

## Assessment Feedback With Parents and Preadolescent Children: A Collaborative Approach

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Psychologists routinely provide feedback to parents (and sometimes children) after conducting psychological assessments of children. The authors review the literature on sharing feedback from child assessments. They then present a rationale, grounded in the theory and principles of collaborative assessment, for why it is useful to discuss assessment results with parents and children. Citing available research evidence, they propose a conceptual framework for understanding the potential therapeutic impact of feedback. Next, they present detailed guidelines—illustrated with case examples from a research project and an independent assessment practice—for how to prepare for and give oral and written feedback to parents and children. The authors encourage assessment professionals to consider the insights and techniques derived from collaborative assessment when providing feedback.

*Keywords:* psychological assessment, feedback, parents, children, collaborative assessment

Given the amount, complexity, and emotionally arousing nature of the information obtained from psychological assessments of children, how can this information best be shared with parents and the children themselves? How can it be presented so that it is heard, useful, and even therapeutic for the family?

An extensive literature exists to guide psychologists who conduct psychological assessments with children (Kamphaus, 2001; Kamphaus & Frick, 2005; Merrell, 2003; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2001; Sattler, 2002). This literature also offers direction for providing oral and written feedback to parents and, less so, to children

(Braaten, 2007). These guides represent a significant advance, because historically psychologists have maintained that assessment results are too complex or threatening for clients (Groth-Marnat, 2003). Feedback was often withheld or minimized with adults and adolescents and was rarely given to children. Fortunately, as ethical codes have evolved, the client's right to know has become paramount, requiring assessors to take reasonable steps to provide assessment results to clients or those acting on clients' behalf. We ask, how can these steps be enhanced to make the assessment process and outcome more meaningful to all involved?

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### Suggestions From the Literature for Providing Feedback to Parents and Children

Many experts have offered guidance for the parent feedback session that occurs at the conclusion of a psychological assessment of a child (Accardo & Capute, 1979; Groth-Marnat, 2003; Oster, Caro, Eagen, & Lillo, 1988; Tuma & Elbert, 1990). Commonly, stages of the feedback session have been described. In the introductory stage, the purpose of the assessment is reviewed, general impressions are shared, and the assessor gauges the parents' level of understanding and openness to feedback (Oster et al., 1988). At the next stage, the assessor communicates and discusses specific assessment findings (Groth-Marnat, 2003). Assessors have been counseled to select the most pertinent information to share and then develop three or four areas around which to organize feedback (Braaten, 2007; Groth-Marnat, 2003; Oster et al., 1988). Assessors are cautioned not to omit bad news because of their own anxiety (Kamphaus & Frick, 2005). Most authors have emphasized the need to balance the challenging findings with significant attention to the child's strengths (Braaten, 2007; Brenner, 2003; Oster et al., 1988; Pollak, 1988). The final stage centers on summarizing the major findings and recommendations with the parents, empathizing with the variety of reactions the parents may be experiencing and answering remaining questions.

There is consensus in the literature that feedback, whether it is oral or written, should be in clear, everyday language (Accardo & Capute, 1979; Braaten, 2007; Brenner, 2003; Groth-Marnat, 2003; Oster et al., 1988; Pollak, 1988; Sandoval & Irvin, 1990). Similarly, recommendations need to be concise, feasible, and communicated clearly (Groth-Marnat, 2003; Miller & Evans, 2004). Moreover, assessment results must be interpreted in relation to the client's culture (Braaten, 2007) and presented in the client's preferred language (Dana, 2005; Draguns & Tanaka-Matsumi, 2003).

Many other factors have been mentioned in the literature as potentially affecting parents' ability to receive, process, and act on assessment feedback. These factors include the cognitive level of the parents (Oster et al., 1988; Pollak, 1988), their mental health (Braaten, 2007; Groth-Marnat, 2003), their prior experience with mental health professionals (Oster et al., 1988), their guilt (Braaten, 2007; Tuma & Elbert, 1990), their fear that their own pathologies may be discovered (Tuma & Elbert, 1990), and their feeling threatened because the assessment feedback pertains to difficulties they also experience (Kamphaus & Frick, 2005). Parents also may be concerned that the findings may lead to recommendations that require more from them than they are able to give (Tuma & Elbert, 1990). There is consensus that the assessor must consider and prepare for the various emotional responses that may be evoked in the parents receiving assessment feedback. The assessor's challenge is to balance the parents' right to know with their ability to benefit from the information shared (Sandoval & Irvin, 1990).

