

## **AN OVERVIEW OF A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO ADLERIAN FAMILY COUNSELING**

**By  
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1. Be prepared to look for the use of behavior. Neither child nor parent will change their behavior if they believe it to be useful.
2. Be alert to the troublesome influences of superiority/inferiority transactions in relationships, and help family members recognize and modify transactions.
3. As a matter of respect (avoidance of superiority/inferiority relationship) give a brief description of your plans for use of the time to all family members.
4. In initial session, typically meet with parents for about forty minutes, with children about thirty minutes, and summarize with entire family together.
5. Give teenagers the option to join in session with their parents.
6. Counseling is both an art and a science. The first order of business is to help the clients feel comfortable. Use your social skills to relate to the family on their level. Never underestimate the value of humor to set people at ease and to make teaching points.
7. Ask parents for the names, ages and sex of children. Ask if any child died, if there were any miscarriages, and if any of the children have mental or physical disabilities.
8. Obtain a brief description of each child. Be attuned to the fact that labels or characteristics which parents use repeatedly in describing their children usually indicate family values.
9. Keep in mind siblings who are most different from one another are in strongest competition with one another. Certainly note sibling who is most different from the identified patient. A very significant influence on our personality development is the brother or sister with whom we are in competition.
10. Try to place yourself in the shoes of each family member and especially in the shoes of the identified patient.
11. Identify the presenting problems. “How can I be of help to you? What would you like to change?”
12. Follow up #11 with a disciplined effort to stay with the pattern of transaction. “and what did you do? . . .What happened then? . . .What’s the next thing that occurred? . . .If I were watching, what would I have seen?” Through this method we are making use of two very important principles: A) Behavior is useful. Let’s identify the use: attention, service,

power, revenge, to be left alone, etc. B) Misbehavior and poor mental health are almost always compensations for feelings of social inferiority (let's identify superiority/inferiority transactions.)

13. Disclose use of goal of troublesome behavior to parent. Do this respectfully and tentatively. No one wants to be put down. Speak encouragingly about parent's wish to be a good parent, but be very clear and forthright in helping parent understand how he or she is unwittingly helping the child or children to achieve the goal of troublesome behavior.
14. If the counselor stays with the pattern of transaction, it will take the counselor where he or she needs to go. For example, grandmother will show up in the transaction if she is part of the problem, or older sister, etc. The most common mistake new counselors make is failing to stick with the specific pattern of transaction.
15. A second method to obtain information about the pattern of transaction is by taking parents through all or part of the daily routine. There are six challenging situations nearly every day in the life of a family:
  - a) The morning routine
  - b) Chores
  - c) Meal time
  - d) Homework and school concerns
  - e) Relationships among siblings
  - f) Bed time or time to be home
16. The counselor must have a good idea of what constitutes a healthy or respectful (socially interested) manner of family functioning in the above situations in order to recognize troublesome ways of functioning.
17. Given that behavior is best interpreted from a holistic point of view (there is a style or pattern to the behavior of each of us), learn to help clients see the relationship between their style of behavior and the presenting problem(s). Keep in mind the same style that takes us to our successes takes us to our difficulties. Therefore, encourage the clients by helping them to see the positive aspects of a style that sometimes influences them in a troublesome way, e.g. the engineer who is great at minimizing errors in construction or design, but who anticipates or over-reacts to imperfections in his children or the nurse who is an excellent helper professionally, but who nursemaids her children into a state of dependence.
18. Child interview. The counselor has formed the hypotheses about parents' mistaken approaches to parenting and the use or goal of troublesome behavior. Now he has an opportunity to validate his hypotheses by obtaining the children's view of transactions. Ask for concerns or problems and follow up by looking at the pattern of transaction. If child indicates no problems, cite those indicated by parents.

19. Disclose goal of troublesome behavior to child tentatively. “Could it be that you would like to show your mother she can’t control your life?, etc.”
20. In order to spoil the use of troublesome behavior, learn to communicate to youngsters how they are shortchanging themselves, e.g., “Do you think there are some choices you could be free to make, but you will not choose them just because your mother is trying to make you move in that direction?”
21. Never fail to attempt to encourage youngsters. Learn to see the socially useful side of their approach to life and call attention to it. “You are a very determined person, and that quality is frequently very helpful to you.” On the other hand, be certain to help him see clearly how he may be giving up control of his happiness to teachers and parents when he is resistant.
22. When alone with parents and when alone with children, show them how they may be making trouble with their approach to problems. Cite some alternative techniques that have proven helpful.
23. Summarize briefly with all present. Ask for agreement and invite all to offer a correction to the summary if it seems inaccurate. Hopefully, each member of the family will have agreed to one or two approaches they will use to help improve life in the home.
24. If progress is being made, the counselor can find it helpful to spend more time with parents and youngsters together in future sessions. It is important for the family to have success in respectful problem solving before ending counseling.
25. Frequently the approaches suggested at this point will be sufficient to bring substantial improvement in family life and the presenting problem(s) will be solved to everyone’s satisfaction.
26. If parents do not make changes despite the fact that the counselor has pointed out how their behavior is contributing to troublesome behavior, the concern of the parents is probably not the children, but it is most likely a concern with their own sense of worth.
27. In order to help parents see mistaken thinking that contributes to difficulties in the home, I typically use a powerful technique I created some years ago. It is known as “The Most Memorable Observation.” The technique involves asking the parent what observation he/she made about life in his family in his early adolescence. What seems important about life in his family then, and was it positive or negative? This technique can be of great assistance in helping determine the superiority/inferiority thinking that provides an obstacle to use of more effective child rearing techniques. Use of this technique can allow the counselor to help a parent see how he/she
  - a) overemphasizes the likelihood of occurrence of a situation the parent guards against.
  - b) overemphasizes the negative influence of such a situation if it should occur, and

- c) Underestimates his/her ability to deal with the situation in an effective problem-solving way if it should occur.