

FAMILY THERAPY WITH ADOLESCENT OFFENDERS: A COLLABORATIVE TREATMENT STRATEGY

BRENT J. ATKINSON
Northern Illinois University
PAUL N. MCKENZIE
W.W. Allen Recovery Center
Plainview, Texas

An intervention strategy is presented which can be used with families of adolescents who continue breaking the law despite improvement of family functioning during therapy. The strategy emphasizes collaboration between the therapist and juvenile justice system in stopping the child's law-breaking behavior in the shortest amount of time. The treatment strategy is suggested as a specific intervention to be used only when conventional family therapy strategies have failed to promote the cessation of the adolescent's law-breaking behavior. As such, it is suggested as a strategy to be used in conjunction with family therapy rather than as a comprehensive treatment approach in itself.

For the clinician working with law-breaking adolescents, some useful literature has recently emerged from the structural/strategic and functional models of family therapy (Alexander, 1973, 1974; Alexander & Barton, 1980; Alexander & Parsons, 1973; Barton & Alexander, 1977; Fishman et al., 1982; Haley, 1980; Madanes, 1980, 1981). Common to these treatment models is an emphasis on the therapist's involvement in restructuring interactional patterns and helping the parents and ad-

Brent J. Atkinson, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor, Family Therapy Program, Department of Human & Family Resources, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115-2854. Paul N. McKenzie, Ph.D., is Director of Clinical Services, W.W. Allen Recovery Center, Plainview, TX 79072.

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olescent negotiate a set of rules, privileges, and consequences for the adolescent. Ideally in these situations, both adolescent and parents benefit from mutual negotiation. The adolescent agrees to stop his or her unacceptable behavior, and the parents agree to allow the adolescent more freedom, privileges, or whatever (within limits) the adolescent feels is important. In this way, parents are able to "be in charge" of the adolescent's behavior, while the adolescent is permitted the freedom to appropriately disengage from his or her family.

Our ideas about working with law-breaking adolescents have emerged from several years of directing a family therapy program housed in a county youth detention center. In this setting, our caseload has consisted solely of families of adolescents who have been placed on probation. The majority of adolescents we have seen have responded well to the range of procedures described in the existing family therapy literature. However, as do all clinicians, we have encountered some cases that have not responded to the family therapy strategies we have used. Despite ongoing involvement in our family therapy program, some adolescents continued breaking the law. After carefully reviewing our treatment failures, we have found certain similarities among these cases. The cases can be divided into two basic types.

In the first type, the therapist is simply not able to facilitate change in family interactional patterns. For example, the therapist is unable to get the parents working in a unified manner, or is unable to restructure interactional patterns through enactment during sessions. In retrospect, we have attributed these failures to misjudgments on the part of therapists, usually related to the timing and pacing of therapy. For example, a common mistake involved the therapist attempting to institute change before being appropriately joined with family members.

There is, however, a second group of failures. In these families, the adolescent continued to engage in law-breaking behavior *despite changes in family interactional patterns*. For example, a therapist may have achieved success in getting the parents to work in a unified manner in setting clear and unambiguous rules and negotiating appropriate consequences. In addition, many times the behavior of the adolescent would improve in certain areas outside of the session. Nevertheless, when it came to approaching the adolescent regarding diminishing his or her law-breaking behavior, the adolescent either refused to negotiate or did agree to stop the unlawful behavior but continued to break such agreements, ignoring any consequences that the parents tried to enforce.

With the aid of a therapist, parents may try a variety of methods of negotiating with such an adolescent. If he or she refuses to negotiate, the parents may remove privileges. If this doesn't deter the adolescent, parents may attempt to enforce disciplinary measures such as grounding. Madanes (1980) has noted that sometimes it is necessary to establish a hierarchy of consequences, so that if the youth acts in an unacceptable manner and then refuses to comply with the consequences for breaking it, there is then another consequence of a more serious nature. But some adolescents continue to ignore the more serious consequences as well.