In addition to guides for parent feedback, general principles for providing child-directed feedback have been offered (Kamphaus, 2001; Kamphaus & Frick, 2005; Oster et al., 1988; Tuma & Elbert, 1990). The principles can be summarized as follows: (a) The purpose of the assessment and the children's important role in the process should be explained well (Tuma & Elbert, 1990); (b) children should have an opportunity to discuss how the assessment was for them and to receive empathy for their likes and dislikes of

the tasks (Tuma & Elbert, 1990); and (c) communication should be appropriate for children's developmental level (Kamphaus, 2001; Kamphaus & Frick, 2005). Including someone in the feedback session with whom the child has an established, positive relationship (e.g., a parent or teacher) has been suggested by Kamphaus and Frick (2005).

### Collaborative Approaches to Assessment Feedback

Much of the existing literature on parent and child feedback presents a hierarchical quality to the nature of the assessment feedback session, with the assessor being the knowledge bearer and the parent and child being the knowledge receivers. This model has been referred to as the information-gathering or traditional assessment model (Finn & Tonsager, 1997) and has dominated assessment feedback practice for decades. Finn and Tonsager (1997) contrasted this model with the collaborative or therapeutic model of assessment. In collaborative psychological assessment, the assessor seeks to midwife new insights and understandings into being, rather than offering them to clients as new truths to be accepted at the end of an assessment (Finn, 2007; Fischer, 1994). Clients are typically engaged actively in many aspects of an assessment, including goal setting, data collection and interpretation, and collaborating with the written report (Fischer, 1994). Recent research conducted with adults has indicated that a collaborative psychological assessment can be a therapeutic intervention in and of itself (Ackerman, Hilsenroth, Baity, & Blagys, 2000; Allen, Montgomery, Tubman, Frazier, & Escovar, 2003; Finn & Tonsager, 1992; Hilsenroth, Peters, & Ackerman, 2004; Newman & Greenway, 1997).

Pollak (1988), somewhat before his time, proposed that effective feedback to parents—characterized by empathic understanding, relevance, clarity, and respect—maximizes the probability of beneficial effects and future successful interventions. Fischer (1994; originally published in 1985) provided numerous examples of collaborative assessments of children that seemed to positively impact the families involved. In addition, many other writers have provided case examples or some elucidation of collaborative assessment techniques as applied to children and families (Becker, Gohara, Marizilda, & Santiago, 2002; DuBose, 2002; Finn, 2007; Handler, 2006; Purves, 2002). To our knowledge, however, no one has yet fully articulated a collaborative model for providing assessment feedback to parents and children, and our aim in this article is to do so.

Informed by collaborative psychological assessment, we advance an extended rationale on why feedback should be provided and provide techniques on how to do it well. We address such practice questions as the following: How do those of us assessing children decide what information is most important to share and plan our feedback accordingly? How can the assessment process help us be prepared to empathize effectively with different types of parents? On what basis can we gauge parents' ability to consider and act on the assessment findings and recommendations and, as assessors, how can we be prepared in advance? In relation to children, how can we give them a meaningful, respectful, and developmentally appropriate dose of feedback that includes them in the process?

## A Comprehensive Rationale for Providing Feedback— The Why

### *Fulfilling Ethical Requirements*

A compelling reason for providing feedback to clients is that professional ethics require it. The American Psychological Association (2002) Ethical Standard 9.10 states,

Regardless of whether the scoring and interpretation are done by psychologists, by employees or assistants, or by automated or other outside services, psychologists take reasonable steps to ensure that explanations of results are given to the individual or designated representative.

In addition, Principle IV of the code of the National Association of School Psychologists (2000) states, in part, “School psychologists adequately interpret information so that the recipient can better help the child or other clients” (p. 28). Further, “School psychologists communicate findings and recommendations in language readily understood by the intended recipient” (p. 29). It is instructive to note that neither ethics code requires that children be given feedback.

### *Gaining Openness, Cooperation, and Engagement From Parents and Children*

When parents and children are confident from the beginning that they will receive an explanation of the results, it has been our experience that they are more likely to be open and cooperative throughout the assessment process. This especially applies to parents. Many parents are quite anxious and apprehensive about the assessment process. If parents are reassured that they will receive a thorough, user-friendly explanation of the results of the assessment, they are more likely to lower their guard and provide accurate and useful information to the assessor. A parent’s increased comfort level is likely to be communicated to the child and, in turn, encourages trust and openness between the child and the assessor. Furthermore, the assessment may be the family’s first contact with a psychologist or mental health professional, and a positive experience sets the stage for following through with recommendations (Finn, 2007).

### *Encouraging the Assessor to Thoroughly Understand, Interpret, and Translate Findings*

Preparing for and giving feedback also has benefits for assessors. To provide feedback that is user friendly and applicable to families’ lives, assessors must clearly conceptualize, understand, integrate, and effectively organize assessment findings. Although this task can be challenging, it forces the professional to develop a clearer understanding of the assessment findings and, ultimately, sharper clinical skills. This benefit seems especially true for the assessment of children, which is almost always multidimensional and involves multiple informants (Johnston & Murray, 2003). The assessor also is challenged to decide what feedback will be useful to the child and how best to present it. Helping an 8-year-old girl who has been assessed feel respected, valued, and understood in a new way and helping her to trust that the central adults in her life have been helped to see her anew and to respond in a more effective manner is truly putting assessment findings to work. An

assessor who can do this really understands both the assessment findings and the client.

