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Possibilities, Potency and Prescriptiveness in Family TIES

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Family TIES is an adaptation of the PREPARE Curriculum® which examines possibilities for intervention and then selects potent transfer training strategies using elements of the PREPARE Curriculum®. It is intended to be prescriptive, thereby facilitating change and improvement in social emotional competency for youth and their families.

We attempt to use an ecological approach to treatment in Family TIES. Ecological treatment focuses on strengthening relationships in the life space of a child's family, school, peers, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). No force is more powerful than that of the parents, who are the life space experts on their offspring. But in a climate that blames problems on so-called dysfunctional families, parents are often the missing team members. The onus falls on the facilitators to reach out to parents and youth and make them feel comfortable in the Family TIES group. In this way they are engaged in becoming team members to help rebuild the family. In our experience, that comfortable training environment can lead to greatly enhanced possibilities for successful acquisition of interpersonal skills for the family. Except in rare cases when parent contact is prohibited, the over-arching goal is to maintain and strengthen family bonds. (Brendtro and Mitchell 2011 p.8)

Urie Bronfenbrenner famously noted that every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her. When asked to explain what he meant by irrationally crazy, he noted that he would have used the word love but some people would probably not be receptive (Bronfenbrenner 2005). Ironically, concepts like love and compassion may be coming back into professional parlance from experts in trauma and neuroscience (Szalavitz & Perry, 2010). Psychiatrist Bruce Perry shows that love is essential for healing and healthy growth. In the simplest terms, the most powerful therapy is human love. (Brendtro and Mitchell 2011 p.12) What better way to attempt to facilitate strengthening family bonds than to have the family engage in caring communication. This type of communication is central to the approach of Family TIES. We first teach youth and their families to use the skills of Listening, Expressing Your Feelings, Understanding the Feelings of Others, Negotiating and Problem Solving. Once this foundation has been laid, the attempt is to practically incorporate and build on the use of these skills in their real life interactions.

The techniques we use to do so are numerous, but a very potent one is the use of the Angry Behavior Cycle (Calame & Parker 2013) . This is the practice where youth identify the things that they do to make others angry. They make a list of approximately half a dozen things that they do that provokes others to anger either purposely or inadvertently. If they

examine those behaviors and deliberately choose to eliminate or change them, they gain the power to greatly reduce the cycle of conflicts they experience.

These lists, created by youth and their families, first can serve to underline their awareness of how they might provoke others and help them to identify what they need to change in order to live a life of less conflict. Family TIES facilitates the revealing of these admissions to the parents of the youth who in turn share their own lists of provocative behaviors with their child. Youth and parents benefit immensely from this candidness when astute Family TIES animators use the lists of behaviors to examine possibilities for change in family interaction. Coaching the family and prescribing the use of the varied skills provided in Skillstreaming and the Prepare Curriculum facilitates potent interventions. Role plays can be set up by allowing parents and youth to choose which of the caring communication skills they have learned, that are best for them to use to work out one of these conflict issues. Controlling their personal skills practice can be an extremely potent factor for change.

If it is not apparent to the youth or parents, there are times when the Family TIES trainer will need to suggest the skills that could be used to address one of the multiple conflict cycles. Frequently there is a problem in the family functioning or interaction that can give the competent or experienced Family TIES trainer an opportunity to become prescriptive in selecting a skill or technique for the family to use in ameliorating the Angry Behavior Cycle issue. This opportunity for prescriptiveness can lead to major change in family dynamics when an otherwise deadlocked issue is brought to the forefront and resolved through this caring communication exercise. A powerful potency exists when the facilitator has the ability to recognize a problem, quickly identify, and recommend a course of action by using one of the skills previously or subsequently learned.

Transfer or integration of skills to each trainee's repertoire is a primary objective. Using relevant experiences as a context to practice the learning increases possibilities for powerful change to occur. Once change occurs in one interaction, youth and families are able to see the potency of the intervention and possibilities for more change in their own lives. This experience is very empowering for both youth and their parents / significant others.

A simple illustration of the potential is in the following scenario where we will examine possibilities for intervention with a typical family who might use Family TIES as a means to smooth out family relations. What can trainers/interveners/animators do in this instance with this family?

