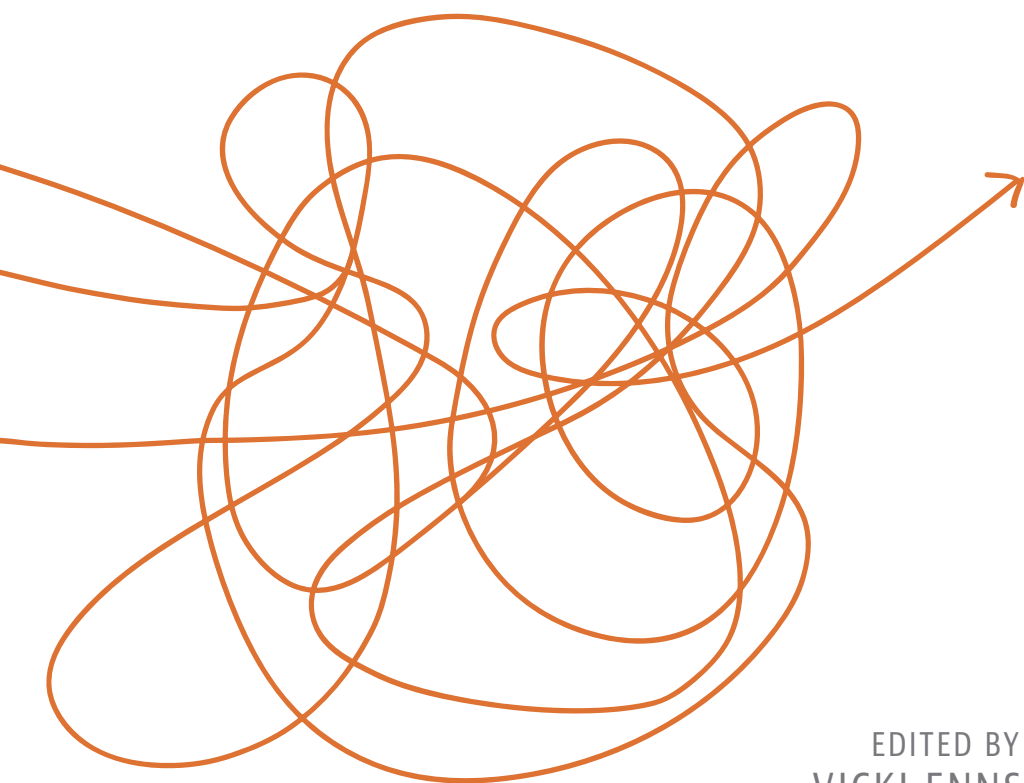


COUNSELLING IN RELATIONSHIPS

Insights for Helping Families
Develop Healthy Connections



EDITED BY
VICKI ENNS

A project of the Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute (CTRI)

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*For all the families we've had the privilege to walk beside.
The opportunity to be part of the challenge, the tangled mess,
the laughter, and the tears fills us with gratitude and
helps us all continue to grow and learn.*

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INTRODUCTION

Relationships are central to everyone's well-being. As helpers and counselors, our roles always involve relationships – both with the individuals we work with as well as with the couples, families, and communities we support. Indeed, we all live within a web of relationships, including those we are born into, those we choose, and our broader connections with the community and society around us. These relationships are like varied strands of thread that all contribute to the tapestry of our physical, emotional, and social well-being, whether we are consciously attending to them or not. In families, these various strands are influenced by – and influence – the quality of connection, structure, and support that is present. In order to support families effectively as helpers and counsellors, it is important to consider these varied relationships and how they contribute to strengths, constraints, and challenges in people's lives.

One way to frame this perspective is to *think relationally*. In other words, we must notice the multiple strands and layers of influence, from different perspectives, that can be occurring simultaneously, as well as the influence of stories and legacies across time in a particular family or community. When we focus our attention on what it is about the relationships themselves that contribute to growth and health for the people involved, this opens up the possibility of supporting change that can have a ripple effect benefiting many people who are connected to each other.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is for those who are in helping and counselling roles supporting families. There are many job descriptions and ways of supporting relationships that use different language to describe this work. We've chosen to use the terms *counsellor* and *counselling* to describe this broad field. We also recognize there are vast numbers of ways to define *family*. In this book we strive to cast a wide net to include examples of ways people engage in close relationships with shared goals for commitment and closer connection. These relationships may be chosen or they may be determined through biology or shared history. If you have found yourself feeling stuck in either living or observing repeated patterns in family relationships that feel stressful, or if you want to support others in making their relationships as healthy as possible, you will find information in this book to inspire and help you.

Counselling in relationships is about *process*, or seeing and exploring the connections between things and the patterns of emotions, beliefs, and behaviours that flow between people. In counselling, we hear a lot about problems and wishes for things to be different than they are. Taking a *relational view* of families allows us to see a bigger picture of patterns in both what is promoting growth and health and what is constraining growth and well-being. When supporting others' relationships, we also need to consider our own location and involvement in our own patterns and relationships. These inevitably shape how we understand and engage with others.

In my own practice of more than 20 years as a counsellor, couples and family therapist, and supervisor of others training to become counsellors, I have become convinced of the importance of *keeping my own learning active* and seeing it as continuously evolving. Learning to do this work well does not end with some experience, a degree, a certificate, or a good book on the subject. The wisdom of the people I have had the privilege to walk with continually teaches and challenges me to stay curious and open. Peers and colleagues around me have also become an important circle of teachers who provide ongoing mentorship.

By sharing experiences, perspectives, and the inspiration from families we support, we all bring a network of our own relationships into every counselling interaction. It is this kind of knowledge that is highlighted in

this book. Exploring what grounds our own approach to relationships as counsellors and continuing to learn from each other are fundamental to our community growth. Our various paths all intersect and influence each other. Together, we can find helpful ways forward.

WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS BOOK

Relationships form the foundation of our lives – they give rise to our deepest longings and, at times, our strongest conflicts. The saying, “struggling to see the forest for the trees,” is a good reflection of working with relationships. All relationships are made up of more than one person and are intertwined with other relationships occurring at the same time and possibly across generations. Entering this complexity to find where we can support change most effectively requires a willingness to become a part of this potentially messy, tangled, and most assuredly layered reality. There is never only one clear starting point to a relationship, and many emotions, beliefs, legacies, and hopes inform the current experience of living that relationship.

This book invites you to take a broader view to simultaneously see the strengths and the strains influencing the bonds between people. We can shift our thinking to see the client as the *relationship itself*, and not just the individuals in the counselling room. To do this without getting overwhelmed, we need some maps, guidelines, and key signposts to tell us where it might be useful to place our focus. As you read you will encounter some terms and concepts that come from a systemic and relational counselling perspective. We will provide explanations and examples of these concepts, encouraging you to consider how they may resonate with or enhance your current way of counselling others.

Each chapter is written from the unique perspective of the author, reflecting their own counselling experiences and inspirations from people they have supported. A specific relationship or set of relationships is the central focus of each chapter. The relationship may be focused on specific people directly involved in the present experience (such as a couple, a parent and teen, or a father with his children), or it may include multiple layers of many people across time (such as adoptive families, blended families,

or multigenerational newcomer families). The relationship focus may take a broader lens to include the rippling effect of how we engage with societal legacies of colonization, systemic racism, or intergenerational trauma and how these layers may exert ongoing influence in the relationships we are supporting, and in our roles.

Underlying each author's contribution is a shared grounding in best practices in the counselling field that aims for a trauma-informed, relational, and culturally safe approach.

