Collective bargaining

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When a child's behaviour is difficult to manage, it's often best to treat the whole family.

Liz Porter reports.

Fourteen-year-old Ryan fidgets as he tells psychiatrist and family therapist Dr Colin Riess that he was kicked out of his last school. Now, only weeks into his new year 9 class, he's already been suspended twice.

"It's just the teachers, they're really hard," the boy scowls.

Like most clients of family therapy, his parents have sought professional help because they have exhausted their own devices for dealing with a "problem" child or teenager. Family therapy - a kind of counselling that treats the family as a unit and works on the patterns of interactions within it - has been practised in Australia for more than 30 years and is now so common in the US that The Simpsons tried it in an early episode of the series.

Riess, director of the Bouverie Centre, Victoria's Family Institute, sometimes shows the Simpsons episode to students of the various qualifications in family therapy offered by the centre .

But he doesn't endorse the methods of Springfield's "family bliss or double your money back" family therapist Dr Marvin Monroe, who gives foam-covered mallets to Homer, Madge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie so they can release their aggression on each other. Instead he favours gentler techniques, all of which involve asking many questions.

Right now, Riess is asking Ryan what he thinks about coming along to this family-therapy session. The boy wriggles and studies his feet; he's not sure.
"If it means working things out with mum and dad, maybe it's worth it," he ventures finally.

The therapist then invites the boy's parents to speak. The pair have been separated since their child was three months old. Neither has a partner and both seem to have maintained a relationship of mutual recrimination ever since. The father, recently returned to Melbourne after five years in Sydney, has just taken over care of the boy, at the request of the mother, who has been in despair over her inability to control him.

But the boy's excitement over his new living arrangement has faded, and father and son are already in conflict.

"Whenever I try and communicate, the walls come down," the father says.

Hearing this, his son rolls his eyes.

"They're always at me, trying to get something out of me, " he mutters. "I can't take it. Dad always wants to talk about his 'feelings'." He spits the word out.

"I'm worried about Ryan," says his mother. "But I felt I wasn't doing a good job (with him) and I was at the end of my rope. He was expelled from school, he was hanging out at the mall, smoking marijuana."

"You allowed it," her ex-husband butts in.

The therapist gently asks the husband if he could respond after his ex-wife has spoken.

Then he asks each family member what they would like to achieve in today's session.

"I'm not used to mixing with dad. I haven't seen him for five years," says the boy, rolling his eyes by way of emphasis.

"So what would be a sign, for you," asks the therapist, "that things had got better?"

"If mum and dad got along a bit better, because they're always fighting," Ryan replies. "If we could just spend some time as the three of us. I've
spent half my life without my father, and now I'm only spending weekends with my mother. I want everyone to be in the same place at the same
time."

"How long have you had this wish?" Riess asks.

"Forever," the boy replies.

Both the parents then point out that they've told their son that a reunion is "not going to happen".

"How have you responded to that?" the therapist asks the boy.

"I've had a big outburst," the 14-year-old replies. "It's not what I want to hear."

Riess then addresses the parents. "So what were your wishes today?" he asks.

"To work out what's best for Ryan," his mother says. "We do need to learn how to deal with each other and respect each other's different approaches. Not living together, but we should be able to spend time together, to go out and spend a day together on Sunday."

The therapist pauses.

"We need to explore what might make it possible for you (three) to be able to spend time together," he says.

"But how realistic is that?" says the father

The therapist persists. "So what were your hopes for today?" he asks.

Ryan's father shifts in his chair.

"I was trying not to have too many hard-and-fast ideas. But I thought there would be one advantage. At least it forces us to talk about things."

At the mention of "talk", Ryan puts his head in his hands. His mother makes a crack about her ex's penchant for "talking about the past". Riess allows the parents a few minutes of psychological biffo, in which dad retorts that some things need to be "discussed" and suggests that Ryan has learned the art of "blocking things out" from his mother.

Then the therapist carefully hauls them back on track.

"What would be a sign to you that this work is valuable?" he asks the father. "If Ryan settles down at school, that would be good," is the reply.

Finally Riess points out to Ryan that his parents have made a commitment to try to get on, to make him happier. He invites the boy to look at making a similar commitment to making the kind of changes in his behaviour that might make them happier with him and less in conflict with each other.

The session ends. But instead of the family getting up and walking out, they stay in their seats and take questions from an audience of family therapists.

Colin Riess, ran this session with "Ryan" and his family (with actors improvising from their roles in a play called Deadbeat Dad) as a demonstration at a family-therapy congress. The session was recorded on a video, which the therapist sometimes shows to students, who also see videos of clients who have given permission for their sessions to be taped, on the understanding they will be shown only to students.

