

# A Model for Parent Education

*John D. West*

For quite some time the traditional approach to child rearing has been remedial in nature, analogous to the homemaker who is furiously mopping up the water on the kitchen floor from an overflowing sink when it makes more sense to turn the water off at the faucet. So it is with child rearing: There is no benefit in waiting until a crisis point before one reflects on a child's behavior.

## **A Parent Education Center**

A developmental approach to child rearing is offered through parent education centers whose theoretical basis stems from the work of Alfred Adler and his followers. Such a parent education center, which operates at Idaho State University, is partially described in this article.

The center is primarily staffed by doctoral and master's level students in counselor education who have received course work in Adlerian psychology as well as the theory and practice of Rudolf Dreikurs and his followers. The assistance of faculty consultants from the counselor education department is available. Two staff meetings a week are conducted to provide an opportunity to discuss staff concerns, to critique audiovisual films from the prior week's C groups, and to deal with theoretical positions.

Initially, the center conducted its weekly sessions in what amounted to be the traditional Adlerian family counseling model (Dreikurs, Corsini, Lowe, & Sonstegard, 1959). One family was counseled at each session in front of a moderately participative audience. Recently, the center's format has been revised to consist of four parent C groups (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973, pp. 303-310): a couples' C group, a C group for mothers, a single parents' C group, and a C group for parents of adolescents. As mentioned by Dinkmeyer and Carlson, a parent C group is concerned with encouraging parents to work together on mutual problems, allowing parents to give and receive realistic and honest feedback, providing a clearer understanding of self, permitting group members to become aware of new approaches to relating with children,

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showing concern for each other's situation, making a commitment to change their approach to problems, and establishing group confidentiality.

Staff and parent reaction to the C-group format has been most favorable as indicated by increased parent attendance and increased participation. Parents who have been interviewed within the C-group format mention an immediate lightening of pressures, which is presumably due to the realization that their concerns are shared by others. A systematic follow-up procedure (Main, 1975) to document the attitudes of C-group parents as opposed to traditionally counseled parents is being considered.

The goal of a parent education center is to bring about an attitudinal change in relation to living with children. Often, C-group members find themselves becoming familiar with child-rearing techniques that apply to a limited number of situations. When an attitudinal change has occurred, group members discover an increased effectiveness in dealing with a large number of parent-child interactions. In-house observation and a text (Rosenberg, Houland, McGuire, Abelson, & Brehm, 1969) on the subject of attitude change indicate the importance of affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. To the extent that the C-group leaders have been able to keep these three components in mind during the group process, attitude change appears to have been facilitated.

### **Couples' C Group**

When the counselor believes that the origin of the parent-child conflict lies in the marriage relationship, the parents are requested to participate in a C group for couples. While in the group, the husband-wife relationship is considered in juxtaposition with the parent-child relationship. Lifestyle assessments are completed on each member of the couples' group, and awareness of mate selection as well as insight into the purpose of husband-wife interactions is facilitated.

It has been noticed that children's behavior often reflects the family atmosphere. The parents play a significant role in establishing the atmosphere. For example, a child that manifests competitive behavior will at times have parents who interact in the marriage with a high level of competition. Therefore, in order to help the parents relate in a more democratic manner with the children, it is beneficial for the parents to learn the principles of cooperation.

### **Mothers' C Group**

Sometimes the mothers are the only members of the husband-wife teams who attend the parent education center. Many of these women share similar concerns; for this reason a C group for mothers was established.

Within all the C groups a chart of mistaken goals of adults with children (Bitter, 1973) has been introduced (Table 1). This chart has facilitated an awareness of how parents ineffectively try to find their place in the family. A typically expressed concern, which mothers can locate on the chart, deals with how neighbors will react to the new child-rearing principles. The chart has many of the characteristic advantages associated with the "mistaken goals for children" paradigm (Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1971, p. 16). Mothers are also often concerned about implementing the new child-rearing philosophy when their spouses maintain an antagonistic set of values. It is important for the mothers to realize that an inevitable part of social interaction is that all through their children's lives people will relate to them from different value positions. All that any mother, child, or person can do is to gain control of his/her own values and behavior.

Many of the members in the C group for mothers, as well as people in the other C groups, enter the parent education center with the purpose of changing their children's behavior. The counselors frequently need to emphasize that the parent education center is just what the name implies, a center for educating parents. At the center the parents are just as much the client as are their children.

### **Single Parents' C Group**

Many of the people who attend the parent education center, for one reason or another, are the only parents in their families. These people also share uniquely common concerns and tend to be rather discouraged. The C group for single parents has grappled with such topics as the implementation of Adlerian child-rearing principles, the pressure of being the single caretaker and breadwinner, the pressure to remarry quickly, and guilt feelings to having deprived the child of a mother or father.

During each C-group session, a certain amount of time is allocated to introducing a new topic on child rearing. Examples of the topics discussed are: logical and natural consequences, encouragement, mistaken goals, etc. In the C group for single parents, it was found to be quite beneficial to have the parents present the topic. This procedure appeared to increase enthusiasm, strengthen the learning of concepts, and promote group cohesiveness.

As mentioned previously, many single parents enter the center feeling rather frustrated about the process of trying to raise their children when they are the only adults in the home. For these parents, encouragement can be very beneficial. Often it is helpful to begin the group session by asking the parents to share a success story or some good experience they have had with their children during the previous week.