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THIS BOOK

Each individual and family is unique. Every relationship carries multiple stories of diverse truths. We need to approach each counselling opportunity with openness to bring these unique experiences forward, and also bring awareness to the common threads of *connection, belonging, emotional attunement, and resilience through stress and conflict* to the deepening health and growth of relationships. As a community of authors and counsellors, we are building our own ideas on a foundation that is evidence based, reflecting components held as best practices in our field. Key components you will see woven through all the chapters are the notions of *attachment, relational resilience, and cultural diversity and humility*, all within in a *trauma-informed approach*.

Attachment

The literature on attachment science has grown over many decades and from many fields, integrating neuroscience, social psychology, health psychology, and trauma theory. This framework underlines the central idea that, at our core, humans are a social, relational, and bonding species. We need healthy connections in our close relationships for survival and for ongoing physical, mental, emotional, and relational development (Fraser, 2013).

Understanding how attachment works in our relationships helps us explore the balance between separateness and connectedness, toward healthy interdependence (Johnson, 2019). An attachment perspective also offers a map to help us skillfully navigate the emotions that organize our beliefs and behaviours in close relationships. Supporting interactions

between people that free up the emotionally regulating power of positive relationships allows new patterns to form that will continue long after people leave our counselling interactions. They will get stronger as they live these new patterns in their daily lives.

Relational Resilience

A relational perspective locates each person's experience within the broader context of their relationships, culture, community, and other influencing environments. This systemic view means that we always remain curious to expand our understanding of what might be influencing a person's or family's life, as well as what influences and contexts may be shaping our own perspective. Change and growth occur within the mutual influence of relationships, from the individual to the collective and in the context of the land and environment. Each individual, family, and community inherently has strengths, and when viewed holistically these strengths are central to determining health (Ross, 2014; Skinner & McLean, 2017).

Cultural Diversity and Humility

Working with people requires us to recognize our interconnection and shared experiences, as well as the uniqueness and diversity of worldviews. Each family is located within broader traditions that reflect their unique identity, wisdom, and cultural inheritance. Cultural connection is a protective factor for families, and when supporting families we value an approach of cultural humility (Frey, 2013). This means we recognize our learning is ongoing and dynamic as we continually learn about our own cultural impacts and privileges, carefully attending to the power we wield in our roles with families. Respecting and affirming each family's worldview, spirituality, and unique life path ensures we approach our work with them in a way that is culturally sensitive and trauma-informed (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015).

Trauma-Informed

We all are involved in each other's health and well-being. When we recognize the prevalence of trauma in the lives of people and communities, we can also see our part in creating environments that promote the possi-

bility of new relationships and new ways of seeing (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). By learning to recognize the power and impact of trauma, which can travel across relationships and across time over generations, we are better equipped to proactively create helping environments that are safer, with more choice and voice for the people involved. Trauma-informed environments honour the diversity, strengths, and resilience that are already present in people's lives. This also requires us to examine our own history and engagement with systemic oppression and collective healing, for example by learning to walk the path of reconciliation as guided by the principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Bellamy & Hardy, 2015).

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book is built on the stories of relationships and how they evolve, requiring individuals within each relationship to adapt and change as well. There are countless ways to create and be in *family*, and these may be through biological bloodlines, chosen relationships, or sometimes through connections to others making choices about relationships over which we have little influence. It is not possible for us to explore all the possible ways of forming a family, so we have chosen a selection of some structures of relationships to explore, with the belief that principles and insights from these stories will resonate and apply to many other ways of being in relationship.

We begin with a chapter taking a broad view of the influences shaping relationships between parents and teens, challenging us to also consider societal messages and cultural contexts that play a role in shaping all families. We move into exploring a variety of relationships within families, including couples, the multiple relationships that often exist in single parent (whether chosen or not) and blended families, as well as adoptive and foster families. We explore some unique considerations when we focus on the role of fathers as well as the multilayered experiences of newcomer immigrant and refugee families. Our tenth chapter returns to a broad view by carefully considering how every counsellor can incorporate an Indigenous perspective and understanding based on the principles of reconcilia-

tion from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada report and its calls to action. This chapter provides guidance and a challenge to reflect and consider deeply what impact authentically integrating these principles can have on how we engage with Indigenous families and, indeed, all of the relationships we are involved in.

Each chapter begins with an introduction to the structure and dynamics of the relationship in focus. Through stories, authors illustrate their guidelines and the helping process in fictional yet true-to-life scenarios. Each chapter emphasizes how to apply the ideas in order to *be present and engaged* with the relationships themselves while offering tangible *ways to offer support*. Authors share their learning from research, counselling experiences, and the unique wisdom of the people they have encountered.

Each author is unique in their own voice, style of writing, and approach to the helping process. This diversity is part of the richness of this book and is a way for helpers from different backgrounds and experiences to see themselves and the people they support in these pages. Additional resources related to and mentioned throughout this book are provided on pages 351–365. These resources are designed to be used by readers in a wide variety of helping roles.

A Note About the Case Applications

Although each story is inspired by the experiences of real people, all actual names and identifying details have been changed. Case applications are composites of accumulated stories or completely fictionalized to protect the privacy of actual people. Any resemblance to any particular individual or family is purely coincidental. In the spirit of respect and gratitude, we authors and editors offer thanks for all the teachings we have received as helpers of others.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Supporting others' relationships can be hugely rewarding, but can also be highly challenging. As counsellors we need to attend to our own relationships and community to help keep us learning, inspired, and enriched in this work. I hope this book can offer you some camaraderie in your work,

solid guidance to navigate the times when it feels like you're taking two steps back instead of forward, and inspiration to stay curious and enjoy the tangled process depicted in these human stories of connection, perseverance, and resilience.



Vicki Enns

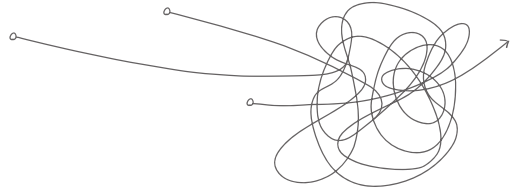
Editor and Clinical Director, Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute

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CHAPTER ONE

PARENT AND TEEN RELATIONSHIPS



By Marion Brown

Raising children is something that many people grow up assuming they will do one day. For many, it's engrained from a young age that bearing and raising children are fundamental parts of being an adult, and that these are enjoyable and rewarding experiences.

Regardless of aspirations at the outset, parenthood is rife with moments of asking, "What should I do now?" These take on a particular intensity while parenting during the teen years. Despite lots of opinions about what parents ought to do, many parents feel quite alone in the challenging moments, feeling the weight of responsibility to "get it right." When there are concerns about the behaviours or development of the child, or when there is too much or too little attention, reinforcement, or role modelling, observers tend to heavily critique the parenting and download all responsibility onto the parent(s). It's an unbearable weight, too often borne individually.

I have worked in various counselling contexts for over 20 years, talking

with parents and teens about their experiences with each other, within themselves, and with their surroundings. I am a woman in my 50s, buffered by privileges of whiteness, postsecondary education, heteronormative assumptions, and middle-class membership. The systems and structures of the world, for the most part, work well for me. As a person and as a parent, I am not subject to surveillance that scrutinizes my race, class, identity, or ability. Yet my work has been in contexts where youth and their families face systemic barriers related to identity, culture, poverty, and accessibility, as well as assumptions and stereotypes that build additional barriers around how people are treated.

In writing this chapter, I take the position that counselling approaches that address the levels of both interpersonal dynamics among parents and their teens (the micro) as well as broader systemic dynamics within which they live (the macro) are required for addressing the challenges and conflicts that arise. My counselling practice is rooted in the belief that individual actions and expressions are given shape by our social conditions, therefore analyzing those broader social processes that lay beneath our actions and expressions is required. In short, parents and their children are not islands, easily making simple choices between right and wrong, good and bad. Societal expectations give shape to our lives; we act in accordance with them and we resist them. We need to acknowledge them and bring them into the counselling room, and not reduce our work in counselling to only a matter of individuals making better or different choices.