### *Facilitating the Assessor’s Personal and Interpersonal Development*

The feedback process also can be beneficial to the assessor by fostering personal and professional growth. As addressed earlier, giving useful feedback to parents and children forces assessors to clarify their understanding of the assessment results and to express complex psychological constructs in plain language. Furthermore, reactions from clients to what the assessor says can help hone test interpretations and teach an assessor a great deal about what different test scores mean for a given client. When providing feedback from a collaborative stance, it is not possible for the assessor to hide behind a veil of omnipotence and jargon. The process encourages and requires an honest and genuine alliance with families, in which parents and children may accept or reject certain findings, demonstrate strong emotional reactions, and challenge the assessor in countless ways. Although frightening at times, this type of connection can be rewarding because it allows the clinician to learn from the client. The feedback process requires assessors to stretch and find their own versions of families’ difficulties, thereby increasing their wisdom, self-understanding, and self-acceptance (Finn, 2005).

### *Using Feedback as a Therapeutic Intervention for the Parents and Child*

Although assessors typically develop recommendations based on their findings that they hope will be subsequently beneficial to a family, many overlook the fact that the process of assessment itself can facilitate positive change. Providing feedback is one of the major ways to make such a therapeutic impact. Studies have demonstrated that well-formulated feedback with adults leads to a decrease in symptomatology, an increase in self-esteem and hope (Finn & Tonsager, 1997; Newman & Greenway, 1997), and enhanced self-related processes, such as self-understanding and positive self-regard (Allen et al., 2003; Arkowitz, 1992). Hilsenroth and his colleagues have documented that collaborative assessment feedback to adult clients significantly influences their willingness to engage in recommended therapy (Ackerman et al., 2000) and their positive alliance to a future psychotherapist (Cromer & Hilsenroth, 2006; Hilsenroth, Ackerman, Clemence, Strassle, & Handler, 2002; Hilsenroth et al., 2004; Weil & Hilsenroth, 2006).

Significantly less attention has been devoted to investigating the effects of psychological assessment feedback with parents and children, and such efforts are needed. Human and Teglasi (1993) found that parents reported positive changes resulting from feedback from psychoeducational evaluations, such as improved understanding of their child, a better parent–child relationship, and an increase in the child’s self-esteem. Colley (1973) reported that parents of children who had received a psychological assessment and feedback indicated anecdotally that their children were more at ease and happier than before feedback.

### Assumptions and Principles Underlying the Collaborative Model of Feedback

#### *Feedback Can Help Parents and Children Develop a New Story*

The therapeutic value of psychological assessment in general, and of assessment feedback specifically, is its potential to help parents develop a more accurate, compassionate, and useful understanding of why they or their child may be facing a certain challenge. For example, before a recent child assessment, the parents were convinced that their 10-year-old son's difficulties completing homework were due to laziness and wanting to hurt them. The boy had been told this enough that he had come to believe this explanation himself and to feel that he was bad. Through the psychological assessment, the parents were helped to understand that their son had a significant verbal learning disability, was depressed and anxious, and gave up easily for fear of putting in effort and then failing. The boy was told after the assessment that he was not bad but that he simply needed more help and different teaching methods to learn effectively. This new story helped the parents and child repair a breach in their relationship, deal more effectively with the boy's academic difficulties, and feel better about themselves. When such shifts in perspective take place, they can create a lasting impact.

#### *Human Beings Are Attached to Their Existing Stories and Resist Modifying Them*

None of us change our existing stories about ourselves or the world easily. Such schemas or narratives are carefully and painstakingly constructed over time on the basis of our life experiences and what important others have told us. They help us organize our perceptions, make sense of past experience and the world around us, and give us a sense of coherence and emotional security (Swann, 1996). Numerous studies have shown that most individuals will discount or screen out information or feedback that is inconsistent with their existing self-schemas, even if the new information is more accurate or more self-enhancing. For example, Collins and Stukas (2006) found that adult clients were more likely to accept feedback from a therapist if it was consistent with their self-view than if the feedback contradicted their self-view. Swann's (1996, 1997) *self-verification theory* attempts to explain this phenomenon. It suggests that individuals are drawn to relationships and interactions that confirm their preexisting self-conceptions and that they withdraw from those that challenge those preconceptions. Self-verification theory helps explain, for example, why individuals with low self-esteem may vociferously reject or discount positive comments from others (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). Accepting such information would require a major revision of the person's existing story and, if attempted too quickly or without enough support, could result in anxiety, disorientation, and potentially a highly distressing disintegration experience (Kohut, 1977). Assessors attempting to give clients assessment feedback that has the potential to change their existing stories about themselves or their children can be aided by understanding the human tendency toward self-verification, the danger of precipitating a disintegration experience, and how to use the collaborative relationship to buffer potential disequilibrium and promote accommodation of the new story.