Parents of such adolescents may eventually come to feel that the consequences they are able to enforce (such as discontinuing services they provide for the adolescent*) are not sufficient to deter the child. Further, parents may come to find that they are not able to enforce stronger consequences (such as restricting the adolescent from engaging in enjoyable behaviors outside the home) short of physically restraining the adolescent, which may lead to violence.

Of course, it is possible that these treatment failures might also simply be attributable to lack of skill in implementing family therapy techniques. However, we feel that other explanations are equally plausible. Among the more viable of these explanations is that there may be *more* involved in the maintenance of the adolescent's law-breaking behavior than in-appropriate family structure or interactions. Madanes (1980, 1981) has noted that while the disruptive behavior of an adolescent may have originally developed as a function of problems in family interaction, when the problem becomes chronic the adolescent's inappropriate behavior may persist regardless of what set it off. For example, there may be payoffs to the adolescent for continuing law-breaking behaviors that are outside of the family's control (i.e., peer approval or financial gain). In such cases, the adolescent is unwilling to give up the benefits of unlawful conduct despite the consequences that the family may institute. The family simply does not have enough "clout" to provide enforceable consequences that offset the benefits of the law-breaking behavior.

Alexander (1974) has indicated that in certain situations, institutionalization, or its threat, may be necessary to deter the adolescent from law-breaking behavior. Fishman, Stanton and Rosman (1982) also state that while expulsion of the adolescent from the family is not normally needed, it may be necessary in some cases as a temporary means to effect parental control. Unfortunately, these authors give little guidance as to how a therapist might best go about facilitating the involvement of some sort of institutional support.

It is our intention in this paper to describe some ideas we have developed in working with cases in which institutional support seemed to be useful as an adjunct to therapy. Again, we want to emphasize that we have used the following methods only when less drastic family therapy procedures have failed to halt the youth's law-breaking behaviors, and it seemed likely that the adolescent would either be apprehended by the police or harm him/herself or others in the near future. We have been using the strategy with just under 20% of the cases referred to the family therapy program. In considering this percentage, the reader should keep in mind that all families referred to us have at least one adolescent already on probation. We estimate that the strategy would be necessary less often for families with adolescents who had not progressed as far in their delinquent behavior.

The basic strategy involves collaboration with the juvenile justice system to help parents take charge in situations where the adolescent has

defied the best efforts of the therapist and parents to stop the child's law-breaking behavior. In this approach, parents are requested to take a course of action that is usually very different from the actions they have previously taken. Specifically, parents are asked to, as a last resort, report their law-breaking adolescent to the juvenile authorities. Parents are typically hesitant to report their child to the juvenile justice system for fear that the adolescent will obtain a police record or will be sent to jail. In fact, parents often will take measures to prevent the child's illegal behavior from coming to the attention of the juvenile system (e.g., the parent may indicate that the child is sick if the school calls home inquiring why the child is not in attendance). However, we have found that if parents become willing to report the youth, there is a greater likelihood that the child will cease his/her unlawful behavior. *Of critical importance is the specific way that parents go about reporting the child to the authorities.* The thrust of this treatment approach involves helping parents plan and implement a specific strategy for reporting the child which maximizes the possibility that the child will decide to stop the unlawful behavior rather than continue to get into trouble with the law. Since the thrust of the approach involves asking the parent to become firm with the adolescent, it is called the "Hard Line."

THE HARD LINE

It generally takes a therapist two or three sessions alone with the parents to develop a plan with them for how to proceed. While the specifics of each plan will vary across cases, all plans involve setting a series of enforceable consequences for the child's unacceptable behavior, the most severe of which is using the support of the juvenile justice system to lock the child up for a period of time. Perhaps the most important aspect of the hard line is that the parents sit down and carefully tell the child *ahead of time* what the consequences will be the next time the child performs an unlawful act. Depending upon the severity of the child's behavior, the initial consequences set may or may not involve reporting the child to the authorities. Many times, the child is given the option of following some condition set by the parents, such as being grounded for a week. However, if the child refuses to comply with such a condition, or complies but continues to break the law, the parents will report him/her to the authorities.