An example from my own teen years illustrates how these layers of experience can play out in real life: I recall being out late at night with a group of friends in an area of town not familiar to us, all of us feeling out of place and starting to get nervous about getting home. When a police cruiser approached us, I felt comfortable and safe, believing that the police would assist us. Three friends yelled, “Run!” and took off. One other stood stock-still, frozen in fear. What a conversation we later had, regarding the ways in which we filtered the experience through our personal and assumed identities and cultures, and the varying extents to which societal systems had and had not worked in our favour in earlier experiences. The differences in our experiences were born from our positionality relative to

identity and culture, and the operation of societal systems in relation to both. In order to be a responsive practitioner, I've been purposeful in seeking, and fortunate to have, colleagues, mentors, and friends who have been both affirming and dissenting in my experiences and analyses, and who have held me accountable for the unpacking and unlearning I must continue.

Raising children is a vast and complicated project, made more complicated when parents bear the scrutiny that comes with differential positioning relative to identity, culture, and systems. Given the weight of societal expectations, I hear uncertainty and fear behind common statements such as "I just have to wait out these years" or "This is that stage when he's only interested in his peers." Given the weight of responsibility, I understand the sense of futility that lies beneath the ultimate statement "There's nothing I can do." In both personal and clinical relationships, I see parents shrug and sigh, communicating that they feel helpless and overwhelmed, lacking the capabilities to manage the teen years. This chapter details principles for counselling parents and teens that apply across intersections of identity, culture, and social context, with examples drawn from two families and their particular positionings.

CASE APPLICATION: SHARON AND HER DAUGHTERS

Sharon is an Indigenous single woman raising her two daughters in an urban centre, away from her family and Nation and without easy access to her cultural traditions and intergenerational roots. She has a full-time job with the federal government. Her daughters, Minna (age 16) and Lottie (age 14), live with her and see their father, Don, every other weekend. Sharon initiated her separation from Don, and it was difficult.

By the time I meet Sharon, Don has been out of the home for six months, and she is concerned about the resistant behaviours she is seeing in her daughters. She's worried that how Don treats her influences how the girls respond to her. She's troubled at the thought that her relationship with her daughters is deteriorating.

When Sharon and the girls sit down in my office, what I see before me is a nervously smiling mother, looking from the girls to

me saying, “We’re here to sort things out ... just to make sure.” She speaks in half sentences, uncertain and tentative. Minna refutes most of what her mother says, correcting details and disagreeing with Sharon’s interpretations.

Lottie is quieter, though she rolls her eyes and makes short sighing sounds as she says, “Whatever.”

Sharon looks at me with despair and says, “See? They fight me on everything. I just want us to be close again, like we were when they were little and they loved me and listened to me.”

CASE APPLICATION: JAYCE AND HIS PARENTS

Jayce is an 18-year-old Black man who grew up in public housing in a town marked by a long-standing history of anti-Black racism. Continuing today, young Black men in Jayce’s town are pulled over by police and asked for identification nine times more often than young white men. Local high schools stream young Black men away from the academic courses required for university, retailers follow young Black men around stores, public transit has cancelled routes to historically Black neighbourhoods, and wearing a hooded sweatshirt has become associated with suspicious behaviour (Maynard, 2017).

Jayce is a successful athlete, playing both football and basketball on the school teams. Over the past few months, he has been less attentive than usual in class, and his grades are slipping; teachers describe him as less focused and say he is argumentative when they correct him.

Recently, Jayce and some friends defaced a monument to the town’s founder standing outside the school – a figure with a long historical record of cruelty to people of non-European backgrounds. The kids wrote anti-establishment graffiti and racial slurs across the school itself and broke several windows. All of this was captured on security cameras. Indeed, the boys faced the cameras at one point, gesturing their displeasure with the school. The parents of the youth were contacted by the principal, and I was called by the school social worker, Jacob, to support Jayce’s parents, whose father is Black and mother is white.

A SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A social-ecological framework focuses on the interdependencies among the many systems – social, cultural, economic, political, and institutional – that make up the environments in which people live and make meaning of their lives. It is a lens that accepts that who we are, where we live, and how we interface with the world are always interacting and mutually informing one another. In order to understand the complexities of people’s identities, cultures, and lives, we need to always consider the impact of context and environment on how those lives are lived (Ungar, 2012, 2014).

The central idea of this framework is that social and ecological issues are inextricably linked, which is why we must work to understand both in order to address either one individually (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In other words, to understand someone, we need to pay attention to the history and current condition of their environment and relationships, their culture, and the surrounding politics. It is a way of looking at people as nested identities, cultures, relationships, and living spaces rather than isolated individuals who are disconnected from the structural conditions in which they live. Much like the natural world, there are always conditions that both threaten survival and encourage possibility for change and growth. A social-ecological approach is ultimately concerned with well-being, yet it doesn’t locate the cause or source of that well-being solely within the individual.

Drawing from a social-ecological framework, I will focus on how understanding a family’s context expands our thinking beyond individualized problems and solutions to community, society, and culture-based ideas about what is happening. Research shows that the ability to thrive through adversity has much less to do with individual capacities than it has to do with the ways in which a person’s environment has accessible, necessary resources (Ungar, 2012, 2014). This means we have to think of people in relationship with their environments – where they are fed and nurtured, challenged and pressed – as opposed to considering people as islands unto themselves. The stressors on parents and youth need to be recognized as significant; this helps validate their struggles and triumphs. At the same time, the counselling process also needs to include discussion of the ways in which the experiences of parents and their teens are connected to broader

social roots. When we do this, we can reframe challenges from individual failings or deviance to social issues in which we all have a role to intervene.

Services offered to all people seeking counselling, including Sharon, Jayce, and their families, reflect practitioner beliefs and assumptions about what needs attention. For example, if we refer Sharon to a communication skills group to work on her assertiveness, we communicate that the deficiency is located within herself. If we think Jayce should be expelled from school because he is a danger to others, we locate the issues of concern within him as an individual. In this chapter I detail how seeking to understand the social-ecological context can energize all of us – parents, teens, family members, counsellors, and citizens – to work systemically and disrupt the pervasive messaging that there is “nothing we can do” during those tricky teenage years.

THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF A FAMILY

Counselling is typically initiated when someone thinks something has to change for a person or group. Often the prompt is framed as a “problem,” and there is stress and concern about living with it. Because of the distress, there can be a tendency to focus on the individual who is seen to have problematic behaviours and map how this affects their immediate relationships. There is important work to be done on these levels, and it is the home base of most counselling approaches. As noted above, however, I urge us to also consider societal and cultural conditions, which are often missed when we take a strictly individual and relational lens to stressors and conflict. The social-ecological framework describes individuals and families as existing within a social and cultural context and emphasizes that we need to bring these contexts into the counselling room. Doing so can help externalize individual deficits and alleviate relationship stress for teenagers and their parents. Below are two stubborn pressures that families with teens face.

The Marketing of Parenting Wisdom

There is a steady, insidious marketing push to convince parents to look to experts who are branding and selling parenting knowledge that people

already have within them. This undermines the deeply relevant, culturally embedded knowledge and wisdom already held by families and communities. Consumer culture and its advertising add weight to the branding of the expert and the explicit and implicit messages that we cannot trust what we know. This cultural push blurs and undermines the role of parents having clear knowledge and authority, leaving children and teens with conflicting messages. It is little wonder, then, that there are power struggles between parents and their children (Barkley, 2003).

