

I do certain things when I interview a family group, or a husband and wife, or a mother and son. People come for help, but they also come to be substantiated in their attitudes and they come to have face saved. I pay attention to this, and I'm likely to speak in a fashion that makes them think I'm on their side. Then I digress on a tangent that they can accept, but it leaves them teetering on the edge of expectation. They have to admit that my digression is all right, it's perfectly correct, but they didn't expect me to do it that way. It's an uncomfortable position to be teetering, and they want some solution of the matter that I had just brought to the edge of settlement. Since they want that solution, they are more likely to accept what I say. They are very eager for a decisive statement. If you gave the directive right away, they could take issue with it. But if you digress, they hope you will get back, and they welcome a decisive statement from you.

Erickson illustrated this strategy with two cases, both of them involving twelve-year-old boys.

Johnny was brought in by his mother because he wet the bed every night. His mother wanted to help him with this problem, but his father did not. The father was a harsh and cold man who accused his wife of "babying the brats too much." When the boy went to his father, he would get shoved aside. The mother tried to make up for the father's behavior. The boy's fundamental reaction was "I want love from my father, he doesn't give it, Mother always steps in and makes it unnecessary for him to give it." Ever since the boy could remember, his father had said that every kid wets the bed, it wouldn't be normal not to, he had done it himself until his late teens. The mother was, of course, fed up with the wet beds and wanted something done about it. Erickson reports:

I had one interview with the father to size him up. He was a loud-voiced man who walked into this office, sat down, and spoke as if I were about sixty feet away from him. He asked me if I didn't know that all kids wet the bed until they got to be about sixteen. That's what he did, that's what his father did, it was very certain I had done it, and certain that every other boy grew up that way. What was this nonsense about curing his boy of wetting the bed? I let the father explain it all to me. He enjoyed the interview and shook hands with me. He said he was delighted to have such an intelligent listener.

When the son and mother came in together, the woman said, "My husband told me he had explained things to you." I said, "Yes,

that's right, he explained at very considerable length." Her facial expression said, "Yes, I know." The son had a pained look on his face. I told them, "As far as I'm concerned, I'm going to forget about everything that he said. You don't have to, but then of course you weren't there, you only have some ideas of what he said. I'm just going to forget them because the ideas that you and I and your mother have are important. It's the ideas that you and I have, and that Johnny has, that are important."

You see what that does? I'm tying myself to Johnny first, and then tying it the other way around. First I'm allied with Johnny, then I have mother allied with me. You see Johnny's going to stand by me—because I'm going to forget what his father said, and Johnny would like to forget that. Then I tie mother to me by having her join me in forgetting what father said. This sets father aside, but it's not a hostile putting him aside. I've heard him out, and they know it. Father has come home and told them. I'm just forgetting about it, with no particular anger or distress. Father couldn't be included in the treatment because of his absolute opinions, so he needed to be set aside on this issue.

As I sized up the situation with mother and the boy, it was apparent that Johnny was utterly hostile toward his mother about this bedwetting. He was angry and in a struggle with her about it. I told Johnny that I had a remedy for him that he wouldn't like. It would be an effective remedy, absolutely helpful, absolutely certain to get him over the problem, yet he would not like it—but his mother would dislike it more. Now what could Johnny do? If his mother would dislike it more than he did, that would be fine. He could put up with anything that made his mother suffer more.

My proposal to Johnny was rather simple. I pointed out to him that his mother could get up at four or five o'clock in the morning, and if his bed was wet she could rouse him. She didn't have to wake him up if the bed was dry. However, if his bed was wet and she roused him, he could get up and sit down at his desk and copy so many pages from any book he chose. He could put in the time from four to seven o'clock, or from five to seven o'clock, copying material. His mother could watch him do that and watch him learning to improve his script. The boy's handwriting was really terrible and needed improvement.

To Johnny it sounded horrible to get up at four or five in the morning—but Mother had to get up first. It sounded unpleasant to have Mother sit there watching him improve his script, yet he only had to do that on mornings when his bed was wet. Nothing more disagreeable than getting up at that hour of the morning—to improve his handwriting.

