

**CAN YOU REALLY TALK WITH YOUR CHILD?  
A PARENTAL TRAINING PROGRAM IN COMMUNICATION  
SKILLS TOWARD THE IMPROVEMENT OF  
PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION\***

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Considerable theoretical speculation and research has focused on the relationship between poor parental communication and emotional disturbances in children. Much, if not most, of the research accomplished in this area has been concerned with the relationship between schizophrenia and the family's use of the "double-bind." Increasingly, however, there is an interest in and need for empirical knowledge concerning poor parental communication skills as related to the more general disturbances evidenced in children—children about whom the social work practitioner must process information, make a diagnosis, and formulate a plan of treatment. If, indeed, interpersonal communication within the family does play an integral part in the child's problematic behavior (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, Weakland, 1956; Bugental *et al.*, 1971), the treatment would of necessity emphasize family interaction rather than the traditional individual therapy sessions for the child. This study, then, focuses on the methods of improving the communication behaviors of parents and, more importantly, on which modes of training are most effective and efficient in transferring these learned behaviors from the 'laboratory' setting to the parent-child interaction.

The skills which the majority of parents utilize in raising their children and dealing with problems in their families are those used by their own parents, by their parents' parents, and by their grandparents' parents (Gordon, 1972). And yet, psychology, child development, and other behavioral sciences have amassed considerable knowledge about effective person-to-person communication, the effects of power in human relationships, and constructive conflict resolution (Gordon, 1972). Ginott (1973) and Gordon (1972) are among the few professionals in these fields to attempt to pass on to parents those very skills used by therapists and professional counselors in helping children with emotional problems and maladaptive behavior. Accordingly, critical research needs in this area are for a clearer operational definition of "healthy"

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communication behavior patterns and for effective means of teaching and transferring these valuable skills. This empirical support must be accomplished before the profession will be able to offer the requested assistance to parents of disturbed children.

While it is apparent that good communication is essential to healthy family functioning, studies of the communication styles of families containing disturbed adolescents usually reveal some breakdown in the communication process. A high frequency of stereotyped, mechanical communication has been found in these families—that is, much may be said but with little respect, acceptance or even acknowledgment of the child. The result is a stifling effect upon the child in that his opportunity to express himself is severely limited (King, 1970; Bugental et al., 1971).

One popular hypothesis of poor patterns of family communication is the double-bind. In order to investigate its credence, Bugental *et al.*, (1971) analyzed videotaped parent-child communication within families containing a 'disturbed' child and 'normal' control families. The study was concerned with the presence of evaluative conflict (friendliness or approval versus unfriendliness or disapproval) between verbal content, vocal intonation, and visual components (facial expression, gestures, etc.). A common type of conflicting message contained a critical or disapproving statement spoken in a positive voice. It was found that significantly more ( $p = .05$ ) disturbed mothers produced messages containing evaluative conflict between channels than did normal mothers.

In *A Preliminary Analysis of the Effectiveness of Direct Home Intervention for Treatment of Predelinquent Boys Who Steal*, Reid and Hendriks (1973) analyzed those cases in which parental reinforcement intervention was ineffective. There was a clear pattern for the mothers and children in this group to exhibit fewer positive social behaviors: attention to other family members, compliance to requests from other family members, friendly laughing, playing with others or alone, talking to other family members, and useful house work. The findings suggest that these families are rather distant, having only loose social ties with one another. The implication is that the parents may not have powerful social reinforcers at their command to be systematically and effectively employed within the social-learning treatment paradigm. Thus, one necessary step may be to teach the members of these families to relate more closely and positively with each other before instituting programs to eliminate undesirable behaviors.

Toward this end, Fabun (1968) has proposed that more emphasis be placed on assessment of interaction processes in troubled relationships. Hickman and Baldwin (1971) took up this challenge through the use of programmed instruction designed to improve communication skills in marriage. Their research, however, is in many ways relevant to the topic of parent-child communication, particularly in that they began to make specific the "skills"

of good communication: understanding personal feelings; the two-way nature of communication; expression and suppression of feelings; having feelings versus acting on them; direct, indirect and accusative expression of feelings; and communication as a developmental process.

