

Family Systems Overview

The theory of Family Systems is grounded in a philosophy and practice that fosters a high success rate for individual families. This series of handouts are intended to provide a brief explanation of Family Systems Theory and provide examples of Family Systems tools.

The Family Systems Theory is composed with a few core principles:

- **Holistic Approach.** Every family system, even though it is made of individuals, is an organic whole. An individual cannot be separated from the system (family). Individuals cannot be understood in isolations from one another.
- **Predictable Patterns.** Families interact in predictable patterns that emerged from the family system. Behaviors of members drive each other to react in predictable ways. History often repeats itself within a family and within generations.
- **Defined Boundaries.** Families have established boundaries as to what they allow to impact their family. This is the degree to which they allow outside forces to influence their family system.
- **Unwritten Rules of Engagement.** Families have unwritten rules that dictate how the members interact with one another.
- **Resistant to Change.** Systems are resistant to change, even when change is desired.
- **Solutions are within the Family.** Every family has skills and resources to contribute to solutions.

The Family Systems approach begins with Empowerment. The Empowerment Model has three key parts:

- Respect
- Responsibility
- Accountability

Empowerment is all about igniting the spark of self-determination in a person. We want to empower people to recognize they have control over their life, they have the ability to make choices, and they have the responsibility to take that control.

Respect

All individuals need to be respected and feel like they are respected. In terms of case management, it is a professional imperative that all customers are treated with respect. Respect equates value – that the person is and feels valued.

Responsibility

All individuals have the responsibility to take control over the direction of their life. They also have the responsibility to make decisions for themselves and their family. As a case manager we must also have the customer responsible for their goals, actions, and assignments in the program. It is difficult to have or develop respect for someone that has or takes no responsibility.

Accountability

Accountability is the enforcement or acceptance of consequences to actions. Consequences can be positive – such as succeeding at a job, or negative – such as losing eligibility for failing to submit necessary verification. A person can not have true responsibility without having accountability and it is difficult to respect someone who is not responsible or held accountable.

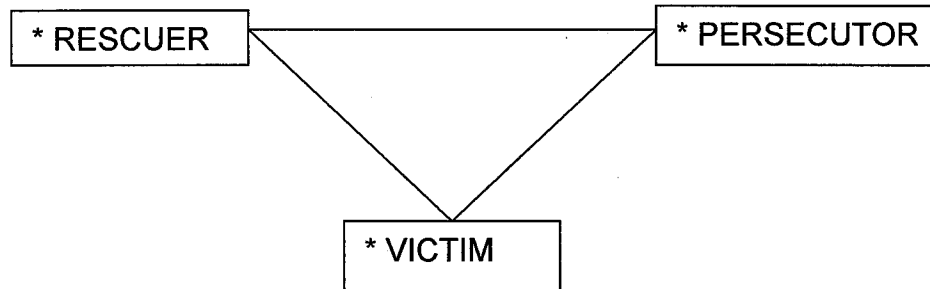
Empowerment Techniques

The following are some techniques for empowering people (as adapted from the Family Project, Parent Partner Program in Boston, Massachusetts).

1. Give the power to the customer – don't control the case management or withhold information.
2. Ask the simple questions – make no assumptions.
3. Ask what changes customers want while respecting their wishes when they don't want changes and being their partner in achieving the results they do want.
4. Pay attention to details of what is important to the customer. Listen actively to all that is being said – especially to incidental comments or closing remarks.
5. Look to your customers for what is next or where to go in the case.
6. Work with the customers' goals and tap into their dreams.
7. Consult with your customers on all actions – do not make decisions without them.
8. Always be respectful and use good manners. Do not be disrespectful at any point – whether the customer is present or not. Comments and judgments may not be heard by the customer, but are carried over in the attitude and approach you take.
9. Be sensitive to the invasion of their space and privacy.
10. Be attentive to the customer no matter what else is going on. Don't answer the phone while in with your customer or allow co-workers to divert your attention.

Rescue Triangle

When "Helping" isn't "Helping"
FAMILY DEVELOPMENT RESCUE TRIANGLE



Rescuer Role:

When we as workers assume the rescue or helping role, we assume a one-up position. We view the person needing help as helpless and powerless to accomplish the task themselves or make the needed changes. We believe the person needing help **MUST** somehow be helped. We assume complete burden of dealing with every problem presented. We expect little or no effort on the part of the person seeking help during the initial helping process.

