



Helping Children from Changing Families

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Day in and day out, professional counselors witness the transformations of families in diverse forms of living arrangements, which can be referred to as the *surface structure* of families. This digest provides guidelines for helping children from families in transition (e.g., single parent, stepparent, nontraditional families such as gay lesbian, interracial and homeless) in the interest of assisting counselors determined to promote competency and resiliency in the face of these challenges.

Single Parenting, Stepparenting and Cohabiting Surface Structures

Although demographic data provides strong evidence that the American family is experiencing vast changes (Sado & Bayer, 2001), one must not be quick to assume that single parenting or any other surface structure provides a simple cause and effect relationship with a child experiencing difficulties. For example, while children of divorce have a higher rate of emotional and substance abuse problems, these effects are “caused not by divorce alone but by other frequently coexisting yet analytically separate factors” (Coontz, 1997, p. 29).

While a counselor can't directly alter the characteristics of a child's family type, one of the most important things a counselor can do is to be a person who the child knows cares for him. In that role of trusted, caring significant other, the professional counselor can help the child understand that the challenges facing his family were not caused by him, nor are they his responsibility to correct. However, the child can learn to cope and have a successful, meaningful life.

Trauma in Changing Families

As the trend toward diverse surface structures in families grows, some of the patterns that are currently thought of as nontraditional will become more common place. Increasingly more children are living with caregivers other than their biological parents. These caregivers may be foster parents, grandparents, stepparents, or adoptive parents. Many of the families in caregiving arrangements will require more services, because the children may present with the effects of traumatic early life experiences (Schwartz, 1999).

Counselors can support families experiencing trauma by helping them find social support and therapy in the community, by listening to the child and family in a caring way, and by helping the child and caregiver to maintain a supportive relationship with each other. Some crucial aspects of a recovery environment (resiliency) for children from traumatic family situations are parental distress, parental psychopathology, individual strengths and resources of the child, social and system resources and intelligence,

communication skills, sense of self-efficacy, coping abilities, talents, and feelings of bonding (Meichenbaum, 2002).

Homeless, Interracial, and Gay and Lesbian Surface Structures

Increasingly, counselors help children from homeless families, interracial marriages, and gay and lesbian couples. The main service most children from these types of families will require is help with acceptance and full inclusion.

Homelessness

Homeless children present with a specific set of difficulties. These include frequent relocation, lack of a permanent address, lack of a place to study, lack of a place to store personal items, difficulty attending or participating in school events, and the stress of living in shelters with strangers and no private space. A homeless child may carry in her backpack all that is important to her. Embarrassment about living arrangements is prevalent and helping homeless children know how to speak about it with others is valuable.

Gay or Lesbian Families

Children from gay or lesbian families most often need help coping with the issues of anger and embarrassment. They may be angry with one or both of their parents or because of society's perception and treatment of the family structure. A child's anger can often be addressed as anger would be in counseling a child for loss. The embarrassment can be addressed through the cognitive technique of challenging assumptions. The child's belief that his peers will label him on the basis of his gay or lesbian parents needs to be challenged. It is helpful for the child to normalize her situation as much as possible. It is supportive for children in lesbian and gay families to be able to interact with peers in similar situations.

Interracial Families

Many interracial families share close, caring relationships and strong parenting skills, which will be strengths to draw upon when intervening to help these children find acceptance and full inclusion. The counselor is encouraged to search for strengths in the culture and race of children who present with a need for acceptance and inclusion. Counselors need to be aware of different approaches families from diverse cultures and races may take in relation to issues such as parenting, spirituality, or the anger they may express toward outside agencies, or even the practitioner (Boyd-Franklin & Bry, 2000).

Basic Considerations When Counseling Children from Changing Families

Note Differences in Families with Similar Surface Structure

The first thing one learns when helping families, including those in transition, is that there are nearly infinite ways to be a family. Therefore, interventions must always be used wisely in the context of the actual family the counselor is attempting to help. A family that has become a single-parent family due to the separation of very supportive and caring yet incompatible parents has different needs than a single-parent family in which the parents are very angry with each other, poorly educated, and, prior to the divorce, were attempting to cope with alcoholism.

Assess Comorbidity and Premorbidity in the Family

Attempting to cope with one stressor is very different from being forced to cope with a series of unexpected short-term traumas or a sustained series of traumatic events including a prolonged trauma (Meichenbaum, 2002). Comorbidity and premorbidity are important factors to consider when addressing the needs of a child from a family that is undergoing a challenging transition. For example, a counselor helping a child from a family transitioning through a difficult divorce where there has been domestic abuse should be sensitive to the need for intervention or referral for additional clinical services in order to address a serious condition premorbid to the stress of the divorce.

Stay Aware of General Factors Fostering Family Resilience

Child-focused studies have pointed to the importance of ten general factors in the family system in fostering resilience (McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Han, & Allen, 1997). These include: family problem-solving communication, equality, spirituality, flexibility, truthfulness, hope, family time and routine, social support, health, and family hardiness. Meichenbaum (2002) cited a list of studies that suggested protective factors characteristic of resilient children and adolescents, including: close relationships to a caring parent figure, supportive extended kin, a sense of belonging and identification, warmth, structure and high expectations in parenting, cohesive families, socioeconomic advantages, and extended family networks.

Assess Basic Family Strengths and Needs

It is helpful when assessing family strengths and needs to collapse the family resiliency factors mentioned by McCubbin et al. (1997) and the protective factors of resilient children and adolescents mentioned by Meichenbaum (2002) into five main categories: 1) Parenting; 2) Legal-Economic; 3) Structural-Social; 4) Beliefs; and 5) Health. *Parenting*

includes decisions regarding schooling, academics, and discipline, as well as warmth, structure, and high expectations. *Legal and Economic* refers to the custody, school records and alimony issues, as well as financial well being of the family. *Structural-Social* refers to all the structural relationship issues in a family such as hierarchy, leadership, cohesion, boundaries, differentiation, extended kinship, social network support, family hardiness, sense of belonging, and identification and communication style. *Beliefs* include values, sense of equality, spiritual issues, sense of hope, and truthfulness. *Health* refers to mental and physical health issues.

Summary/Conclusion

A key to helping changing families is to not get lost in their differences. It helps to be aware of issues that frequently arise with a particular type of family, and at the same time stay open and sensitive to the individual nature of the family. There are many ways to be a family, and a particular family, no matter the type in terms of surface structure, may not evidence the issues typically associated with that type of living arrangement. Counselors need to approach all changing families according to both their strengths and needs.

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