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Social Learning/Cognitive Family Counseling

James Grant had to assume the roles of mother and father for three children (aged seven, eleven, and thirteen) when his wife died in a car accident. Prior to her death his responsibilities had been primarily on weekends because he worked long hours and his wife had the major responsibility for raising the children. The family was not only dealing with the grief of the loss of a wife and mother, but Mr. Grant was floundering in his role as a parent. He vacillated from feeling sorry for the children and thus imposing no limits on them and becoming overly strict when he felt that the situation was getting out of control. The children were further confused by his inconsistency and dealt with this by testing limits further. Discouraged in his role as a parent, he found excuses not to spend time with the children and volunteered to take on extra responsibilities at work. This was a world in which he felt competent. The children responded to his increasingly unavailability by testing him further and seeking attention by negative behaviors. When the thirteen-year-old began to have behavior difficulties at school, the school social worker identified the presence of family problems and referred the family for further counseling. Mr. Grant was both defensive at the implications of failure on his part and relieved that some help might be at hand.

Sarah became a mother at aged fifteen. Her boyfriend ended their relationship when he learned she was pregnant. Although there had been conflict with her parents, she continued to live with them while going to school and taking care of her child. She is now caught between the two worlds of an adolescent mother—trying to establish her separate identity from her parents and trying to learn how to be a parent herself. When her parents try to give her advice or other types of help, she interprets their actions as indicating they think she is still a child and resents their help. As a result, she finds it difficult to accept the help they offer. Her peer group of high school friends is no help in her new role as a parent and do not understand the pressures that she experiences. Sarah has become very discouraged about her ability to take care of her baby and feels overwhelmed by her responsibilities. She confided in the school social worker that while she loves her baby, she wonders if she had made the right decision to keep her baby and fears that she might hurt her child sometime when she becomes frustrated.

Jennifer and Martin's marriage was dissolving in ongoing tension. While they loved each other, they found themselves hurting each other as they tried to talk about the issues in their marriage. Both of them had grown up in conflictual family situations. Each of their parents had argued bitterly for years before finally getting divorced. While Jennifer and Martin desperately wanted something different for themselves, they found themselves repeating the patterns of the parents. Jennifer would withdraw from Martin who in turn would shout at her. The more she withdrew, the more threatened Martin would become and the louder he would shout. Jennifer would then think that Martin did not love her and would withdraw further. Martin in turn interpreted her withdrawal as lack of interest in him and felt further threatened. When they finally sought counseling help for their marriage, they were extremely discouraged about their ability to save their relationship. They feared that they were about to repeat the pattern of their parents and doubted both themselves and their partner's ability to change.

Members of these families are struggling with troubling relationships and difficulties in carrying out their family responsibilities. While motivated to make things different, they find themselves repeating problematic patterns and unable to create effective new patterns. The vicious circle becomes more intense as they become discouraged about their ability to make things better and their efforts fail to make positive changes. In terms of the context of resiliency, these families lack critical coping skills to deal with the situation at hand and interpret their family situations in ways that intensify the problems. Although the family members are motivated to improve their relationships, lack of these skills has intensified the nature of the problems that they are facing and has destroyed their sense of mastery and self-efficacy. Skills and beliefs systems go hand in hand. Family members are also burdened by beliefs that are creating problems within the family. Family members lack a sense of self-efficacy regarding their ability to carry out important tasks and roles within their families and have become discouraged about their ability to do so. They also interpret the behavioral response of others in ways that create further fears and difficulty. These belief systems represent a further burden in the relationship and make it difficult for them to use some of the skills that they currently have. In terms of protective factors, these families have adequate housing and the economic resources to meet their other essential basic needs. They are also motivated to improve their situations. Using a resiliency assessment of these families, a social learning/cognitive approach could be a valuable approach to helping them gain new skills and address their belief systems. It can help them develop a critical sense of mastery and self-efficacy and begin to replace their current dysfunctional belief systems with those that can be more productive within the family.

The social learning approach is essentially an optimistic and strengths-based approach that assumes people are able to learn. The current patterns that one sees in families can be understood in terms of the family members'

past and present learning opportunities. The central approach within a social learning perspective is to provide effective learning opportunities that enable family members to learn and implement new coping skills. Family members might need skills, for example, in communicating, in parenting, in dealing with other community members, in addressing employment issues. While social learning approaches have some patterns that are general to the approach, the nature of the appropriate coping skills and reinforcement systems are tailored to the individual family in terms of their culture, the developmental stages of family members, and the many unique characteristics of the family. As a result, the approach can be adapted to people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and contexts.

Belief systems can constrain people from learning new skills and using the skills they possess. Parents who believe that their children will not pay attention to them are not likely to try to exert their repertoire or discipline skills. Parents who believe that good parents must always have harmonious relationships with their children or fear the loss of their child's love can find it difficult to set appropriate limits. Children quickly learn the art of emotional blackmail of their parents. Partners who believe that if their partner loves them he/she should understand what they are feeling without being told. They might not use their existing communication skills and instead feel hurt and rejected when they are not understood by their partner.

