

## CLINICAL CASE APPLICATIONS

# “Why Do I Get in Trouble So Much?”: A Family Therapeutic Assessment Case Study

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Recent case studies have demonstrated the potential benefits of Finn’s Therapeutic Assessment (TA) model with families (e.g., Handler, 2007; Tharinger, Finn, Wilkinson, & Schaber, 2007). This case study of a 6-year-old girl and her family follows the Therapeutic Assessment (TA) model, focusing on the specified goals of each session and how those goals were accomplished. In this article, we illustrate the flexibility afforded by the TA model to tailor an appropriate intervention for a specific family and also show that extensive experience with the TA model is not necessary for this approach to yield clinically significant results.

Various authors over the years have explored the use of assessment as a therapeutic technique (e.g., Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1977; White & Epston, 1989). Such alternatives to traditional psychological assessment have become more prevalent in the literature in the last decade. These approaches, in contrast to traditional information-gathering assessments, are designed to be a transformative experience for the client (Finn, 2007; Handler, 2007). Finn (2007) and Finn and Tonsager (1997, 2002) have devised a systematic assessment approach, Therapeutic Assessment (uppercase; TA), that synthesizes elements from a number of therapy and assessment theories, resulting in a unique approach using assessment as the cornerstone of a brief family intervention.

### FINN’S TA

Finn’s TA (2007) model is a semistructured form of collaborative assessment that is highly related to the work of Fischer (1985/1994), Handler (2007), and Purves (1997). TA fuses psychological assessment with brief psychotherapy to produce change in the client. Finn’s (2007) approach differs from these other collaborative and TA models in that it is guided by a formalized set of principles. As TA has grown as a brief intervention, case studies have been presented in the literature to demonstrate the technique and its effectiveness with adults (Finn, 2003; Finn & Kamphuis, 2006; Finn & Tonsager, 1992, 1997; Newman & Greenway, 1997; Peters, Handler, White, & Winkel, 2009) as well as children (Hamilton et al., 2009; Handler, 2007; Tharinger, Finn, Wilkinson, & Schaber, 2007) and adolescents (Newman, 2004). In this article, we present a case study of a child and her family, which illustrate how TA can be used to impact the child and family system as a whole. This

case follows the TA model but also illustrates the flexibility afforded to the assessor in tailoring an assessment to the particular family.

### PRINCIPLES AND GOALS OF THERAPEUTIC ASSESSMENT

Previous publications have presented the specific principles and progression of the TA model (Finn, 2007; Tharinger et al., 2007). A brief description of the defining characteristics and goals of TA with families is included for those who are unfamiliar with this approach to psychological assessment.

Finn and Tonsager’s (1997) landmark article compares traditional assessment with TA and highlights differences between the two approaches. The goals and guiding principles of TA differ from those of traditional assessment. For example, the usual goal of traditional assessment is a communication about the client. In TA, the goal is for clients to learn about themselves and experience new aspects of their personality (Finn & Tonsager, 1997).

Collaboration is essential in the TA model. In a child-focused assessment, the family system as a whole collaborates with the examiner throughout the intervention (Finn, 2007). Collaboration is critical because assessment findings are integrated into the current family context (Tharinger et al., 2007). Similarly, the collaborative nature of the assessment builds the relationship between the assessor and the examinee’s family, providing additional information that will be used to interpret test data and answer assessment questions generated by the families themselves (Finn, 2007; Tharinger et al., 2007). Hypotheses are continually reworked throughout the assessment; and as new evidence emerges, consultation with the family is taken into account. In addition to the family system, other potential significant participants, such as therapists and teachers, are included in the assessment as appropriate. Second, the collaborative involvement of the family throughout the assessment process promotes curiosity about the family system and teaches parents to step back and become active observers of the interplay rather

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than passive participants in the cycle (Finn, 2007; Tharinger et al., 2007).

Another defining characteristic of TA that is distinctive, compared with traditional assessment, is the way in which psychological tests are used. Traditional assessment typically emphasizes standardized test scores that can be translated into nomothetic predictions about clients' behaviors outside the testing situation (Finn & Tonsager, 1997; Handler, 2008). Alternatively, Finn (2007) proposed the use of psychological tests as "empathy magnifiers" to help assessors understand their clients' "dilemmas of change" (Finn, 2007). Test data are considered useful if they provide the client and assessor an opportunity for dialogue concerning the client's subjective experiences of the testing situation (Finn & Tonsager, 1997). Emphasis is on mutual learning by the assessor and the client. Additionally, psychological tests are used in an Assessment Intervention (AI) session or in a family session (Finn, 2007; Tharinger, Finn, Austin et al., 2009) to help clients and their families understand their current problems. In an AI session, assessment tools may be used in a standardized fashion if appropriate but are more often used in a nonstandardized form in which the instrument is modified specifically for the client and his or her family's situation (Finn, 2007).

TA helps families change their stories about the child and themselves to more accurate, coherent, useful, and compassionate stories (Finn, 2007). By changing the story the family holds about the current problems being experienced, changes will follow in how the problem behaviors are managed. TA with children and families can be a powerful intervention into the systemic nature of the problem, and benefits are believed to grow in the months following the assessment, as the parents and child begin to live out their new story (Tharinger et al., 2007).

This assessment follows the general principles and techniques of TA as described by Finn (2007) and colleagues (Tharinger et al., 2007). The case example includes descriptions of each session with a discussion of the specific goals for each session, according to the TA model, and a description of how these goals were accomplished. Last, we present a description and transcript of the AI and summary/discussion sessions. We present a brief summary of the theory and recent empirical research findings and then incorporate these into the case example.

#### BACKGROUND AND PRESENTING PROBLEMS

Danielle<sup>1</sup> is a 6-year-old female who had just started the first grade. She is an attractive girl with blond hair and blue eyes. She has a 4-year-old sister who is in preschool. Her mother is the manager of a local business, and the father is a salesman who works from home and is the primary care provider of the two girls. The family recently moved to the area from Florida. The parents contacted the clinic, an outpatient facility serving community members as well as students, and an intake was scheduled with a master's level graduate student clinician.<sup>1</sup>

At the intake, Danielle's parents indicated that they sought a psychological assessment because Danielle was the youngest in her class, and they had some doubts about her readiness for first grade. After the interview, which included gathering demographic information, the referral questions, and a review of patient privacy rights, the parents completed the Child Behavior

Checklist (CBCL) and the Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach, 1991). The case was then assigned to J. D. Smith, a master's level graduate student clinician, supervised by a licensed clinical psychologist. We contacted the parents to schedule a meeting with the therapist and asked them to prepare 3 to 6 questions they hoped the assessment would be able to answer.

Before meeting with the parents, I (J. D. Smith, the assessor) examined the intake materials including the CBCL and YSR. The results of both instruments were unremarkable. The highest elevated scale on the CBCL was Affective Problems on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Oriented Scales for Girls* (4th ed. [DSM-IV-TR]; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). This was within the normal range, with a T score of 63. The only other elevated scale on the CBCL was the Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder scale, with a T score of only 55, well within the normal range. Similarly, on the CBCL Syndrome scales, Attention Problems were reported higher than other complaints. However, with a T score of 59, this was well below the clinical range. These slight elevations in affective and attention domains did not appear at first glance to be serious cause for concern, and thus, I was interested to speak with the parents about these and other factors leading to the referral of their daughter.

