**Good listeners, yet poor interpreters**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Children do or say something, but the parents understand something else. Most often these misunderstandings are caused by miscommunication, by the fact that the message (the one sent by the child) is decoded using the wrong decoding cipher (an adult’s cipher, we could say). We describe a case with discrepancies between the children’s needs, their signals and the parents’ improper understanding. Talking about fundamental human needs, Alfred Adler divided them this way: the need for belonging, the need to develop and improve, the need for significance and the need for encouragement. All human beings make efforts to fulfill these needs; therefore children are struggling too. Adults/educators/parents often improperly decode children’s actions as attempts to annoy adults, to get them angry, to use them, to get revenge or simply to oppose them. If we are not able to understand what the child’s goal is (what he is trying to fulfill), then we will take that action personally and we will not be able to recognize the educational opportunity which appears in almost every confrontation between parents and children. We will miss the long term goal: developing a relationship based on communication, reciprocity and mutual respect.

**Key-words:** children, communication skills, parent, goals alignment, education, reciprocal understanding, mutual respect.

**SHORT STORY**

A few days ago I received an invitation to publish an article in ARPCAPA’s medical journal. Since then my mind started to work, to classify, to look for an interesting case to present. One of my everyday jobs is to counsel the team from GOGALNICEANU Foundation in their work with children in the program called KREATIVE ERZIEHUNG, and to help parents work with them and try to understand together the way their children grow up, discover the world and decide to think and behave according. Another job is to do parenting, counseling and psychotherapy in a private practice. Sometimes these activities join together. Yesterday was one of those days. I had the opportunity to meet a family (mother, father and their first born), we started to talk about parenting and we stopped at a very interesting situation (the mother asked me why her child – a 4 year old boy– did not listen when she and his father asked him to be good and understanding with his baby brother; another request was to provide an explanation for the moment when their first born decided to change his very nice and cooperative behavior. I do not intend to talk about their family. This situation only gave me the possibility to access some information in my own mind and to think about what ANTHEA MILLAR wrote in a recent article (Millar, A. 2011) (Communication,
My point is that, when I talk about children and their behavior, I think about what RUDOLF DREIKURS used to say: “children are good observers, but poor interpreters!” And they have the right to be like this. ANTHEA MILLAR tells us (following Tomasello & Farrar, 1986):

"Parents watch to see where their baby looks and will talk about whatever it is that appears to interest the infant. Far from the baby simply imitating the caregiver, it is the caregiver who follows the baby’s lead, and imbues meaning to the baby’s actions, enabling the baby to learn that actions lead to learning, that actions lead to responses, and so begin to make sense of the stream of words. Most crucially, when those who are providing language follow the infant’s focus of attention, the infant’s vocabulary acquisition is shown to proceed at a faster pace”.

As you see, infants and little children appear to have this way of collaborating with their caregivers. At some point, children seem to possess a good vocabulary, and they do exercise their language skills, sometimes supplying the audience with fun and excitement when they put into words some adult philosophical concepts. At this point, it is the parents and caregivers that are in a position of “good listeners, yet poor interpreters”. They tend to think about the development of their children’s mind and world understanding as a finished process. Step by step, they will give up following the child’s way of thinking, and they will start asking more from their children, more understanding and more listening to what the adult talks and preaches, without realizing that their children are incapable of understanding the meaning of the concepts they are using. It’s like talking together, but understanding separately. There’s a saying in Romanian language when a parent gets angry with his child for not listening: „it’s like we’re not talking the same language.”

This is the moment when some adults and their children will start to distance themselves from a good, harmonious relationship. Now, it came to my mind that sometimes we, as psychotherapists, have to focus on therapy relationship and alliance and one key for building and maintaining a good therapy relationship means making sure every moment that we and our patient/client focus on the same therapy goals. I wonder if things might not be the same in educating and parenting our children. Maybe the most common misunderstandings come from the lack of having the same goals.

GOALS, MISBEHAVIORS AND THE ECONOMY OF RELATIONSHIP

ALFRED ADLER and RUDOLF DREIKURS talk systematically about these mutual misunderstandings between children and adults (parents or caregivers or educators), and about the need for educators to keep in mind that they always have to investigate the goals of the child’s behavior or misbehavior.

SOPHIA J. de VRIES used to say:

"Another basic concept is that man is seen in motion, constantly on his way. Consequently the question arises: “Where is he going?” If we know where a person is going, we can understand why he is moving the way he is moving. In other words: we understand his behavior. Thus Adlerian psychology adheres to the principle of affinity, expressed in the concept of goal.

This goal has a starting point in the combination of factors found in early childhood. With his inheritance and the thousandfold impressions given by his physique, his environment (people and surroundings), as well as the influences of climate, culture, and society, the child creates his very own way of survival and development. The chances are that he is not merely “on his way,” but that he protects or defends himself in his very own way - according to Adler, with his “life style.””

The basis of a good education is the harmony of the relationship, and here I am thinking about the goals alignment of those involved, and about a good reciprocal understanding and mutual respect.

