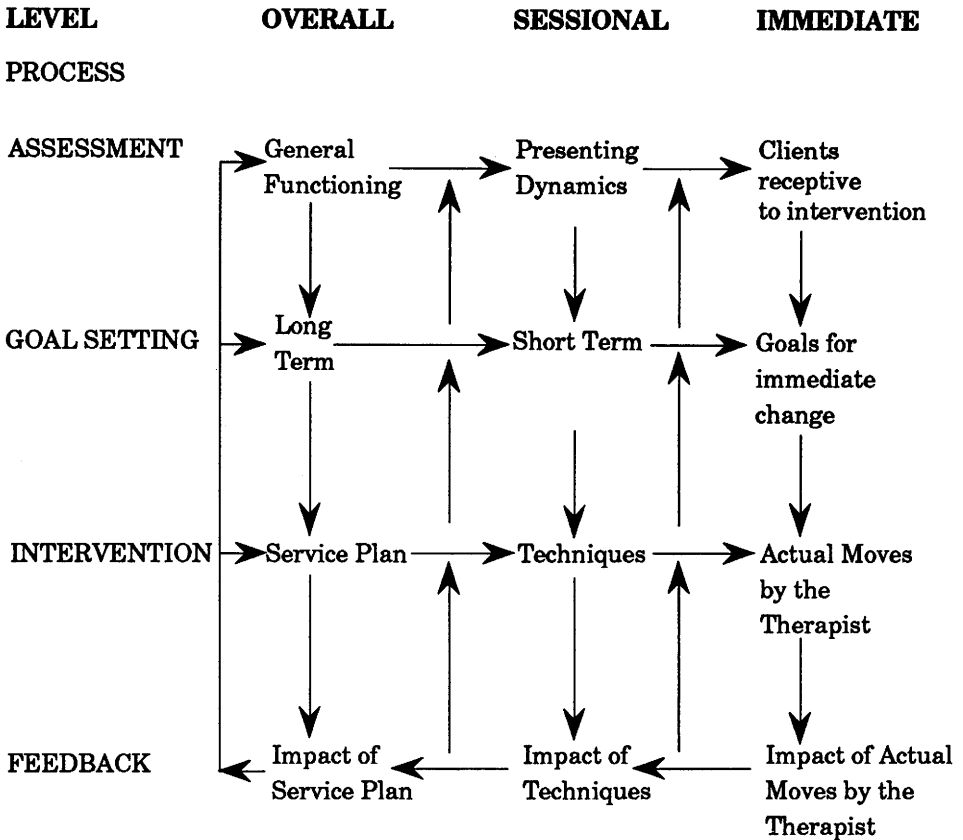


FIGURE 1. Therapeutic Process Model

attends to four process functions: assessment, goal setting, intervention and interpreting feedback or evaluation. This all happens very quickly and simultaneously, and the considerations and deliberations of the worker can be more easily accomplished with a better sense of these level and process characteristics.

**Overall**

*Assessment.* At the overall assessment level the worker is concerned about the general ability of the family to function and the type of assessment depends on the particular theory used by the worker. For example, workers who think in terms of structure will attend to boundaries or rules, whereas communication workers will focus on assessing communication patterns. Regardless of the type of assessment, the worker determines the nature of the problem, what is not working or what is missing in the family relationship(s).

*Goal Setting.* Goal setting at this global level involves setting long-term goals based on desired outcomes. Generally these goal statements are behavioral statements of how the family will be functioning by the end of treatment (Ricks, 1987). Because the theories for normal family functioning vary, the goals will vary according to the worker's biases or theoretical perspective. Examples of overall goals include: Family members will decide whether to stay together. Mom and Dad will instigate a new pattern of parenting whereby they agree on what they will do, who will do what and when. Family members will learn to disclose and communicate feelings. Family members will decide what it means to be close and instigate ways to bring about that closeness, particularly between Bob and Mary.

