accept setbacks, and take responsibility for creating its own new and more functional reality.

Handling Conflict

Some of the examples in this chapter involve family conflict, but the question of how to handle conflict is so important that it bears further discussion.

To begin with, there is a theoretical issue about working directly on negative family patterns. Especially for a population that has experienced so much misery and has internalized so much social criticism, it's important to highlight family strengths, reframe negatives, focus on solutions, and empower family members through respect for their viewpoints and support for their efforts. In this chapter, we have focused principally on ways to implement that approach. However, accentuating the positive may be insufficient if a family has not learned to handle their disagreements and their anger. People need mechanisms for managing the tension that is buried, that arises and erupts, or that jeopardizes affection and breaks important connections.

Family disagreements are a part of life. They can be bitter and unyielding in any family, sustained by the unresolved issue of who's "right," by hurt feelings, and by the frustration of efforts that seem to go nowhere, producing statements such as: "I've told him over and over and nothing works", "She doesn't listen; she doesn't understand", or "Nothing gets through unless I hit him." People get stuck in repetitive patterns, hurting each other and unable to see alternatives. The anger may go underground, erupt and escalate, or find its solution in drink or drugs.

What does a worker do? Certainly the staff must assess the degree of danger. They must be concerned to protect the weaker family members and short-circuit incipient tragedy. But there are many stages of family conflict before truly dangerous levels are reached. One definition of empowerment or resilience is that the family has learned to tolerate their differences, and has developed a repertoire for resolving conflict.

Every professional worker knows how useful it is to vent anger. Allowing a client to rail at the system or even at another family member often clears the air, if only because there is a tolerant ear as well as a release of pressure. But conflict goes beyond internal pressure; it is an interactive matter, a failure of communication and resolution

between people. The staff cannot tiptoe around that reality if they want to help the family.

Being willing and able to relate to conflict requires a variety of skills. The worker needs to be prepared to stir up disagreement when the family is sidestepping their differences, tolerate conflict when it arises spontaneously, and mediate when conflict is getting out of hand. It is a tall order, perhaps, but the staff doesn't work alone. Members of the family are often effective allies, helping to explore the issues and develop new pathways. The worker initiates and orchestrates the action but may select certain family members to coach, help break silences, or get past the shouting.

For instance, Megan's sister, Saral, who is Megan's ally, manages her father better than Megan does. The worker asks Saral to coach Megan on how she can tell their parents what she wants for the baby and herself. When the silence is broken, the father erupts in anger and the family sits frozen in their chairs. The worker then enters to stir up further discussion: "I understand your pain and your disappointment—and so does Megan—but she's afraid now, and she needs to plan for her baby. Can you and your wife and Megan talk now about what to do?"

The worker is sometimes a traffic cop, keeping some people out, putting others together, providing some with the possibility of venting their anger and others with the experience of resolving an issue before anger takes over. Tina's mother and grandmother need to talk together as adults, expressing their mutual disapproval of the other's way of disciplining Tina, and Tina must be kept out of the discussion. Abel and John need to negotiate the rules for getting up in the morning, while Tracy sits on the sidelines and the worker waits to punctuate the discussion. The worker will intervene at the earliest point of possible agreement, having decided that these family members need to resolve something before their discussion escalates to a conflict—whether or not the plan is optimal.

Tracy and John would need to have their own discussion about how he treats her and what triggers his abusive behavior. When they talk, they will probably shout at each other, an event the worker will need to tolerate, and talk over each other so that neither hears the other—a situation in which the worker will have a role to play. There are various possibilities, and he may use all of them: He may introduce some version of "Hold it! He doesn't hear you. It's too noisy and he's heard that before. Say it in a different way." Tracy would

then say something and the worker might say, "Good. Find out if John understood. . . . Ask him." Tracy asks. John shrugs, then says he doesn't mean to talk her down, but he can't stand the way she gets on his case. Tracy is silent. The worker says, "Find out what he means."

The worker is a coach, sometimes part of the discussion and sometimes deliberately on the sidelines. He stirs the pot, sometimes illustrating how a dialogue proceeds when everyone has a say, meaning is explored, and discussion has a longer duration than is usual in this family. It's a new pattern, and it begins to create a new pathway for resolving conflict: fragile, not yet self-sustaining, requiring practice, but potentially significant for the survival of this couple.

The worker has other possibilities, and they are not always verbal. One worker handled situations in which everybody talked at once by calling a halt and holding up a pencil: "This is the talking stick (or 'the magic wand'). Whoever has it can talk; the others listen." Or, in order to make subsystem boundaries concrete, the worker asks the family to change or move their chairs, indicating that certain people will talk about their conflict while other people, who usually intervene when anger rises, will sit at a distance and remain out of the battle. The worker stays out of the discussion but is alert. She may enter to jump-start the discussion again if it comes to an angry halt, or intervene to say to the mother, "This is when your daughter gets frightened and is afraid you'll hit her, so she shouts or runs away. Can you take a minute to listen to her, then you can respond." Or she may bring in a helper from the family to work on different ways of communicating.

