The family’s influence on its individual members cannot be underestimated. Most children develop their values, beliefs about self and others, and typical patterns of behavior within their family system (Adler, 1931). Alfred Adler, a pioneer in the use of a systems approach to working with clients, believed that individuals could be understood only within a social context and that the family provided the first and most important context (LaFountain & Mustaine, 1998). Other writers support Adler's recognition of the family system's influence on individual family members. For example, Brown and Proud (1983) stated that the family is "the center of learning for social behaviors" (p. 83), and Lewis (1996) asserted that "it is seldom that a school counselor can successfully intervene in the life of a student without considering the continuous influence of the family as the primary social system for the student" (p. 93). Kraus (1998) also proposed that school counselors "embrace the idea of children's problems being viewed in the social context of their families and a family being understood as a system" (p. 14). As suggested by these authors, school counselors can better understand the student's social context by maintaining a family systems perspective when consulting with parents.

Life cycle transitions and extrafamilial influences

Life cycle transitions refer to the developmental events that occur in all families (Walsh, 1993). Births, deaths, developmental changes in children as they age, and illnesses are examples of developmental events. It is beneficial for school counselors to assess any major life cycle changes that might have led parents to seek assistance. For example, the birth of a new child creates necessary changes in the existing family, and consultation may be sought to ease the transitional stress. Parents can be taught how to respond to their older child's new and excessive requests for attention, and the child can be taught to seek attention in appropriate ways such as asking parents for some one-on-one time rather than misbehaving to get negative attention.

Separation and divorce are transitional events for some families (Ahrons, 1999). School counselors are well aware of their effect on families that experience these events. It has been thought that divorces often leaves lasting scars on children (Loehart & Keys, 1998). Teachers often are more tolerant of a student's behavior if they understand that the student is responding to family circumstances. In addition, school counselors often refer families for counseling. Knowledge of family systems can help counselors collaborate with family counseling providers as well as evaluate the services offered.

In this article, we describe family systems concepts and techniques that school counselors, as consultants, can use to better understand the family system. The concepts are life cycle transitions and extrafamilial influences, extended family influences, boundaries, parental hierarchy and power, and triangulation. Family systems techniques include joining, normalizing, and reframing problems, using siblings to obtain information, asking questions about the daily routine, using solution-focused strategies, and encouragement.

Family Systems Concepts

Investigating the issues that affect the family and the dynamics within the family not only helps school counselors assist parents, but also helps school counselors have a better understanding of the students with whom they work. The following concepts can be explored during consultation sessions with one or both parents or other family members.

Life Cycle Transitions and Extrafamilial Influences

Life cycle transitions refer to the developmental events that occur in all families. Births, deaths, developmental changes in children as they age, and illnesses can have a significant impact on family dynamics. School counselors can play a crucial role in helping families navigate these transitions. By understanding the life cycle transitions, counselors can provide support and resources to families. Additionally, extrafamilial influences refer to events outside the immediate family that can affect the family system. These influences can be positive or negative and can include social, economic, and health-related factors. School counselors can assess how these external factors might be impacting the family and provide appropriate support or referrals.
while offering nurturing and support (Minuchin, 1974). Some typical family subsystems are parents, siblings, females, and males. Boundaries are the rules that determine who participates in a subsystem and how he or she participates. Healthy families have clear boundaries. Clear boundaries not only allow family members to be different from each other and to develop autonomy, but also allow contact, nurturing, and support among family members. When boundaries are not clear, families gravitate toward either enmeshment or disengagement (Minuchin, 1974). Enmeshment and disengagement indicate preferred styles of interaction and do not necessarily suggest dysfunction.

When boundaries are diffuse, enmeshment tends to occur (Minuchin, 1974). In families with very young children, enmeshment frequently develops between the parents (particularly the mother) and the children. Because infants and very young children need much care and nurturing, this interaction style is useful, but it becomes less functional as children grow older. When enmeshment is excessive or continues beyond the infant and toddler years, children may not be allowed to develop independence or assume responsibility for their actions. Problems in one person echo throughout the family system and strongly affect other family members who may become overinvolved in the problem. For example, siblings often argue with each other. In enmeshed families, parents become involved in the argument, try to determine which child is right, and resolve the problem, rather than allowing siblings to solve the problem independently.