The preceding families demonstrate this interaction of skills and belief systems. James Grant needs to learn more effective parenting skills now that he is a single parent and cannot rely on his wife to assume the major role of raising their children. He also feels so sorry for his grieving children that he is uncomfortable setting limits on his children. He feels defeated in his ability to effectively parent his children as the children push him to become more engaged through negative behavior. He misinterprets their actions and withdraws further. Sarah needs to learn the skills of parenting a young child as well as balancing her responsibilities as parent and student. She interprets her parents' offers of help in this realistically difficult situation as a message that they view her as still a child. As a result, she rebuffs what might be valuable help and feels even more alone in her situation. Jennifer and Martin need to learn the skills of communicating and facilitating a mutual relationship. Each interprets the actions of the partner as lack of love and responds in ways that only compound the misunderstandings and hurt.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social learning approaches developed from behavioral traditions that emphasized the role of contingencies in maintaining behavior. From the perspective of operant conditioning, voluntary behavior is shaped by the consequences of this behavior. Change is organized in terms of changing the

nature of responses to behavior. Reinforcement increases behavior; punishment or extinction (not responding) tends to decrease behavior.

In terms of family counseling, the social worker conducts a *functional analysis* of the behavior to identify the immediate antecedents (what occurs prior to) and the consequences (what occurs as a result of) the problem behavior. Parents might be asked to identify what was taking place when their child started sulking and what consequences followed this behavior. The consequences frequently become *reinforcers* that serve to maintain the behavior. In this process, parents could identify that they were perhaps inconsistent or in some way gave in to the child in ways that only perpetuated the behavior. They might be going to great lengths to find something that would make the child happy again and stop sulking and thus be inadvertently encouraging (*positive reinforcement*) the very behavior that they were trying to eliminate. Parents often engage in *intermittent reinforcement*—sometimes giving in and other times remaining firm. Behavior that has been reinforced in this manner is the most difficult to change. Using the results of this behavioral analysis, parents might be encouraged to alter their reinforcement system to reduce the nature of the difficult behavior. This model of working with families has been an important element in parental education programs as well as work with individual families.

The behavioral model identifies a set of responses that influence the frequency of behavior. As indicated above, positive reinforcements are responses that encourage behavior to occur more frequently. *Negative reinforcements* also increase behavior when a specific behavior results in the termination of something aversive. These two types of response are frequently paired. The common situation of parents and children at the check-out counter represents this duet. When parents finally give in to the child's whining and buy candy, they are positively reinforcing the child's whining behavior. The child in turn negatively reinforces the parents by stopping the whining when the parents hand over the candy. Both parties are reinforcing the other for their part in the duet. Responses that decrease behavior are called *punishment*.

Behavior is influenced most quickly if the response occurs shortly after the behavior and is consistent. It is most difficult to change behavior if the reinforcement system is intermittent. People continue to put coins in to the slot machine in hopes that the next coin will produce a larger payoff.

Extinction occurs when there is no reinforcement for the behavior. Since the individual involved frequently escalates the intensity of the behavior at first in hopes of gaining the desired goal, extinction does not result in an immediate decrease in behavior (Jordan, Cobb, & Franklin, 1999). If parents finally give in to these louder demands, they inadvertently set in motion an intermittent reinforcement system.

The nature of these reinforcers is also idiosyncratic to the individuals

and context involved. Over the years my children and I have frequently had very different sets of reinforcements in terms of music. While music by Bach might be a positive reinforcement for one person, heavy metal music might work for another.

Stuart transferred this nature of behavioral reciprocity to work with couples using contingency contracting (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000; Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). Stuart focused on developing and enhancing positive behaviors by applying a “reciprocity reinforcement paradigm” (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001, p. 267). Within this arrangement, couples would identify a positive behavior that they would like to occur, record the frequency of the behavior, and identify and exchange positive responses.

Social Learning Paradigms

Bandura and colleagues identify how current behavior is not only shaped by the actual reinforcers but also by social context and cognitions, especially the person’s expectations for such responses (Bandura, 1977, 1978). They also describe how complex behaviors are learned through the process of *modeling*. Individuals learn new behavior from others who demonstrate (model) this behavior. Models are especially likely to be emulated if these models are perceived as successful and their behavior is followed by positive consequences. If models are also viewed as similar they serve as especially effective models (Bandura, 1977). Younger siblings mimicking older brothers and sisters is an example of this pattern.

As a result of this broadened perspective, social learning focuses on the triad of learning *opportunities*, the *reinforcement systems* at work, and the *thoughts* of individuals that influence the nature of the behavior that is learned and the actual practice of adaptive or maladaptive behavior patterns. Cultural and unique individual life experiences shape relevant beliefs, learning opportunities, and anticipated rewards. Expectations regarding the impact of behavior are critical in the actual performance of behavior. If people believe that they are able to carry out a specific behavior (self-efficacy) and will be positively rewarded for this behavior, they are more likely to act in this manner. As described in the above situations, the thoughts and consequent interpretations of the family members in the previously described family situations play critical roles in the behaviors of family members. Mr. Grant does not feel confident in his parenting and withdraws from his children. His beliefs about the impact of the death of his wife and their mother further make it difficult for him to discipline the children. Sarah’s interpretation of her parents’ actions in the context of her own developmental journey causes her to rebuffs her parents’ often well-meant and potentially helpful advice. Mr. and Mrs. W’s relationship is caught in a vicious circle of withdrawal and pressure that leads both of them to become discouraged about their relationship and thus to further withdraw and pressure.