It is emphasized to the parents that the approach being suggested is very different from the way parents usually end up reporting their children to the authorities (if they report them at all). Generally, parents will only turn their child in after they discover that he or she has committed a serious crime. At that point the damage has already been done. The child will have to bear serious consequences for the crime. In the approach we suggest to the parents, they are asked to report *any* unlawful act of the child, even if it is a curfew violation. In this way, the child learns that the parents are serious about what they say before the child commits a serious crime. In addition, the adolescent may get enough contact with

*See Barcai and Rabkin (1972) for a description of a dramatic intervention of this sort.

the juvenile system to know that the juvenile authorities are also serious and will not hesitate to lock the youth up if he or she continues to break the law. Thus, by being willing to report the adolescent's less serious violations, the parents increase the likelihood that the child will stop breaking the law before committing a serious crime.

A second way that the hard line approach differs from the way parents usually report their children to the authorities has to do with advanced warning. Often adolescents are surprised and angry when their parents actually report them to the authorities. Some adolescents feel betrayed, because they have not anticipated that their parents would turn them in. However, in the hard line approach, the parents clearly tell the adolescent ahead of time that they will report him or her if the law-breaking behavior continues.

A critical aspect of the hard line approach involves a change in the interaction that typically takes place between the parents and adolescent. Usually in situations where an adolescent is repeatedly breaking the law, parents spend a good deal of time insisting that the child cease misbehaving. In the hard line approach, the parents are told to stop insisting.* Rather, parents simply explain to the child what will happen if the behavior continues, and then allow the child to decide for him/herself whether to stop or not. It is emphasized to the parents that it may actually be best if the child does continue the behavior so that he or she will learn more quickly that the parents are not bluffing about the consequences. The therapist explains to the parents that the child is going to test them sooner or later, so they may as well get it over with. The therapist prepares the parents to face the possibility that the child may continue to push them to the point of having them turn him or her over to be locked up, but emphasizes to them that chances are much better that the child will not push that far if they refrain from *demanding* that the child stop the unacceptable behavior. The parents should simply inform the child of the consequences, and then let him or her decide if continuing the behavior is worth it.

We feel that a change in the interactional style between parent and adolescent is absolutely critical. In fact, we will not begin the hard line until we have some evidence of the parents' success at changing the interaction. Setting up consequences in a demanding atmosphere can be like waving a red flag in front of charging bull. The interaction may be perceived as a direct challenge or threat to the adolescent. For this reason, if the therapy up to this point has not yet resulted in a change in the interactional patterns between parent and youth, we typically have the parents "practice" changing the pattern before beginning the hard line. For instance, we help them set up consequences for relatively minor problem behaviors that they can easily implement in a nonthreatening way. "Withholding of a privilege" consequences are a good kind to begin

*Of course, this intervention strategy is not unique to the approach we have developed, but can be commonly found in various forms throughout the family therapy literature. In our program, by the time that the "hard line approach" is implemented, this change in interaction has generally already been facilitated.

with because they do not require cooperation from the adolescent to be successfully implemented.

Finally, parents are directed by the therapist to use the consequence of reporting the adolescent to the authorities only for unlawful behaviors that are *verifiable*. Of course, some of the more serious unlawful acts are not easy to verify, such as theft, burglary, or vandalism. However, we have found that adolescents who commit these acts generally also break other laws which, although less serious, are verifiable. Among the most frequent of these verifiable behaviors are curfew violations, truancy and/or drug use (verifiable through urinalysis). Thus, even if parents are quite certain that their child has been engaging in thefts or some other nonverifiable crime, the therapist directs the parents to report the youth only for unlawful acts which can be verified.