Victim Role:

Person wanting help immediately assumes a one-down position. They believe they are helpless and powerless to accomplish a task or make a change. They expect the helper to assume responsibility for the outcome of the helping process. The victim has no involvement in the helping process thus any investment in the outcome.

Persecutor Role:

This role is looked upon as being the punisher. This role is the result of either being a Rescuer or the Victim and is caused by the accumulation of resentments and anger that is acquired by assuming either of these roles. (i.e. the Rescuer becomes angry when the Victim continues to not help themselves and thus the Rescuer begins to Persecute the Victim. Those in the Victim role grow tired of being kept in the one-down position by Rescuer and begin to Persecute the Rescuer.

Family Development philosophy cautions workers about getting caught up in the **Rescuer** role. Government policies tend to get caught up in the same **Rescuer** role because we believe families are broken, helpless and **Victims**. Laws are made to **Persecute** those who don't abide by the **Rescuer** rules. Policies and laws need to empower families to become strong and healthy.

**Rescue Triangle description by Grant County Department of Social Services as adapted from the National Resource Center on Family Based Services.*

Personal Exploration Handout

We all have beliefs or values on which we base our actions. We have developed ways of looking at our job based upon our experiences. These experiences have been important to our survival in our jobs. One of the most important aspects of working in the human service system is how our beliefs affect our interactions with people who are involved in these programs.

When dealing with people on a daily basis, it is important to explore some of these beliefs/assumptions/ expectations that we have. Listed below are areas that are issues for workers in the welfare system. In this exercise, you are encouraged to share reactions to the following statements with your co-workers and team members. No one is right or wrong. The focus is on beginning to explore what we are thinking and why we think that way. If we are to be facilitators of change, we must first find out why we do our jobs the way we do.

Complete the following statements and explore what in your experience/job has led you to feel that way.

Helping:

- When I need help, I feel.....and what I want is.....
- When someone asks me for help, I want to.....
- When I try to help someone and it doesn't turn out the way I thought, I.....
- What I expect recipients to want is.....

Welfare Issues

- My reaction to the word welfare is.....
- When people talk about welfare and the rights of welfare recipients, the area that most concerns me is.....
- When I think of media images of welfare recipients, I.....
- My reaction to working with an anti-poverty program is.....
- When I think about having to rely on public assistance, I.....

Support Systems

- When I think of home, I think of.....
- When I think of family, I think of.....
- My sources of support are.....
- My reaction to the belief that the government needs to be responsible for citizens' financial security is.....
- My reaction to the belief that communities need to support their own is.....

Personal

- I deal with my own needs by.....
- What is my value system and how does it affect my behavior with others.....
- My basic philosophy on life is.....on welfare.....
- I am perceived by others as.....
- Being in a "helping" position, am I truly able to practice what I preach.....

(adapted from the National Resource Center of Family Based Services, 1994)

Interviewing for Solutions – Family Systems

The following are a few different approaches to interviewing customers in order to get at the “issue” and begin the process of developing goals.

Exceptions Sequence

Ask questions that direct the customer to when the situation or barrier is not present:

When don't you have that problem?

What is different about those times?

What happens instead?

Who does what differently? (You, family members, etc.)

What will have to happen for that to happen?

Who will have to do what more often?

Who is most likely to want to do it?

How will you know that the problem is really solved?

Miracle Question Sequence

Sometimes taking the “magical” approach of having the customer imagine being able to wave a magic wand to make the problem disappear helps focus the customer on what would be different after the change.

If a miracle happened and you woke up tomorrow and your problem was solved, what would be different?

What do you think will have to be different for that to start happening?

Are there times when it already happens, if only for a little while?

How come, what is different?

What will have to happen for that to happen more often?

Who will make it happen?

What will be the sign that it is happening more often?

How will you know that your problem is really solved?

Coping/Pessimistic Sequence

One approach is to take the other side and see if it isn't really that bad – in other words, what if it was worse?

How come things aren't worse?

What are you doing to keep it from getting worse?

How has that been helpful?

What could make it worse than it already is?

What do you think will happen if things don't get better?

Resources for Family Systems Theory

National Resource Center of Family Based Services, University of Iowa School of Social Work

Dodson, L.S. Y Kurpslus, D.J. Family Counseling: A Systems Approach

Elizabeth Carther, Monica McGoldrick The Family Life Cycle

Bronfenbrenner, U. Toward an experimental ecology of human development. American Psychologist, 32(7), 513-529.

Rush, K. Early childhood: The role of the paraprofessional. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration.

Handouts consolidated by



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