At the other extreme are rigid boundaries that result in disengagement of family members. Families exhibiting this interaction style respect individual differences and support striving toward independence. However, support is absent when family members experience difficulties. For example, children who are failing in school may be left to solve the problem on their own with no parental support. Even though adolescents must develop independence, they also need support that may not be provided in families with a disengaged parenting style.

Children alter the family's structure and require flexibility in parenting styles to meet their developmental needs. Infants need nurturing and support, older children require guidance and structure, and adolescents need to develop independence and responsibility (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). A functional family system allows independence while offering nurturing and support (Minuchin, 1974). School counselors can teach families about children's developmental needs and how parents can help them meet these needs through allowing appropriate independence or providing needed support.

**Boundaries**

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**Parental Hierarchy and Power**

Parental hierarchy and power pertain to the parents' leadership role in the family (Minuchin, 1974). According to Minuchin, families must have a strong parental subsystem with clear boundaries in order to function effectively. Exploration of the influence of extended family members will assist in determining who is the ultimate decision maker in the family. In single parent families, the single parent and a grandparent or other relative may share leadership responsibilities. If the adults work together effectively, shared leadership can be useful; however, problems often arise when adults disagree on rules for the family.

A frequent occurrence in families with many children, in single parent families, and in families where both parents work outside the home is that a child is used as the third leg of the triangle. This child might be selected because of his or her position in the family constellation, looks, behavior, or other characteristics. The child used in this way often exhibits behavioral or academic problems at school (Minuchin, 1974).

Minuchin (1974) postulated that triangles develop when there is conflict between the marital partners. Each partner demands that a child take sides with him or her. Siding with one adult automatically means that the other adult is being attacked, which puts the child in a lose-lose situation. Families who consistently use one child to reduce conflict or stress between the partners often contend with behavioral problems. School counselors can offer suggestions for working with the problem behavior. However, if consultation indicates that parental conflict is very high, marriage counseling might be the treatment of choice. If this is the case, a referral is in order.

**Triangles**

Bowen (1978), Minuchin (1974) and other family systems theorists (e.g., Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000) discussed the concept of triangulation. Bowen observed that a two-person system is inherently unstable and that when anxiety becomes high within the dyad a third person, activity, or thing is “triangled in” to reduce anxiety. Often, one child in the family is consistently used as the third leg of the triangle. This child might be selected because of his or her position in the family constellation, looks, behavior, or other characteristics. The child used in this way often exhibits behavioral or academic problems at school (Minuchin, 1974).

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**Family Systems Techniques**

Family systems techniques have been used effectively when counseling families (e.g., Bowen, 1978; Cherniss & Herzog, 1996; Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987; Minuchin, 1974; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). In addition, school counselors can use these techniques to establish a working relationship with one or more family members and to gain valuable information about the family system during traditional parent consultation.

**Joining**

Joining, or establishing rapport, is a technique frequently used by school counselors in their work with children and adults (Baker, 1996). Engaging in small talk and discussing the parents' previous school contacts are common ways to join with parents. Mimesis, which means to imitate, indicates the counselor's adoption of the family's communication style and affective range (Minuchin, 1974) and is another joining technique. For example, a counselor might assume a relaxed posture and an informal communication style with parents who appear to be “tied back.” Using self-disclosure to establish commonalities with parents is another joining method that can be used by school counselors. Joining can also be used to establish the counselor's leadership role in consultation by structuring the session in terms of session goals and time allotted.

If more than one person is present for the consultation session, it is important to physically attend to everyone. When the counselor addresses each person, that person should be faced squarely and offered direct eye contact if that is culturally appropriate. Because the mother has traditionally been the primary caregiver and the liaison between home and school, questions are often addressed to and information sought from her. If both parents are present, it is vital to include them both in information sharing. For families whose culture is patriarchal, addressing the father first is an effective way to join with him and gain his active involvement in the session and
Normalizing and Refraining

Normalizing refers to helping parents see that their and their children's behaviors, attitudes, and feelings are normal (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987). For example, if parents seek the help of the school counselor because their child lacks motivation to do his or her homework, the school counselor can state that this is common for students and that parents often consult counselors regarding this issue. This relays a message to the parents that they are not alone in this struggle, they are not bad parents, and their child is not dysfunctional. It is reassuring to know that other families also struggle with this problem and that this situation can be resolved.