Once the therapist and parents have reached a decision regarding the specifics of the plan, the parents set aside a time with the adolescent in which they carefully explain to him or her what they have decided. Since the successful delivery of this message is essential to the remainder of therapy, it is generally a good idea for the therapist to have the parents rehearse several times in front of him or her before delivering the message.*

THE ROAD TO HELL

Needless to say, the treatment strategy outlined thus far requires that the parents be willing to report the adolescent to the juvenile authorities if necessary. As mentioned earlier, most parents we have encountered are very hesitant to involve the juvenile system. They prefer to hope that they can somehow persuade the child to stop breaking the law before he or she gets caught. Thus, the first task of the therapist is to convince

*The reader may notice some similarity between this approach and the "Toughlove" program (York et al., 1982). Both strategies may involve encouraging parents to report a law-breaking adolescent to the authorities. We think there are some important differences. The strategy we are suggesting is to be used in conjunction with family therapy, and only as a last measure when the youth continues breaking the law in spite of improved family functioning. We think that the success of the strategy is dependent on the extent to which parent-adolescent interaction is altered. The Toughlove program states that adolescent acting out is *not* rooted in family patterns, but rather is a product of our current cultural emphasis. Thus, the Toughlove program uses the method of "turning the adolescent in" as a standard procedure rather than as a last measure after family therapy has been tried. We could not find in the Toughlove program an emphasis on the kind of parent-adolescent interactional change that we consider to be essential to the success of our strategy. The emphasis in the Toughlove program appears to be on administering the consequences, with less attention paid to the accompanying interaction. In fact, in the Toughlove program it often is not the adolescent's parents at all who initiate interaction leading to the implementation of consequences with the youth, but rather other parents who are in the parents' Toughlove support group. In our view, perhaps this is better than having the parents implement consequences without an accompanying interactional change. Other parents will probably not be as likely to engage in demanding or coercive interaction with the youth. However, we think that the most effective strategy involves helping the parents implement consequences themselves while changing their interaction with the youth at the same time.

the parents that they are simply putting off the inevitable, and it is in the best interest of the child for them to report the unlawful behavior before the adolescent gets into more serious trouble, or somebody gets hurt. They must be convinced that they are presently gambling with the child's life, and that the child would be much safer in detention than continuing in his or her present lifestyle. Haley (1980) and Madanes (1980, 1981) have identified some basic resistance "themes" that therapists will often encounter when trying to get parents to take an active role in structuring consequences for a youth, which need not be repeated here. In our program, we have developed a synthesis of some of these strategies, added some of our own ideas, and have come up with an approach that has been particularly successful in helping the parents become willing to involve the juvenile system. It is called, the "Road to Hell."

The Road to Hell involves an all-out effort on the part of the therapist to emphasize to the parents the seriousness of the adolescent's problem. Using specific details learned about the adolescent during previous sessions, the therapist explains to the parents that their child shows many of the classic characteristics of a kid who is headed for serious trouble. The therapist tells the parents what they can expect to happen to the child unless something changes. Using his or her knowledge of the parents, the therapist paints a futuristic picture of their child's life which would be their worst dream come true. Generally, this picture ends up with the child's imprisonment as an adult.

Having delivered this somber message to the parents, the therapist then shifts to an optimistic note. The therapist indicates that there is a chance that their child may not have to go through all of the travail that the therapist has predicted. The only chance is if somehow, while still a minor, the child learns that there are certain things in life that one just cannot do. The therapist concludes the message by indicating that experience has shown that generally the parents are the only ones who can help the child learn this lesson.*

DISCUSSION

Although in most situations incarceration in a juvenile detention facility will not be necessary in order to deter the delinquent behavior, the point should be made that the adolescent's continual acting out may require such action. In such situations, we believe that a parent-initiated lock-up is more beneficial to the adolescent than if he or she were to get caught and locked up by the police. Several reasons justify this action: First, the threat of parent-initiated lock-up is more likely to deter the child from continuing the law-breaking behavior than the threat of police-initiated lock-up. It is much more difficult for an adolescent to hide his or her law-breaking behavior from parents than from the police. Most adolescents

*This is an abbreviated version of a more detailed paper which includes case examples. The longer version is available from the first author upon request.

know that sooner or later their parents will find them out if they continue the misbehavior. Therefore, if the parents become willing to turn the adolescent in, the adolescent knows that choosing to continue breaking the law really means choosing to get locked up. There is no guesswork. Consequently, the adolescent is more likely to decide to stop breaking the law if the parents become involved.

