

The FUTURE Series - VII

Family Unification Techniques: Unique Relationship Enhancement

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EVALUATING PARENTAL BEHAVIOR

During the course of unifying families, MHPs must frequently wonder about, and evaluate, parental behavior. Much has been written on this topic. Writers and commentators have been particularly concerned with the question of what the standard should be in thinking about this issue. Can the state rule “with a heavy hand,” and demand perfection? What right, it is asked, does the state have to demand standards in custody situations that are higher than those that normatively exist in regular intact families? Parents in normal, intact families yell, threaten, cajole and even spank. If “normal” parents can do this, why should the standards be higher in cases where the state has presumed that it has the right to stand in judgment on such a “sacred right” through the ages as that of a parent to be privately responsible for a child’s upbringing.

The solution embraced by the huge majority of MHPs is spelled out eloquently in the book *Solomon’s Sword* (Schutz, Dixon, Lindenberger and Ruther, 1988). They have explained the concept of the “good-enough” parent. Interested MHPs are referred to this source for a discussion of the topic.

For our purposes, we distinguish four categories for the MHP to keep in mind in thinking about the adequacy of parental behavior in reunification therapy. Note well that the people caught up in custody disputes often demand huge concessions from each other, each believing he or she is wonderful and the other person is terrible. Often *everyone*, including the children, harbor unrealistic demands about what can reasonably be expected of a certain parent.

Useful Categories of the Adequacy of Parental Behavior

1. Obviously Poor Parenting Behaviors

This category includes behaviors almost every court would find unacceptable. It would include long periods of neglect, severe beatings, proven sexual abuse and so forth.

2. Ineffective Behavioral Strategies

This category would include behaviors most courts would find acceptable but most MHPs would find strategically ineffective in the long run. Such behaviors would include the rather long list of things that go on in normal families: yelling, making threats, relatively infrequent spankings and so forth. While such behaviors are quite typical in normal families, and judges would find them characteristic of the good-enough parent, most MHPs believe an excessive use of such strategies do not promote positive parent-

child bonding, especially in the long run. NOTE CAREFULLY: These behaviors are not to be confused with strict limit setting. They are poor strategically not because of what they might aim to accomplish, for example, a child's cooperation with a parental request, but because of the negative emotion that accompanies parental requests, requests that are framed in needlessly aggressive manners.

3. Perfectly Reasonable Parental Requests A Child Just Happens Not to Like

Here we would list strict homework enforcement, a demand for moral and polite behavior, strict adherence to religious values, strict chore enforcement and so forth.

In custody situations, children often come to believe they can judge the rightness or wrongness of such requests, because the other parent, wittingly or unwittingly, or the complexities of the divorce situation, supports this very-wrong empowerment of the children.

Sometimes the children just observe that one parent is strict about such parental values and the other is not. From this, they conclude the more strict parent is wrong. Just because a child does not like a behavior does not make it "wrong."

4. Obviously Good Parental Practices

This would include affection, proper empathy, the teaching of competency skills, reasonable consistency and so forth.