

Enabling Families to care for children: an innovative approach

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This workshop will introduce a new tool, the Play of Life", developed by Dr. Carlos Raimundo, which will enable family members to cut through the tangle of issues often related to family misunderstandings and difficulties. It also presents a platform for family members to envision a healthy goal for which to aim and the first step needed in order to begin to bring about change. A practical demonstration will be presented.

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One of the things that gets in the way of good family relationships is the ability to understand things from another's perspective. Every person has their own way of seeing situations and oftentimes "read" into them things that have to do with their past experiences. That is not always conducive to functional relationships.

On top of that, very few of us, if any, have ever gone to school to learn good communication skills. Some people are blessed with having been raised in a family where these were present, but most people were not. Learning to communicate is often a lifelong struggle to get one's ideas transmitted clearly to another. And the more important the "significant other person" is, the more emotionally laden can be the issues that really matter and that need to be discussed.

Cultural issues can add to the complexities of relationships as well generation gap perspectives. Rules for relating between parents and children and in-laws (or the "political family") change from place to place, often even within the same country or language group.

Perhaps one of the most precious aspects of the development of this tool, the Play of Life", is that it cuts through all of these knots with which families (and others) get entangled. The Play of Life" was developed by Dr Carlos A. Raimundo, and derived from Psychodrama and Actions Methods created by J. L. Moreno (1889 -1974) and the Argentinean School of Psychodrama created by Dr Jaime G Rojas-Bermudez. Since it is a visual tool, it enables people to see things from the perspectives of others as well as having a means to "explain" - in a non-threatening manner – how they perceive their own situation. Oftentimes, people do not have the means to express what is going on within themselves, especially if they are not even aware of it!

The tool itself borrows many elements from Psychodrama in a miniature form. It utilizes a small board, called a stage, and small figures that are placed by the client (or protagonist) on the stage to represent a specific life situation. Dynamic and interactive techniques are used to provide insight, clarity and understanding to the client about the situation that is being studied. It also gives the facilitator a visual language and thus independent information about the client. That means that the facilitator has information about what is going on in a family situation without the members of the family having to give any big explanation about it. It is not language dependent. Nor does it depend on the cultural aspects of language, since the client(s) can explain certain structures according to their perception, which includes their cultural explanation, when necessary.

Another interesting aspect of the Play of Life" is Relationship Mapping (or sociometry). The client(s), guided by the facilitator, is able to observe at a glance, simultaneously, and in three dimensions, what are the relevant issues present and interacting in the clients situation. This mapping gives the facilitator a wider perspective of what is going on in the relationships portrayed "onstage" (role of social analyst). Who is closer to whom? Further away? What does the physical distance mean in terms of emotional distance? For example, if we are studying the relationship between two siblings, and the brother portrays the two of them as being at opposite ends of the stage, and the sister portrays them as being physically close together, we have a situation here that needs to be better understood.

After the presenting situation is interactively understood and insights have been derived from it, the next step in using the Play of Life" is for the facilitator to invite the client to imagine an ideal situation where healthy relationships are present. If the client could imagine a "perfect" situation, where the relationships were working in what s/he perceives as being in harmony and health, what would it look like? Once again, the client(s) pulls out figures and arranges them on another miniature stage, forming his/her ideal situation, and the "picture" is studied or "read" according to postures, distances and visual information.

This second picture brings in a mapping of a relationship and the type of interactions that would bring health for the client and people around them or the family with whom they live. The idea is to provide clear insight of the desired goal, something to aim for. It is worth mentioning that some people do not have any idea of what a healthy life looks like. In this sense, this technique is extremely valuable since it allows the client to "create" - for the first time - a picture of a life worth living.

Thus far, then, we have a visual "diagnosis" – where the client or family is with regards to their relationships – and now we have a goal, a healthy picture for which they can take aim.

The third step is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this technique. It requires that we now invite the client(s) to determine: what is the "First Step" they need to take in order to achieve their "ideal picture? The client is asked to physically demonstrate with the figures onstage what would need to happen, as a first step, in order to reach their goal.

This is the point of power. This is what brings into the picture the possibility of change (If nothing changes, nothing changes.) This first step will need to be translated into the behavior necessary to introduce the change into the family system or develop in themselves. As each member of the family proposes a small amount of change, their own First Step, the change introduced into the family system is compounded.

Additionally, it allows for each member of the family to see how every one perceives their situation in the family system, as well as what they perceive as an ideal situation for the family, and each one's First Step. Finally, the whole family can be asked to construct an ideal situation for the family system, working together until each family member feels comfortable with the position they find for themselves in the family structure.

Photographs with film or digital cameras can be taken along the way to document and map out what is happening. Some individuals even enjoy having their "ideal picture" put onto their computers as a screensaver, which helps them maintain their goals on a daily basis. These also allow for future comparisons in terms of progress reports: what has changed in the family system as interventions move along?

Although a Play of Life" kit has been developed for personal use with all the proper and simple instructions, we would suggest that when it is used as a family intervention, that a therapist, facilitator or other wise counselor be present to accompany the family. Although it is not necessary to be a fully licensed psychotherapist to use this tool, knowledge of how family systems function is helpful. Since there is no " interpretation" to be made by the facilitator – oftentimes just looking at the stages brings sufficient insight into the family to make a first step of change a reality – one does not need to be trained in psychoanalysis. However, we strongly recommend that those who are interested in developing their skills in the use of this tool go through a short training program, and on to more advanced levels, if they so desire. There is also online help and support for those who are interested in that media.

For more information contact:

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