Second, if the situation progresses to the point where the parents do have to initiate a lock-up, the adolescent is less likely to engage in law-breaking behavior subsequent to his or her release than if the adolescent had been locked up due to getting caught by the police. If the adolescent gets caught by the police, he or she may rationalize that the cops were just lucky, and he or she will get away with it next time. However, if the parents initiated the lock-up, the adolescent knows that they will do it again if necessary. The uncertainty of getting caught by the police or juvenile department is removed. If the child chooses again to break the law, the parents will most definitely initiate incarceration.

Third, many adolescents are caught in a context where they are simply unable to stop their escalating behavior by themselves. Among certain peer groups, law-breaking behavior is expected. Being faced with a certain lock-up is the only legitimate excuse the child may have for ceasing his or her unlawful activities.

We have found that it usually takes about 5 weeks of work on the part of the parents and therapist to successfully implement the strategy described in this paper. We rarely stop therapy at this point, however. Rather, the therapist resumes family therapy, working at separating the adolescent from involvement in the parents' marriage, supporting the adolescent's attempts to individuate from the family, etc. It often appears that the adolescent's misbehavior has been stabilizing the family in some way, and when the adolescent decides to stop the unlawful acts, a crisis emerges in the family. For example, often the parents will begin to experience marital difficulties as the adolescent improves. Such problems must be anticipated and dealt with as they arise.

In short, we do not feel that the treatment strategy described in this paper is a comprehensive family therapy treatment approach. Rather, we see the "hard line" strategy as a specific stage of therapy which can be used in situations where an adolescent continues to break the law in spite of initial progress made in restructuring family transactional patterns.

Finally, for those therapists interested in utilizing such a strategy, the importance of developing a close working relationship with local juvenile authorities cannot be overemphasized. There should be at least one person within the juvenile system who is familiar with the strategy of the therapist in helping families. Working closely with the juvenile system is absolutely essential for two primary reasons. First, the therapist must know exactly when the juvenile officer can legally take action to administer consequences to the adolescent. States differ with regard to their juvenile laws. Some unlawful acts (e.g., certain status offenses, or "Class C misdemeanors") must be committed more than once for the officer

legally to be able to take any action. A serious problem will arise in therapy if the therapist tells the parents that the juvenile system will back the parents in gaining control of their child, but when the parent calls the juvenile department, he or she is told by the juvenile authorities that they cannot do anything. Obtaining a copy of the State Family Codes that outline the laws governing juvenile behavior is a step toward becoming informed about the juvenile department's potential helpfulness.

A second reason the therapist must work closely with the juvenile system is that, even though a juvenile officer may legally be able to take action, the officer may not be interested in doing so if the unlawful acts are not of a serious nature. Like most law enforcement officials, juvenile officers are accustomed to organizing their time to put out the "largest fires" first. If a parent calls up and reports that their child came in after curfew the previous night, the juvenile officer may consider the call an irritation. Juvenile officers have enough "serious" adolescent problems to worry about and don't enjoy being bothered with a parent complaining about their son "coming home late last night." However, we have found that most juvenile officers will become enthusiastic about working with such parents if they know that the parental call is part of a preventive strategy devised in collaboration with the therapist.

In short, before a therapist can implement the treatment strategy suggested in this paper, he or she must have a working relationship with at least one juvenile officer. The therapist and officer must have an understanding as to *exactly* under what circumstances the officer can (and will) take action. When the therapist begins working with a family, he or she should contact the officer and alert him or her to the fact that the parents may be calling to report the behavior of the child. The therapist and officer need to have discussed exactly how the officer will handle such calls.

In our experience, juvenile officers enjoy being part of a collaborative treatment effort and contribute enthusiastically to the effectiveness of the approach. Most juvenile officers are well aware of the need for family therapy in many of their cases, and are relieved to have a future referral person who shows initiative in learning more about juvenile law and the juvenile justice system.

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