For example, Sharon is a competent and loving mother who was raised with strong values rooted in respecting Elders, walking gently on the earth, and valuing community responsibility over individual achievement. In our conversations, she shares stories of how she brought these values to life with her daughters when they were younger. When it comes to the challenges she is currently facing with her daughters, she feels full of self-doubt, deeply questioning her ability to know what to do to maintain the closeness she has always felt with the girls, which has been an anchor for her. She regularly references the parenting advice she has gleaned from magazine articles and episodes of popular talk shows. She goes to public lectures by visiting experts and tells me she is considering going to the five-week “Teens in Trouble” program she had seen advertised by a local psychologist.

Pathologizing Social Behaviours

Answers for parenting challenges offered by experts are often embedded within complex psychological explanations and paired with a behavioural or psychological diagnosis; medicalization gives explanations and interventions more authority. An industry of care available for purchase has been created through the marketplace of counselling and other forms of treatment based on a medical model. Certainly, there are youth who need specialized services. Yet a great sweep of professionalization has taken what are social and developmental behaviours and deemed them pathological and in need of medical intervention. This further undermines the deeply held parenting wisdom of families and communities and their coming together to support one another (Barkley, 2003). After Jayce’s involvement with

defacing the monument, the professionals involved have a range of ideas for interventions: The principal advocates for anger management, so Jayce can learn to regulate his emotions and practice deep breathing for distress tolerance; the school nurse requests a psychiatric assessment for behavioural disorders and medication; and parents interviewed for the town newspaper think criminal charges should be pursued.

Jayce's parents are shocked and embarrassed to learn of their son's behaviour and feel the eyes of the school community upon them. Jayce's mother, Robyn, wants him to go for anger management and the psychiatric consult. She expresses fear of the deeper issues that may exist, and she wants professional intervention right away. Terrence, Jayce's father, sees things differently. He recognizes his younger self in Jayce's anger. He understands the frustration toward school, community, and life that Jayce feels because he knows what it felt like to grow up as a young Black man. He wants Jayce to be held accountable, but he does not consider his son's behaviour to be pathological.

The implications of commercializing parental wisdom and pathologizing social behaviours are particularly devastating for families already marginalized by racism and classism because the stressors and pressures of parenting are layered on top of already significant challenges located in the environment. I understand the urge to focus specifically on what is happening in the counselling room and not the outside environment. It can seem as though the drivers of marketing and medicalization are beyond the domain of our counselling practice. Yet I suggest that we actually have more tools to work with when we engage the outside influences and the broader layers. Moreover, it is our responsibility to offer approaches that match the complexity of people's lives. The next sections detail practical examples of such tools and approaches.

COUNSELLING INSIGHTS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

We know that adolescence is a time of development physiologically, mentally, and emotionally, when we see shifting identities, expressions of power, emotions and hormones, peer influences, and the push and pull

of dependence and independence. On top of all these tensions, investment in image is strong and thus can mask everything beneath; this means that while there is a lot to work with, sometimes we are still guessing at what exactly we are working with! A strong therapeutic relationship is key, and the counsellor needs to include the young person as a partner in the process. The work requires humility and sincerity because teenagers can quickly sniff out insincerity; we have to be comfortably ourselves.

When working with youth and their families, counsellors must be careful not to form an exclusive alliance with parents. Teens are often anticipating allegiance among adults, and this can sink the relationship before you've even had a chance to develop one. Because the assumption that adults will band together is so strong, I align with the young person wherever I can. I tend to think I can engage in relationship repair with the parents if necessary, but some teens won't allow a second chance after I've made a first impression.

We also need an intentional plan or we risk floundering beneath the weight of what we think we're supposed to say and do. The following three principles guide my work with young people and their parents, and I think they are transferable across other family relationships and counselling settings.

1) Build awareness as action

As many social movements have shown, when people build a deep understanding of their situation, it can motivate change. As counsellors, when we shake up some of the strong preconceived notions about parenting, we can expand awareness and build capacity for a broader range of options to parent in different, more possibility-laden ways. For example, when working with Sharon, I prompt reflection on how her grandparents would have advised her in the tensions with her daughters; then I wonder aloud how it is that grandparents and their values have been replaced by the advice of experts we don't even know. Wondering aloud is a way to share a speculation with clients and examine a phenomenon together.

2) Find and nurture strong common ground

Problems tend to divide people from one another; they typically exacerbate differences in behaviour and perspective, which can lead to judgements, hurt feelings, and further divisions. Families under stress already feel pressure; not feeling united adds exponential weight. Taking time to identify and reinforce shared history and values within a family can remind its members that they are a greater sum than what is currently pulling them apart. Seeking common ground promotes the exploration of individual and collective experiences and the meanings made of them; it prompts us to reach for a similar thread among the stories. For example, asking Sharon to reflect on her experiences in her first jobs as a teenager helps us find common experiences with her daughter Minna's part-time job and struggle with her boss. Rather than another example of her daughter's rebellion, we focus on shared life learning.

This exploration can bring to awareness a larger array of coping strategies that family members have already tried and still have available to them. Exploring past experiences together can reveal creative ways in which the family has previously faced and overcome challenges as well as weave those shared threads more tightly.

3) Grow *just enough* consensus on key issues

This principle reminds us that families likely won't agree on everything. In fact, it's not necessary. Similarly, family members won't all feel settled and at peace with every decision made. This can be reframed as a way in which everyone needs to shift something rather than another challenge to overcome; as a result, the family shares the common ground of change. This principle means we are aiming for a "yes" that all parties can live with, but that not everyone needs to love. Such a goal requires a process for sharing what one's *bottom lines* are – the most important factors to consider in terms of choices, behaviours, actions, values, and/or positions among family members.

1) BUILD AWARENESS AS ACTION

We live in a time that explains away pressures and challenges as personal responsibilities or individual deficits. For example, if we step back from blaming the child for being disruptive in class or receiving a failing grade, we tend to do so only by one step, which is to blame the parents. Working from a social-ecological framework means that, as counsellors, we talk about identity and culture and identify assumptions and biases that are embedded in societal systems. For example, when we are supporting a student of any marginalized identity who doesn't seem to be participating in a group project, it is important to consider biased influences from these broader contexts and not default to individualized interpretations about motivation. It is important to remember that "individuals are not to blame for the strategies they use to cope in contexts that deny them choices" (Ungar, 2014, p. 66).

Building awareness means coming to see that while large social forces such as race, class, and gender discrimination have an impact on individuals, *we* are simultaneously and incrementally shaping those social forces as well. Our daily choices and how we talk about them reveal ways in which we both support and resist social forces and the expectations they put upon us. For example, I am contributing to gender role typecasting when I say, "Well, of course I called a plumber; I'm just a girl after all." Seeking to resist gender role typecasting, I may say, "Well, of course I fixed the kitchen faucet myself; I'm a capable woman after all." And aiming to influence a combined analysis of gender, race, and class I may say, "I called Dexter & Sons; it's good to support family-owned businesses in the Black community after all." To varying degrees, these three different approaches to the issue of the plumbing needs are influencing my children, my neighbours, and, slowly but surely, community understandings of gender, race, and class expectations and possibilities. Through the accounts of our actions – as parents, counsellors, and citizens – we can and do shift the social messaging that, over time, shifts social conditions.