#### SESSION 1: PARENT INTERVIEW

The initial meeting with the parents in a family assessment is critical in determining the path the assessment will take. A number of general and specific goals need to be reached in this meeting. Two general goals of the initial session are to (a) establish a trusting and safe environment and (b) enlist the parents as collaborators in the assessment process (Finn, 2007). To accomplish these goals, the assessor collaborates with the parents throughout the session, fostering a strong working relationship. One specific goal of the initial meeting with the parents in a child assessment case is to generate assessment questions that will guide the examination (Finn, 2007).

Once the questions are formulated, the assessor asks a series of follow-up questions to obtain background information regarding the origins of the concern, about how the parents would answer their assessment questions, and the evidence for their position. Through the process of gathering information relevant to the assessment questions, the assessor begins to hear the family's "story" about the child and his or her problems. Follow-up questioning also helps to foster the parents' curiosity about their child and the assessment process (Finn, 2007).

Assessment questions and follow-up dialogue serve one more important function that is essential to the effectiveness of the TA approach: It allows the assessor to gauge the impact "level" of the results of the assessment (Finn, 2007; Tharinger, Finn, Hersh et al., 2008). The term *level* refers to how closely findings align with the parents' existing story about their child. Findings that are closely related to the parents' story are called Level-1 findings. A finding that deviates slightly from the existing story would be Level 2. Level-2 findings are easily woven into the existing story because they serve to "reframe" what parents already believe. Level-3 findings are those that are in conflict with the existing story. Without proper planning and due caution, Level-3 findings may be quickly dismissed by parents (Tharinger, Finn, Hersh et al., 2008). As we further explain later in this article, the way in which assessment findings are presented, which is determined by the level of the finding, has a major influence on the

<sup>1</sup>All names have been changed to protect client confidentiality.

overall effectiveness of the assessment (Finn, 2007; Tharinger et al., 2007).

During the initial session with the parents in this case, three questions were formed that would guide the assessment. The mother's main concern was whether Danielle's intellectual, emotional, and social maturity were commensurate with other first graders. She was concerned that because Danielle was much younger than most of her classmates, some of her behavior problems in school (running in the hall, being known as "the touchy girl") might be due to immaturity. The questions she generated are as follows:

1. Is Danielle *intellectually* ready for the first grade?
2. Is Danielle *socially* and *emotionally* ready for the first grade?

I then asked the father if he had any additional questions that the assessment might answer. Because he is the primary caregiver, he was concerned about the time he spent with Danielle in the home. His question was the following:

3. How can I better parent Danielle at home?

After these questions were formulated, I began to gather additional information about these concerns by asking follow-up questions. Despite receiving predominantly above average grades in kindergarten, Danielle consistently received check marks for misbehavior in class. She would often accumulate more check marks than any other student in her class. She typically received check marks for talking when her teacher was talking and for being out of her seat when she was not supposed to be. Additionally, in kindergarten the previous year, Danielle had developed a reputation for being "touchy." She hugged her classmates and constantly sought physical contact, which made them uneasy. Danielle's parents felt this behavior might be a sign of emotional and social immaturity.

I inquired about Danielle's behavior at home, particularly about interactions with her younger sister. The parents reported that the siblings played together all the time and for the most part played well together. Dad indicated that he had a hard time getting Danielle to sit down and do her homework and that he would become easily frustrated with her for not being able to pay attention and get her work done. In addition, the parents noted that Danielle was more energetic than her sister. This was in contrast to her sister's easygoing manner. It was evident that Danielle's energetic temperament was harder to deal with and may have been serving to magnify her behavior problems at home.

During this first session, I began to formulate some hypotheses about the family's questions and how the family's dynamics play a role in the development and maintenance of the problems. It was clear from the onset that Danielle's mother had been the driving force in this assessment. She took the lead in providing most of the girl's background information. Danielle's father would not hesitate to state his opinions if they differed from hers, but he allowed his wife to take control of the interview. I hypothesized that even though the father was the primary caregiver who spent more time with the two children, the mother had a matriarchal role in the family. Her questions about Danielle clearly showed how she valued achievement and success. Despite her doubts about Danielle's academic abilities, when I asked her further about the nature of the problems, I did

not hear evidence that supported her level of concern. My initial impression was that the parents had very high expectations for their daughter and were concerned that she was not meeting these expectations. I was hoping that meeting Danielle would clarify my impressions, so we scheduled to meet two days later for our first standardized testing session.

#### SESSION 2: STANDARDIZED TESTING: RORSCHACH INKBLOT TEST

As in traditional psychological assessment, standardized use of test instruments provides much of the data. However, in TA and other collaborative assessment situations, material beyond that attained by the standardized administration is often emphasized through extended inquiry (Handler, 2005), Testing of the Limits (Handler, 1998, 2005), and other follow-up procedures as simple, for example, as asking the client to reflect on the testing experience. These additional procedures are performed following the standard administration of a particular test so that they do not affect the validity and norm-based comparisons of the test. These inquiries often illuminate the results of the test for the assessor and the client and provide information to the assessor about the client's story.

When I first met Danielle, she was in the waiting room, playing with her sister. I immediately noticed the difference in their demeanor. Danielle was moving about the play area much more than her younger sister and she talked continuously. She seemed to be enjoying herself very much. When I introduced myself and shook her hand, she smiled and asked what we would be doing "today," eagerly anticipating my response. I told her we were going to play a picture game and that seemed to be a satisfactory response for her. I led the way to our testing room and she skipped past me. As we headed down the hallway, she tried to guess which door we would be entering. When she guessed the correct door, a smile came across her face and she appeared proud of her accomplishment. When we entered the testing room, she immediately spotted the toys, games, and puzzles and asked if we could play. I told her I had a picture game to play first, but we could play at the end of the session if we had time.

I had decided to give a Rorschach (Exner, 2003) first because of the breadth of information it provides. I felt that I needed to gauge Danielle's intellectual, social, and emotional maturity level early in the assessment to guide subsequent sessions. Prior to the Rorschach, I talked with Danielle about the assessment. I told her that when I had spoken with her parents, we had come up with questions that we were hoping could be answered by the assessment. I did not share these with her so as not to raise her anxiety, but I mentioned this because I wanted to ignite her curiosity about herself as well. I asked her if there were any questions she wanted to know about herself that I could answer. She thought for a few moments and said she didn't have any.

Danielle's manner during the Rorschach administration is noteworthy. It provided a good deal of information about the assessment questions beyond what I could have gleaned simply from scoring the test itself. During the response phase, Danielle was attentive, followed instructions, and was engaged throughout. She quickly understood the procedure of the test after viewing only a few cards. She would associate to the blot and then ask if she could get the next card, which I had stacked next to me on a chair, out of her view. I said she could, and she walked around the table, replaced the previous card, and took the next

card back to her seat. She would also wait a few seconds to allow me to catch up with her responses because she understood early that I was writing them down. This conscientiousness indicated to me that she was somewhat empathic and attuned to me during the testing session. This process occurred until Card X when Danielle gave four responses, the most to any card, in a very quick, almost impulsive manner. I attributed this change in her response style to the card itself.