Samuel's Family Profile:

15 year old Samuel is the son of a busy set of parents in their late thirties. The family is intact at this point, but the marriage has had ups and downs since 1997 when Carol and Henry were married. Henry is a long distance truck driver who is away from home frequently on long hauls. Carol works as an assistant manager in a retail clothing store which causes her to work long hours. Carol blames her husband for an unruly son who doesn't listen to her, is skipping school and has been caught smoking marijuana behind the school gymnasium. She claims Henry is not home enough and their son needs him. Henry makes almost double the money on long hauls as he would make if he transported locally and did moving. Henry suspects his wife of having an affair with her boss because she works late at night after store closing.

Samuel is left to his own devices because of his hard working parents and is often upset by his parents' bickering when they are finally together. He waits for the day to return when his family was closer and happier. Samuel supports his dad's work but not his mom's. He thinks she should stay at home and be a homemaker for him and his dad. Mom hopes to become the store manager one day.

Samuel is at home after being suspended from school until his parents can come in to see the principal. Father hates drugs, including marijuana, as he lost a brother to a heroin overdose. Samuel has proclaimed that he loves marijuana and will never do anything more serious. Mother smokes marijuana occasionally and Samuel has recently observed his mother smoking a joint from a distance, has said nothing to his parents, but has confided in the Family TIES training staff. The secrecy around Mom's pot smoking may have led to the false suspicion about an affair because mom has had to sneak around to buy and use her pot even if it is only occasionally. She knows her husband would freak out if he knew.

The Angry Behaviour Cycle session for this family:

Samuel's list:

from himself:

- leaves dishes around the living room
- doesn't come home on time
- uses foul language
- skips school

does not do his homework

From his father:

doesn't take out the garbage

From his mother:

doesn't answer our call on his mobile

From Mother and Father: gets thrown out of school for skipping and smoking marijuana

Henry's list :

from himself:

works too much

watches too much TV

snores

from Carol:

always says he is tired

only watches sports

doesn't support Carol's need to succeed

from Samuel:

won't take him on the road

yells at him to do chores

Carol's list:

from herself:

doesn't return from work when she says

she will

doesn't let people know where she is

forgets the grocery list at home

nags about house cleaning

from Henry:

leaves his car without gas in it

never tells him what she's doing

from Samuel:

goes in his room when he is not there

she smokes marijuana too

nags about dirty dishes

Suggested PREPARE Curriculum tools for this family in response to Angry Behavior

Cycle issues:

Samuel		
Said by:	Statement	Suggested Prepare Curriculum tools
Samuel	leaves dishes around the living room	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Responsibility
	doesn't come home on time	Understanding the Feelings of Others Negotiation, Trust Account, Responsibility
	uses foul language	Using Self Control, Apologizing
	skips school	Using Self Control, Trust Account, Responsibility
	does not do his homework	Arranging Problems By Importance (if overwhelmed) Apologizing
Father	does not take out the garbage	Anger Regulation, Trust Account, Responsibility ,
Mother	doesn't answer our call on his mobile	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Apologizing, Anger Regulation, Responsibility,
From parents	gets thrown out of school for skipping and smoking marijuana	Dealing With Group Pressure Understanding the Feelings of Others, Apologizing, Anger Regulation
Suggested tools to use		Expressing Your Feelings, Anger Regulation, Problem Solving, Social Perception Training, Stress Management, Moral Reasoning, Character Ed , Empathy Training

Henry

Said by:	Statement	Suggested Prepare Curriculum tools
Henry	works too much	Negotiating, Apologizing , Understanding the Feelings of Others
	watches too much TV	Negotiating, Understanding the Feelings of Others, Stress Management
	snores	Apologizing, Problem Solving
Carol	always says he is tired	Problem Solving
	only watches sports	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Negotiating, Apologizing
	doesn't support my need to succeed	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Apologizing,
Samuel	won't take him on the road	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Expressing Your Feelings
	yells at him to do chores	Making a Complaint Constructively, Anger Regulation
Suggested tools to use		Understanding the Feelings of Others, Expressing Your Feelings, Character Education, Anger Regulation, Empathy Training, Social Perception Training, Problem Solving, Moral Reasoning