Carkhuff and Truax (1966) also have attempted to explicate the facilitating and retarding interpersonal processes; they propose the key elements to be empathy, warmth, and genuineness. It is suggested through their review of the literature that it is the low levels of these facilitative conditions in the parent-child relationship that often seem to lead to the development of problems and/or psychopathology.

Ivey (1971) has picked up on this theme of the specificity of communication skills. He has to a large degree gone further than Carkhuff in delineating and describing the component-skills of communication which facilitate increased exploration and expression of the client. Although, like Carkhuff and Truax (1966), his basic application of these skills was to the counselor-counselee relationship, it is implied that they may successfully be transferred to many different relationships, including that of parent-child. The following is an outline of these communication behaviors:

#### Attending Behavior

- A. Eye contact, body posture, verbal follow
- B. Open invitation to talk
- C. Minimal encourages to talk

#### Listening Skills: Selective Attention

- A. Reflection and summarization of feeling
- B. Paraphrasing and summative paraphrase

#### Skills of Self-Expression

- A. Expression of feeling
- B. Expression of content
- C. Direct, mutual communication

Ivey (1971) through his review of the literature, concludes that these very specific behavioral skills can best be taught in the framework of microtraining, a training program involving videotape, modeling, feedback, instruction manuals, and direct supervision. It has been observed that behavioral skills are taught most effectively when the supervisor adapts the basic model to suit his own preferences and needs (Ivey, 1971). However, certain advantages have been found in keeping the basic propositions of microtraining in each model.

Video equipment has increased in reliability and simplicity in recent years, while equipment costs have been reduced dramatically. In effect, all that is needed for microtraining with video equipment is the equipment, the trainees, a supervisor, and a room. The basic dimensions of focusing on a single skill, feedback, supervision and practice can be accomplished without video equipment. However, videotape and the resulting pictorial and sound feedback is an impressively powerful tool (Ivey, 1971).

The complexity of the learning process is lessened through focusing on single skills. Stoller (1965) has pointed out the importance of focused feedback in therapeutic work with videotape. Focused feedback means that the supervisor focuses training only on a single dimension of the trainee's behavior and does not try to remake the trainee all at once. When he sees a trainee committing six or seven errors in the course of a five-minute session, the supervisor must choose a specific area to stress. If all skills are stressed at once, improvement might be painfully slow. Often improvement in other areas results even when they are not pointed out (Ivey, 1971). Self-observation through use of videotape provides instantaneous feedback which serves as a guideline for future behavioral patterns. The trainee has the opportunity to view himself in action, and little dispute arises when the action appears on videotape.

Bandura and Walters (1963) have conclusively demonstrated the importance of modeling in human learning processes. Trainees learn new interviewing skills more quickly and easily when they see skills demonstrated by experts. Each specific skill is demonstrated on videotape by a skilled model. Bandura suggests the use of modeling in a hierarchic progression, taking an individual through a series of progressively more difficult behaviors. A combination of verbal and demonstrational procedures is usually most effective in transmitting new patterns of behavior.

Written manuals provide concrete written materials and instructions to further enhance the learning process. Hickman and Baldwin (1971) have shown written instruction as an effective ancillary technique in counseling. Finally, the supervisor must continuously model the skills he is teaching, thereby providing further modeling. There is usually much concern and nervousness about first sessions in front of a video camera and some special attention may have to be paid to concern over physical appearance during the first microtraining session. A positive and supportive supervisor's presence and the stressing of positive aspects (primarily of the first five-minute session) helps to decrease this concern (Ivey, 1971). Also, the human factor in supervision was shown by Hickman and Baldwin (1971) to be a most important element in resolving communication breakdowns.

Microtraining is a method which has been shown effective in teaching behavioral skills in a wide area of diverse theoretical and practical frameworks. There has been some speculation, however, as to how effectively these skills are transferred to environments outside of the training setting. This is evidenced in a study by Carkhuff and Bierman (1970) where parents of disturbed children were trained in improved communication skills, and the relationships between the parents themselves improved to a great degree. However, the relationships between the parents and the children did not.

It has been suggested that, by structuring behavior rehearsals in the social environment, the transfer of the behavioral skills to that environment is

greatly facilitated (Ivey, 1971). Especially whenever the children have problematic behaviors which would tend to diminish the probability of cooperativeness on their part, it would be preferable if a methodology were designed and utilized where the parents could be instructed in the use of the skill itself and in the method of practicing this skill in the home environment with the child.