Reframing refers to putting a positive spin on or restating a negative statement, problem, or situation (Taffel, 1999). When things are not going well, there is a tendency for family members to perceive the situation event negatively. Although normal, this thinking is not productive. Reframing is used to "change family perspectives and ultimately to change family behavior patterns on the basis of the new options and alternatives" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000, p. 214). For example, parents may present the problem of a rebellious teenage daughter, explaining that she sneaks out at night and is disrespectful to them. The school counselor can reframe this rebellious behavior as a bid for independence and can encourage the parents to provide appropriate opportunities for independence. The counselor might say, "Perhaps what your daughter is trying to tell you by her behavior is that she would like to be in more control of her life. What are some areas where she can have more say and make more decisions in things that concern her?"

Although normalizing and reframing may seem simplistic, their effect on parents and children is enormous (Taffel, 1999). It is often difficult for parents to muster the courage to talk to counselors because they may mistakenly think that it signals a parental weakness or problem. By using normalizing and reframing early in the session, the school counselor can allay those fears. Appropriate and frequent use of normalizing and reframing also deters or limits blaming behavior and shifts the focus to problem solution.

Use of Siblings

The sibling relationships within the family are important, and talking to members of the sibling subsystem can provide school counselors with valuable information about family dynamics (McGoldrick, Watson, & Benton, 1999). When parents, for whatever reason, are unable to furnish information to the school counselor, school counselors can elicit information and help from siblings who attend the same school as the child exhibiting problems. For example, if a student is presenting selective mutism at school, the school counselor can ask the siblings if this behavior is also present at home. At times, children discuss strained relationships with their brothers and sisters; younger children often complain of bullying behavior by their older siblings. School counselors can mediate problems between siblings to create a more pleasant situation at home. School counselors should obtain permission to talk with the other siblings to maintain a respectful relationship with both students.

Daily Routine Questions

Consultation with parents usually is focused on concerns about one child in the family. Asking questions about the family’s daily routine obtains information that will further understanding regarding that child (Walton, 1976). In addition, sibling relationships, parent-child relationships, and the relationship between the parents are identified. During the questioning sequence counselors have many opportunities to join with the family by expressing empathy for them and for their situation. For example, simply saying, "It sounds like things are pretty busy around your house in the morning," can help parents feel understood and also suggest that they will not be negatively judged.

To determine how the child gets up on a weekday morning, the counselor can ask who awakens the child, how many times he or she is called, and how the child manages dressing. Other questions gather information about how the child takes care of washing and brushing teeth and eating breakfast. Asking questions about leaving for school provides information about riding the bus and making certain the child has homework, books, lunch money, or other items. Questions can be asked about dinner time such as responsibility for setting and/or clearing the table, eating, and helping with the dishes. In addition, questions can be asked about handling homework and going to bed. The answers to these questions can provide information about decision-making, responsibilities, and discipline as well as about problem-solving strategies, expectations for children, family activities, and feelings of encouragement or discouragement in the family (Mullick, 2002).

If, for example, an 8-year-old child has help getting washed and dressed before school, the parents are doing things for the child that the child could do for himself or herself. The counselor can suggest that the child be allowed to make decisions about what to wear and to assume responsibility for getting ready for school. Eliciting this information can lead to other questions about responsibility for performing chores. It has been our experience that children who have few responsibilities at home often have difficulty managing school work on their own.

When problems are uncovered, counselors should follow up with questions regarding problem-solving strategies or discipline techniques, such as "How did you handle that?, How did that work? What else have you tried?" and "What other things might you try?" By obtaining this information, counselors can determine the range of responses available to parents and whether information about alternative problem-solving techniques is necessary. If successful strategies are already being used, parents can be complimented on their success and encouraged to use the strategies for other problems.

Sometimes problems arise because of parental expectations for their children. If the school counselor believes this might be occurring, it is useful to elicit the source of the expectations. Expectations are often handed down from generation to generation, passed on by extended family members, borrowed from general societal expectations, or result from unfulfilled parental wishes. For example, a boy might resist going to baseball practice because he doesn't like sports, but he would like to play in the orchestra. Making expectations and their source explicit can help parents become more accepting of differences between them and their children. Asking, "Who would be disappointed or upset if your son quit baseball and joined the orchestra?" can help parents determine the origin of expectations for their children, themselves, or for the family as a whole.