The family context provides a critical learning environment. Children learn the myriad of behaviors that are necessary for their life as children as well as for adult responsibilities. They emulate their parents and their siblings as well as relevant extended family members. They watch how parents deal with older siblings and thus they learn how to deal with conflict and to communicate their wishes in effective ways. They learn patterns of violence or verbal negotiation. They learn to expect certain responses from others for their behaviors. They learn what is valued in their family context. As children become older, their models become part of their wider context of peers, neighborhood, school, and the media. As a result, family members who come for help represent a wide array of learning opportunities in their current and past relationships and belief systems that are relevant to their situation.

As people begin to believe that they can carry out various tasks effectively, they develop a sense of self-efficacy in this area. Parents who experience success in helping a child learn a new skill develop a sense of self-efficacy in the area of teaching their children. Parents who do not experience children as being responsive to their efforts to enforce limits begin to doubt their self-efficacy as parents in this area. *Reciprocal determinism*—the concept that individuals both influence their environment and are in turn influenced by it—represents another important concept relevant to family life (Jordan, Cobb, & Franklin, 1999).

Cognitive Therapy Paradigm

Cognitive therapists have traditionally looked at the patterns of belief systems of family members as well as specific responses to individual situations. As described in the work of Hill in chapter 1, McCubbin and McCubbin (1996), and Beck (1976), these underlying belief systems (variously called paradigms, schemas, core beliefs) influence how family members view the world, themselves, and the family and thus shape the families' thoughts and behaviors in individual situations. These beliefs are shaped by the family origin as well as ongoing events within the life of the family. Cultural patterns profoundly influence these schemas. These schemas in turn influence the types of help that are valued or viewed as demeaning. Families with core beliefs that "You cannot trust anyone who is not family" would have great difficulty seeking supports beyond the family circle and would be very guarded if referred for counseling. Beliefs about what is appropriate behavior for men or women influence family options and probably played a role in the current problem facing James Grant. Life cycle development also shapes beliefs and makes it especially difficult for Sarah to accept help from her parents. Helping family members identify these core beliefs, how they are affecting what is occurring currently, and examining their validity in the current situation can enable family members to adopt more effective ways of interpreting the world and behaving accordingly.

SOCIAL LEARNING/COGNITIVE THEORY MAJOR TENETS

From a family perspective, a social learning/cognitive approach has several key tenets that guide the assessment and intervention process. These tenets address both the process by which behavior is learned and the motivation system that influences which behaviors will be demonstrated in a specific setting. They include both cognitions and behaviors.

1. Behavior is learned. Individuals learn from their social context how people behave and how others are likely to respond to them.
2. The behaviors that people demonstrate are the product of their learning context.
3. Belief systems influence the learning and the performance of behavior.
4. Individuals behave in such a way as to maximize rewards. As a result, they anticipate that the behaviors they demonstrate will accomplish this for them (based on their experience either personally or in terms of the models in their life setting—vicarious reinforcement). As a result, behavior is logical within the context of this learning experience and the current cognitions of the individuals.
5. Consistent and immediate reinforcement is effective in influencing behavior. Inconsistent reinforcement is effective in maintaining behavior.
6. Educating clients about the process of learning and performance and the role of belief systems is valuable.

These tenets shape the social learning/cognitive assessment and treatment approach with families. If individuals can learn one set of behaviors, they can learn others that are more effective in addressing their current situation. If people act in such a way as to maximize pleasure, then it is important to understand the context and their expectations. If people continue to act in ways that would appear to have a negative impact on their lives, is it because they lack more positive ways to behave? Do they fail to anticipate the negative impact due to earlier learning experiences or are seemingly negative responses in reality positive for the person involved? What role are expectations and other cognitions playing in behavior that might otherwise seem self-defeating or having negative consequences? Children, for example, have been known to prod parents into yelling at them because being yelled at may be better than being ignored. People sometimes continue in abusive relationships because they fear the alternatives.

GOALS OF TREATMENT

The goals of the social learning/cognitive model are to enable families to meet the needs of members and to cope more effectively. Based on a paradigm that includes skills and motivation, the model seeks to promote family

functioning by helping family members learn appropriate skills, promoting a motivation system that encourages family members to perform behaviors that meet the needs of family members, and addressing the belief systems that foster effective behaviors by family members. While the model includes interventions with negative behaviors and belief systems, the focus is on promoting positive changes.

ROLE OF THE FAMILY COUNSELOR

In the social learning approach the role of the family counselor can be viewed as that of a coach. An effective coach helps individuals learn new behavior through modeling and other forms of instruction, provides opportunities for practice, offers feedback regarding the nature of the performance, and motivates individuals to learn and persist in the process of improving their performance through encouragement or other ways to promote positive cognitions. Since family members frequently do not understand the process by which behavior is learned and performed and the role of their belief systems, the social worker as coach helps educate family members about these important aspects.

Horne and Sayger (2000) stress the critical role played by the counselor's attitudes toward the family members on the therapeutic relationship. It is important that the counselor hold to the belief that each member of the family is "doing the best he or she can given the circumstances of that person and given the previous learning experiences that person encountered" (p. 472).