Jay Haley (1963) also discusses this "homework assignment" technique; he states that the patient must be persuaded to participate in bringing a change about. He should be asked to follow specific directions to involve him in a cooperative endeavor to change his behavior. Behaviorists such as Patterson (1968, 1971) and Lazarus (1971) have given their clients on-task assignments in which they are instructed to practice in certain situations the skills being taught during the sessions.

For the purposes of the present study, these specific, instructive tasks are to be termed "behavior rehearsals" and the content of the task will be directly related to the content of the previous training session. Thus, as the learned skills increase in difficulty, the behavior rehearsals shall progressively require more difficult skills. In addition, the basic format of the microtraining session will be adapted to include edited versions of videotaped pre-test Structured Family Interviews, followed by focused feedback from the group concerning each family's use of each specific skill.

Thus, the most general statement of the subject of this study is: Is parental training combined with behavior rehearsal an effective means of increasing child communication within the family?

#### OPERATIONALIZATION OF TERMS

For the present study, the independent variable, "parental communication training program," is operationalized as six specific instructive sessions in communication skills (microtraining) which include six home assignments to practice the communication skills with the child (behavior rehearsals). The dependent variable, "increased child communication," is operationalized in terms of three measures.

The first measure, percent of available talk time used by the child, is defined as that time expired between the first and last word of each response of the child throughout the Structured Family Interview. This measure is indicative of the degree to which the parents are able to successfully utilize the communication behaviors in the interaction in order to encourage and facilitate the child's self-exploration and self-expression. Healthy communication is based on the premise that each member of the interaction share in an equal portion of the time spent—the parent should not dominate the communication. The child's total talk time, therefore, should move toward a more equitable portion of the interview.

Number of responses made by the child is the second measure, with each response being defined as the complete content of the child's speech, bounded on either side by the speech of another person. It may be a one-word utterance; it may consist of several propositions (a verbalization containing a subject and a predicate, either expressed or implied); or it may be a number of sentences which are uninterrupted. This measure represents the degree to which the child perceives freedom in expressing his opinions, thoughts and feelings. The end result of effective utilization of the communication skills by the parent, particularly attending behavior, open invitation to talk, and reflection of feeling and content, would encourage the number of the child's responses to increase. Ivey (1971) states that these skills are "designed to assist the [child] in talking and help him in expressing himself fully . . . to give the [child] the confidence to talk and to grow further."

Attitude of the child toward parent-child relationship serves as the third measure and is operationalized by the Child-Parent Relationship Scale (Appendix A). This questionnaire was devised for measuring the child's attitude toward his relationship with his parents. The reliability coefficient has been set at .928. The validity coefficient of this scale is  $.892 \pm .021$  (Swanson, 1950). As the communication and interaction between the parent and child increases, the child's attitude toward his parents and their relationship should improve.

Thus, the following hypotheses have been set forth in order to empirically examine the effectiveness of training and behavior rehearsals in transferring improved communication from the parent to the child:

- H<sup>1</sup> Children of the Communication Training Program Parents are more likely to increase the percent of available time talked with parents than Children of the Untrained Parents.
- H<sup>2</sup> Children of the Communication Training Program Parents are more likely to increase the number of responses with the parents than Children of the Untrained Parents.
- H<sup>3</sup> Children of the Communication Training Program Parents are more likely to demonstrate improved attitude toward parent-child relationship than Children of the Untrained Parents.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN

The training program was conducted in the spring of 1974 at the Child Study Center, Fort Worth, Texas. The research is a classical experimental design. It included two groups: an experimental group which received micro-training and behavior rehearsal techniques; and a time control group which received no training or behavior rehearsals. The problem-behavior child of each couple continued to receive individual counseling normally provided by the Center.

The parents of ten (10) children were randomly placed in two groups so that five children were represented in each. The experimental group was composed of seven (7) parents and the control group of six (6) parents. Subjects were referred to the Child Study Center of Fort Worth due to behavioral problems of one of their children. The parents were chosen according to the time of their appearance at the Center corresponding to the time of the training program; thus, the helpes selected were as random as helpes enrolling themselves for clinical help. The ages of the children in the experimental group range from six (6) to seventeen (17). The ages of the children in the control group range from seven (7) to sixteen (16).