Danielle's approach in the inquiry was quite different than her approach to the response phase. After I explained the inquiry procedure, but before we could get started, she spotted a bin that contained a tea set and some play food. She asked if she could look in the bin. I nodded that she could, feeling that it was important not to stifle spontaneous play that could provide valuable data to the assessment. After rummaging around in the bin for a minute or so, she returned to the testing table with a tea set and two plates of "food." She asked if I would like tea and then she poured a cup for each of us. I was surprised that she had chosen an activity for both of us to participate in; I noted that our play was reciprocal and that she felt comfortable in both leading the play and following my cues.

As we drank our tea and ate our "doughnuts," I brought out the Rorschach cards, one by one, and inquired about what she had seen. Again, Danielle was quick to pick up on what I was looking for and would give a fairly detailed description of how she had seen what she did, often without a prompt. In between cards, Danielle would pour more tea or return to the bin to find new food items for us to eat. After we ate and sipped tea, she would indicate that she was ready for the next card and we resumed the inquiry.

After this exchange, I looked over the answers she had given. None stood out that I felt needed further exploration, so I instead asked her to separate the cards into two piles, one pile for cards she liked, and the other for cards she did not like. In the Like pile, she put cards III, VI, VIII, IX, and X. I asked her why she liked these cards, and she said that she liked the colors in those cards (VIII, IX, and X), that she liked the people she saw doing flips in card III, and she liked the flower and rainbow that she saw in card VI. I asked why she put cards I, II, IV, V and VII in the dislike pile, and she said she did not like them because they were dark and because they didn't have any color. I examined the scoring on these sets of cards for discrepancies, but nothing remarkable was evident aside from the color differences.

The following are interpretations of the Rorschach results and the scoring from the Structural Summary (Table 1) on which they are based. The Sequence of Scores is also provided for reference (Table 2). Danielle's scores are followed in parentheses by reference values (mean and standard deviation) from Meyer, Erdberg, and Shaffer (2007). Table 5 from Meyer et al. (2007) provides reference data for a contemporary international sample averaging scores from 1,257 child and adolescent subjects from 19 samples in 5 different countries. Meyer et al. reported that many scores in this composite sample have reasonable stability across samples despite differences in culture and age. Thus, those reference values were considered more representative of contemporary children and adolescents than Exner's (2003) age-specific samples, which are now thought to be dated and are atypical on a number of critical variables relative to contemporary samples from the United States, Denmark, Italy, Japan, Portugal, and France (Andronikof-Sanglade, 1999). Meyer et al. argued that Exner's sample and normative

data "do not adequately serve as reference points for clinical applications and inferences about the contemporary functioning of children" (Meyer et al., 2007, p. S214). Given recent scrutiny of Exner's Comprehensive System norms, and the availability of a contemporary sample, in this article, we rely on the new composite international reference data provided by Meyer et al. (2007). Reference values for the two scores interpreted that were unstable across the child and adolescent samples are noted so they can be interpreted more cautiously.

Danielle gave 23 responses (22.71, 8.09) with a Lambda of 0.28 (unstable reference: 3.24, 4.10; her Pure F% was .22; the less unstable reference is .60, .19). Her low Lambda suggests excessive openness to experience and an acute awareness of events in her life (Weiner, 2003). Her a:p ratio is highly imbalanced at 14:1 (3.49, 3.23:2.21, 2.16), which suggests cognitive inflexibility. However, Weiner (2003) suggested that this finding of rigid thinking is often moderated by a low Lambda. Overall, Danielle's Rorschach is relatively healthy in many respects. For example, her GHR:PHR ratio of 3:0 (2.48, 1.85:3.01, 2.59) indicates that she has a history of rewarding and successful interpersonal relationships (Weiner, 2003). She also showed a healthy self-perception as evidenced by a normative  $3r + (2)/R$  of 0.30 (.25, .16). However, a number of significant Rorschach variables help shed light on some important aspects about Danielle, helping to clarify the presenting problems and parents' assessment questions.

One prominent score is the 6 inanimate movement (m) responses (1.09, 1.44), which suggests a feeling of helplessness to forces outside of her control and may reflect a lack of a sense of agency. Her unbalanced SumC':WSumC ratio of 0:6.0 (1.40, 1.76:2.17, 2.08) indicates that she has little anxiety or restraint about openly expressing her emotions to others (Weiner, 2003), a finding that might be reflected in her parents' report of her seemingly impulsive behaviors.

Danielle also had a high Zd score at +6.0 (-0.72, 5.00). Weiner (2003) referred to respondents with a Zd of +3.0 or higher as *overincorporators*. Weiner noted that overincorporators tend to take in more information than they can effectively organize and also tend to examine their experiences in an unnecessarily thorough manner. Weiner suggested that they also tend to feel unsatisfied with their decisions and are often hesitant and uncertain when making decisions. Because they are unsatisfied, they may also feel unfulfilled, as if they have fallen short of their best efforts. Weiner stated that this attribute is not a fundamental flaw and can even be adaptive in circumstances requiring keen attention to detail. However, in situations of limited time or other added pressures, overincorporators can feel overwhelmed, and this characteristic can lead to poor decisions and lower cognitive efficiency. The high Zd score is consistent with her high DQ+ score of 11 (unstable reference: 4.49, 3.80). High DQ+ is often seen in people of higher intelligence and more psychological complexity (Weiner, 2003). In Danielle's case, a high Zd and a high DQ+ may be evidence of her attempt to incorporate many aspects of the card into one response. Her tendency to be overwhelmed by stimulating situations, such as school, might be a result of her attempt to account for everything present in her environment, which often leads to inappropriate behavioral decisions such as running in the hall.

A summary of the Rorschach findings yielded the following hypotheses: Danielle is somewhat hypersensitive to cues in her environment and tends to try and make sense of large amounts



TABLE 2.—Sequence of scores.

Card & Response No.	Loc & DQ	Determinant(s) and Form Quality	(2)	Content(s)	P	Z	Special Scores
<b>I</b>	1	WSo		Ad		3.5	
	2	Wv		Sc			
<b>II</b>	3	Wo		F—		4.5	
	4	Wo		FC—		4.5	
	5	Do		F—			
<b>III</b>	6	D+	2	Ma.FCo	P	4.0	GHR
	7	D+	2	Ma.FCo	P	4.0	GHR
<b>IV</b>	8	W+		FMao		4.0	
	9	Wo		FMa—		2.0	
<b>V</b>	10	Wo		FMao	P	1.0	
<b>VI</b>	11	Do		ma—			
	12	Wo		Fu		2.5	
<b>VII</b>	13	W+		mpu		2.5	GHR
	14	W+		FMau		2.5	
<b>VIII</b>	15	D+		mau		3.0	INC
	16	D+	2	FMa.FCu		3.0	DV
<b>IX</b>	17	Wo		CF.mao		5.5	ALOG
	18	Ddo		mau			
	19	D+	2	mau		2.5	
<b>X</b>	20	D+	2	CFu		4.0	INC
	21	DdS+	2	CFFMau		6.0	
	22	Wv/+	2	CF—		5.5	
	23	D+	2	FMau		4.5	

(Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001a) and Cognitive Ability (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001b). Two sessions were needed to complete the standard battery.