The repertoire of skills is broad and the worker uses them flexibly as the contact with the family evolves. At some point, with any family, it will probably be useful to use most of the skills we have described: *to ask people to discuss their disagreements, to keep other family members from smoothing over the situation or taking sides, to introduce other family members in helpful but atypical roles, to mediate—when that seems indicated—by stirring up or slowing down the action, to offer talking sticks or metaphors or even humor as a way of facilitating alternative ways of interacting, and to explore new, more constructive patterns for the resolution of conflict.*

Lurking behind this discussion is the specter of violence, the knowledge that disagreement can escalate to rage, and that rage can express itself in physical aggression. It's the responsibility of the staff to assess the level of violence, and if the decision is made to work

with the family, to make the starting point clear: "It's not permissible to hurt the children. There are other ways to do things and we'll explore them, but that's the ground rule. That has to change."

It's not easy to work with family conflict. The staff is often personally uncomfortable, as well as worried. It's a relief to emphasize strength, respect, and support, but agency families—like any others—need ways of moving off their battlegrounds without leaving carnage behind. Or, to soften the image, they need to learn how to avoid severing family connections that are sources of potential support in a difficult world. Megan and her baby need an extended family. Tracy, John, Abel, and Abel's sisters should be able to live together as a family, negotiating their disagreements and their anger. Tina's mother should be able to control her daughter without a broomstick, and Tina should be able to speak up for her rights without pulling in a social worker and calling on the power of the state. In all those situations, conflict can be resolved without harming family members, and without invoking the social interventions that dismember the family.

To work effectively with family conflict, staff members need to factor in a realistic evaluation of their own level of skill at any particular time. They can move on to more difficult situations as they acquire more experience, being sure to maintain the essential staff structures that offer supervision and support during the process. If the workers are to empower families, however, the effort and the risk are necessary.

FAMILIES AND LARGER SYSTEMS: HELPING AT THE JUNCTURE

Many of the problems that beset a family lie at its juncture with larger systems. The multicrisis poor don't manage their contacts with agencies or workers very well. The difficulties are similar to those already existing within the family: confusing pathways of communication, unclear boundaries, weak skills for conflict resolution. The problems are compounded by the fact that the system is skewed, with families in a less powerful position than people in authority. Rebalancing the system often requires procedural changes within the agencies, and we will address the possibilities for facilitating such changes in the next chapter.

To some extent, however, it's possible for staff to help the family relate to service systems more effectively. Staff can do this by

actions and attitudes that empower the family: withholding professional competence, shedding power, respecting and strengthening the boundaries between the agency and the family. Although such actions seem mostly a matter of stepping back, they involve some skill. They require a letting go on the part of professionals who are trained to take charge, so that people accustomed to a more passive role can step forward. Knowing when and how to cede power to the family is a significant skill.

Some opportunities to strengthen family participation occur during ordinary moments of contact with its members. If the worker isn't alert, they will slip by unnoticed. During an initial interview, for instance, a teenager recalled being molested by a neighbor as a young child, and the worker and mother concurred that "she needs to talk with somebody about that." There was no suggestion that this was not purely a professional matter, that the mother might be up to the task, or that other family members might be helpful. In a different situation, when a young mother was holding her infant during a scheduled visit and the baby began to cry, the foster mother automatically extended her arms, and the mother promptly returned the baby to her. Everybody took it for granted. The worker never suggested that the mother try to soothe him herself, or that the foster mother advise her about the ways that seem to work best.

In these situations, control and expertise remained with the representatives of the system. Changing the usual pattern would require some trust that family members will find their way, some skill in handling the moment when they turn again to the expert, and some ability to coach in a way that is simple, useful, and not intrusive. Suggestions by the foster mother about how to soothe the baby, along with a comment that it doesn't always work, would give the birth mother some guidance, while protecting the young mother's relationship with her child and encouraging the growth of competence.

Another way of strengthening the family's role is to search assiduously for resources within the family before automatically making a referral. To do this, the worker must accept that there is a trade-off. The family is apt to be less knowledgeable and efficient than professional helpers, but they can probably use the mechanisms they work out themselves in a more sustained way. Maybe a young boy's uncle, rather than a worker, can coach him on how to stay away from fights in school. Maybe older siblings can help a teenager with an incipient drug problem. And maybe the grandparents who have their grandson

in kinship care can negotiate directly with their daughter about the conditions for visitation, rather than automatically relying on rules set by the agency.

To help families regain control over their lives, the staff must rein in the impulse to refer every situation to an expert, and they must monitor their own controlling behavior, asking themselves in each instance whether an intervention is really necessary. Whatever the answer, there should be a pause between impulse and action; control should be a function of necessity rather than of role.