Carol		
Said by	Statement	Suggested Prepare Curriculum tools

Carol	doesn't return from work when she says she will	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Responsibility
	doesn't let people know where she is	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Responsibility
	forgets the grocery list at home	Problem Solving
	nags about house cleaning	Making a Complaint Constructively
Henry	leaves his car without gas in it	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Responsibility
	never tells him what she's doing	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Responsibility
Samuel	goes in his room when he is not there	Understanding the Feelings of Others
	she smokes marijuana too	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Apologizing, Dealing with Someone Else's Anger, Getting Ready for a Difficult Conversation
	nags about dirty dishes	Understanding the Feelings of Others, Negotiating, Apologizing
Suggested tools to use		Understanding the Feelings of Others, Apologizing , Anger Regulation, Morality Empathy Training, Problem Solving, Character Education, Social Perception Training: understanding family norms

The goal of the exercise is for the family members to initially select 2 or 3 provocative behaviors they can change about themselves and contract to do that. The objective would be to take a simpler issue first to try to give the family opportunity to succeed at making positive change on a minor annoyance and build up to some more challenging issues later.

Samuel's disclosure of his mother's drug use initially shocks mom and dad, and may become an immediate focus. Given the sensitivity of the statement Samuel makes, a first step needs to be to deal with the "Elephant in the room". Our suggestion is to respectfully ask the group to take a break and talk to the family members about how to deal with this situation:

1) The first option is that the facilitator proposes to the family that the issue be discussed elsewhere or at a later date due to its delicate nature. 2) It could be that Samuel and/or the family want to discuss this now in the presence of the facilitators and group members. 3.) It could be that Samuel is asked to do a role play "Apologizing" to his parents about bringing this up in public. 4) A suggestion could be that other issues are discussed for now and that this one is not appropriate for the Family TIES group. This is the challenge facing the Family TIES facilitator.

Other strategies could be used after careful consideration as to the impact or level of comfort of the family. Above all, the issues revealed in the Angry Behavior Cycle exercise or any discussion of family situations, need to be processed in a way that is comfortable for all concerned. It should be made clear to families who agree to do the Family TIES program that the confidentiality rule is extremely important. This is a multiple family training program that uses real life events in an attempt to resolve issues that are frequently very common to all. In reality, some youth would only ever disclose sensitive issues in the safety and comfort of this group. Relationships are formed, understood and changed in this environment. Trainers and facilitators must take this approach seriously and handle it with care and most definitely in consultation with others at all times.

The best strategy is for the facilitator to prepare each session in conjunction with his /her co-trainer giving special consideration to what may be best to focus on with each family. That is where the prescriptiveness of the training becomes key.

Should this family decide to deal with these issues immediately both Samuel and Henry will need to use "Expressing Your Feelings", and Henry will need to use Anger Regulation when he hears his wife is smoking pot. Both Samuel and Carol will need to "Understand the

Feelings of Others”, taking into account Henry’s family history with drugs and, in doing so, discuss family norms. Carol should use Getting Ready for a Difficult Conversation, knowing and expecting her husband’s prospective outrage. Carol will have to be humble and understand Henry’s suspicion that she was having an affair because of her sneaking around and staying late to work in order to smoke a little pot. The potential for working on interpersonal communications in this family is enormous. The possibilities are endless. With multiple families in the group there is tremendous opportunity to do the same. Also families tend to help other families as the training takes on significant meaning and an ability to be helpful to all who participate.

As animators, we would do further role plays with some Negotiating around having some time for being together as a family. Both within this skill, and outside of it, there is opportunity to use “Expressing Your Feelings”, “Understanding the Feelings of Others’ and “Problem Solving”.

A very helpful consideration for Family TIES facilitators is to understand the use of Empathy Training and/or the corresponding use of Understanding the Feelings of Others. This not only fits perfectly here, but also is one of the most frequently needed tools to resolve issues that greatly affect the interpersonal relationships of family members. Consequently, a good deal of time is spent with families using Problem Solving (Parker & Calame et al. 2013), Social Perception Training (Gundersen, Stromgren & Moynahan 2013) and Empathy Training (Sara Salmon-in press) concepts along with the other essential social skills training procedures (McGinnis 2012) in the program. The aim is to reconcile differences and improve family ties using the essential skills and expansions of the PREPARE Curriculum (Goldstein 1999). We also use the skill of Giving a Compliment in a closing exercise to give families practice in looking for and expressing things they appreciate about other family members. Hence the name of this training program: Family TIES - **T**raini**I**n **E**ssential **S**kills (Calame & Parker 2013)

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