*Intervention.* The overall intervention plan reflects the worker's biases about normalcy and how to achieve it. For overall service interventions some workers choose to work with families once a week for two hours and others one hour twice a week, some prefer residential care, and others prefer community care. Overall interventions are the general strategy that the worker uses to assist the family in reaching the overall goals.

*Evaluation.* Overall evaluation or feedback reflects the attainment of overall goals of treatment. The evaluation is based on information that has been collected systematically across sessions. The feedback may be subjective feedback from the client and/or other professionals or it can be specific behavioral measures of targeted behaviors, e.g., more smiling, no police involvement, no incidence of child abuse. This evaluation is used to reassess general functioning so that a new plan can be generated or discharge or termination can be planned.

## **Sessional**

*Assessment.* Sessional assessment is based on what the worker perceives in any one session. The functioning of the family in any single session is only a portion of the family functioning and may be typical or unusual. Sessional assessments are useful when considered in relation to the overall assessment. Once the sessional assessment has been formulated relative to the overall assessment, sessional goals can be set.

*Goal Setting.* Sessional goals pertain to a single session and represent steps toward the overall goals. They are behavioral statements of how the client(s) will be at the end of the session. Sessional goals include statements like: Mom and Dad recognize the pattern of parenting whereby the child gets one of them to side with him and sets in motion their longstanding disagreement about parenting. Mom and

Dad will decide whether they can and should co-parent rather than leave the parenting to the biological parent of their respective kids. Mom and Dad will decide on a cue to time themselves out when they have a parenting conflict.

*Intervention.* To attain sessional goals, like the above, workers select and employ particular techniques and strategies — moves that elevate stress, make implicit conflict explicit, change the mode or tone of the session and so on. Workers might give homework, use an empty chair, send someone from the room, direct two people to speak directly to each other, make a rule to be followed by everyone such as only speak for yourself, and so on. An example of a sessional strategy to get Mom and Dad to notice how the child gets in the middle and sets up the longstanding parental conflict would be to use reenactment, a strategy in which family members role play stressful situations.

*Evaluation.* Sessional feedback is used to evaluate particular techniques and strategies. The worker wants to know whether the techniques and strategies used had the planned effect on the family dynamic. Put another way, the worker wants to know whether the techniques and strategies were effective in getting the family to reach the sessional goals and move in the direction of the overall goals. If the strategy was not effective, the worker determines whether to take another run at it by using another strategy, or whether to adjust the sessional goal, or sometimes even both!

## **Immediate**

In the immediate time and space, the process is the same. *Assessment.* The worker assesses the momentary encounter and determines the client(s) receptivity to intervention at that moment. *Goal Setting.* Based on this assessment of the moment, immediate goals are set which are designed to lead towards the attainment of sessional goals, which are in turn steps to overall or global treatment goals. *Intervention.* In order for the family to attain these immediate goals, the worker selects a specific behavior or activity. If, for example, the worker has decided on the technique of elevating stress, the actual action to elevate stress must be decided and executed, e.g., take sides with one parent, pick a fight with Mom, or shout at one of the children. *Evaluation.* After implementing the actual move, the worker then determines whether the immediate goal was met, how that in turn influenced the sessional goal and the overall goal.

There are two key points to keep in mind when applying the therapeutic process model. The first is that every moment of the therapeutic encounter is related to the overall process of the therapeutic encounter

and the second is that feedback at any time and space serves to alter all other aspects of the therapeutic encounter. Information about what is happening now and what is working or not working now is important feedback that determines the worker's next split-second assessment, goal setting, intervention planning and evaluation. Because of these two key points, the worker has to stay alert! The model highlights the demands on the worker for an increased consciousness and readiness while working with families. Such awareness, in fact an accountability, is more demanding than what is required when working with individuals. These demands are a function of a therapeutic context that is dramatically different from the therapeutic context of working with individuals.