I began with the Test of Cognitive Ability and then continued with the Tests of Achievement. It was clear from the first several subtests that Danielle was performing very well. The results were General Intellectual Ability (GIA): 129, Working Memory: 128, Thinking Ability: 135, Verbal Ability: 130, Phonemic Awareness: 109, and Cognitive Efficiency: 99. Overall, her GIA is in the superior range, as are most of her subscale scores. However, despite being in the average range for her age, Danielle's phonemic awareness and cognitive efficiency are considered weaknesses because they are far below the expected level when compared with her GIA. A relatively low cognitive efficiency score supports the high Zd score on the Rorschach. It would appear from the results of the WJ—III that Danielle had the necessary skills to succeed in first grade. However, the behavioral observations during these two sessions were far more important than the results of the testing itself could have predicted.

In the course of the administration, I noticed that Danielle would often look at me imploringly on difficult items after she responded. Her eyes searched my face for an expression of confirmation of the correctness of her answer. The frequency and extent of this behavior was unlike my experience with other children her age and I began to explore what it might be about. In hopes of understanding how reinforcement affected Danielle, I subordinated maintaining standard conditions that promote scoring accuracy to an approach I felt had the potential to yield important information about her search for reassurance. I would allow this behavior to occur and would either provide her with a subtle smile and nod, affirming her need for reassurance, or I would remain stoic and blank to not provide any indication of correctness.

When I provided even subtle reassurance, Danielle would smile and indicate eagerly that she was ready for the next question as if she had been energized. Her uncertainty instantly

melted away and was replaced by confidence and enthusiasm. I reinforced her slightly more than I normally would, and she responded favorably. However, when I did not provide reinforcement for Danielle's responses, she became clearly deflated. She would slump in the chair a little each time and would proffer her next response in a very tentative manner. At one point, toward the end of one subtest, she had missed four in a row, and I had been stoic throughout this string of incorrect responses. The resulting behavior surprised me. Danielle sat back in her chair and said she didn't want to answer any more questions on this test and asked if we could move onto the next one. I told her she was doing fine and that there were only two more questions before we would begin the next test. I said, "Let's give these two a try." Danielle refused, in a passive and dejected manner. I decided not to push her further and disrupt the rest of our session, so we moved on to the next test. Her confidence seemed to be restored quickly, as the early questions were very easy for her. This interaction was congruent with the Rorschach finding that Danielle is an overincorporator (Weiner, 2003). For example, Danielle was quick to seek reassurance because she was unsure of herself and her ability to do well on the test. This interaction also provided evidence for the emerging story I was constructing about Danielle.

This session's highly structured test provided contrast to the semistructured Rorschach session in which Danielle was allowed to play during the administration. Keeping in mind the parents' concerns regarding her focus and attention, I reflected on the differences in her behavior between these two sessions. Daniel's choice to play with the toys in the room rather than remain consistently engaged with the Rorschach inquiry was not surprising for a 6-year-old. However, despite her playful interruptions of the inquiry process, she had been able to quickly return to the task and accomplish what was asked of her when prompted. In contrast, in the WJ—III administration, she was highly attentive, with few instances of losing focus. This session also took place in a room with few toys and activities for

children. With fewer distractions and more clear expectations about the task, she had little trouble maintaining attention. A new hypothesis emerged about her attention: I felt that in a more structured environment with few distractions, Danielle does have the ability to remain focused. This is a point that would be emphasized later in the treatment.

After scoring the Woodcock–Johnson and reviewing the results, I felt as though I had an answer to the parents' first question about intellectual readiness. Her superior scores on Verbal Ability, Thinking Ability, Working Memory, and GIA indicated Danielle was more than capable of the academic expectations of first grade. Even though her Phonemic Awareness and Cognitive Efficiency were lower, they were still in the high average and average range, respectively. However, I felt that Danielle's behavior and approach to the test were evidence that might lead to answering the parents' second question about social and emotional preparedness.

I ended both the Rorschach and WJ–III sessions with a less structured test and then some playtime. Many 6-year-olds would have a difficult time maintaining focus and energy for a long period of time, which is why I chose a test that would not be seen as stressful to Danielle at the end of these sessions. However, I was impressed with her ability to maintain energy and performance on the tests. At the end of Session 3, I administered the House-Tree-Person (H–T–P) Test (Buck, 1948), and at the end of Session 4, I administered the Sentence Completion Test for Children (Haak, 2003). Results of the H–T–P were unremarkable. Danielle's drawings were very simple, although developmentally appropriate, and the stories she told about her drawings did not produce significant material. However, the Sentence Completion Test for Children, given at the end of Session 3, was very fruitful in understanding Danielle's inner world. Her responses also allowed me to hear the "story" she has about herself and evoked her conflict about experiencing herself negatively when she misbehaves and is punished. Here are some of the answers she provided:

15. I often wish *that I wouldn't be in trouble all of the time.*
26. My sister always says *I am mean.*
35. Too many times *I get in trouble.*
39. In school, *I get in trouble a lot.*
40. I feel ashamed when *my parents ground me, cause they do that a lot.*
42. I would hate to be in an accident, because *I would get in trouble.*
45. I feel terrible when *I get grounded.*
47. When something is hard for me *I ask my parents to help . . . and they ground me.*
52. I don't know how *I get punished.*
56. My teacher thinks *that I am a bad girl.*

A number of themes that are important in understanding this child and the story she has about herself emerge from these sentences. She is ashamed and saddened about how often she gets in trouble and also does not really understand why this happens to her. There is also evidence of an underlying feeling of persecution in her responses. The theme of persecution may be evidence of a dominant superego, often developed from an exaggeration of the internalized representation of the parents (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Danielle's hypervigilance to negative cues during the WJ–III and the depressive, low self-esteem responses

on the Sentence Completion are evidence of an overactive superego. This is congruent with previous observations such as her self doubt during the WJ–III. When confronted with the possibility that she could be wrong, Danielle seemed to defend against these feelings by pushing away the negative feelings in favor of positive aspects of her self. The frequency of themes about being in trouble and feeling bad is certainly difficult to ignore. Haak (2003), the author of the Sentence Completion Test for Children, suggested that markers of depression in children can almost always be found in the sentence completions because the test is partially structured, allowing the expression of depressive feelings in low-energy, depressed children.

In TA, as new test material is gathered during the standardized testing sessions, new hypotheses about the questions are formed, and the direction of the assessment focuses on supporting or disconfirming these hypotheses. Prior to this session, and the conclusions drawn from the Sentence Completion Test, questions remained about the source of Danielle's behavioral and academic problems. There was evidence of both attentional and emotional factors that needed to be reconciled. In this case, the conceptualization of her problems focused more on her emotional issues. This was done based, in part, on the interpretation of a high Z<sub>d</sub> score on the Rorschach being partially attributed to a difficulty making decisions due to overincorporation and issues of uncertainty and confidence in one's abilities. I felt that this sufficiently accounted for her low cognitive efficiency and other attention deficit symptoms reported by the parents that had not been evident during interactions with the assessor. Thus, it is important to score tests as they are given so that they may inform the next session. In this case, had I failed to examine the results of the Sentence Completion Test for Children, I would have missed key evidence as to the nature of the problem and may have missed an important opportunity to refine the assessment process.