They began the procedure, and it wasn't long before Johnny didn't have a wet bed every morning; he began skipping mornings. Pretty soon he had a wet bed only twice a week. Then a wet bed every ten days. Mother still had to get up every morning and check.

Finally it was a wet bed once a month, and then Johnny re-oriented himself entirely. He developed the first friendships he ever had. It was during the summer, and the kids came over to play with him and he went over to play with the kids. His marks in school that following September were greatly improved. His first real achievement.

Now that was playing mother against son and son against mother. It's that simple idea of "I've got a remedy for you, but you won't like it." Then I digress to the fact that mother will hate it even more. Johnny wants me to come to just what it is that is a remedy. Then he's all for it. Improvement in handwriting becomes the primary goal, a dry bed becomes an incidental, more or less accepted thing. It's no longer the dominant, threatening issue at hand.

Mother, watching her son improve his handwriting, could take pride in her son's accomplishment. The son could take pride in it. When the two of them brought the handwriting to show me, it was just an eager boy and an eager mother showing me this beautiful handwriting. I could go through it page after page and point out this letter "n," this letter "g," this letter "t," and discuss the beauty of the script.

Since Johnny has a dry bed, his father has played ball with him—coming home early from the office. The father's response when the boy stopped wetting the bed was surprisingly complimentary. He told the boy, "You learned to have a dry bed faster than I did; must be you're a lot smarter than me." He could afford to be very generous. He had told me off completely. Besides, it wasn't the psychiatrist who solved this problem for his son, it was the superior brain power he bequeathed to his son. In the family it became a joint achievement that was blessed by the father, and the boy got recognition and acceptance from his father.

Whatever the symptom, whether bedwetting or some other childhood problem, there is usually one adult who is overinvolved with the child, and the therapy disengages that pair from each other. In the previous case a task was given to mother and child, which forced them to become disengaged. In the following case an exasperating problem was relieved by a task for both boy and father.

For two years a twelve-year-old boy had been picking at a sore, a pimple, on his forehead, and it had become a continuous ulcer. His father and mother had resorted to all manner of punishment to keep him from picking at the sore. His schoolteachers and his schoolmates had tried to reform him. Medical doctors had explained about cancer, had bandaged and taped the sore, and had done what they could to keep him from touching it. The boy would reach up under the adhesive tape and pick at it. He explained that he just could not control the impulse.

The boy's mother and father did what they could to stop the boy from picking at the sore, but they disagreed on the value of punishment. The father had gone to extremes, depriving the boy of any number of toys; he had sold the boy's bicycle and had broken his bow and arrow.

Finally the parents brought the boy to me. I had an interview with the mother to learn something about the family situation so I could pick out something to work with. I learned about the values and obligations in the home, including the fact that the boy did chores. They had a large lawn, which he cared for, and a large garden. I also learned that the mother tended to be on the boy's side and that the boy was angry with his father for the various punishments, in particular the breaking of his bow and arrow. I also found out that the boy had a spelling problem; when he wrote he tended to leave out letters in words. I like to check on a child's schoolwork to see what is there.

I had an interview with the boy and his father together, and I focused immediately on how ownership is defined. I picked out the bow and arrow as an issue. Whose was it? The father admitted that the bow and arrow belonged to the boy; they were given to him for his birthday. Then I asked how an ulcer should be treated. We agreed that it should be treated with bandages and medications of various sorts. I asked how would you use a bow and arrow to treat it? How would breaking a bow and arrow be treating an ulcer? The father was very embarrassed, and the son was eying his father with narrowed eyes. After the father had flushed and squirmed quite a bit in this discussion, I turned to the boy and asked him if he did not think he could at least honestly credit his father with good intentions despite his stupid behavior. Both of them had to accept that statement. In this way the boy could call his father's behavior stupid, but to do so he would also have to credit him with being well-intentioned.

Then I asked how much further we should go in discussing medicines that didn't work. Or could we forget about those? I said, "You've had this for two years. All the medicines from breaking the