#### *Collaboration Helps Circumvent the Self-Verification Process*

Research to date suggests that when clients are actively engaged as collaborators in psychological assessments and when they are asked to comment on, modify, and discuss assessment feedback with an assessor, they are more likely to remember the feedback, find it useful, and be impacted by it in their daily lives (Hanson, Claiborn, & Kerr, 1997). We believe that collaboration aids in circumventing the defensive aspects of the self-verification process. Put simply, if clients get a chance to co-edit and revise their existing stories with the guidance of the assessor, they are more likely to accept and remember those new stories than if the assessor tries to impose a revised understanding at the end of the assessment. For this reason, many of the procedures we outline emphasize engaging parents as collaborators in their children's assessments and in making sense of the assessment results.

#### *The Process of Developing a New Story Is an Emotionally Challenging Process*

As Finn (2007) observed, when clients are able to develop a new story about themselves or their families during the course of a psychological assessment, it often is a highly emotional experience for them. This is because for all of us, the ways we have come to think about ourselves and our loved ones are intricately tied to certain emotional states and are incompatible with others. When we change our stories, different affective states are mobilized, and these must be dealt with for the new story to stick. For example, in the assessment mentioned earlier, the parents began the assessment angry at their son for being lazy and not taking full advantage of the private school they were paying for, and through the assessment they came to see their child as having a previously undiagnosed learning disability and depression. Along with this shift came a flood of different emotions: relief over finally understanding their child's problems, guilt about having blamed their child for difficulties out of his control, anger at previous mental health professionals who were consulted but failed to diagnose the learning disability, hope about the future, and grief about having a child with significant difficulties (as opposed to an attitudinal problem). Depending on the parents and their own backgrounds, such an event could also mobilize their own grief about being misunderstood or harshly treated as children or could create marital difficulties if the parents had disagreed in the past about how to handle the child. Such emotions could easily become overwhelming if parents do not have adequate support, leading to the aforementioned state of high anxiety, disorientation, or disintegration.

#### *Clients Are Best Able to Develop a New Story When They Feel Held in a Supportive Relationship*

It follows, therefore, that clients are most likely to accommodate new stories about themselves when they feel supported by others who can help them with the feelings that are mobilized by the assessment. For this reason, our model of feedback emphasizes ways to create a strong holding environment between assessors and clients, because it is the relationship between assessor and client that primarily protects clients from being overwhelmed by the information and emotions that arise from an assessment. There

are many ways that assessors can help parents feel supported during an assessment, and we now detail some of our specific techniques.

### Preparing for an Assessment Feedback Session With Parents

Assessors need to carefully prepare before giving feedback to parents about their child’s assessment findings. We recommend developing a comprehensive written outline. The following questions may be useful to consider in planning the session with the parents.

#### *If I Were the Parent, What Would Be the Best Way to Talk to Me About the Assessment Findings?*

If assessment feedback is to be most effective and if it is to take clients’ existing stories into account, it must be tailored—both in content and approach—to the particular parents and child. There is no fixed format or language that can be used with everyone, even if the findings of two assessments are highly similar (e.g., both indicate a developmental reading disability). Finn (1996) has suggested that this process is basically one of assessors asking themselves, on the basis of the assessment findings, “If I were this client, what would be the best way to approach me about these results?” Many different variables can come into play in answering this question. As Fischer (1994) so aptly modeled, how one communicates with parents about their child’s assessment should vary according to the educational level, cultural background, and structure of the family. For example, recently we assessed a child in our research project whose mother could not read. At the end of the assessment, we gave the mother an audiotape of our feedback session, rather than a copy of our written report to the child’s teacher. For another family, we deemed it necessary to have separate feedback sessions with a divorced mother and father, because it became clear that it was extremely difficult for them to be in the same room together.

#### *Whom Should I Invite to the Session?*

This is an extremely important question, and as Fulmer, Cohen, and Monaco (1985) noted, whom the assessor invites can be part of a planned family system intervention. With intact two-parent families, it is generally desirable to request that both parents attend the feedback session, rather than having one parent get feedback and later convey it to the other. If one parent has typically been less involved in parenting (e.g., the father), that parent’s attendance may serve to alter proximity in the system (i.e., get that parent to be more concerned about and invested in the child). Similarly, if other interested adults (grandparents, aunts, uncles) live in the household and are involved in caretaking for the child, it may also be desirable for them to attend the feedback session, so that everyone has a chance to hear the same new story about the child at the same time. In one recent case, we found it desirable to invite the following family members to the assessment feedback session concerning a 10-year-old boy: his mother, stepfather, grandmother, and the grandmother’s female partner. In other instances, one might choose to reinforce the hierarchy in the family system by, for example, giving a mother feedback first and then including

other family members—thereby supporting the idea that the mother is the primary caregiver. There also may be cultural considerations influencing who is present for the feedback meeting and who ultimately receives feedback information (Dana, 2005). For example, there may be an important kinfolk relationship between the parent and a close friend who participates in caretaking and who therefore may need to receive assessment feedback as well.