### **Therapeutic Context**

The actual decisions that are made by the worker in directing the therapeutic process to bring about family change depends on the therapeutic context. In other words, the therapeutic process is context dependent. Because this process depends on the context, workers need to not only be aware of the context, they must understand that no two contexts are alike! Further they must be aware that the context of family work is more complex simply because of the number of players involved.

The main players in the context are the worker(s), the individual family members, and the family as a whole. Each player brings to the therapeutic encounter beliefs, values, theoretical model, mandate for family work, as well as skills and skill level. Below are definitions and examples of these context variables.

**Beliefs:** tenets held as true, e.g., we can't change, you can change

**Values:** tenets held as important, e.g., family is important and if we break up there is no family; family is not as important as individuality

**Theoretical Model:** a set of tenets for behavior and behavior change, e.g., systems theory, client-centered theory, psychoanalytic theory (Cory, 1986; Foley, 1979)

**Mandate:** statement of purpose, e.g., serve families within 50-mile radius of the city, see whole families

**Skills:** facility or expertise in action, e.g., communication ability, empathic response capability, language level

**Skill Level:** appropriateness and level of execution of expertise,

e.g., communicates descriptive observations, does not communicate demands or requests from others; feels empathy and does not demonstrate empathy

No therapeutic context and therefore no therapeutic encounter is like any other. This means that workers must select a particular technique in light of the particular family and that if it is not successful the worker, by implication, has made an inappropriate analysis of the context. For example, if the worker values confrontation as a technique and is good at being confronting, yet the client devalues confrontation, the application of confrontation would likely be met with misunderstanding from the client and no movement toward the goal. Another example would be when a worker uses adult language in family sessions where the children are under 10. The point is that each assessment and judgement to proceed is idiosyncratic to the particular context and that all therapeutic contexts are idiosyncratic since no two families, in combination with their worker(s), are alike.

To assess and plan in family work requires self, family members and family unit awareness. Compared to individual work where the worker is monitoring two persons (self and other) and planning for one (the client), the family worker is monitoring at least four persons (self, partner, and two clients) and the family unit, as well as planning for all of the above! In essence, the context is more complex because of the number of persons/units to monitor, and as a result the assessment and planning demands are greater.

## Summary

Child and youth care workers who work with children/youth and their families need to have a rationale or theoretical perspective for family disfunctioning and how to change it. Further, they need to have a way of thinking about the process of working with families. The model presented here posits that child and youth care workers need to consider the levels of the therapeutic encounter: overall, sessional, and in the moment, as well as the functions of the therapeutic encounter: assessment, goal setting, intervention and feedback/evaluation. This conceptual understanding of the therapeutic process promotes more effective family work because it provides a way to organize information in order to proceed. Because feedback from any point in the process serves to alter all subsequent aspects of the process, the worker must be fully present and attentive at all times. Such presence is necessary in order to be able to determine what is needed for a particular therapeutic context which includes the worker, all family members, and the family unit.

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## GOING BACK HOME

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My name's Kevin and I'm 15 years old. I'm suppose to be in tenth grade, but I'm in eighth this year. I'm in a special classroom at school. They say I'm slow, I say I'm just plain dumb. I've been at Youth Home for eleven months. I'm goin' home tomorrow, and I can't wait! Oh, the Home is ok, but when I gets home I be cruisin' to my own tunes again.

My teaching-parents, they're pretty cool. They've been helpin' me alot. My therapist, he's ok too. But the relief couple, they sucks! I don't think the Mrs. ever liked me and I'm always in trouble whenever they're in the house. The guys here are mostly jerks, real losers. Couple of 'em are okay; but there's a few puff-heads, a jock who thinks he's Michael Tyson, a couple mouth-breathers who probably dumber than me, and my main-man Randy. I know I'm the coolest in the house, but nobody ever treats me like it. That's ok — I'm outta here tomorrow, right after my discharge conference.

