

Publication Reference:

Armstrong, R.M. (1982). Videotape Review of The Joy Family The Girl Who Didn't Like School. Australian Journal of Family Therapy, 3(4), 234.

TITLE:

The Joy Family — The Girl Who Didn't Like School

PRESENT:

Mother, Father, Daughter, aged 10.

THERAPIST:

Moshe Lang

PLACE:

William Road Family Therapy Centre :

YEAR:

1980

CONDITIONS:

Video — good

Sound — reasonable

TECHNICAL DATA:

¾" Umatic Cassette, black and white,

P.A.L. — 60 minute tape.

AVAILABILITY:

Professional audiences only

RENTAL ONLY:

Price \$60.00

The Joy Family — the girl who did not like school

Is it family therapy to see a family once, to tell the daughter who has been refusing to go to school that it is perfectly normal to not want to go to school and then to tell the parents that as parents it is their right to insist their daughter attends school? This was the question posed by Moshe Lang when he asked me to write a review of this video tape. Moshe added that follow up some months later found the daughter attending school regularly and the family reported as settled.

First, let me outline what happens in the interview. The family comprises a publican father, a pregnant mother and a self-possessed ten year old daughter. The interview opens as Moshe invites the mother to change chairs so she faces the camera. This produces a rapid game of musical chairs. The mother

commences by saying she wants Loretta to get to know herself better, that she is worried by her unwillingness to go to sleep and also by the fact she is not keen to go to school. Moshe shifts his attention to the father, a very big man, lounging in an indifferent manner. The father's attitude is that Loretta is perfect. Increasingly the mother overrides her husband's comments to press her point of view. Loretta states she prefers to be at home and that her parents can teach her what she wants to know, and that she stays up late to see her father when he returns from work. Moshe enquires about the parents' own experiences of school. The mother was a conscientious pupil whilst the father was disinterested and got into trouble. On one occasion he was severely hit by a teacher; his father went to school and gave the teacher a thrashing!

I teased myself by contemplating what was "really" going on in the Joy family. So many possibilities; marital difficulties; the over involvement of father and daughter; inadequate parental control; and most interesting of all, maybe this is incipient school refusal expressing the girl's fears of rejection and jealousy because of the soon-to-be born baby. All idle speculation, as all Moshe did was to offer his understanding of what was happening. The mother was overjoyed, "That is what I want to hear", and the family left expressing thanks and appreciation.

When I showed this interview to a group of colleagues, their response was a mixture of disappointment and appreciation. The disappointed colleagues considered many issues had been ignored whilst the appreciative ones were impressed by the way Moshe worked very simply with what the family presented. Certainly there were no family therapy pyrotechnics. Yet in my view what happened was very basic to the family therapy approach. Moshe treated "the problem" as something belonging to the whole family rather than an individual; he respectfully heard each person's view of what was happening; by talking about the parents' different experiences of school he highlighted the differences each would bring to viewing Loretta's behaviour. He also brought the mother's generalised concerns down to a specific aspect of behaviour, namely schooling. He re-labelled both the girl's and the parents' behaviour and normalised what was rapidly heading towards a conflict situation. Instead of prescribing "homework", Moshe legitimized the differing views of the parents, namely of being conscientious about school and of being indifferent to school and at the same time united the parents as having the right to insist their daughter attend school.

This is not an exciting interview to watch. However I believe it is this fact which provides the challenge to draw out the essential principles of family therapy involved.

Some family therapists assert, "problems develop from difficulties as a result of persistence in expending effort on the very approaches which are proving unsuccessful in dealing with these difficulties". (Bodin 1981). Equally well I believe therapists need to be aware how their urge to do "something", to change the family structure, can convert what is basically "a difficulty" into "a problem".

R.M. Armstrong

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Reference:

Bodin, A., 1981 "The Interactional View: Family Therapy Approaches of the M.R.I. in Gurman, A. & Kniskern, D. (Eds.) Handbook of Family Therapy, Brunner/Mazel, New York.