Viewed through the lens of resiliency, the family counselor provides a model of the new skills required and helps family members carry out these new skills. The counselor might serve as the model personally or identify other models in the life space of the family members. The counselor arranges for family members to have the opportunity to practice these skills in the counseling session and uses these occasions to give corrective feedback to ensure success. The counselor helps the family members identify ways that they can practice these skills in other settings to facilitate the process of generalization. The counselor encourages family members in terms of their ability to learn and the progress that they making. The family counselor helps family members identify and alter cognitions in ways that promote the family functioning. In the process the family members develop the critical skills needed to address their family situation and gain an appropriate sense of self-efficacy. For James Grant this means learning ways to parent his three children without vacillating between setting no limits and being overly strict. It means addressing some of his cognitions that prevent him from being an effective parent. It means gaining increased confidence in his ability to parent his children so that he does not have to retreat from parenting to the world of work where he views himself as successful. For Sarah

it means learning how to parent her baby while balancing her own needs as a teenager. It also might mean learning ways to communicate more effectively with her parents. In the process Sarah can begin to accept the help her parents could give her and to view this help in rewarding rather than in negative terms. It might also mean working with the parents to help them understand Sarah's perspective and to offer their help in ways that might be more acceptable to her. For Jennifer and Martin it means learning new ways to communicate in their marriage so they do not continue to destroy their love for each other by their learned patterns of retreat and attack. It means beginning to learn to trust each other and their relationship.

Assessment

The assessment process from a social learning/cognitive perspective includes identifying issues in the following areas: skills, motivation system, signaling system, and belief system. Difficulties can arise in any of these areas and the nature of the intervention differs depending on this assessment.

Skills. Family members or the family unit can lack the essential skills needed to address family issues within their current context and stage of development. These issues might include how to parent a toddler or a teenager, how to manage money, how to communicate with a partner, how to negotiate with extended family members, how to deal with a new culture, and how to adjust to changes in family roles due to illness or other major shifts, as well as various other family issues. Sarah and James Grant both struggle with lack of skills to parent their respective children. Jennifer and Martin's pain arises from their lack of skills in communicating with their partners.

As described previously, family members have typically learned their skills from past experiences; however, they might have had role models that were not appropriate for their current circumstances. What did they learn that could help in raising teenagers in the current world, in coping with circumstances in which the wife is the major wage earner, in dealing with the give and take of marriage, in caring for children as a single parent, in communicating between parents? While their previous models might have demonstrated coping skills that were effective within this context, families can be facing a disjuncture between these previous contexts and their current life. This can be especially critical for families that have moved from one culture to another (families in cultural transitions). In the rapidly changing world in which people move from community to community and the wider social context changes, such a disjuncture can be experienced by many families.

Motivation system. There can be a problem in the motivation system for the family or members of the family. Cognitions play an important role here because motivation is related to the perceived reward system within the family and the larger context. In terms of the parent-child relationship

world, a child might know what to do but lacks the motivation to do it because the child gets more attention for misbehavior than for listening (a parent's version of punishment might thus be a positive reinforcement for the child). A parent might be reinforced by the child to just let things slide because the fight to get the child to listen is just not worth the effort given the other demands on one's time and energy. A parent might be stymied by a child's emotional blackmail "I hate you; my friend's parents are nice and you are mean." Another parent might give up on setting limits because the child tests extinction by pushing the limits harder. Parents might be setting opposite reinforcements in place—what the mother praises the father devalues and vice versa. Lack of self-efficacy can contribute to a person's difficulty in acting in an effective manner.

Cultural context is important in this reinforcement system. Family members who come from cultures in which extended family or relational issues are valued more than individual accomplishments might make choices that seem lacking in responsibility or ambition from the perspective of a more individualistic counselor. Another issue relates to the nature of the reinforcements within the current cultural setting. People in cultural transition situations frequently live with cultural messages of what one should do (for example, care for older family members) but without the supports that enable one to carry these behaviors out in their current cultural context. Couples can experience tension if they come from different cultural contexts and expect behavior to be rewarded accordingly. Parents also must contend with powerful cultural messages from the media and the community that contradict family values. While parents might, for example, value academic achievement, the peer group of a teenager might place its value of athletic prowess.

Signaling system. There can be ambiguity in the current signaling system. People not only need to be able to carry out a certain behavior and be motivated to do so, they also need to be aware when such behavior is appropriate and required. Parents frequently stress this by saying words like "I mean it now" as a signal that the parent is serious about what he or she is saying. Parents and teenagers often end up in arguments because the parents and the teenager interpret words like "don't be late" in very different ways. Children who have done well in structured situations with clear behavior clues often slip back into old ways of acting without the presence of these structural clues. As a result, helping parents develop clearer signals can be an important intervention.

Belief system. There can be the problems and distortions in the belief system (cognitive part of the system) that in turn impede proper responses. The interaction between beliefs and the behavioral interaction between family members is often a cyclical one. A parent whose self-talk is "It doesn't do any good to tell the children what to do because they won't do it anyway" is not likely to assert one's self in an effective manner with the children. The

children's disregard in turn only reinforces this belief system and further discourages the parent from acting in an effective manner. The individual who thinks that it doesn't do any good to tell the partner something because he or she wouldn't listen or care is not likely to communicate these wishes to the partner. Again, this individual is not likely to respond in an effective way and the partner's anticipated lack of response becomes a perceived reality.