COUNSELLING STRATEGIES



1. *Think bigger than the presenting issue*

Step back from narrowing in on what's going on within one person to ask, "What are the conditions of the world that are at play here?" Focus on the environment and the social conditions. Critique the cause, not the outcome. This means looking critically at explanations that make the client solely responsible for their situation. Wonder aloud in ways that bring focus to the bigger picture, beyond only the individual. Questions could include:

- "What do people who share your culture say about this issue?"
- "What conditions of your life (related to your neighbourhood, your home, your work, your beliefs) make the issue more likely to occur? Which make it less likely?"
- "How does this issue influence your life?"
- "Have you ever seen changes in this issue? Under what circumstances?"
- "To see change in this situation, what is needed from your family, school, community, neighbourhood, or government?"

Use visual tools to help explore contextual influences. For example, draw concentric circles emanating out from your client(s), expanding your focus to environmental, cultural, political, and economic parameters. Don't worry about being definitive or certain about them. It can be enough to ask questions and open our minds to multiple and broader perspectives on what else may be occurring beyond individual situation and action.

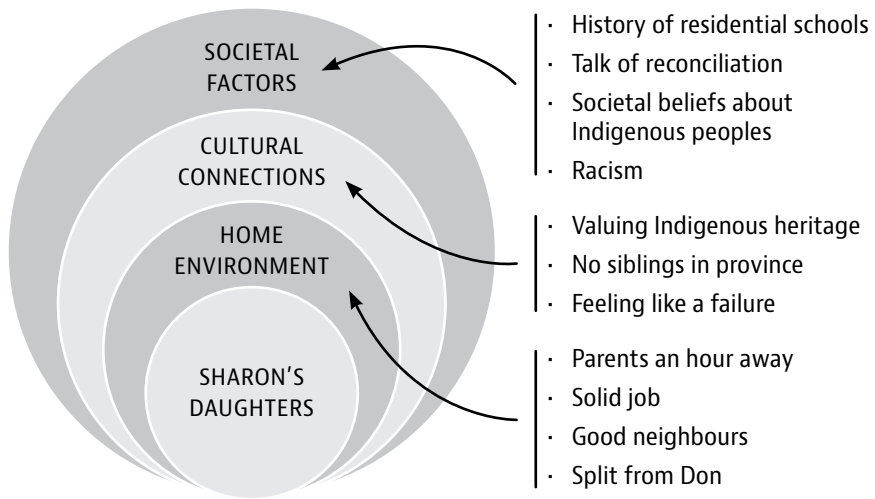


Figure 1.1
Expanding the focus

2. *Focus on language*

The words we use reveal and reinforce our ways of seeing things. Given our status as counsellors, our words carry particular weight, and thus we need to be attentive to the possible interpretations taken up by the people we work with. For example, if I refer to the basketball coach as a “good guy” because he always arranges rides for Jayce to get to games, I may be overlooking that this same coach also heightens expectations on Jayce to never miss a game and to carry the team, which worries Jayce. I have to be careful not to convey a singular characterization of a person in the family’s sphere that actually needs to be more finely understood.

Consider the slang used by teens and their parents and take the time to deconstruct the meaning behind certain words. This allows us to explore the impact of language much more directly. Some questions that can help us understand language include:

- “I know we use the term often, but what does _____ mean to you when you use it?”
- “What other ways could we describe this challenge?”
- “How would others in your life describe this challenge? What words would they use?”

3. *Educate and advocate*

Given that we are focused on understanding the contexts of the people we work with, our education never ends. We know that in probing with clients we need to come with a humble curiosity and learn directly from them. There are also times for us to educate ourselves *outside* the counselling room – to learn to appreciate the facets of our clients’ lives that we don’t know about. For example, as a white woman, I cannot expect Sharon and her daughters to be my sole educators on Indigenous ways of being. And believing that assumptions about Jayce’s identity as a young Black man were involved in how the school community reacted to him, I needed to educate myself to advance my understanding. Engaging with scholarly and lay sources to learn about a range of identity and culture positions and how they are taken up by societal systems can help build the knowledge base counsellors need to appreciate the environmental pressures faced by our clients (Brookfield & Associates, 2019; Saad, 2020).^{*} With this relevant knowledge can come the attunement to generate relevant questions that focus on the family’s environment and its impact. This focus on environment also requires us to examine our own practice for accessibility and relevance, asking questions such as:

- Is my counselling practice located in a convenient time and place?
- How long is my client’s commute to this setting?
- Could I meet at my client’s home for some sessions?
- Why do I only have daytime appointments?

^{*} Good sources for additional information are the NPR podcast *Code Switch* and the website Racial Equity Tools (www.racialequitytools.org).

Consider your client's community and the barriers that exist there. Often, it is financially and socially vulnerable parents who are seeking our assistance with their children; they may be employees with the least flexibility and the most punitive rules about missing work. We need to watch for opportunities to advocate within the broader environment that the social-ecological model prioritizes. Unless we see it as part of our job to help assure that appropriate resources are available and accessible, the conditions required to sustain changes over time will not magically appear. When I asked Jayce's parents about their work conditions, I learned that Terrence is seasonally employed and that the periods of unemployment are challenging not only financially, but also in the suspension of medical benefits. Attending medical appointments during his working season conflicted with his schedule, and going for periods of time without drug plan coverage compromised his health. Part of our work together was advocating with the company for a different structure for seasonal employee health-care coverage. Advocacy-related questions we can ask ourselves include:

- Regarding political barriers, what are the ways in which this community is heard by elected officials? How could I use my voice and position to facilitate change?
- Regarding social and relational tensions, what does this community need that could help people come together and build relationships with one another? Is there a role for me to play in that broader work?
- How have recent or past changes in my client's community affected the issue under discussion? How might I be an ally in helping others understand the impacts of these changes to address the broader issues?

CASE APPLICATION: JAYCE AND HIS PARENTS

Terrence could name his common ground with Jayce – shared experiences of being watched as a young Black man, feeling overestimated in some ways and underestimated in others, and always feeling the need to prove himself. My work with Robyn was to remind her of what she knew – through her husband and son – about growing up as a young Black man, steadily monitored both explicitly and implicitly through school and police systems designed to uphold white privilege. Talking with Robyn, I was intentional in shifting the narrative that was being spun about Jayce as a “problem child.”

Robyn: “This is unbelievable; it’s terrible. He was always such a good boy. But now I see how deeply troubled he is.”

Counsellor: “Another way to see it is that it’s a deeply troubling time for a young Black man. And he’s still a good boy, Robyn. He is *also* a person who has some thoughts and feelings that are rooted in legitimate anger.”

Robyn: “Are you saying it’s legitimate that he did all that damage?”

Counsellor: “I’m saying it’s legitimate for a young Black man to feel angry. You know that in this very school, teachers respond to Black students differently than to white students, including sending them to the office more often and heralding them in their sport achievements while not supporting them in their academic potential. You’ve had some of those same concerns about Jayce’s school experience.”

Robyn: “How are you blaming the teachers for this?”

Counsellor: “I’m not blaming individual teachers. I am saying that experiences of school matter, as do experiences in communities and neighbourhoods. I wonder if those settings in this town are more troubling to Jayce than he is troubled as a person. What would happen if we shifted our thinking from ‘He’s a problem’ to ‘I wonder what is going on?’”

Robyn: “I can’t afford to alienate the teachers or anyone else for that matter. My family is going to be a pariah.”

Counsellor: “I hear your concern about the impact for your family and the reaction of your community. Which community members are most likely to support your family?”

In this conversation, my effort is to help counter the pathologizing of Jayce – the idea that there is something wrong with him – and build awareness of responsibilities for this situation that lie beyond only him. I am prompting reflection on how the ways in which social structures like schools respond to us are part of the issue. Helping Robyn see the broader pressures and tensions while still holding Jayce accountable for his behaviour can counter her focus on the idea that there’s something “wrong” with him.