With separated and divorced parents, there are many points to consider when choosing whom to invite. Again, a general goal would be to have all interested adults—including both parents and any stepparents—in the room at the same time when the assessment results are discussed. This is a way of emphasizing that children are generally best off if parents are on the same page and if children are subject to similar rules in different households. (Of course, such considerations should be discussed with parents beforehand, and parents should collaborate in deciding who is to attend.) If this arrangement is not possible because the parents are geographically separated or because the various individuals do not get along well together, then separate sessions may be required or advisable.

#### *In What Order Should I Present the Findings?*

This is another major decision point, and fortunately research is available to guide the assessor. Schroeder, Hahn, Finn, and Swann (1993) demonstrated that clients are more likely to accept and be impacted by assessment feedback when it is ordered in terms of its similarity to their existing narratives. Finn (1996) used *Level 1, 2, and 3 feedback* to capture this distinction (see Table 1 for a

Table 1  
*Ordering Assessment Findings in Planning an Assessment Feedback Session With Parents*

Findings	Description
Level 1	Findings that verify parents’ usual ways of thinking about their child and their family and that will be accepted easily in the feedback session. When told this information, a parent will generally say, “That sounds exactly like my child . . .” If possible, present several Level 1 findings before moving on to others that are less accessible to the parents.
Level 2	Findings that modify or amplify parents’ usual ways of thinking about their child and family but that are unlikely to threaten self-esteem or closely held beliefs. When told this type of information, a parent might say, “I’ve never thought about my child quite this way before, but I can see how what you’re saying fits.” Most of the assessment feedback session should be composed of Level 2 findings.
Level 3	Findings that are so novel or discrepant from parents’ usual ways of thinking about their child and family that they are likely to be rejected in feedback sessions. Typically, Level 3 findings are quite anxiety provoking for parents and, thus, are likely to mobilize their characteristic defense mechanisms. As long as parents do not appear overwhelmed, such findings should be presented until definitive rejections take place. Sometimes parents will accept Level 3 findings if they have felt understood and supported earlier in the feedback session.

description of the levels). How one orders assessment findings is one of the major ways to address the self-verification effect mentioned earlier in which parents resist information that is incompatible with their existing story about their child/family.

On this basis, we strongly suggest that assessors first present those assessment findings that are closest to how parents already conceive of their child (Level 1 findings). This strategy lowers parents' anxiety and reassures them that many of their previous understandings are supported by the assessment data. For example, in one recent assessment, the parents mentioned early on that they thought their son was emotionally immature. At the end of the assessment, the assessor confirmed that the child appeared to be delayed in his emotional development and went on to detail this finding and spell out its implications for parenting and treatment.

Ideally, the bulk of a feedback session should consist of information that slightly modifies or reframes parents' existing conceptions about their child (Level 2 findings). For example, an assessor might attempt to reframe the parents' view of their child as bad and willfully disobedient to one where they see the child as depressed and feeling badly about himself or herself and trying to preemptively provoke rejection by antagonizing others. The assessor might tie together test scores, historical information, teachers' observations, and other information to weave this new story. For example, the assessor might educate the parents about how childhood depression can present as oppositional behavior (Angold & Costello, 1993) and/or read the parents one of the child's stories from the Roberts Apperception Test (Roberts, 1994) about a boy who instigates a fight with classmates because he is sure that they don't like him anyway.

The assessor should plan to present assessment findings later in the feedback session that conflict with the parents' existing view of their child (Level 3 findings), especially if the assessor senses that the parents' current view of the child is essential in maintaining their own self-esteem. For example, in a recent assessment, a mother insisted that her son did not have mental retardation, but intellectual testing was consistent in showing that he met the criteria for this disability. Because the mother's acceptance of the disability was crucial to the child's qualifying for certain school programs, we did discuss this finding with her. However, we worked hard to counter various misperceptions the mother had about what it meant for someone to have mental retardation. Because the mother had perceived the earlier (Levels 1 and 2) assessment feedback as accurate, she was willing to seriously consider this finding also and to listen to the additional information the assessor presented.

Before seeing parents' reactions, an assessor can never know for sure if a certain assessment finding comprises Level 1, 2, or 3 information. However, how parents describe their child in interviews provides crucial clues to their existing story about the child and family. Also, parent-rating forms provide important information about how parents view their child (and whether two parents see the child similarly). In planning the feedback session, the assessor makes his or her best guess about a finding's accessibility to parents and then watches carefully during the session to gauge the parents' reaction.