The assessment process is a joint one with the social worker and the family members. Family members are encouraged to identify patterns to help them understand what is taking place. Tracking sequences of behavior can give important new insights. Parents, for example, can chart the patterns of what is occurring prior (A = antecedent) to a child's specific behavior (B = behavior) and the nature of the consequences (C = consequences). These categories can include belief systems as well as actions. They might discover that the child's whining occurs when the child is hungry or tired, or perhaps when the parents are busy with another child or other family responsibilities. They might learn ways in which they have been inadvertently reinforcing the behavior by redirecting their attention from the other children to this child in response to the whining and ignoring the child when he or she is behaving appropriately. Family members can recognize that their beliefs are triggering issues or maintaining certain behaviors. In counseling families, it is common for family members to be surprised at the thoughts evoked in each of the family members and how these belief systems are pushing them farther apart. Understanding these behavioral and cognitive patterns gives clues to the solution. Family members need to be involved in the development of these tracking systems with an emphasis on trying to make them as simple as possible. If they are too complex and difficult for the family to carry it out, family members can become discouraged by the process and be viewed by their family counselor as resistant to change.

Including the family members as partners in the assessment process serves several purposes. First, they are in a unique position to identify what is taking place within the family context. Second, they are learning an important skill of identifying family patterns that can stand them in good stead in addressing future problems. Third, the experience of identifying patterns helps them in developing a sense of mastery that encourages family members in the process of change. Family members are helped to gain a sense of ownership over the nature of the problem and possible solutions.

TREATMENT PROCESS

The following represent important steps and principles in the intervention process.

Build intervention efforts on the identified nature of the problem.

If the social worker addresses motivation, for example, but family members lack the necessary skills, the result will only be frustration for all concerned.

Identify positive changes. Families typically come for help because they want to change something wrong with their family or its members or because some outside party wants them to make these changes. As a result, the emphasis is upon something negative to eliminate. Families can easily spend the entire session complaining about what the other family members are doing wrong. One of the first steps in the counseling process is to help family members begin to think in terms of what are the positive changes that they want. Goals and the steps to reach them must be positive and clear in their direction. This step can be difficult for some families at first because they have become locked into their negative patterns and have not been able to envision other approaches.

Positive changes can give a meaningful direction to the efforts of family members. Parents, for example, can shift from “He has to get rid of that attitude” to “I want him to show a sense of responsibility by helping with the dishes without complaining.” Sarah can identify ways that her parents can help her without making her feel that they are putting her down. Jennifer and Martin can identify something positive that they would like from the other one. As family members are helped to identify some positive actions, the counselor can help assess what further skills are needed to accomplish these changes and what reinforcement systems the family might put in place to encourage these positive steps.

Strategize for success. Family members usually come for counseling feeling defeated in their efforts for change. As a result, it is important for the counselor to help the family members identify changes that are realistic and can really be carried out. The counselor can problem solve with family members about what small behavior would be realistic as a beginning step, ways to identify if it has taken place, and how to reinforce this positive change. By breaking down changes into understandable and manageable steps, the family is more likely to experience success and to gain important self-efficacy. Such an experience of success helps motivate the family members to persist and believe in the possibility of change.

Success is more likely if the identified behavioral steps are specific. “Doing better in school” is open to a multitude of interpretations by parents and their children with the potential for misunderstandings and consequent mistrust. “Raising the grade from a D to a C on the next science test” or “helping by loading the dishwasher after the evening meal” are specific and clearly understood by everyone. In the partnership context, “Showing that you care” is another ambiguous request. Helping partners identify what actions might reflect this, leads to specifics such as “Ask me how it went at work/or with the kids today when you come home,” “Read the children a bedtime story so I can get a break,” “Sit with me to watch X TV show in the evening,” that are understandable to the individuals involved. To be effective, steps must be realistic for the parties involved and the counselor can discuss this issue in the session with family members.

Educate the family about the learning process. A knowledgeable partner is a more effective one. Helping family members learn about ways in which behavior is learned and reinforced can give family members the tools to understand their family and to make additional positive changes in other areas and in the future. If parents understand that the first response of children to the process of extinction is to raise the volume of their whining, they will be able to interpret such behavior as a beginning sign of progress rather than the failure of their efforts. This knowledge can help parents persist rather than give in and create an even more entrenched pattern by their intermittent reinforcement.

Help family members develop needed new skills. Family members might lack the skills to carry out this positive change. As a result, they will need help in learning and carrying out these new behaviors. The family counselor can use the family session to model the new behaviors and to enable family members to practice them. Jennifer and Martin, for example, have few skills in communicating with each other about troubling issues without their pattern of withdrawal and shouting. The counselor can model beginning steps of stating their views. The counselor then encourages the couple to practice these skills in the session in areas that are manageable for the couple. These practice sessions permit the counselor to give feedback about ways to improve their skills. Without this critical step, Jennifer and Martin are likely to go home and repeat the old troubling patterns and dig the hole of distrust and lack of self-efficacy deeper.

Build in ways to generalize use of new skills and response patterns. Homework is a key element in helping people begin to generalize changes from the office setting to the daily life of the family. The social worker can problem solve with the family members ways to practice these new skills in their daily life. James can be helped to begin to make change in his behavior with his children or he and the children can identify steps that each of them will begin making. Sarah can be helped to identify a way she can handle a troubling situation with her baby more effectively. Jennifer and Martin can practice a specific new way of discussing an issue in their marriage.

Recognize that learning is a process. People have learned and practiced their current behaviors for many years so that these behavior patterns are well entrenched. Use of these old behavioral patterns is automatic, especially when people are under stress. It also takes time to generalize new behaviors from one setting to another. Family members can become discouraged by their responses or angry with other family members who slip back into old ways of behaving. The social worker can encourage family members to realize that learning and change is a process and thus that relapse into old ways is a normal part of change. They can also be encouraged to see signs of progress—the blowups occurred only three times instead of five

times last week or the time of conflict lasted for only half an hour rather than an hour.

