


Lose the parent, lose the child

A mantra for supervising clinicians in working with families and young people

eing able to work with clinicians as they find their stride in their work, and support them as they develop their own approach, has many rewards. I find that providing supervision to other clinicians has two major benefits: being able to take part in a clinician's growth, and being able to grow as a clinician yourself as you work to articulate what it is that you do in your work. Becoming an effective supervisor is much like gaining competency doing therapy; you gain competence through experience, training and supervision.

Learning how to provide effective feedback, encouraging self-reflection, and exploring counter-transference are all essential skills in providing supervision with all therapist experience levels (Falender & Shafranske, 2004). Being mindful of the clinician's level of experience is also important, providing more support and direct instruction to novice therapists, and less direct instruction with more experienced—keeping in mind that, according to Falender and Shafranske (2004), it takes five years for a therapist to reach competence and ten to reach mastery. Regardless of years of experience, one area that clinicians often seek supervision for is in their work with children and families.

Many therapists find themselves in the situation of needing to engage families

and, in particular, parents in the therapy process and have received little training as to how to do it. The most common pitfall I see in my work is the clinician getting stuck trying to engage the child while forgetting about the parent. This can have disastrous consequences. Certainly we have seen a lot of interventions and research that tells us that parent involvement is essential for the effective treatment of children (e.g., Barkley, 1997; Chorpito & Barlow, 1998; Roff, 2008). This is where my mantra comes in: Lose the Parent, Lose the Child. Developing the skills to engage the parent, while not appearing to the child to be siding with the parent, is an important challenge for a therapist.

Part of this challenge hinges on the therapist's views of the parents and their role in the child's problems. It can be difficult in many family or child counselling situations to not blame the parents for the challenges the child is experiencing. Being able to support the clinician in recognizing these feelings, and knowing what to do with them, can be a big part of this work. It is always important to remember, when working with families, that when parents phone a psychologist to get help with their child, before they even pick up the phone, they feel judged, feel like they have failed as parents.

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Deborah Bell is one of the proprietors of To the Moon and Back Psychological Services in Vancouver and Surrey. Deborah enjoys sharing her love of both clinical work and the spirit of children through teaching and supervising practitioners in their clinical work. She teaches at the graduate level and supervises clinicians at all levels of career development.

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They feel that, regardless of their best efforts and all their hopes and dreams of being the perfect parent to their child, they did not succeed, as they could not help their child themselves. Thus, although the clinician may be able to see many things the parents could be doing that might help, first they have to break through all of those feelings of parental ineffectiveness. Parents who feel judged in any way, when they are already primed to interpret the clinician's comments through this lens, will simply not come back.

Working with clinicians as they walk this line of engagement with the parents and the youth or child is very rewarding. And being witness to the powerful work that can be done when the parents and the child/adolescent in the family are embracing the process of therapy is a privilege. It is a reminder of why we do what we do, and if we can hold the parents' inner fears in our consciousness, while at the same time entering the world of the child, we can do so much more in the support of families, either directly or indirectly. ☞

References

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