### *How Do I Decide on the Major Findings and Recommendations?*

A comprehensive assessment almost always yields more information about a child than can be productively transmitted to parents. It is important for assessors to sift carefully through the various assessment findings, to identify which of those are most pertinent to the parents' presenting concerns and questions, and to determine which are most crucial to the new story that will set the stage for the parents and family to take their next growth steps. It can be useful to ask, If I could only tell the parents five points from the assessment (or three), what would they be? When choosing the most important points, it also is essential that assessors not omit information simply because they are anxious about presenting it to parents or because they imagine that it would be upsetting for any parent to hear such information. Finn (1996) has identified a frequent error of beginning assessors: They imagine that socially undesirable information is Level 3 information when, in fact, it often is Level 1 information that parents find comforting to have acknowledged. For example, in a recent assessment, parents were relieved to be told that their son was having hallucinations, because they had suspected this and were afraid that they were misinterpreting the boy's reports about what he was experiencing.

### *What Kind of Language Should I Use?*

Language plays a significant role in understanding information. The assessor should be mindful that words and concepts have different connotations in different languages. In addition, using the client's culture-specific language may facilitate greater understanding. For example, in many Latino cultures, *ataque de nerviosa* may better describe a daughter's emotional state than the words *anxiety* or *depression* (Lopez & Guarnaccia, 2000). Further, it is important to use language that is accessible and familiar to parents. Fischer (1994) has emphasized the importance of avoiding jargon, adopting clients' own language whenever possible, and using metaphors that are familiar to clients according to their culture, occupation, and education. For example, if a parent had repeatedly mentioned her sense that her son was *blue* and had never used the word *depressed*, the assessor might decide to say that the assessment results confirmed that the boy was *seriously blue*. If the assessor decided that a certain technical term would be useful to parents (e.g., *compulsions*), that term should be carefully defined in language the parents understand (e.g., *a very strong desire to do a specific thing to relieve anxiety*).

We also suggest that assessors utilize metaphors that arise from discussions with the parents or from the child's actual test responses. For example, in a recent assessment, one family came to describe their problems with emotional regulation as a *wildfire that swept through the family* when one person got angry. In the feedback session, one of the major findings conveyed and readily understood was that the family was prone to *emotional wildfires*.

### *What Tone Should I Take?*

Assessors should also think carefully about what emotional tone they wish to project. We find that some parents need lots of support and emotional reassurance, and we remind ourselves to take frequent pauses and check in with parents about how they are

hearing what we are saying. Other parents seem to resist acknowledging—for whatever reason—the seriousness of their child's problems. In these instances, an assessor may choose language and examples that hit hard (i.e., that are intended to raise the parents' anxiety about the child in hopes that they will become more involved and take subsequent appropriate action).

### *How Will I Know if the Parents Are Overwhelmed?*

As mentioned earlier, it can be overwhelming for parents to try to incorporate a new understanding of their child and family during the relatively short period of a psychological assessment. It can be useful before the actual session to review in one's mind how a particular set of parents is likely to show that they are feeling overwhelmed, so that one can be attuned to such signs and modify course. For example, in a recent assessment, we knew that a father tended to fall silent when he was emotionally stressed. Thus, we planned to monitor his involvement carefully during the feedback session and to take a break if it seemed that he was growing quieter. At other times, an assessor may be on the lookout for a parent's arguing about assessment findings or passively agreeing without seeming to really understand.

### *Am I Anxious About the Session?*

Finn (1996) has suggested that feedback sessions go better if assessors are aware of their own anxiety and take active steps to get support beforehand. Hence, a final step in preparing for a feedback session is to check in on one's own level of anxiety and attempt to lower it by, for example, talking with colleagues or monitoring one's self-talk.

### Presenting Oral Feedback to Parents

In the feedback session with the parents, the assessor follows the comprehensive plan/outline developed during preparation, yet remains flexible in order to accept and respond to parents' comments, additions, and disagreements with the findings. Through this process, the assessor reaffirms the collaborative nature of the assessment. The following steps are designed to best meet these goals and provide an overall structure to the parent feedback meeting.

#### *Check in With Family Members*

The assessor should begin the session by asking how the parent feels about coming to the feedback session, being mindful of the anxiety-producing nature of receiving information about one's child. Any worries or concerns the parents have should be addressed prior to providing any feedback to ensure that the process does not become overwhelming before it has begun.