#### SESSION 5: AI SESSION—TASKS OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT, FANTASY ANIMAL

One of the key aspects of the TA model is the AI session. The development of the AI session came about when Finn (2007) recognized that many of the findings of the assessment were at Level 3 and that giving this kind of feedback could be threatening to the client without preparation. In an attempt to reduce the threat to the client, AI sessions introduce the client's problems in living through various assessment procedures and also provide an opportunity for those problems to be worked through with the assessor. This in vivo experience allows the problems to be lived, observed, explored, and addressed in a way that lessens the threat to the client (Finn, 2007). The assessor attempts to get the client to "trip over" the assessment findings themselves in the AI session (Finn, 2007). By experiencing the findings in the session and exploring them with the assessor, clients begin to integrate these new aspects of their way of being into the story they hold about themselves. In addition, AI sessions provide a setting for the client and the assessor to work through the client's problems (Finn, 2007). For the assessor, AI sessions are an opportunity to test hypotheses about the client that have developed through the standardized testing (Finn, 2007). AI sessions serve to bridge the gap between standardized assessment sessions in which there may be few opportunities to fully explore the test results, and the potentially

threatening summary/discussion session in which the client can feel overwhelmed by previously ego-dystonic information.

In every TA, the AI session is most often the most difficult for the assessor. First, the assessor must identify the problem in living he or she is going to target in the AI session and then also must determine how to illustrate that problem using psychological assessment instruments. In family assessments, there is also the question of how to involve the family in the AI given that many children's problems are embedded within the family system. In the previous session with Danielle, I had identified a Level-3 finding that would be the target of the AI session, but there was still the important question of how to elicit this problem in the room with Danielle and to do so in a way that could be used to illustrate to the parents what was happening with their daughter.

I had gathered evidence from the developmental history and other conversations with Danielle's parents to suggest that her self-esteem and uncertainty in herself could be a symptom of a greater problem within the family system. How the parents reacted to Danielle's behavior and then how they punished her might be contributing to her low self-esteem and sensitivity to failure and punishment. I also felt that Danielle's parents were placing considerable pressure on Danielle regarding her academic performance that led to increased anxiety and doubts about her abilities. However, I felt that this information would be painful for her parents to hear because it would be difficult to convey to them in a nonaccusatory way that their way of dealing with Danielle's problem behavior is contributing to her low self-esteem. I felt it would be safer to take a different approach with the parents and try to illustrate this point to them one step removed. I decided to conduct and videotape the AI session with Danielle individually and then integrate the video into the summary/discussion session with the parents.

The question of how to evoke Danielle's sensitivity and tendency to feel badly about herself when punished still remained. I chose four cards from the Tasks of Emotional Development (TED; Pollack, Cohen, & Weil, 1982) and used the Fantasy Animal Game (Handler, 2007; Handler & Hilsenroth, 1994; Mutchnik & Handler, 2002) as the instruments that I felt had the most potential in illustrating the targeted problem.

I then selected four TED cards for Danielle. The cards were ordered in a way that I felt would progressively raise Danielle's anxiety and illustrate her feelings about always being in trouble and feeling bad about herself as a result. The first 3 cards were (a) the girl left out from the group, (b) two girls in confrontation, and (c) a girl studying alone. Responses to these cards did not yield any interesting or helpful results. The fourth card proved to be more telling as I had hoped. This card depicts a mother scolding her daughter for a mess she has made. I gave Danielle the standard TED instructions but deviated from the standard administration in my inquiry. Danielle's story about the card and my inquiries are as follows (J.D. = J. D. Smith):

Danielle: The girl forgot to clean up that room and her mother is telling her she has to clean it up. She is feeling sad about doing it because she was planning to play that day and not work and she is feeling sad because she has to clean it.

J.D.: What do you think mom is thinking?

Danielle: (Stands up, puts one hand on her hip and with the other hand, points her finger and shakes it in my direction and in a loud voice proclaims) "You better do that right now!"

J.D.: What will happen if the girl doesn't clean up the room?

Danielle: Her mom would get mad at her and she wouldn't get to play.

J.D.: Is that what she really wants to do? To play?

Danielle: (lowers her head and sadly says) Yeah.

Given the card pull from this image, it is not surprising to get a story like this. The element that stood out to me in hearing this story was the emotional reaction to getting in trouble. Danielle responded with sadness to the request to clean up the mess. She was not angry or defiant; she was sad. I felt that this was a good start to the final assessment tool I had planned to use in the AI session: The Fantasy Animal Game.

The Fantasy Animal Game, devised by Handler (2007; Handler & Hilsenroth, 1994; Mutchnik & Handler, 2002), is a way to tap into the unconscious processes of the child and to allow the child to express these processes in narrative form. The story-telling aspect of the game allows the assessor to hear the child's self-narrative (Handler, 2007). The aim of the Fantasy Animal Game with Danielle was to encourage the expression of her narrative for illustrative purposes to be reviewed with her parents. With this goal in mind, I chose to be more inquisitive, reflective, and clarifying during her story to get the most comprehensive narrative possible. I chose the Fantasy Animal Game because I felt that if the parents were able to hear Danielle's narrative, it could be a powerful family intervention. The transcript of the Fantasy Animal Game during the AI session follows:

J.D.: Okay, now we are going to play another game.

Danielle: This time you get to pick the game.

J.D.: I get to pick? Okay, I want you to draw an animal that no one has ever seen or heard of before. Can you do that?

Danielle: Yep.

(Danielle then drew an animal that can be seen in Figure 1.)

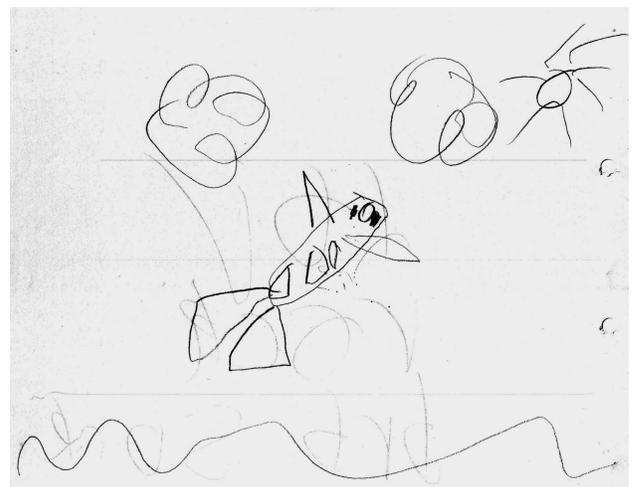


FIGURE 1.—The lava rock bird shark: Danielle's fantasy animal.

J.D.: That's a neat animal. What do you call it?

(She then flipped the drawing over to write the name).

Danielle: It's a lava rock bird shark.

J.D.: That's very cool. I was hoping you could tell me a story about the lava rock bird shark. Can you do that?