This discharge conference is a waste. Look at 'em all sitt'n around talkin' 'bout me and what I gotta do when I go home. My mom, she did finally make it 'bout one hour late. I couldn' believe she came up here to get me in that rag-box car. The guys, they laughed at me! My therapist said, I shouldn' been braggin' that she was comin' in a stretch-limo to get me. Look at him sittin' there talkin' 'bout the progress I've made at Youth Home. Man, I know I've changed. I'm not the same dude I was a year ago, I'm . . .

"Sorry, I didn' hear your question." My teaching mom said something.

"Back home, are you going to try to enroll in the same type of classes as you now have?" she asks.

"No. I plan to quit school when I get home, cuz there be too many ol' dudes, who probably are wait'n for me to settle business with."

"Kevin, the law requires you to attend school until you attain the age of 16," my therapist says.

"What! I can't quit 'til I'm 16? Man, that's another 9 months! That means I've got to finish this school year and start next one before I'm done, if I live that long!". . . "Will I get to keep you as my therapist still, cuz I may need to talk to somebody if I got to stay in school?" I ask.

"I'm sorry, no. But if you need to talk with someone, I'm sure the

school counselor will be more than happy to listen and discuss whatever concerns you may have.”

I stare at the wall. “Man, I don’t understand how come you can’t still be my therapist. I thought you liked me. Man, you don’t care ‘bout nobody! I don’t know no school counselor there. Why you telling me that?”

Before he can answer, my mom says, “What kind of rules do you have for him here?”

“Mom, why you askin’ ‘bout the rules I been livin’ under here? I can teach you the rules,” I say.

“Maybe you can, maybe you can’t.” Then turning to the therapist she asks, “Will there be someone available to help me enforce the rules, if I need it?”

“I’m sorry, the Home doesn’t offer this service. We don’t have a formal aftercare program,” he says.

I say, “Good, that means you can’t be leanin’ on me all the time. Mom, you don’t need no more help with raisin’ me.” I look at the therapist, “I’ve changed. I handle things better than before. I don’t do drugs no more, I know all ‘bout choices and consequences, I’ve got me some vocational training, I even know how to do my own laundry!”

The adults keep talking and I drift off . . . if I got to be in school, that means some of the ol’ dudes who didn’t get caught will still be ‘round. Hey, what’s that crap mom’s askin’ ‘bout some Big Brother’s program? Wow! I’m sure glad to hear they got a 15-month waitin’ list. I’ll be gone and free by then. But if those ol’ dudes start comin’ ‘round again, that could be bad trouble. I sure want to leave the Home, but now I’m scared ‘bout goin’ home.

“What happens to me if I’m in trouble again?” I ask. They sit like deadmen. “What’d I say wrong this time? Why’s everybody just sittin’ and starin’ at me?”

Finally the therapist asks, “Kevin, are you planning on getting into trouble again? Because if you are . . .”

“No. No, I don’t plan on being into nothin’ I shouldn’t be; but if trouble finds me, what’s gonna happen?”

They’re quiet again.

“Just as I thought, nobody gonna tell me what they gonna do ‘til they do it to me. I shouldn’t asked, cuz here comes mom’s lecture on stayin’ away from bad dudes, stayin’ in school, and gettin’ a job!” “Can I get some help findin’ a part-time job?” I ask the therapist.

“Since the Home has no aftercare funds or services, you’re pretty much on your own in seeking any kind of employment. I’m sorry.”

“Oh man, Youth Home sucks! Everybody’s happy to help me while I’m here, but soon as I goes they don’t do nothin’. And that crap about

there's no money for helpn' — that's jive!"

My mom changes the subject by asking if there is any possibility of getting help for my younger brother. I shift in my chair to stare out the window. I wonder why she had to be askin' help for little Tom? After all, I'm the big brother and I can help Tom.