2) FIND AND NURTURE STRONG COMMON GROUND

All families have histories of shared time and space; we need to take time to explore and expand shared interests, values, experiences, and ideas. This means following trains of thought into the obscure and perhaps asking tangential questions, probing and prompting in ways that may help the parent or teen hear something that reflects an experience of their own. The idea here is to find and grow the ties that bind, for there is much in parent–teen conflict that can separate families and make them feel disjointed. This principle reminds us that Terrence may need support to see the relevance of sharing his high school experiences with Jayce. A range of positive and negative thoughts and feelings can all be fleshed out in service of finding and nurturing shared interests and experiences.

COUNSELLING STRATEGIES

1. *Listen for strengths*

Listen for individual and collective strengths and capacities. Ask spe-

cifically about what is already working well. Reflect on solutions, asking for detail about how and when things worked. Listen carefully also to what is dismissed as not working, for there may be pieces of an overall unsuccessful effort that might be useful. A strengths approach seeks to expand the array of coping strategies, exploring past experiences in depth to examine what has been meaningful over time (Lee, 2017; Saleebey, 2008). Multiple strengths have exponential effects, but they need to be uncovered, heard, and validated to do their work. Terrence left high school when he was a teen, returning later to get his high school equivalency diploma through classes at the community college with other adults. He found the change of physical location combined with learning among more mature students in similar circumstances more validating, and his frustrations lessened. He found a pathway that capitalized on his strengths; he used a different means to the same end.

Questions and statements like these can be useful when probing for strengths:

- “Sometimes we know the things we’re good at, other times we don’t. Sometimes we can spot our ‘invisible’ strengths by noticing the things that energize us. Thinking about this past week, when did you feel most energized? What strengths were you using?”
- “Sometimes other people are better at spotting our strengths than we are. What positive qualities have other people said they notice in you? How did they notice them?”
- “Think about a time you felt you were at your best. Describe what you were doing and what about that situation made you feel confident. Compare this to a time when you felt uneasy or a time you were not confident. What are the differences?”

While we listen for strengths, we are not overlooking the challenges. Sometimes strengths-based approaches can seem like cheerleading, glossing over social injustices and lack of access to resources that populate the worlds of many. Some questions to ensure balance with a strengths focus include:

- “Who else has been affected by this challenge? Family members? Peers? Community members?”
- “How has this challenge affected you and others?”
- “How have you and others faced this challenge?”
- “What are sources of hope for you and others in facing this challenge?”

2. *Find parallel experiences between parents and teens*

Part of our job is to find ways to connect the story of the parent(s) to the story of the young person. Using metaphors and finding similarities with well-known fables can help us hone our ability to find connections between accounts that initially sound incompatible. The aim here is to draw parents and youth who are feeling distanced and unknown to each other toward common ground. It is not a quick process to find similarities in their stories and see what they have in common. Therefore, these questions are more likely to be woven through and across several sessions. For example:

- “We’ve heard Jayce talk about being seen in particular ways and feeling like there’s nothing he can do to influence how he is seen. Robyn, are there times you can think of when *you* have wanted to influence someone’s perception of you? What did that feel like for you? What was it like to feel futile in trying to affect or alter another person’s view of you?”
- “Sharon, I hear you saying you think Minna has been manipulating the teachers at the school so that they’re not calling home about her late assignments and disruptive behaviour. If manipulation means a sophisticated handling of a situation so that the outcome benefits us, can you think of a time when manipulating a situation might be a useful tactic? When might it serve a person, community, or situation to cleverly handle various interpretations in order for things to be seen a certain way?”

- “Sharon, you’ve said you’re feeling a range of emotions and reactions toward Don. I remember you sharing with Minna and Lottie the Indigenous teaching about two wolves living inside us: one that is fearful and angry, and one that is hopeful and empathic. The story goes that the one that thrives is the one we feed. Maybe it’s something to think about as you reflect on the range of experiences you’ve had with Don.”

3. *Establish touchstones*

Anchor the strengths and parallels in something tangible to return to regularly. Build the common ground by developing new rituals and applying new names to patterns that are serving the family well, perhaps even documenting them in a culturally relevant way to help reinforce the foundation of the common ground. Robyn and Terrence reflected that in not staying regularly connected with Terrence’s family, Jayce is missing out on the opportunity for solid cultural grounding within Terrence’s home community. They return to attending Sunday suppers at the family homestead, which they hadn’t done since Jayce was in elementary school. Some prompts toward developing touchstones could be:

- “Is there an activity you all enjoy that can help you remember that what you share is important?”
- “Are there songs that capture your family values well?”
- “Is there someone in your community – a neighbour, spiritual leader, past babysitter – you could include in some way to help remind you of what you are committed to?”

Working with Sharon, I hear her uncertainty, the lure of popular media fixes, and the desire for a recipe to ensure good relationships. I hear these not as individual deficits of Sharon’s, but as reasonable responses given the consistent messaging from her environment. Sharon is actually responding perfectly to the construction being fed to her, deferring to the “experts” about how to parent. On top of that broad messaging to all parents, being an Indigenous woman carries

particular messaging. My understanding is that the weight of historic and contemporary systems designed to erase Indigenous peoples lives on in Sharon in her desire to minimize attention, not stand out, and do what is expected of her. Through stories that tie back to her grounding values and beliefs and are rooted in cultural and community connection, we unearth what is already there – the wisdom and knowledge passed down by her Elders, her own experiences of being a confident mother, and the strength of her reasoned intuition.

Sharon's concerns around her shifting relationship with her daughters suggest that things had not always been this way. When invited to tell stories of when the girls were younger, Sharon does have many tales of adventure and closeness reinforced by focused time spent together. When the girls were in elementary school, weeknights and weekends were spent in swimming lessons, doing crafts and chores, and going on outings and trips to see family members. It was a time Sharon described as “golden,” before the pull of peer activities took away from the family focus.

Opening space to hear these stories is an important way of reminding all three of that foundation. It doesn't mean that those activities will necessarily return, but it reminds them of the meaning of that time. It also serves to remind Sharon that the current strain does not define the entirety of their relationship. I learn that Minna is a funny storyteller, using a myriad of voices for characters caught up in outlandish antics. I learn that Lottie took to drawing the characters that Minna created in her stories. I learn that because Lottie is diabetic, the family spent a great deal of time revising favourite recipes together. The diabetes diagnosis was also a time when Sharon collected information to share with her family and the kids' school, and volunteered with the Juvenile Diabetes Society doing education sessions around town.

Talking about experiences as well as challenges in the past also led to talking about challenges Sharon faced as a teenager. I'm careful not to unravel these while in the family session; I want to explore them with Sharon in a setting away from her kids in order to respect the boundary of what parents share with their children. This approach

weaves in several strategies of building awareness as action and finding and nurturing common ground, as well as examining language.

CASE APPLICATION: SHARON AND HER DAUGHTERS

Counsellor: “At the last session with the girls, you mentioned something about your parents being hard on you. I wonder if we could return to that now.”

Sharon: “Oh yeah, they were so strict and never let me go out. They were so afraid I was going to get caught up in the bad shit going around, which was ridiculous. I was a scared little mouse, never stepping out of line. They had nothing to worry about.”

Counsellor: “That was not your scene, eh? What made your parents think you were at risk of getting caught up in the bad shit?”

Sharon: “Oh, well I was no angel at home, that’s for sure. I covered up being a chicken with my peers by being a real hard-ass at home, talking back to my parents, *giving* them attitude. It was a rough few years. Since then, I’ve said that I’m so sorry for stressing them out. I used to stay out past curfew knowing it made them worry so much, even though I was just hanging at my friend’s house. My mom would plead with me to just call her, but I didn’t because it bugged me so much that she was always hovering all over me.”