Danielle: Sure, once upon a time there was a lava rock bird shark. One day he was chasing after another lava rock bird shark. It was the bad lava rock bird shark, so the good one was trying to stop it with lava rock power. When he was chasing him, they dove into the water and swam and swam. Then his wings got soggy and he swished up and spilled lava on him and he started to fight him.

J.D.: So the good one was chasing after the bad one? Did he ever catch him?

Danielle: He tried to catch him and he got away for a while. The lava rock bird shark did get him and they are in the jail. Then the superhero one had nothing to do. So he rushed out and tried to get the bad one again. He swam and swam and now they are at the beach.

J.D.: It sounds like it's hard for the good one to catch the bad one.

Danielle: He was saving the world from the evil lava rock bird sharks. He had defeated all the other evil lava rock bird sharks until there was only one evil lava rock bird shark left. And he killed him and killed him and the evil lava rock bird shark died and went up to lava rock bird heaven. And then the superhero lava rock bird shark died too and that is why we don't have them anymore.

J.D.: Why did the superhero lava rock bird shark die too?

Danielle: Because it was too hard to fight. But he had a son, and he died too. The end. And the lava rock bird shark was never seen again. So, is it time to watch it yet?

J.D.: We can watch it now.

Danielle: Start from the beginning!

(We sat and watched the story about the lava rock bird shark. During the video, I said to Danielle)

J.D.: So, even though it was really hard for the good one to catch the bad one, the good one ended up winning in the end?

Danielle: Yah. The superhero won!

J.D.: Wow! He died? He won but he paid for it with his life?

At this point, I felt that the desired results had been somewhat achieved. Danielle had expressed her internal struggle between her good "superhero" and bad "evil" aspects, but I felt that the message to the parents I was trying to elicit could be further strengthened. Because Danielle and I were now further removed from the storytelling by watching the session on video, I thought it might be a good opportunity for her to reflect on her story and identify, herself, what she was trying to communicate. Taking a page from the mutual storytelling approach (Gardner, 1986, 1993), that advocates asking the child for the moral of the story, a kind of superego message, I asked Danielle the following:

J.D.: If someone else were to hear this story, what lesson would you want them to learn?

Danielle: I don't know. Let's keep watching.

J.D.: Okay, think about what the lesson might be as we watch.

(We continued to watch the tape.)

J.D.: So, what do you think the lesson might be?

Danielle: That it's hard to fight the bad things.

J.D.: You're right. It is hard. But it was good that the good lava rock bird shark won, right?

Danielle: Uh huh.

J.D.: That kind of sounds like getting into trouble. What do you think about that?

Danielle: Yah, it's hard not to get in trouble sometimes.

Danielle was able to articulate her struggle when asked for the story's lesson. Her story indicated her tendency to split the "good" and "bad" and describe how an internal conflict exists between the two. She seemed to be having a difficult time holding these two aspects of herself. To make this message more concrete for the parents, I related it back to Danielle's proclivity to feel like she gets into too much trouble. Normally, asking the child to produce a moral can be counterproductive when the child is in need of more uncovering work (Handler, 2007). However, in this case, when the aim was a communication to the parents, this approach worked well.

As the videotape came to an end, as did my time with Danielle, I tried again to elicit her story and to begin the process of rewriting that story, a process that the parents would hopefully facilitate after the completion of the assessment.

J.D.: What do you think I'm going to tell your parents we found out during our time together?

Danielle: That I'm thinking. That's what they want to hear.

J.D.: I think you're thinking. Do you think your thinking is good?

(Shakes her head "no" and sticks out her lip in a sad, pouting expression.)

J.D.: I think your thinking is good. I think you're smart.

Danielle: (with her head still down) But my mom does not, and my dad does not. I'm in trouble *all* the time.

J.D.: Well, being smart and getting in trouble can sometimes go together. Lots of smart people still get in trouble sometimes.

Danielle: (She looks up at me with a surprised look. After a pause she asks) Can I take home the pictures I drew today?

At this point, I felt that the AI session with Danielle had been a success. Her narrative during the Fantasy Animal Game was a very good illustration of her internal conflict, and I was confident that this would provide the parents with the Level-3 information in a way that would be less threatening than me presenting this to them. I also felt that this would be an opportunity to ask Danielle if she had an assessment question she would like to have answered. She immediately replied, "Why do I get in trouble so much?" I was happy to see that she was becoming curious about herself, and I felt that she had experienced her internal conflict through the Fantasy Animal story—a perfect outcome for an AI session!

## SESSION 6: SUMMARY/DISCUSSION SESSION

A major decision the assessor has to make when presenting the parents with the findings is the order in which they are presented. Planning for this session is a crucial component in how effective the overall assessment can be. Assessment experts have outlined approaches to providing feedback to parents (e.g., Accardo & Capute, 1979; Braaten, 2007; Groth-Marnat, 2003; Oster, Caro, Eagen, & Lillo, 1988) and children (e.g., Fischer, 1985/1994; Kamphaus, 2001; Kamphaus & Frick, 2005; Oster et al., 1988; Tuma & Elbert, 1990) at the conclusion of a psychological assessment. Finn's (2007) and colleagues' (Tharinger, Finn, Hersh, et al., 2008) approach to feedback combines elements from these experts. As noted before, one of Finn's (2007) contributions to assessment feedback approaches is the concept of levels, which provides a way to gauge the potential impact of an assessment finding and is also a way to structure the order in which those findings will be presented. Throughout the assessment, the assessor listens for the story the parents hold about their child. As test data are compiled, the assessor begins to formulate a new story that will be presented to the family. This process of reframing the family's story is the guide for the summary/discussion session and provides evidence to gauge the impact of a particular finding.

While preparing for the summary/discussion session with the parents, there is a great deal to keep in mind and therefore, planning out the session in outline form allows the session to unfold smoothly. I was confident that the findings to the parents' first two questions would be Level 1, and thus, they would be presented first. In the initial meeting in which the assessment questions were formulated, Danielle's parents were obviously concerned about her academic, emotional, and social abilities. Follow-up questioning about the problems in each of these areas yielded few concrete examples, and there was even evidence to the contrary, that there was not a problem at all. I felt the parents were likely to assimilate the findings about these concerns very rapidly, with very little reframing of their current story. However, the findings for Dad's question and Danielle's question, "Why do I get in trouble so much?" were likely to raise their anxiety and would need to be approached more cautiously. One caveat remained that tied into the answer to this question and that was the issue of Danielle's sensitivity to perceived failure and tendency to split her internal experience of herself. Previous discussions with the parents did not provide any indication that they had noticed these problems in Danielle, which would likely make it a Level-3 finding. When preparing for the session, I decided to make subtle hints at this finding when answering the other questions, but I thought watching the videotape of the AI session would be most effective. I felt that this course was the best option, but I was still anxious about presenting these findings to the parents.

I began the session by thanking the parents for allowing me to get to know Danielle through the assessment and also for their participation and collaboration. I then went right to the first question and asked them to posit an answer. Asking parents to answer their questions prior to providing test results allows the assessor to once again gauge the potential impact level of the findings.

J.D.: Your first question is, "Is Danielle intellectually ready for first grade?" I can tell this is an area that concerns you since it was the main

reason you brought your daughter in for testing. What do you think the answer to this question might be?