Sessions can be used to problem solve with family members the nature of some of the challenges in responding in new ways. These challenges might be in several areas: An individual might still lack some of the skills needed. Motivation might be a factor, perhaps lack of confidence that the new behavior will really work—worry how the other family members will respond (Will the children really listen if I do not threaten to hit them? Will my partner really listen?). Lack of clarity in the signaling system leads to confusion about what behavior is expected. It also takes time to generalize behavior from one setting to another—from the counseling office to the home, and from one aspect of life to another. Jennifer and Martin might find it difficult to transfer their new communication skills to another topic of concern for them. James Grant might find it difficult to transfer his changes in response to the thirteen-year-old to the seven-year-old due to the differences in developmental needs. Based on this assessment, the counselor can both encourage family members that learning and change takes time and identify some of the specific issues facing this family that can be addressed in the counseling setting.

Help families reinforce positive behavior meaningful for individuals involved. Family members need to find ways to encourage behavior that is identified as positive in order to help individuals maintain this behavior. If people do not believe (expectancies) that their positive changes will be favorably recognized (positive reinforcement), they will be less likely to continue these behaviors and to make them part of the life of the family. Frequently, troubled families have developed a pattern of negative comments about problematic behavior while positive behavior is ignored. Sometimes family members have grown up in families in which words of praise or other forms of positive recognition were uncommon. There are thus several aspects to altering the reinforcement system depending on the specific family situation. If family members lack role models who have given affirmation, the counselor can serve as a role model for such behavior as well as educate family members about the valuable role of these responses. The counselor can problem solve with family members about the reinforcements that would be meaningful and feasible within this family context and the ways to implement them in the life of the family. This new skill can be practiced within the session as well as in homework opportunities.

Help family members identify and counter destructive cognitions. Our belief systems influence whether we expect (expectancies) that it will be worthwhile to act in a certain way. As discussed previously, sometimes our cognitions prevent positive changes from occurring and trap us into self-defeating patterns. Recognizing and addressing some of these cognitions can help people begin to carry out new behaviors. For example, in terms of

the discouraged parent who interprets the child's testing behavior as a sign that the child does not care about the parents, this cognition can be recognized and then reframed within a more benign developmental context: "You might be right that your child does not care what you want, or perhaps your child is like all other children that age, they try to test you because in their hearts they want limits. Being a parent at these times can be difficult." This cognition might reflect a more pervasive schema of not feeling valued by others generally. Generalizing the intervention to this larger schema may be useful. When partners begin to make changes, one partner can dismiss this change with a comment that "He/she is just doing this because I asked for it." Sadly neither of the partners experience positive validation through this interchange. Helping people recognize that "doing something because the other person asked for it can be a sign of caring" might be another way of interpreting this new behavior that furthers the healing process. The family can also help in creating these changes. Sarah's parents might be encouraged to phrase their help in ways that can be less threatening to Sarah. Sharing with her their own uncertainty and fears when they were new parents might reduce her thoughts that she is being criticized. They can also comment favorably on things that she is doing in her care of the baby.

Brock and Barnard (1999) describe three keys to success in teaching new behaviors within the context of family counseling. First, The counselor discusses the skill and presents a rationale for learning the skill to the clients. Second, The counselor demonstrates the skill. Third, the clients have the opportunity to practice and receive feedback while performing the skill. (p. 84).

The family therapist needs to explain the nature of the skill, its importance, and how it will benefit family members. Encouraging further discussion between the family members and the counselor regarding the rationale is helpful in obtaining commitment to learning this skill. In the second stage of demonstration, the family therapist must ensure that the modeling gives an accurate picture of what is being taught and the context in which it will be used. Asking clients to explain what they saw you doing and discussing what occurred helps clarify any misunderstandings. The next crucial step is to have family members practice the new skill within the session. This can be difficult for family members not only because it is a new skill but also because the topics involved or the situation can be a highly emotionally charged one.

Brock and Barnard (1999) indicate the importance of having clients begin with situations in which the tension and threat is relatively low and gradually move to more emotionally charged ones. Encouraging feedback is important. The therapist needs to let clients know that they are doing well. When there are problems in the performance, it is useful to stop and determine if there is need for further clarification of the skill that might require

another demonstration or if the topic at hand is too emotionally charged to be appropriate at this time.

APPLICATION

Parent-Child Relationship

Parent-child relationships play important roles in supporting resiliency. As discussed in the earlier chapters, unfortunately external stressors on the family as well as the previous learning experiences of family members can jeopardize these relationships. Issues related to parenting play critical roles in terms of risk and resiliency factors regarding child maltreatment and positive child development. Protective factors include parental competencies in parental roles and related satisfaction in the parenting roles while risk factors involve poor problem solving skills and harsh, inconsistent discipline, and low nurturing skills (Thomlison, 2004).

Horne and Sayger (2003) describe the situation facing many Level II parents as “relying on spanking, lecturing, or grounding to punish children for their behavior. These punishments are typically ineffective, particularly if the parent’s authority is not secure or respected” (p. 125). Social learning approaches offer family members opportunities to learn new parenting techniques and strategies to implement them in ways that restore parental authority and respect.