Counsellor: “Can we pause for a moment on what you mean by ‘hard-ass’? I just want to be sure I understand how you use the term there.”

Sharon: “You know, just full of don’t-try-to-get-close-to-me energy. I would tell stories I knew would worry my mom, like about fights at school and kids shoplifting. I wasn’t doing that stuff, but I made it seem like I was into it. I was always telling her she was overreacting and so out of touch.”

Counsellor: “Okay, I see now. What do you think was happening for you back then?”

Sharon: “Oh my god, I was just a mess inside, trying to sort out who I was. There was so much stuff going on with other kids I knew, and some of it I wanted and some of it I didn’t, but the pressure was on to do all of it and be such a hard-ass. I took my parents for granted, for sure. I just figured they could handle it, and I guess I figured they would ride out the storm. And they did, thank god.”

Counsellor: “You know, I think it’s not unusual for teenagers to test their parents in a range of ways. Looking back, many of us shake our heads at how we behaved. The thing is, we feel so invincible when we’re young, like it’s impossible for us to be harmed and like nothing is a big deal. For those of us who eventually become parents, we suddenly see that there are lots of big deals!”

Sharon: “I know – like Minna wanting to go to these parties. I know there are serious drugs there and no parents home and all kinds of drunk sex. It scares the life right out of me. And now Lottie wants to go because she sees Minna going. I just want them home with me where I know they’ll be safe.”

Counsellor: “I wonder if you hear the similarities I do between your quest for independence and that of Minna and even Lottie.”

Sharon: “Oh yeah, I hear it. But it’s a totally different world now. Looking back, what I was up to really was pretty tame. But not now.”

Counsellor: “What did you want from your parents back then?”

Sharon: “For them to trust that I could make good decisions! For them to get off my back! My mother was so cloying, always wanting me to be with her, and I just needed to do my own thing ... oh god, I hear myself. But it’s not the same, truly. It’s a way more dangerous world now.”

Counsellor: “I agree that there are differences. At the same time, I think this has been important because we’ve found that there are some parallels here between what you wanted when you were 16 and what Minna is saying she wants. I have also heard you talk about how you found ways to reassure your mother of your choices around safety and how you negotiated for the independence you were seeking. You have lots of ingredients that have built and sustained your relationship with your mother. I wonder about bringing these effective ingredients and negotiation skills back into your interactions with your girls. You have a bank of expertise to draw on – you as a child, you as a teen, your mother’s mothering, examples of friends and other family and community members. It can be easy to get distanced from what we know, but let’s return to it now and draw out the most relevant pieces to this time with your daughters.”

3) GROW JUST ENOUGH CONSENSUS ON KEY ISSUES

Another social convention that is held in high regard is everyone agreeing with one another. Perhaps it’s confused with being polite, or maybe it’s easier to just “go along to get along.” I don’t disagree that aiming for less rather than more conflict can result in more peaceful sharing of time and space. Yet this principle reminds us that parents and teens don’t need to agree about everything. In fact, it is not often that this will be the case, and it may even set families up for an expectation that can add to feelings of despair or frustration when it’s not met. A shift in perspective can alert us to the idea that maybe we can live with agreeing “just enough.” This principle prioritizes getting to a “yes” that all parties can live with, even if they don’t all love it.

COUNSELLING STRATEGIES

1. *Separate the person from the problem*

This strategy is rooted in strengths-based, solution-focused work and the idea that the *person* is not the problem, the *problem* is the problem (Lee, 2017; Saleebey, 2008). There is nothing to be gained from characterizing a person as a problem, as in a “problem child.” It does not build understanding – it drives division. Rather than asking, “What is her problem?” we need to step back and ask, “What is *the* problem?” To assist this process, which is often called *externalizing*, it can be helpful to reframe what we hear our clients say and purposefully replace “I” or “she/he/them” with “the problem.” The following figure lists some examples of reframing.

PROBLEM-FOCUSED, PATHOLOGIZING LANGUAGE	STRENGTHS-BASED, EXTERNALIZING LANGUAGE
“I’m useless as a mother. I can’t even get my child out the door to go to school.”	“I wonder if the problem has a way of telling you you’re no good at getting your child out the door to school.”
“How do you feel about Jayce spraying graffiti on the school walls?”	“How does the graffiti situation leave you feeling?”
“She’s always been saucy.”	“Let’s take ‘saucy’ and lift it outside of Minna and examine it. How would you describe ‘saucy’? When does it show up? What feeds it? What tames it? What are other terms for it?” Find or create an object that can come to represent “saucy” and place it on a table, so you can walk around and view it from many angles.

Figure 1.2
Reframing questions

2. *Focus on values*

“I’m the parent” is quite hollow reasoning when asserting that one’s decision should prevail, as is “because I’m a kid” as rationale from the teenager who didn’t stay to volunteer at the community event when they said they would. In negotiating for consensus and building on common ground, we want to focus on the *values* that underscore our beliefs and priorities, shaving off the superficial posturing that is fed by ego or role. Questions to get at this layer include:

- “What would you say are the things that matter to you or in your family?”
- “What are the traditions you follow?”
- “How do you mark what is important to you as a family?”
- “How do your expectations of each other impact your choices and behaviours?”
- “How do people in your community share their values across generations?”

3. *Help everyone feel heard*

Negotiations require all parties to have a voice and participate in the process of shifting rules, interactions, and access to resources. The focus is on supporting parents and their teens to isolate and communicate what their values and needs are. Being heard also means having influence, so part of our job is to support communication skills that help people have influence. Questions may include:

- “What would you find helpful for dealing with this situation at this time?”
- “Of the things that you need to change, which do you feel most strongly about?”
- “How would it feel to accept help from others in this situation?”

Sharon can readily articulate the values of her culture and family. She knows that she has raised her children from this foundation. Yet

she acknowledges that, as her relationship with Don deteriorated and when the marriage ended, she lost her confidence in a number of ways. One significant way was less participation in the customs that have grounded her and the community activities that are important to her. For example, she stopped going to gatherings at the Friendship Centre, which meant she became distanced from other parents and family-oriented activities that maintain those interpersonal and cultural connections. She also stopped volunteering with the Juvenile Diabetes Society, which was a place where she felt knowledgeable and useful. Returning to those engagements rebuilds her confidence and reaffirms her priorities, returning to values that are intuitive to Sharon.

Over the course of about four sessions, we hear more from Minna, primarily that she wants her mother to trust her more, and from Lottie, who thinks her mother is too worried about her diabetes and isn't letting her be a kid. In this session, I am focused on growing "just enough" consensus.

CASE APPLICATION: SHARON AND HER DAUGHTERS

Counsellor: "I'm going to try to summarize what we've been talking about here for the past few weeks. Minna, you'd like your mom to trust you more; it sounds like you're saying it's important to you that she believe you can make decisions that keep you from harm and too much risk. Does that sound right?"

Minna: "Yes. I keep telling her I'm fine! I know what I'm doing!"

Counsellor: "What's important to you in that? In having your mom believe that you can handle what comes your way?"

Minna: "Well, it's important to me because I'm not an idiot."

Counsellor: "What's important to you in knowing *your mom* knows you're not an idiot?"

Minna: “I’ve seen how she looks at people she thinks are idiots. I’ve heard what she thinks about them. I don’t want her looking at me like that, thinking about me like that.”

Counsellor: “It sounds like maybe you want her to have a higher opinion of you than that?”

Minna: “Yeah, obviously. I mean, she’s my mom, she’s supposed to believe in me.”