The experimental group met in 2½ hour sessions twice a week over a period of three weeks for a total of 15 hours. The following was used for each session:

- I. Introduction of a specific skill (5 min.)
- II. Written Manual (20 min.)
- III. Modeling Tape (15 min.)
- IV. Edited version of Structured Family Interviews (20 min.)
- V. Videotape made of couples practicing the skill (30 min.)
- VI. Videotape reviewed by group (focused feedback) (50 min.)
- VII. Behavior rehearsal assigned (10 min.)

A contract was signed by each participating parent of the experimental group which included the release form allowing the use of videotape in the sessions and granting permission for these sessions to be used for research purposes (Ivey, 1971). It also assured attendance and cooperation in behavior rehearsals. This contract explained the fee schedule set at \$60.00 for the total training program with a refund of \$10.00 for each session's attendance and cooperation parents (Reid and Hendricks, 1973).

Primary analysis of pre- and post-tests by means of two research instruments was conducted: (1) a recorded Structured Family Interview was rated as to the percent of time talked by the child and the number of responses made by the child; (2) the Child-Parent Relationship Questionnaire was scored for the child's attitude improvement toward his relationship with his parents. Two independent raters were trained in the use of a stop watch and the recording equipment. They were instructed as to the method of coding and then tested for reliability, which is calculated at the .98 and .99 levels for the total talk time and the number of responses, respectively. The Child-Parent Relationship Questionnaire reliability coefficient has been set at .928 and the validity coefficient of this scale is  $.892 \pm .021$  (Swanson, 1950).

## DISCUSSION

In order to examine empirically the effectiveness of training and behavior rehearsals in transferring improved communication from the parent to the

child, it is first necessary to consider each hypothesis separately since each is statistically computed on an individual basis. A test for significance of the difference between two means for small independent samples was used with each of the three measures, employing the t-distribution to determine if two independent samples are drawn from one population or two.

Hypothesis 1 ( $H_1$ ), stating that Children of the Communication Training Program Parents are likely to increase the percent of available time talked than Children of the Untrained Parents, is supported at the .05 level of significance by the data. ( $\bar{X} = +16.28$  for the experimental group;  $\bar{X} = -9.82$  for the control group;  $t = 1.86$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Five (5) out of five (5) of the training parents' children increased their percent of talk time, whereas only two (2) out of the five (5) children of the control parents increased their percent of talk time. The percent of available time talked is probably the best measure of the overall program effectiveness in that it requires a combination of all skills for improvement. Each skill works to encourage and facilitate the child's self-exploration and self-expression, and the misuse of one skill (for example, asking close-ended questions) can discourage the child's communication throughout. Therefore, a combination of all skills is more likely to have been used in order to support this hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 ( $H_2$ )—Children of the Communication Training Program Parents are more likely to increase the number of responses with their parents than the Children of the Untrained Parents—is not significantly supported; however, there is a definite trend in a positive direction. ( $\bar{X} = +55.00$  for the experimental group;  $\bar{X} = +1.40$  for the control group;  $t = -1.57$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p < .05$ ) Once again, five (5) out of five (5) children in the experimental group increased their number of responses, whereas only two (2) out of five (5) of the control group children increased their number of responses. There are several factors that could be involved here. Unlike the percent of talk time measure, the number of responses does not require a combination of all skills for improvement. A parent could increase the number of closed-ended questions, and this measure would show improvement as the child answered with more "yes" and "no's." This, then, could limit the child's self-expression while showing an increased number of responses. Increased utilization of attending behavior and reflection of feeling and content could account for the positive trend.

That Children of the Communication Training Program Parents are more likely to demonstrate improved attitude toward parent-child relationship than Children of the Untrained Parents, the third hypothesis ( $H_3$ ), is not shown to be significant. However, the experimental group changes in a positive direction once again. ( $\bar{X} = 21.6$  for the experimental group;  $\bar{X} = -11.2$  for the control group;  $t = -.92$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p < .05$ ) Here, four (4) out of five (5) children in the experimental group improved in their attitude toward the relationship with their parents. Only one (1) out of five (5) children in the control group

showed improvement. It is possible that three weeks is too short a time period to show considerable attitude change after it has taken years in forming the child's negative attitudes toward the parent-child relationship. However, the positive trend in the experimental group can possibly be accounted for by the fact that the parents assumed part of the "problem label" (that the child had previously carried alone) by coming for help without the child.