There are several alternative strategies that parents can use to help shape the behavior of their children. These include timeouts, the Premack Principle, natural and logical consequences, assigning extra chores, and loss of privileges.

Timeouts involve sending a child to a nonreinforcing environment for an appropriate length of time to gain self-control. This technique provides a way for both the parent and the child to detach from an escalating situation. The length of the timeout is dependent on the age of the child because too long a length of timeouts for very young children quickly loses their sense of meaning. Parents also need to be aware of the potential reinforcers present in a setting. Sending a child to a room full of toys or computer games may represent a reward rather than a timeout.

The Premack Principle requires children to complete an activity they are less likely to choose before they can do something that they are more likely to choose to do. A child might be required to complete homework or a household chore before playing a video game. Naturally the parent has to ensure that the child has not rushed through homework or the chore at the expense of quality in order to get to the video game.

Natural and logical consequences is a means of teaching children that behavior has consequences through experiencing the results of their

behavior. The child who impulsively spends his or her allowance on the first day will need to experience waiting until the next week before getting more money. A child who rushes through a task by doing a poor job will have to spend the extra time redoing it and missing out on some desired activity. A teenager who drives recklessly can be denied permission to drive the family car for a period of time.

Assigning extra chores involves giving additional task for older children who have violated important rules.

Loss of privileges involves taking away privileges that are important for a child (response cost) when the child has violated a family rule. These might involve use of the telephone, the car, or a weekend at a friend's house. As with all parenting techniques, it is important to respond in ways that match the loss of privileges to the severity of the behavior and the developmental stage of the child. If parents impose too severe of punishment, they might later feel the need to recall the punishment (thus undermining their future effectiveness) or generate serious resentment on the part of the child.

Contingency contracts is a useful technique for use between parents and older children. "A contract is negotiated wherein each participant specifies who is to do what for whom, under what circumstances, times, and places" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000, p. 285). The terms of the contract are clear and precise. Description of a contract between an adolescent and parents illustrates this clarity. The contract specifies that if the adolescent earns "a C or better on her weekly quiz," the parents in turn "will give \$10.00 toward the purchase of her clothes for that week" (p. 285). As discussed, both sets of statements must be realistic for the parties involved. The contract opens the door to the opportunity for success in this specific interaction and helps build new ways of relating between the parties involved. Each of the parties reinforces the other to carry out their part in the contract. Hopefully the good results of this process generalize to other aspects of the family and thus help the family problem solve and resolve conflicts generally.

Working with families requires more than educating parents about the nature and possibility of these alternative-parenting strategies. Several important interventions can also be necessary. Addressing the belief systems of parents can be crucial. Parents who have grown up with physical punishment as the norm and have relied upon it as their primary means of discipline might be reluctant to try what they view as softer techniques. They might fear losing control of their children, perhaps based on a core belief they will lose control of their children and their children will get into serious trouble if they do not impose such punishments. The social worker may need to address their reservations by explaining the value of these new strategies. It also means helping parents in the actual implementation of these new strategies. Since these are new techniques for parents, it will also be important to discuss ways to implement them given the developmental age of the child and the nature of the infringement. Ineffective implementations

of these alternative strategies can reduce their effectiveness and fail to create the important parental authority and respect. A fifteen-minute timeout for a two-year-old can seem like an eternity and quickly loses its meaning. Upset parents can fall into the trap of creating overly harsh responses, for example, a loss of privileges for a month. After the parents have cooled off, they might rethink their actions. They are then caught between being inconsistent and or unrealistic. Parents can frantically try a series of responses (“We have tried everything”) without being consistent in their application. As a result, helping parents create realistic arrangements and ways to implement them consistently are important parts of the skill development with parents. Parents can also be helped to understand that the emphasis needs to be on positively reinforcing what the child is doing right rather than merely deterring negative behavior. Parents who might fear losing the love of their children or at least alienating them might be reluctant to set limits that cause the child to become angry and say hurtful comments. Children quickly learn the power of words like “I hate you, you’re not my friend” as well as the silent treatment. Parents need encouragement and positive recognition from the counselor for their own efforts to implement alternative parenting techniques. The family counselor needs to recognize small steps toward this goal. It is also important to look at the support systems available to parents and other family members as they seek to implement new ways of behaving. James Grant, for example, might find a grief support group of other single parents who are facing some of the same issues that he is. Parents who find themselves being blackmailed by their children might be able to benefit from a parent support group to receive support from other parents and to realize that others parents are also facing this challenge.

Communication Skills

Communication skills are important in supporting family resiliency as ways to problem solve and create emotionally affirming relationships within the family. Many of the families who seek help have experienced a breakdown in communication between family members. Family members often report that they are not listened to or are misunderstood. The situation escalates and erodes the sense of trust within the family. As Jennifer and Martin illustrate, frequently family members misinterpret what is said or not said in ways that increases hurt. As a result, helping family members identify and develop valuable communication skills can be an important step in restoring family relationships and promoting resiliency. Again, this process requires assessing the current skill levels of family members as well as their expectancies. If family members do not believe that other family members want to hear from them, they are unlikely to invest themselves in these efforts and addressing these belief systems is important. The counseling session is an important venue for teaching family members about communication

strategies, identifying problems in the communication sequence, and giving useful feedback. By asking family members to carry out these activities in the session, the counselor can identify verbal and nonverbal messages and problems that impede the communication process. For example, while a family member might ask in the session why his partner does not believe that he is listening, observing him turning his eyes up the ceiling while she talks gives an important clue to her reaction. The counselor might also discover that a parent states an expectation of children in such a tentative and hesitant way that it is very clear why the children do not follow these instructions and the parent feels devalued. As described earlier, such behavior reflects skills as well as belief systems.