Counsellor: “That sounds like something you hold as pretty important. And I’ve heard your mom talk about something similar – family members believing in each other. Even when we don’t get along. Sort of knowing, deeper down, that they know you’re a good person, a smart person, worthy of respect. Does that get at it?”

Minna: “Yup.”

Counsellor: “I wonder if that’s something you consider as a value among the three of you. I think it’s really helpful when families recognize something they can come together on. Lottie, what are your thoughts and feelings on what Minna has just said about your mom believing you can make good decisions?”

Using Minna’s expressions and examples as places to begin, I follow a similar path with Lottie and Sharon, curious as to each of their interpretations of trust in the family relationships.

CASE APPLICATION: JAYCE AND HIS PARENTS

Two distinct configurations gather to talk with Jayce about what is happening. One is Jayce; his father, Terrence; and Jacob, the school social worker who is also Black. The other also includes me and Robyn. In one such full family session, we begin by talking about what the key issues are on which we’re reaching for “just enough” consensus.

Robyn wants an apology to the school administration, as well as their own extended family, and atonement through more involvement with the church. She wants Jayce to attend anger management

and go for individual counselling. She also wants him to be assessed for behavioural disorders. Terrence wants Jayce to get involved with a community men's group focused on mentorship with Black youth. Jayce looks uncomfortable with the scrutiny of these outward expectations and says he doesn't want to do anything, including returning to the school. Clearly there are widely discrepant ideas on how to proceed.

Jacob and I had already met to talk about our approach, aiming for congruence. In sessions with Robyn alone, I continue with externalizing the behaviours of concern away from Jayce as a person, an approach that matches up well with thinking about the bigger context of his life. Jacob's work with Jayce also focuses on the systemic roots of Jayce's feelings and thoughts, providing space to explore and validate them. In the family session, we prioritize the focus on values and helping all to be heard, starting with Jayce.

Counsellor: "Jayce, what's important for your parents to know about what your experience is like at school?"

Jayce: "You have no idea what it's like, Mom. I hate it here. It's so fake. People loving me and wanting some of me when I'm ripping it up on the field or the court, and then treating me like shit everywhere else. They see me out around town and don't say hi – they look the other way. It's bullshit and I'm sick of it."

Robyn: "How can you say that, Jayce? Everyone loves you – you're so popular! At your games, all the parents are always telling me how great you are, how you're going to get recruited for all the top university teams. Everyone's so proud of you!"

Counsellor: "I hear that that has been your experience, Robyn. I'm also hearing Jayce say that's not his. Or maybe it is sometimes, Jayce? But it's not your impression all the time. Let's stay with what Jayce is offering up. It sounds heavy. It sounds tough. Can you share with us an example of this fakeness?"

Jayce: “Well, like, the girls at the after-parties for the football games. They’re all over me, wanting to wear my jersey, laughing and flirting like crazy, a whole group of them. One of them I like, so I was trying to talk to her alone. Every Saturday after the game, same situation, and I was just trying to see what she was all about. She wouldn’t leave her friends to talk to me. I said, ‘Maybe let’s meet up later, just us,’ and she was like, ‘Ah, no, I think I’ll stay with my girls. But we can all hang together.’ I even said I wanted to take her up to the lookout, to show her the view from my place and she got all weird, saying she can’t do that and I can’t make her. I was like, ‘What?’ I’m actually trying to be a nice guy with this girl, but all she wants is for me to be the football player, the jock in the crowd, and she’s afraid to be with me.”

Robyn: “Oh, she’s not afraid of you, Jayce! Don’t overreact! And what does that have to do with what we’re talking about anyway? About you breaking the law and tearing apart that statue? We’re getting way off track here.”

Counsellor: “You know, I think we are right on track actually. We’re talking about what’s important to Jayce, and – tell me if I’ve got it wrong, Jayce, but I hear you giving us this example as one of perhaps many instances where you don’t feel like you are connected to the school or the people in it. It’s like people have a one-sided view of you, or make assumptions about you and what you like to do or are going to do. How do you want to be seen, Jayce?”

Jayce: “Like someone with a brain. Like someone who’s got more going on than just sports. Like someone you might want to talk to! Even the teachers – they chat me up about the games and stuff, but they never ask me to take one of the reading parts in English or tell me to come up to the board in math. They smile at me and are all, ‘Hey man, those scouts were out in full force last week.’ I’m cool with them all in the halls, but it’s like I’m invisible as soon as I step into the classroom.”

Counsellor: “I hear the weight of what you’re saying, Jayce. Schools are such important places of resources and support, but the people within them often operate according to their assumptions and beliefs, which are more about them than about you. It can feel pretty unfair.”

Terrence: “Don’t I know it. I went to that school 25 years ago and it was the same thing then. Love the athlete, but that’s all you are. It’s bullshit.”

Jacob: “I hear it too, from all the guys I work with. It’s real. It’s one of the reasons we have ‘J’s Room,’ where you can come in and talk about it and just let your Blackness out. It’s our own space away from that gaze that casts us in a certain light. It builds up in a person and feels like pressure, and sometimes the pressure bubbles over. I get that, Jayce.”

Robyn: “I just don’t see it. The teachers are always so nice to us. They’re professionals!”

Counsellor: “I can appreciate that you don’t see it, Robyn. The world works differently for you and me, in large part because of our skin. I wonder though – even if you don’t see it – if you can hear how Jayce experiences it and the effect it has on him. He’s speaking pretty plainly about how it makes him feel.”

Robyn: “Well, I just don’t want him to let it grow into some big thing, you know? And let it take over his life. Because you can’t live like that. It will take you down.”

Jacob: “I can tell you that it *is* very difficult to live like that. We’ve got ways, though, ways to stay on top of it.”

Counsellor: “Robyn, hearing you say that suggests to me that you do hear how hard it is for *Jayce* to feel those feelings.”

Robyn: “Yes, it is hard. I don’t want him to feel like people are excluding him, dismissing him, not seeing all of who he is. He’s my boy – he’s smart and funny and kind. I can’t understand why these kids *and* teachers at school don’t want to know more about him. It breaks my heart that they don’t.”

Robyn turns to Jayce and tells him, “It’s wrong. You don’t deserve that.”

There is still a long way to go in this conversation, including the need to hear from all family members, move from values to behaviours, and then on to talking about concrete connections with community networks and social supports. However, this is the beginning of consensus building, rooted in separating the person from the problem, articulating values, and striving to be heard.

FINISHING THOUGHTS

Young adulthood is a time of sorting through opportunities, choices, and constraints relative to identities and cultures, differently accessible across our societal systems. In other words, it’s a time of trying things on, discarding some and keeping others. Just like an ecosystem that is always in motion, forming and storming, the teenage years are full of possibility, change, and growth. Far from a time for parents, teachers, and counsellors to “ride it out,” it’s a time to *lean in* – to find ways to have a relevant and meaningful impact on their complex lives, not only in the clinical corner. The young people in our lives need us to stay engaged in their social ecosystem, seeking to sort out everything from the micro interpersonal encounter to the macro societal messaging, and all points in between. They need us to develop our awareness and take action, to help find common ground and build from it toward solutions families can live with. When we do so, we are counsellors as well as advocates, extending from our clinical skills to shape relational and systemic processes that can meet the complex needs of complex lives.

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Marion holds a PhD in social work and is a professor of social work at Dalhousie University. In addition, she has a small private practice where she works with individuals and families who are facing barriers related to mental health, addiction, poverty, discrimination, violence, and relationship conflict. She has a particular interest in helping parents and teenagers consider their relationships within the broader social contexts of their lives. Marion is also a contributing author of CTRI's book *Counselling Insights: Practical Strategies for Helping Others with Anxiety, Trauma, Grief, and More*.

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