#### *Review the Plan for the Session*

The assessor should then review with parents the purpose of the session and provide an outline of how the session will be organized. It is beneficial to remind parents that their input is highly valued and continues to be useful for the assessment process. Emphasizing collaboration at this point helps both the assessor and the family create a dialogue during the session in which familial

input, examples, and disagreements are welcomed and encouraged. The assessor should also remind the parent (if applicable) that a summary letter or report will be sent and provide an approximate time frame for its completion. The letter/report is mentioned at this time to ease any anxiety the parent may feel about remembering all the details of the session.

### *Share Appreciations of the Family*

The assessor is encouraged to thank the family for their participation in the assessment process, making sure to acknowledge the time, energy, and sacrifices the parent has made. It is also helpful to acknowledge any risks the parent took in bringing the child for an assessment (e.g., "I know your last experience with psychological testing was challenging, so I appreciate your taking the chance that this assessment might be different"). This is also the time for assessors to join with parents, by admitting any feelings of confusion or frustration they experienced in working with the child that fit with the concerns shared by the parents (such as the child being oppositional or hyperactive). Such acknowledgement is often deeply relieving to parents and can be balanced by also highlighting positive traits exhibited by the child.

### *Review Assessment Results*

There are multiple methods of presenting the assessment findings. Assessors can begin by discussing the global findings and then addressing the more specific parental concerns or questions. Alternatively, assessors can address parental concerns or questions first. This is the preferred method if the assessment findings map onto the parents' presenting concerns. An example of a letter written with this approach is provided in Tharinger, Finn, Wilkinson, and Schaber's (2007) article.

We recommend that the assessor begin the feedback with Level 1 findings, moving to Level 2 and then to Level 3 findings as the session continues. During this process, the assessor should consistently engage the parents by asking them to confirm, disconfirm, or modify the findings rather than simply accepting them as absolute truth. Whenever possible, the assessor should attempt to elicit real-world examples from the parents, which helps tie the findings to real life. The assessor should pay close attention to parents' affective reactions as the session proceeds and should pause and offer support when appropriate. If the parents reject any findings, the assessor should never argue with them or attempt to convince them that a certain finding is correct. Instead, the assessor should restate the findings using different language that may be more familiar for the parents, ask the parents for their ideas on how the findings could be modified so they more closely fit their own experience of their child, or agree to disagree.

### *Review Recommendations*

Often, recommendations are introduced in the process of providing feedback to parents and addressing questions they posed at the beginning of the assessment. Even so, we find it useful to collect these recommendations and repeat them toward the end of the session. At this time, the parents can be asked if the suggestions are feasible and whether they will need help in carrying them out. We find that many parents appreciate concrete suggestions

they can work with at home, beyond referrals for psychotherapy or other support services.

*Closing the Session: Eliciting Reactions, Checking Comprehension, Discussing Future Contacts, and Sharing What You Learned*

After discussing the findings and answering remaining questions, the assessor should encourage parents to share their reactions to the assessment findings. If the assessor is concerned that parents did not comprehend aspects of the findings, he or she can check for any distortions by asking the parents to summarize the main points. Next, the assessor should discuss the details of any future meetings or correspondence (such as a report or letter) with the parents. Details for any child feedback sessions should be discussed at this time. The assessor may also wish to share with the family what he or she gained from the experience, including what he or she learned that will be helpful in future assessments. Finn (1996) has reported that many clients are incredibly touched to learn that they impacted the assessor. At this point, the session is concluded, and the assessor can plan for the feedback session with the child and complete the written feedback to the parents.

#### Written Feedback to Parents

There are many different ways to provide written feedback to parents about their child's assessment, and many authors have written extensively on this topic (Braaten, 2007; Groth-Marnat, 2003; Kamphaus & Frick, 2005; Oster et al., 1988). Fischer (1994) has argued that whenever possible, it is useful to produce a single written report or summary to provide a single frame of reference and facilitate a common understanding of the assessment findings. We agree with this point in principle, but we have found that traditional psychological reports are not as helpful as they could be to parents, because they are too technical, are full of jargon, and do not succinctly and cogently address the issues that most concern parents. Fischer modeled a modified psychological report format that is highly comprehensible to parents and professionals. For example, when tests are referred to, an assessor may briefly describe the task involved ("John was then administered the California Verbal Learning Test—Children's Version, where he was asked to learn a list of words, in order to measure his attention, concentration, and short-term verbal memory"). Such reports can be used with schools and parents alike, or one always has the option of cutting certain personal material from a full report (perhaps with the collaboration of parents) to make a clearly labeled school report.

Another option is to write separate, brief, focused letters to parents, schools, and referring professionals to address the issues that are of most concern to each. This has the advantage of allowing one to tailor the content, language, and format of each document to the intended audience. Parents may still be provided with copies of all the letters so they know what is being said to each party. A final option is to provide both a comprehensive report and tailored letters. In cases where parents initiated the assessment, whether the assessor generates a single report or brief focused reports for each audience, we further suggest that the assessor share the documents with the parents before giving them to others. This process not only serves to recognize parents as the

primary clients and as the most important people in the child's world, but it also allows them to correct errors in history and so forth, further collaborating with the assessor.