In addition to these findings, there are several other observations made by the group leaders and members. The group gave feedback as to their feelings about the 3-week group during the last session. The entire group felt that the program had been most beneficial overall. There was a definite feeling that communication had improved between husband and wife, but that more time and practice would be needed to transfer the skills to the home environment with the child. This is an indication that follow-up is needed for this group. The group thought another one-to-two weeks, with the additional time being spent on the expression and reflection of feeling, would have improved communication with the child even more. These were the most difficult skills to teach the group, and it was observed that the group tended to spend most of the time in content discussion.

Each group session was 2½ hours in length, and was composed of modeling, written manuals, focused feedback, and behavior rehearsals. This time period was found to be too short for inclusion of all these factors. Many times, everyone did not have the opportunity to practice the new skill within the group and to receive focused feedback due to the time shortage. This could be corrected by either lengthening the sessions or reducing the number of people in the group. The best means would probably be to have a group of eight (instead of thirteen) rather than lengthening the hours of each session. Also, the time shortage limited behavior rehearsal discussion to the explanation of the next assignment and a few words as to the results of the previous assignment. Generally, there seems to have been a cognitive awareness of each skill for each group member; however, the behavior change was less obvious, probably due to a shortage of practice time both in the 2½ hour session and during a three week time span. Other limitations of the study include the small sample size and the absence of a follow-up study.

In summary, this study supports the notion that it is possible to train parents in those facilitative interpersonal skills which are utilized by the fields of psychology, social work, child development and other behavioral sciences (Ginott, 1973; Gordon, 1972). Moreover, these skills can be specified, operationalized and demonstrated behaviorally to such a degree as to enable their inclusion within the framework of a didactic training program (Ivey, 1971). It was observed that the communication skills were utilized by the parents to improve the marital relationship as Carkhuff and Bierman (1970) suggest; however, the findings of the present study do substantiate the immediate transference of these skills from the parent-to-parent interaction to the parent-to-child interaction.

## SUMMARY

In many areas of concern to social work the problem of poor parent-child relationships recurs with utmost consistency. Finding effective and efficient means of improving these relationships has also consistently been a problem for the professional. Therefore, a didactic and experiential program was devised in order to instruct parents in the use and practice of improved communication patterns within parent-child interaction. The communication skills, as well as the format for teaching these skills to the parents, were taken from Ivey's theory of microtraining (1971). However, because research findings in the past have shown as unlikely the parent's ability to transfer these program skills to direct interaction with their children (Ivey, 1971; Carkhuff and Bierman, 1970), the basic formula for the microcounseling program was somewhat revised. In addition to following the basic guidelines set forth by Ivey (1971), edited versions of the pre-test Structured Family Interviews were shown within the framework of each training session, followed by focused feedback from the group concerning the use of each specific skill. Behavior rehearsals were also assigned at the conclusion of each session, requiring the parents to practice a particular skill outside the framework of the laboratory situation and within the direct, specified interaction with their child. Therefore, the major research hypothesis predicted that, by the use of microtraining and behavior rehearsals, parents of behavior-problem children would be able to utilize these skills in conversations with the child toward the end of facilitating the child's self-expression and communication.

Five families completed the training program which consisted of six sessions over a period of three weeks. The sessions were conducted at the Child Study Center, Fort Worth, Texas. Each session entailed modeling, written manuals, focused feedback through videotape of previous family interaction, focused feedback through videotape of current parent-to-parent interaction, and behavior rehearsals. In evaluating those segments, parents assessed focused feedback as the most beneficial. Five families who were receiving counseling for their children from the Center but who were not enrolled in the communication training program served as a time control group.

The expectations of this study were that (1) the children of the experimental group would demonstrate a greater increase in their total talk time during parent-child interaction than those children in the control group; (2) the children of the experimental group would demonstrate a greater increase in their number of responses than those children in the control group during parent-child interaction; and (3) the children of the experimental group would demonstrate a greater degree of improvement in their attitude toward the parent-child relationship than those children in the control group. All hypotheses were confirmed, with the measure of total talk time significant at the .05 level ( $t = 1.86$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

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