There are many different approaches employed in family therapy, Riess explains. One method is to focus on change, looking at the symptoms of a problem, and intervening to change family member's responses to them. Another is to look more closely at the family history. Yet another, the one he used in Ryan's family's case, is "solutions-focused."

"You look at what works and then use that to inform your responses," he says. "So I am working with Ryan's actions, and I'm saying to him, 'If you want them to collaborate about doing things differently, then you have to do something about your part in this - because your difficulties are not serving your interests.'

"But there is no recipe. Within one family there may be many different ways of working."

Most families seek therapy, says Riess, because they have a child or a teenager whom they see as a reflection or, in some cases, the "cause" of the family's problems.

"In my experience, the more sophisticated the parents, the more likely they are to see the problem as a relationship issue (rather than as a 'problem child')."

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while Prahran-based family therapist Moshe Lang has counselled "children" in their 40s caught up in their retirement-age parents' domestic wars.

One woman Riess saw was feeling "persecuted" by her defiant six-year-old son, who rejected her, often said he "hated" her and would never do what she asked. The boy was obedient at school and had a positive relationship with his father, while the mother had no such problems with her younger child.

In this case, the therapist identified that the woman's negative view of herself was undermining her confidence in herself as a parent. So he took a more "behavioural" approach, talking to her about times when her child had done "good" things for her, and indicated a desire for her approval.

"My hypothesis was that it was a case of 'If you don't like me, I won't like you'. I got them to keep a diary of conflicts - and of good things. And we talked about them being in each others' "good books " or "bad books".

"At six, the boy liked the idea of the chart, and it gave them a language to describe the relationship, which was different from 'he's bad' or 'I'm bad'. It was about how they were with each other."

There were also practical tasks.

"When she had asked him to tidy his room, instead of coming into his room in an aggressive manner, she would just come in and 'be' with him, and just ask, 'What's happening?' (instead of immediately getting angry)."

And what about every parent's nightmare: the classic-case "out-of-control" teenager? Staying out all night. Getting drunk or smoking dope. Failing to do schoolwork, let alone household tasks.

The first step, says Riess, is finding out what the fights at home are "about".

"It could be some unknown trauma, triggered by puberty. It could be acute stress caused by something in her life now. It could be something more subtle and serious, to do with the parents, but being played out in the relationship between the mother and daughter."

Once again, says Riess, there is no bumper-sticker diagnosis or cure. But he always advises negotiation with teenagers, rather than increased limit-setting, which is appropriate for younger children but only exacerbates the problem with adolescents.

"That will be experienced by the adolescent as a put-down, a vote of no-confidence, so they push harder and the parents push harder (they think they have to be stronger) and you get a pattern of blow-ups followed by a period of apology. That dynamic is a common destructive one."

Family therapy does work, says Riess, with one or two sessions often sufficing, although some families may see a therapist over longer periods. "It is most important that the family sees there is a problem and that they are prepared to do something about it.

"What therapy does, rather than blaming the young person, is saying that the difficulty lies in the relationship, in the dance between the parent and child."

According to Moshe Lang, who founded Australia's first private family-counselling centre, the Williams Road Family Therapy Centre, in 1979, even deciding to see a therapist can be helpful.

"We always used to tidy up on the days the housekeeper came. So if you decide to see a professional, you'll spend some time thinking 'What is the problem? How do I explain?'"

In his 40 years as a psychologist, nearly 35 of them as a family therapist, Lang has found parental feelings of powerlessness to be a constant issue.

"Parents now feel even more ineffective than they used to. There is so much information, so much advice - and it's a more difficult world." The key to working well , he says, is to listen to their views.

He remembers dealing with a family in crisis over two siblings' continual fights. He got the warring siblings to discuss when, where and how they were going to fight, arranged for them to have bean bags to fight with, and left them to it.

"To work well with people, you have to use their energy. I try and get the solution to the problem out of the family, not out of me." He also regularly sees parents and teenagers separately, if they feel more comfortable that way.
"You are still treating the whole family, whether they are literally there in the room or not." But most child and adolescent problems are best dealt by looking at the whole family.

"The environment in which that child lives is controlled by the parents. If you can help to change the environment, then the chances are that the child's problems will get better."

WHERE TO FIND FAMILY THERAPY

- Bouverie Centre, 50 Flemington Street, Flemington. Tel: 9376 9844
- Williams Road Family Therapy Centre, 3 Williams Road, Windsor. Tel 9530 2311