Questions about the daily routine can indicate if parents demand too much of children, or too little. If the demands on children appear to be inappropriate, counselors can provide information about child development. Demanding too much of children, as happens when children are parentified, can deprive them of needed support. Demanding too little, or pampering children, is common in today's busy households. Doing things for children that they can do for themselves can, however, prevent children from learning that they are capable people who can master the skills needed to be successful in school and at work (Bettnar & Law, 1990).

Some families, especially those headed by single parents, have little time for fun. Questions about the daily routine frequently reveal this state of affairs. Helping the family plan enjoyable, inexpensive activities to do together can ease family stress. If children look forward to family fun time, their parents may be motivated to take on additional responsibilities in the home. Planning simple rituals such as regular mealtimes and bedtime routines can lead to higher ratings of overall family adjustment (Sprunger, Broyce, & Gaines, 1985). Bedtime rituals also contribute to feelings of comfort and security for children (Mullick & Fincher, 1996).

Discouragement about problems is often the reason that parents seek consultation, but parents frequently mention things they like about their child/family when answering daily routine questions. School counselors encourage parents when they discover and point out aspects of family life that are effective or enjoyable. Likewise, when parents have worked out an appropriate solution for a problem, explicitly discussing what they did that was useful further suggests that this is a technique that can be used for other concerns.
Questions about the family’s daily routine can provide a wealth of information for the school counselor. In addition, they frequently help parents gain insight into common, systemic patterns of interaction that may not be effective.

**Solution-Focused Strategies**

Solution-focused strategies were designed by family counselors (e.g., De Jong & Berg, 1998; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998) to provide a model of brief therapy that focused on small changes and on solutions (what is going right) rather than on problems (what is going wrong) (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Instead of striving for drastic changes in a family, O’Hanlon (1999) suggested that very small changes help people see a difference in their lives. By doing something—anything—different, behavior change can occur. One technique that uses the idea of small changes is to have parents change their clothes after coming home from work. This “Mr. Rogers” technique is something different that parents can do to mark the transition from the workplace to home that can result in a more relaxed and cooperative relationship with their children (O’Hanlon, 1999). School counselors can suggest that parents take 10 to 15 minutes of time out for themselves several times a week. This is another small change technique aimed at lessening the enormous amount of stress experienced by parents.

Solution-focused questioning is a consultation tool that can be used to discover what is going right with families and individuals. Berg and Miller (1992) described five types of questions that are based on the belief that the best way to help parents is to build on their strengths and resources. The first type of questioning is aimed at eliciting descriptions of change that occurred before the parent consulted with the counselor. Clients often begin changing the problem behavior prior to seeking help. The counselor can determine if anything has changed by stating the following: “It is our experience that many people notice that things are better between the time they set up an appointment and the time they come in for the first session. Have you noticed such changes in your situation?” (Berg & Miller, 1992, p. 72). This question helps parents see that not only is change possible, but also it might have already begun. Another question that suggests change is possible is “What do you hope will change as a result of meeting with me today?”

The second type of questioning, finding exceptions, helps parents discover times and situations when the problem does not occur. Counselors can say to parents “I’ll bet there are times when you expect the problem to occur and it doesn’t. How do you account for this?” Counselors can also ask the following: “How do you make this happen? When is this problem less frequent?” and “Was this easy or difficult for you to do?” De Jong and Berg (1998) suggested that if the parents have difficulty thinking of exceptions the counselor could ask, “If I were to ask your best friend if things have been better lately what would your friend say?” This type of questioning helps parents see that they do possess successful strategies for changing behavior.

The third type of questioning helps parents define their goals and also prompts them to notice small changes. Examples are “How will you know when things have gotten better for you?” and “What will be different?” When parents struggle with stating their counseling goal in specific terms, the miracle question (Berg & Miller, 1992) is especially useful. This question can be asked in the following way:

Suppose that one night, while you were asleep, there is a miracle and the problem that brought you into therapy is solved. However, because you are asleep you don’t know the miracle has happened. When you wake up in the morning, what will be different that will tell you that this miracle has taken place? What else? (Berg & Miller, 1992, p.13)

The miracle question helps parents specifically describe their counseling goal, visualize the behavior sought, and notice goal attainment.