Still staring out the window, I slouch in my chair. Listen to that! They're tellin' her to seek services for Tom locally. Now what does that mean? Good for you mom! You stuff it back at 'em! You've tried phonin' four other agencies and none of 'em take medicare. Four other places? Tom can't be doin' that bad! What's she mean she's 'fraid he gonna be just like me! Why she startin' to cry! I'm cool! Wait 'til I get home and get my hands on that fool! Tom's breakin' mom's heart.

I'm sure glad we're on our way. This rag-box car better do the two hour trip back to the city. I'm super glad to be outta the Home. I'm free! Least 'till Monday when I go back to school. Man, that scares me.

Made it through the weekend! It's good to be back. My neighborhood's 'bout the same, but the street's different. The street's talkin' heavy stuff goin' down day after tomorrow, and sayin' names I never heard. I've got to stay out of this drug dealin' and keep my booty clean. Richie says to keep one eye lookin' back of me whenever I go out. He sure is jumpy! I need to ask him if little Tom is messin' with anythin', or if anybody is messin' with Tom. Kevin's back in town, and I'm the baddest dude around!

"Mom, I can't believe you're walkin' me to school today!" "Somebody's got to get you properly re-enrolled," she says in her measured strides.

"You're just 'fraid I'll skip. Mom, you should be keepin' your appointment with the electric company 'stead of takin' me to school. Why they always wantin' to shut our electric off anyway?"

We walk in silence, both knowing the answer. I need to get me a job and help mom with these money problems. I wished my therapist were here to do this school thing for her, and to help me find a job. Oh, oh! Be cool, there's the Gonzales brothers.

While walking home after school, Richie asks Kevin, "You ready to get into some lucrative action, my man? I'm talkin' makin' and shakin' more money than you ever dreamed of!"

"Maybe. Maybe not," I say. "Man, I hate school! Why those people always got to be gettin' in my face? Why they stick me in another dummy room? Even the dummies be makin' fun of me. They make me feel like cryin', but I'm too cool for that."

"Wow! Where you comin' from dude?"

"Richie, I can't let down now, not like I use to at the Home. I wished I was still there. Man, I can't believe I wished that! I'm gettin' confused

inside again.”

“Catch you later Kev. I gotta cut over one block and stop by a house and take care some business. Chill-out, cuz it’ll get better. You’ll see.”

“Sure. Later man.” I walk and sort my thoughts: Somethin’s matter with mom. She’s worryin’ too much ‘bout Tom. I think my 13-year-old brother is into somethin’ heavy, but mom and me don’t know for sure what? It’d be good if she got some help for herself. She’s needin’ somebody to talk her worries over with. Maybe she can get some help for herself wherever she can find help for Tom. I hope she got the electric company happy – at least for another month.

At 9:30, Tom comes busting through the front door. He hits the stairway like a stallion and nearly knocks me over as he slides into our bedroom. “I can’t believe it, Kev! Some dudes I never seen before just come by and wasted Richie. I mean Richie is dead!”

“What? Cut the crap, man!” “I ain’t lying. They just pulled up in a car and started firin’ down on him! He’s iced.”

My eyes get glassy. I feel a lump in my throat and a knot begins to grip my stomach. “Why?”

“Word on the street is that Richie was dealin’ at a crack house and stole some dudes’ profits.”

“Tommie, I didn’t know Richie got so deep. I’m really scared now! I wonder if the Gonzales’ be layin’ for me thinkin’ I maybe squealed when I got busted last year? I never talked ‘bout nobody or nothin’. Maybe I need to get me a heater of my own for protection?”

“Kevin, Richie said Steve was dealin’ guns and could get me anythin’ I needed. You want that I go and get you one?”

“If you do, it’ll just be one for protection – insurance – nothin’ more. Man, I’m talkin’ junk! Cops ever stop me I’d be busted to jail, not Youth Home. My head hurts tryin’ to think what to do. Man, I wasn’t havin’ these problems a week ago!”

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