Horne and Sayger (2003) describe the following steps in the communication process.

1. Speak your piece. Individuals must express their own thoughts rather than expecting others to understand their thoughts.
2. Find out what others are thinking. Family members are encouraged to ask others what they are thinking rather than making assumptions. Frequently in counseling situations, partners are surprised to learn what the other person was really thinking because it was far different from what they had assumed.
3. Show others that they are being heard. Demonstrate through words, eye contact, or other culturally appropriate behaviors that one is listening and hearing what is being said.
4. Ask questions when confused. Ask for clarification when family members are uncertain rather than making assumptions.
5. Stop and let others know when communication is breaking down. When the discussion begins to escalate with the danger of hurt statements, it is important to ask to stop the interaction and wait for a calmer moment. (pp. 125–126)

The social worker can model these behaviors and then problem solve with the parties involved ways to implement them regarding a specific topic. Family members can be praised for changes that they are making as well as helped to identify behaviors that continue to disrupt communication. The social worker and the family members can also problem solve ways to implement these changes within the home context and possible challenges in doing so. Using the principle of strategizing for success and beginning with small realistic steps, they can identify issues that are realistic to communicate about using these new techniques and other issues that might be too explosive to tackle without the presence of the counselor at this point in time.

Anger control can play an important role in family communication, especially if angry comments have escalated and created major conflicts. Jordan, Cobb, and Franklin (1999) describe a sequence of steps to help fami-

lies learn to reduce these negative interaction. The first step in this process is to educate family members about the nature of anger and ways in which anger can escalate through the family system through the interaction among the family members. The next step is to engage family members in agreeing upon another way to deal with handling these angry interactions. Family members must be willing to recognize when the situation is escalating. When this occurs, family members agree to give each other a sign agreeable to all that indicates "I am getting too angry to continue this discussion and I need a break and cool off" (p. 81). The discussion then stops for a period of time but resumes again later enabling the family to resolve the issue. The request for the timeout occurs again if needed while the family works on the issue at hand. Family members learn new skills of handling conflict with the accompanying sense of being able to control anger within the family (Jordan, Cobb, & Franklin, 1999).

Problem Solving

The ability to problem solve is a critical aspect of resiliency. Problem solving requires family members to assess the problem facing them and to identify possible steps that can help resolve it. Gaps in the problem-solving process can create further difficulties within the family and relationships with the external world. Within the social learning approach, the social worker can help family members problem solve more effectively by modeling more effective problem-solving skills or helping family members carry out these steps in addressing a specific problem facing the family.

Family members might lack skills in problem solving generally or demonstrate this ability in some contexts, but lack specific skills pertinent to the family situation. James Grant demonstrated effective problem-solving skills at work but lacked critical ones in the area of parenting. Sarah might have good problem-solving skills in terms of dealing with her girl friends, but feels lost in her parent role. A further assessment of Jennifer and Martin might have revealed problem-solving skills in other areas of life that were not being tapped in their marital relationship. Using a strengths-based perspective, the social worker can help family members identify ways they are solving problems effectively in other areas of life and possible ways that they can transfer these skills to the family arena. This approach helps build an important sense of self-efficacy as well as improving family problem-solving skills.

Horne and Sayger (2003) identify four key questions to help families guide their problem-solving efforts.

1. What is your goal? What would you like to see happen?
2. What are you doing to achieve this goal?
3. Is what you are doing helping you achieve this goal?
4. If not, what are you going to do differently? (p. 127).

These questions can help family members identify the steps in generating and evaluating possible alternatives to reaching family goals. It also helps translate problems (negative) into goals (positive).

EVALUATION

The social learning/cognitive approach represents opportunities that enable family members to develop more effective coping strategies and relate to each other in more positive ways. Jordan, Cobb, and Franklin (1999) reviewed the literature on family counseling derived from behavioral learning principles and found them to be effective in addressing parent-child and marital issues. Increasing communication skills has been one of the most effective aspects of couple therapy (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). Parent-child issues have also responded well to programs combining cognitive and behavior components (Jordan, Cobb, & Franklin, 1999, p. 91). Parental education has emerged as helpful for the targeted behavior but as having less impact on other behaviors, thus suggesting limitations in generalizability (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). While parental education has demonstrated effectiveness in addressing conduct disorders with children, families with many risk factors show less improvement than do families with fewer risk factors. Length of treatment (especially more than ten sessions) and the therapist's knowledge of social learning principles and skills were also associated with increased effectiveness of this approach (Sexton, Robbins, Hollimon, Mease, & Mayorga, 2003).

SUMMARY

The social learning/cognitive approach to counseling with families can be effective in helping families learn and practice new skills and alter belief systems that contribute to dysfunctional patterns within families. The approach is strength-based in that it assumes that people are able to learn more productive patterns of behavior. The counselor acts in the role of a coach helping families learn and practice behaviors that are adaptive and identifying and altering belief systems. The implementation of the model is tailored to the unique circumstances and cultural context of the families involved.