The fourth type of query is scaling questions. “On a scale from one to ten, with one being failure and ten being complete success, how would you rate how you’re doing with your problem right now?” Another question is “When you are a — — (one or two points higher than the former response) what will you be doing differently?” These examples of scaling questions are quick assessments that help the counselor and parents know where they are and where they’d like to be. According to Berg and Miller (1992), scaling questions are also useful because they help parents focus on small changes that can then be encouraged or reinforced. Often when parents seek help from the school counselor, they have a list of things they would like to change in their family. Scaling helps to rank the most important problem to address that session or on which to spend the most time. This can be done by asking, “If 10 is the most urgent and 1 is the least, which one of the problems you just mentioned would get a 10?”

The fifth type of questioning is used to highlight the coping strategies that parents employ when faced with their problem. These questions demonstrate to parents that they have the power to solve this problem. By realizing that they already utilize successful strategies, parents can be encouraged to continue using them or use them more frequently. Asking, “How do you manage to keep going?” can point out some instance of success and is especially useful when working with parents who feel discouraged (Berg & Miller, 1992).

**Encouragement**

Many people agree that parenting is the most difficult job anyone can have. Because of this, the most important and helpful thing the school counselor can do is to encourage parents (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987). Encouragement is essential for both individuals and the family as a whole. Encouragement, which focuses on the parent’s resources, empowers them ( Eckstein, Belingua, & Elliott-Aplnpe, 2000), and is the most important element in promoting change (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987). It is the process of instilling confidence to do something different (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1983, p. 318). The use of encouragement can also help break down or prevent resistance by parents and persuade them to talk, listen, and return to counseling. By using encouragement techniques with parents, counselors model its effectiveness and promote its use with children. Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) wrote extensively of encouragement being the most important and powerful aspect of raising children. They defined encouragement as a “continuous process aimed at giving the child a sense of self-respect and a sense of accomplishment” (p. 39).

Encouragement is not reassurance (e.g., telling someone that everything will work out fine if they just persist or that there is nothing to fear) and it is not praise. That is, it is not a response that is tied to something one has or does. Examples of praise are “You did a great job, You look great,” or “What a pretty picture.” Instead, encouragement comments on the process (Dinkmeyer, Carlson, & Dinkmeyer, 1994).

Examples of encouraging statements that can be directed toward children are “You really worked hard on that. Look at the progress you’re making,” or “I can tell you really enjoyed doing that.” The difference between praise and encouragement is subtle; however, it is helpful to remember that “praise puts the emphasis upon the product, while encouragement stresses the effort of contribution” (Dinkmeyer et al., 1994, p. 153).

Parents as well as children need to be encouraged. Some encouraging statements school counselors can use with parents are the following: “I can tell you’re worked hard to change that behavior. What are your ideas on ...? It sounds like your family has a lot of fun together. You are an expert on knowing your child. What do you think might work?” and “I can tell you really love (him or her).” Often counselors are so focused on solving problems that they do not take the time to encourage the parents with whom they are working. It is helpful for counselors to remember that parents are often discouraged and extinction of this discouragement as well as the problem behavior is worthy of their effort.

Encouragement is the thread that can be woven into the other concepts and techniques described. For example, thanking parents for taking time to come to the school not only is encouraging, but also fosters joining. Normalizing and reframing behaviors reassure and encourage parents. Using daily-routine and solution-focused questions allows school counselors to note and encourage efforts at effective child rearing. Encouragement is a “demonstration that the client has the resources and
options which he [or she] can bring to bear on significant issues in life” (Allen, 1971, p. 45). Recognizing parents’ and children’s courage and willingness to try something new can be a very useful tool in establishing an atmosphere for change.

Conclusion

Without adding family counseling to an already overloaded schedule, school counselors can view the concerns expressed and information provided by parents through the family systems lens. Through the application of family systems concepts and techniques, counselors can ascertain family relationships during parent consultation, regardless of who is present. They can then help parents plan interventions that have an increased chance of being supported by other family members. In addition, school counselors who are mindful of the influence of the family system can use this knowledge to be more effective in their individual and group work with students (Davis, 2001).

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