CASE

Now, I will come closer to my chosen case. It is a simple case about misunderstandings and parenting in a way that is to be avoided. It is about a family with four members – two children, P., 4 year old and M., 14 month old, and mother (34 yo. - first born) and father (36 yo.– first born). The parents came to me with a situation from
the kindergarten where P. goes. Since the beginning of the school year he had been acting fairly violently, and the kindergarten has given the parents an ultimatum. I asked them if they discussed this with P., and both of them said they didn’t. The mother explained to me that she tried to, but, when she asked P. about the kindergarten and what he did there, he answered every time: „Good” and nothing more. At this point she felt stuck, and ceased pursuing the topic of his misbehaviour.

She continued complaining about the fact that she is taking care of the household and her children’s education all by herself, and that sometimes she felt like giving up. Other times she is tempted to lose her temper with the children, and sometimes (but more often now) she felt furious and yelled at them.

Until now we had the opportunity of meeting three times (first with the whole family, and the others with both parents). P. is a very nice little fellow, interested in me and in my office, acting with care and asking me about one thing or the other. When I started to talk with his parents, I asked him if he wanted to paint something, in order to talk to the parents without interruption. P. agreed, and we had the possibility to talk in good peace for almost 10 minutes. After this time, P. started to interfere with us, mainly when his mother was talking, constantly demanding her attention. She was the one keeping M. (he was sleeping) on her knee, but at one point, the mother asked the father to help her with M. and he gladly agreed. Almost immediately, P.’s interest turned toward his father and he started demanding his attention, but this time through whining. The parents told me that P. does that every time. Right away, M. started to cry. P. stopped his whining when his mother took M. back.

Writting this material, I think again about DREIKURS’ words about kids being good observers and ... great tuners. P. tunes his parents and makes them do what is necessary for him to feel good.

The parents thought that P. is associating his mother with M., and himself with his father. This looks to me as being very close to the idea I stated above: ”good listeners, yet poor interpreters”. Children do/say something, and their parents understand something else. And all this is tributary to the misunderstandings started from the difference between what the children intend to obtain, to achieve what they need (the need to belong; striving for significance; the need to be trusted; the need to be encouraged), and the way their parents make an adult type decryption of these attempts made by their children. It is like using cubic measurements to measure the length of the road.

I asked P. about the car he painted. He told me about his wish to visit his grandparents. I asked him to paint more about the grandparent’s house, and about what he does there. He calmly agreed and returned to the table. This child was trying to gain appreciations for what he was doing. The fact that I was interested in P.’s painting made him aware of my attention, and his striving for significance was fulfilled for the moment.

To my mind, this young fellow knows very well how to push his parents’ buttons.

Later, our meeting moved to discussing their goals. The father started by telling me that he expects to learn more about his children, and perhaps to develop himself into a better parent. The mother told us (she was looking first at her husband and then she turned her eyes to me) that her goal is to be here together with her husband and to regain the feeling of working together in the same direction. She mentioned to me that sometimes they used to argue in front of their children (the father agreed by nodding his head). She thought that educating is different from discussing about education with her partner in front of the kids. On the other hand, he considered discussing is an important thing to be taught to their children, that by learning how to discuss, their children will learn about the importance of supporting one’s point of view.

During this meeting I realized that these parents were discouraged in their work with children, they did not have common ground on how to manage things in their family and about the best education for their children. They also seemed to be discouraged in working together and aiming for a common goal. For the moment, their only common goal was to come together to therapy sessions, and I think this could provide a very good foundation for our next encounters. They asked me about the possibility of meeting again as soon as I had an available hour. I agreed to see them next morning.

In the final part of our meeting, I asked them if they agree to recount our meeting, and if they would like to hear some advice from me. They agreed, and I encouraged them to do the recounting, and to point out the problems and what they remembered from my interpretations. Four points emerged: 1) the need to discuss the kindergarten situation with P., telling him that they heard what happened there (from a fairy or from a little bird), and to ask him how he sees the situation and possible solutions; 2) to give him the possibility of having private time and enjoying his love of painting without being afraid that M. would come and destroy his work; 3) the parents should refrain from arguing about their children in front of their children; 4) when she gets angry, she can think about what THEODORE E. GRUBBE says in The Challenge of Kindergarten (the entire material can be found here: http://pws.cablespeed.com/~ltstein/chall.htm) in September 1963:
When the child is misbehaving, DO NOT REACT to your first impulse or act upon it. By reacting, the authority tends to intensify the behavior problem rather than correct it. When the authority does so, he is acting in accordance with the child’s expectations. The child will expect you to get mad and if you do, the child has won. He may not like the reprimand he gets; however, he has manipulated you into it. A simplified rule of the thumb is to do nothing or to react the opposite from the way you feel. This will negate the effect of the success of the misbehavior and place the authority in a better position to effectively arrange with the child what to do about the situation”.

Briefly, I will finish this depiction by telling you that both parents agreed to invest time in learning about themselves and in becoming efficient educators, and in understanding better the way ADLER and DREIKURS shine a light into family relationships and dynamics. This is the way I ‘work’ with preschool children – by working with their parents!

REFERENCES

1. de Vries, Sofia J. (1951) - Some Basic Principles of Individual Psychology - originally published in the Individual Psychology Bulletin, Vol. 9, 1951 – and now we had the opportunity to find these writings on www.adlerians.us, published there by Dr. HENRY T. STEIN