Sometimes, of course, a controlling stance is unavoidable. If that happens, the worker must find a way to keep the issue from dominating the relationship. When Jane missed her appointment for a urine test at the clinic, for instance, the worker was required by law to notify the agency. At the next session with Jane and Jerry, her boyfriend, Jane was angry.

JANE: I don't feel like having a session today.

WORKER: How come?

JANE: I'm pissed. I miss one f____ test and you report me.

WORKER: Well, the rules are that if you miss a test, I have to report it and I did, but I wrote down your explanation as well. I'm glad you came in, though. I know you're angry at the agency these days and I think you might try to find out from Jerry how he thinks you should handle that.

In general, an effective worker wants to strengthen the boundary between family and agencies, stepping out of the action, withholding expertise, and asking family members to talk together about their issues—even those concerning problems in dealing with agencies. In the following interchange, which involves parents whose children have been taken into care, the worker wants the parents to develop a sense that they're a team, that they probably have useful ideas, and that together they may have some power. The couple begins with the assumption that all the decisions lie outside of them.

WORKER: Have you talked with your husband about what you need to do to get your children back?

MOTHER: He's not the one who took them away. It's the people who

took them away who's got to give me some answers. We can't do anything until we get some answers.

WORKER: Who have you been talking to?

MOTHER: This woman, McSomething, at protective services.

WORKER: (to father) And you?

FATHER: Nobody. I don't talk to those people. I tell her it's no use.

WORKER: I think you need to work as a team. Why don't you talk together now about how to deal with this.

As indicated earlier, the problems that lie at the juncture between families and larger systems cannot be fully handled by agency workers, even those who are skillful. Progress often depends on procedural changes in how an agency functions, and on the coordination of services among the various agencies that serve the same families. We will discuss procedural matters in the next chapter, and we will continue to illustrate the application of skills throughout the remainder of the book.

A SUMMARY OF SKILLS

Because the skills described in this chapter are so basic in working effectively with families, we close the chapter by summarizing and rephrasing its main points.

Workers must first *think* about families (Points 1–5), then must exercise *practical skills* to help families change (Points 6–10):

1. Families are social systems. They organize their members toward certain ways of thinking about themselves and interacting with each other. The behavior of family members becomes constrained over time by family rules, boundaries, and expectations. What the staff sees when they meet a family is predictable behavior that defines "the way things are" in the family.

2. The typical behavior of family members may be preferred, but alternative patterns are available—even if seldom used. This fact encourages a hopeful view of possibilities, providing incentive for exploring the family's repertoire. Assessment of a family should always include the invisible roster of strengths and resources.

3. Individuals are separate entities, but are also part of a web of family relationships. Staff members are often presented with an identified client whose symptoms or behavior are defined as the problem. They can accept the presenting complaint as valid, but must be aware that control of the symptom lies in the interaction between family members and the client.

4. Families move through transitional periods, in which the demands of new circumstances require a change in family patterns. The family may respond by adapting and evolving, but families sometimes get stuck, maintaining patterns that are habitual but not adaptive. Symptoms or disruptive behavior in one family member may reflect the family's distress. The problems are potentially transitory, and the function of the staff is to help the family through a period of disorganization.

5. When they intervene, workers become part of the family system, and are likely to be pulled toward accepting the family's view of who they are and how they should be helped. The staff should understand that the pull of the system narrows their view of the family. It's important, even if difficult, to think about the family in a different way and to highlight their capacity for expansion.

6. The staff's first efforts to help families change should explore how they define their problems, questioning and expanding what the family has taken for granted. The skills for gathering information and exploring possibilities include listening, observing, mapping, reframing, and helping families explore agreements and disagreements through spontaneous and guided enactments.

7. Workers are the catalysts of change. They help the family recognize dysfunctional patterns and explore the possibility of relating in different ways. Family members are encouraged to connect, whenever alienated, and to explore constructive approaches to conflict.

8. The staff empowers families by focusing on family strengths, but they must also work with conflict. If conflicts aren't resolved, they may alienate family members from each other or erupt into violence. Workers should explore this area, listening for disagreements, helping the family to handle conflict safely, and exploring new ways of relating under stress.

9. Intervention is most effective if the staff can restrain their expertise, using their skills to encourage family members to see each other as a resource and to mobilize help from within their own network. That may involve a new role for workers, requiring a less cen-

tral position than is customary and a less active effort to solve the family's problems for them.

10. The staff should consider the extended family as its own primary resource, expanding their initial view of who might be available to help. A request for additional professional services may not be necessary and should be considered carefully. When many agencies are providing a family with multiple services, it's important to evaluate the balance between help and confusion. One of the most useful interventions on behalf of a family may be to induce organizational changes, so that services become more collaborative, family-friendly, and effective.