Danielle's mother immediately responded by explaining that Danielle had received her report card the day before. She seemed surprised when she explained that Danielle's grades were very good and concluded that her teacher must think she is doing well. This response was great news. The good grades on Danielle's report card had started the process of changing the parents' story, and my job now was to reaffirm this change. I presented the parents with my overall impressions of Danielle's intellectual level, citing specific examples from our testing sessions. I then presented the results of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Abilities and Achievement as evidence. As I had suspected, both parents easily assimilated the test findings related to this question.

To answer the second assessment question, "Is Danielle socially and emotionally ready for first grade?," I presented test material from the TED and Rorschach prior to asking the parents to come up with their answer. I wanted the parents to be able to use that data for their decision. I first presented the stories Danielle told to the four cards of the TED. In each card, she could accurately label the feelings of the characters in the situation she was describing and even showed some simple empathy, a definite sign of emotional maturity. She was also able to provide realistic resolutions to the interpersonal situations in the cards. For example, in one card, she told a story of two girls who did not know each other, meeting for the first time. When I asked what they were thinking and feeling, she replied, "They're anxious because they don't know each other, but they're going to get to know each other and will become friends." Both parents were very surprised that she had used the word "anxious" and that it was done so accurately, the same feeling I had experienced when Danielle told this story.

The fourth card, the girl with the mess and the scolding mother, was evidence of the Level-3 finding and was presented more tentatively. I began by showing them the card and reading the transcript of the story, just as Danielle had told it. I also described her demeanor during the story.

I allowed the parents to reflect on the story without offering my own thoughts about what was happening for Danielle. I asked them to keep in mind the ideas they had about these cards as we talked about the answer to their second question. I then explained to them how Danielle interacted with me during our time together. I said she had been interactive, able to participate in cooperative play (as evidenced from the Rorschach tea party), that she had been able to pick up on my social cues, and that she had been able to regulate her own emotions during our sessions quite well. I then presented them with some Rorschach findings and integrated them into the themes from the TED stories as well as providing other examples I had witnessed that bolstered the test findings. As I presented each of my points, the parents presented their own supporting evidence as well. They were clearly accepting the findings and integrating them into their story about Danielle. This part of the session was very collaborative, and I felt confident that they were almost ready to watch the videotape and would be able to handle the Level-3 findings.

To further prepare them for the final assessment questions and the videotape, we went through the Sentence Completion Test for Children together, pointing out answers that stood out. Not

surprisingly, they picked up on the same responses I had. They were very amused at some of her answers, and they were very surprised at those that indicated a low self-image and feelings of being in trouble. I asked them to reflect on the sentences. They said Danielle sounded very sad, and they questioned her feelings about always getting in trouble because they did not feel like she had been punished harshly.

It was now time to introduce the idea behind the AI session and to then watch the videotape. I gave a quick rationale of the AI session and then also what I had done, including the directions to the Fantasy Animal Game. I showed the parents the picture Danielle drew of what she called a lava rock bird shark (Figure 1). Then we watched the videotape from where she had finished the drawing and was beginning to tell the story.

As we watched Danielle tell her story about the lava rock bird shark, her parents listened intently. They smiled and laughed as Danielle told the story of the fight between the lava rock bird sharks. After we watched her tell the story, her parents and I read through a transcription I had prepared for them. Together we read the portion of the session where I asked Danielle about the lesson of the story and also our conversation about finishing the assessment and what she thought I was going to tell her parents. I allowed the parents to reflect on watching the video and hearing Danielle's story. I also provided an opportunity for them to come to a conclusion about the lesson and her other comments about how she is always in trouble. I was delighted when her mother remarked, "It seems like she feels all bad when she is in trouble." This was a good understanding of Danielle's message and her struggle.

The parents then provided an example of why Danielle may feel this way. They explained that many times when she is in trouble at school, her father talks with her about her behavior and punishes her at home with a time-out or a lecture. In addition, Danielle's mother would come home later and reprimand her as well. They realized that this might be sending a more severe message than they intended. They recognized that this is a behavior they could change to lessen Danielle's guilty and shameful feelings. They also recalled that in recent months, Danielle had been in trouble much more than her sister, and they thought she was probably feeling like she was a bad child in comparison. They also commented on Danielle's tendency to take directions and comments in a negative way. For example, they recalled a number of times when Danielle reacted very strongly to directions to sit in her seat or pick up her clothes. Her mother commented that Danielle appeared to feel as if she was in trouble when given these instructions and that the child felt badly about it. This was an illustration of how she reacts to perceived failures. In response to these observations, we talked about some alternative approaches to Danielle in these situations, which are reflected in the summary letter to the parents as discussed (see Appendix).

At the end of the session, we reflected together on the experience of the assessment with Danielle. The parents reported that it had been helpful in exposing some issues that they had not considered. In addition, they reflected that the assessment had been able to show them that changes were needed in the way they handled Danielle's being in trouble and how it was contributing to her feelings of being a bad child. They felt that what they had gained from the assessment would be helpful in both understanding their daughter and changing their own approach to her in a way that would lead to positive changes.

### *Letter to Parents*

Findings in a TA are disseminated to the parents in the form of a letter, written in clear, personal language that summarizes the assessment and the family's experiences (Finn, 2007). This letter is written following the summary/discussion session and incorporates material from the dialogue with the parents during this session as the assessment experience is reflected on. Additionally, recommendations for the family, reiterating those discussed during the summary/discussion session, are formally stated in the letter. The letter written to the parents is included as an Appendix. In addition to a letter sent to the parents summarizing the assessment findings, the TA model often involves presenting feedback to the child in the form of a personalized fable or story (Tharinger, Finn, Wilkinson et al., 2008). In this case, the family and assessor's holiday travel schedule prevented providing feedback to the child in this way.

### CONCLUSIONS

Less than a week after the family received the letter (see Appendix), I received a phone call from the parents requesting family therapy. They had been very pleased with the experience of the assessment and were already seeing changes in Danielle as a result of their new understanding of her and her problems. We were forced to postpone the beginning of therapy for almost 2 months due to the holidays and previous commitments that prevented them from starting immediately.

During the first therapy session with the parents, we spoke at length about the experience of the assessment and the changes that had resulted following its completion. The parents reported that Danielle's report cards had been very good and that she was rarely receiving check marks at school. They had instituted a reward system, targeting her behavior at school and home, which had worked very well. They had begun to concentrate on positive reinforcement and had noticed improvements with getting Danielle's homework done on time and taking care of her household responsibilities in a more appropriate manner. The additional structure and clear, consistent expectations they had instituted in the home had proven effective in decreasing the behaviors that had gotten her into trouble previously, a sign that my initial thoughts about her potential attention problems had family system correlates. The focus of therapy then centered on concerns regarding her self-critical thinking because Danielle's parents were now noticing that she would become depressed at times and had a hard time recovering from those moods. The process of therapy with this family was no doubt facilitated by the TA, which provided the necessary information to conceptualize the problem systemically and change many components of the parents' existing story about Danielle. The collaborative nature of the assessment had also built a strong working alliance between the assessor/therapist and the parents.