While the parents attend the C groups, the children participate in

Table 1  
The Mistaken Goals of Adults with Children

| Adult mistaken goals                                                                      | What the adult is saying                                                                                                                                                                                              | What the adult is feeling                                                                                                                                                                                  | New goals for the adult                                                                                                                                                                                          | Some corrective changes                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A demonstration of adequacy; to feel social worth or approval through children's behavior | I am only a "good" parent when my children behave well; I have a place and have status when I am seen as a good parent; my children are my responsibility and they need me                                            | Delighted with "good" children; a need for others to see good children; self-worth as a good parent; or annoyed, irritated, a need to make children behave; wants to remind, coax, demand; over-protective | To be good enough as you are regardless of mistakes; to be courageous to win true cooperation and share responsibility; to allow independence in children                                                        | Have the courage to be imperfect; respect the rights of children; give recognition instead of attention; let children make decisions for themselves                  |
| To gain a sense of power or superiority over the children rather than the situation       | I only count when I am boss, when I am dominating; I can't control the situation (I don't know what to do) so I will control my children and make them mind me                                                        | Provoked; angry; generally wants power or control; challenged and a sense of losing in the battle to be a good parent                                                                                      | To gain power or superiority over the situation rather than the children; to throw in the towel and admit that the children will have to control themselves, because that is all any of us can control           | To be friendly in the face of children's power; to withdraw from power struggles; solve the problem, not just end it; act rather than talk; use natural consequences |
| To assert power and seek revenge or hurt back and get even                                | I am continually being hurt by my children so I will hurt back; I feel no good as a parent, so my children will feel no good either; I'll make them behave and they'll be sorry                                       | Hurt; angry (raging); "How could they do this to me"; wants to hurt back or get even; "I feel extremely embarrassed by my children"                                                                        | To do things with children not against them; to avoid retaliation; to love regardless of the response; to feel adequate enough to ignore hurting statements of deeds by children and return love                 | Withdraw; maintain order with a minimum of restraint; encourage; be friendly; love your children and respect them; accentuate your positive side and your children's |
| A demonstration of inadequacy as an adult interacting with a child or with children       | I am no good as a parent in this situation or possibly at all; I need to demonstrate that neither I nor anyone else could handle the children or the situation; I need to save face and not lose the esteem of others | Despair; wanting to give up; not wanting to be seen as bad person because I feel inadequate as parent; embarrassed; depleted                                                                               | To have faith in the children; to learn to give up a sense that adult value depends on children's behavior; to have courage; to act because it needs to be done regardless of consequences or feelings of others | Stick with it! Develop as soon as possible a non-demand relationship with the children; have faith in their ability; enjoy just being with them; encourage           |

Note: We have used the example of "parent" as an adult role with children; however, any adult role (e.g., teacher) may be substituted for the parent role.

playroom activities (Dreikurs et al., 1959, pp. 53-61). In any of the C groups, the children of a particular family may at times work with the parents and counselor in the group. This process seems to be especially helpful for the single parents' C group, possibly because the lines of communication between parent and child appear to be much more direct when there is only one parent in the family.

### **Group Counseling for Adolescents and a C Group for Parents of Adolescents**

Recently, the center has offered group counseling for adolescents. The adolescent groups have emphasized the democratic principles of cooperation within as well as outside the group. The Dreikursian chart of mistaken goals, with the added goal of "thrill-seeking" (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964, p. 65), is frequently discussed. Recommendations from the group provide adolescents with a way of dealing with the private logic (Adler, 1969) of their lifestyles. Group exercises have been initiated to facilitate reflection on the roles that people play, the goals that one is seeking, and the means by which one can increase the effectiveness of this interaction with others. It is felt that the exercises have helped to produce group movement. At times, the adolescents attempt to shock the members of the group by revealing an assortment of past exploits. Disclosing these experiences appears to be one vehicle by which adolescents evaluate the trust level within the group. A female and a male counselor lead each group, with the idea that modeling by a compatible, mixed sex team of counselors is helpful in promoting an awareness of positive adult-adolescent relationships.

A C group for parents of adolescents is also provided by the center. The major emphasis within this group is to help parents understand how their behavior affects their children. In many instances the way parents interact with the adolescents may encourage the children's mistaken assumptions about life. An interesting session for parents often takes place after they have observed an audiovisual film in which adolescents discuss personal concerns. The parents have expressed their amazement at some of the very human conflicts that exist for young people. A suggested exercise for future work with adolescents and parents has been to bring A, B, C adolescents together with X, Y, Z parents in order to foster meaningful dialog. Hopefully, such an approach would allow participants to more clearly observe the purposive behavior in adult-adolescent interaction.

### **Conclusion**

Today, people are licensed and trained for a variety of activities; however, child-rearing practices are usually developed through a random series of personal experiences, and parents often question the need to take time for child-rearing preparation. A response to their hesitancy can be found

in the observation that the old traditions for child rearing are no longer effective (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964, pp. 6-7).

Unlike some psychologies, Adlerian psychology may be easily understood. A parent education center with the C-group format can be used as one instrument in fostering needed training and facilitating effective understanding of Adlerian child-rearing principles.

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