#### Preparing and Providing Feedback With the Child

The nature of providing assessment feedback to a child is quite different from providing findings to parents and is challenging in its own right. Because of this, assessors may overlook this important process, devoting little time and energy to it, or may skip it altogether (providing feedback only to involved adults). However, just as providing feedback to parents has the potential to be therapeutic, so does giving feedback to children.

We advise that feedback to the child follow the oral feedback to the parents and, if possible, that it take place in an entirely separate session, possibly a few days or a week apart. This sequence allows the parents to discuss and absorb the feedback presented to them about their child. This timing also allows the assessor to reflect on how the parents responded to the feedback they received and what growth steps they committed to undertaking. This understanding helps the assessor decide what to represent to the child in the feedback session.

The assessor should carefully choose which findings to share with the child. Although the prior preparation for the parent feedback is foundational, the child is given much less direct information, perhaps just one step in the new story. Typically, appreciation is given, strengths are emphasized, and Level 1 and 2 information is included. In almost all cases, providing Level 3 information to the child should be considered only if the parents have indicated strong support for the child in beginning to address these issues. In most instances, it would be better for Level 3 information to be addressed over time through ongoing interventions.

In most cases, the child and parents attend the session. If the child is advanced cognitively and has raised his or her own concerns or questions for the assessment, it may be appropriate to spend some time alone with the child, providing Level 1 and Level 2 information, with the parents joining afterward for the remainder of the session. However, it is important to keep in mind that a child may be cognitively advanced but significantly emotionally delayed and, thus, may not be able to absorb direct feedback. Fortunately, the assessment findings likely have informed the assessor about the child's emotional level and, thus, have prepared the assessor for the likelihood of the child being able to profit from direct feedback.

Feedback should be given to the child in language as close as possible to that of the child. It is a good idea to use images or words the child actually used during the assessment. The tone should be supportive and hopeful. Parents should be encouraged to share appropriate aspects of their new understanding and the next steps. Even with such careful planning, it is very important to be alert to the possibility that the child, nonetheless, may become overwhelmed. The child may demonstrate being in overload in a variety of ways, such as becoming hyperactive, zoning out, or pushing the information away. It is important to recognize the child's emotional state, point it out to the parents (e.g., "Johnny is so quiet, I'm thinking that it might be time to move on"), acknowledge that this can be a lot of information to take in, and let the child know that his or her reaction is OK.

On reflection, it is not surprising that many children's ability to absorb highly personalized emotionally laden material is limited. It is our experience that children primarily tune out during direct oral feedback but that they usually are quite engaged when an individualized fable or some child-friendly modality is used to teach them about the findings and the next step toward change. For example, an individually constructed fable (or rap song, poem, or cartoon drawing) can be shared with the child during the oral feedback session and can serve as a lasting record for the child (and for parents, in our experience). We have found this method to be very effective and have described constructing individualized fables from assessment findings in Tharinger et al. (2008).

### Summary and Conclusion

We have provided a rationale grounded in collaborative psychological assessment for why an assessor would want to devote substantial energy to planning and providing feedback to parents and children. In summary, the promise and experience of meaningful feedback enhances the depth of the assessor's, the parents' and the child's participation in the assessment. Successfully translating the findings to address the child's and parents' concerns and everyday life promotes a more engaged and authentic process for all involved and maximizes the likelihood of agreed on recommendations being attempted. Finally, feedback has the potential to be an intervention in and of itself for the parents and the child and to impact their lives in positive ways. This benefit occurs because assessment feedback can help the adults in a child's life understand the child in a new light, integrate a new story about the child and the family, and reinvest in their efforts to foster the next positive steps in their child's development.

We also have provided a framework for how to plan and deliver feedback to parents. Throughout the assessment, we strive to thoroughly and compassionately understand the parents' existing story about their child, that is, how they currently understand their child and his or her behavior. Then, after an in-depth analysis of the findings in relation to the parents' concerns and questions, we tailor and individualize the feedback. The assessor has at the front of his or her mind that feedback is inherently anxiety producing, as the theory of self-verification helps us understand. We have found that attention to the categories of Levels 1, 2, and 3 greatly impact the parents' ability to take in the findings and also allows the assessor to anticipate and monitor the parents' emotional reactions and be alert and responsive to parents if they feel overwhelmed. Finally, feedback is presented to the child in a modality that is cognitively and emotionally accessible, provides some protection, (i.e., is not overly direct; e.g., a fable is constructed), and incorporates the parents' new understanding and dedication to changes in the family. In conclusion, a thoughtful, deliberate, and collaborative approach to feedback with parents and children is the capstone of the assessment process and has great potential to be an intervention for everyone involved.

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