This case illustrates how the TA model can provide a positive and potentially transformational experience for families. Admittedly, the assessor of the case began the assessment with little previous experience with psychological assessment or the TA model. Thus, this case study (along with one by Peters et al., 2008) shows that extensive experience with the TA model or psychological testing is not necessary for this approach to be used successfully. This case is also an example of the flexibility TA affords the assessor to tailor an intervention to each specific family and how potentially sensitive Level-3 feedback

can be presented to parents in a way that is not immediately rejected. Participation in the TA also facilitated the family therapy that ensued some months later. This case study adds to the growing list of examples supporting the effectiveness of the TA model with families (see also Finn, 2007; Hamilton et al., 2009; Handler, 2007; Tharinger et al., 2007). Additional rigorous empirical study of the model is warranted given these provocative examples of its potential.

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#### APPENDIX

##### *Letter to Danielle's Parents*

Dear Parents,

As promised, I'm writing to summarize the answers to your assessment questions about Danielle. I hope this letter serves mainly as a reminder of what we have already discussed in the summary session.

Before addressing your assessment questions, I would like to thank you both for having Danielle take part in the assessment. I am aware that psychological testing can be a vulnerable endeavor for anyone, and I imagine this is especially true in regard to your daughter. I very much appreciate that you allowed me to get to know Danielle, and to work with her on this assessment. I also wanted to thank you for your participation in the interview and Discussion/Summary sessions. I hope you felt the assessment was a worthwhile experience in gaining understanding about your daughter and in answering your questions. Let me start by reviewing what was done to complete the assessment.

##### *Opportunities for Assessment*

Overall, Danielle and I met for a total of 10 hours, on four different occasions. In addition, you and I were able to meet for an initial interview to discuss the assessment questions and to collect background information. During the first three meetings with Danielle, we did the following psychological tests and procedures together: the Rorschach Inkblot Test, the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Cognitive Abilities and Achievement, Sentence Completions for Children, the House-Tree-Person task, and the Early Memory Procedure.<sup>2</sup> At intake, you both filled out the Youth Self-Report and the Child-Behavior Checklist. At the initial interview, you both completed the Behavior Assessment Scales for Children 2 and also had Danielle's teacher complete this as well. The fourth meeting with your daughter consisted of the Assessment Intervention where cards from the Tasks of Emotional Development and a Fantasy Animal story were used to elicit some answers to the assessment questions. The final meeting with you both was a summary session where we discussed the results of the assessment and how they related to your questions. We also watched a tape of the Assessment Intervention I conducted with Danielle. Your input during this session as to what ideas and impressions seemed right about Danielle were very helpful. The answers to your assessment questions that follow are based on these sources of information.<sup>2</sup>

Now to your questions:

##### **Is Danielle intellectually ready for the first grade?**

I can tell that both of you are concerned about your daughter being able to keep up with the academic expectations of first grade because she is one of the youngest in her class. The results of the assessment indicate that cognitively, she is more than capable of meeting the expectations of her grade. The Woodcock-Johnson III tests of Cognitive Abilities and tests of

Achievement were used to answer this question. I'll discuss cognitive ability first. Danielle's overall intellectual ability is in the Superior range at 132. Her working memory (129), thinking ability (138), and verbal ability (133) are all in the Superior range as well. Two areas are more on par with his age expectation and those are phonemic awareness (110) and cognitive efficiency (99). Despite these two scores falling in the Average range, they are considered relative weaknesses because of Danielle's high overall cognitive abilities. In the tests of Achievement, Danielle is equally ahead of her age group. Passage Comprehension and Writing Sample tests were highest and overall math ability are considered strengths. Handwriting was the only category which was below average. This was mostly due to backward letters and difficulty distinguishing between letters. For example, lower-case *r*'s are very similar to lower-case *v*'s. These minor mistakes are appropriate for a first grader and should not be seen as a problem at this point in time. The results of these tests indicate that Danielle is cognitively capable of performing at a first grade level, and she is also keeping up with her classmates in nearly every academic achievement category.

##### **Is Danielle socially and emotionally ready for the first grade?**

Beyond being cognitively ready for first grade, you had expressed concern about Danielle being socially and emotionally ready for first grade. Socially, Danielle has demonstrated a capacity for adaptive interpersonal behaviors that is greater than would be expected of a six-year-old. Themes of interacting in the TED cards showed that even when there are disputes, she feels as though she is able to reconcile with the other person. Her GHR:PHR ratio on the Rorschach also indicates that she has a history of successful and rewarding relationships. Emotionally, Danielle showed appropriate self-control during the testing sessions. The high amount of movement in her Rorschach responses is often interpreted as being emotionally reactive and impulsive. However, Danielle did not exhibit these behaviors in our sessions and was able to calm herself in the few instances where she became excited. She seems to solve problems based on how she feels and through immediate action rather than thinking through alternative possibilities and potential consequences. These Rorschach findings are incongruent with Danielle's behavior during the testing sessions. I attribute this, in part, to the highly structured environment and also to the one-on-one interaction between her and I, where she received my undivided attention. Her behavior control problems at home and at school may be the result of looser structure or attempts to garner adults' attention amidst her peers or her sister. Firmer structure at home and clear, consistent expectations might positively affect these behaviors along with some time spent alone with her, where she does not feel the desire to compete with her sister.

##### **How can I better parent Danielle at home?**

Danielle seems to be feeling a lot of pressure. She is having a very difficult time accepting that she is smart, while also getting check marks for poor behavior at school. Rather than being able to hold on to the image of being intelligent and good when she experiences punishment, she ignores her good qualities and focuses entirely on the bad aspects of herself. In reaction to potential failure, Danielle sought validation and encouragement, appearing to be frightened to make a mistake or to seem unintelligent. She desperately wants to be able to see herself as a good child but has a hard time when she gets into trouble a lot. She may also be feeling the pressure to perform at

<sup>2</sup>The Early Memories Procedure was administered at the beginning of the Assessment Intervention Session but was not interpreted in this article due to space considerations.

a high level academically, which probably comes from the high expectations placed on her.

New approaches to Danielle at home may be a way to alleviate some of this conflict. Since her response to punishment affects her self-image, a reward system may help promote a more positive self-image. Instead of time-outs or taking away things she wants when she misbehaves, try offering incentives for her positive behaviors. By reinforcing her positive behaviors, negative behaviors will begin to diminish. Danielle understands that she is intelligent, but this view is shaken by punishment and by being told she has behaved badly. She needs to feel as though she doesn't need to be perfect in order to be a "good" child. She also needs to be able to distinguish between exhibiting bad behaviors and being a bad child, which she currently confuses.

Second, given Danielle's tendency to act without a great deal of forethought, when she does behave in an inappropriate way, try talking with her about her actions and try to problem solve how it could have been handled better. She does not seem to think in advance and teaching her this skill will likely reduce her emotion-driven, impulsive behaviors. Redefining the purpose of time-outs as an opportunity to think about why she got into trouble would help her to think about her actions as well as lessen the negative effects of punishment. This type of thinking may need to initially be collaborative, with a parent scaffolding the process of making sense of the situation and how it could have been handled in a better way. Scaffolding means that you initially offer potential solutions and then discuss the most appropriate response with Danielle. In time, she will be able to provide a constructive solution without as much prompting from you.

Third, Danielle needs permission to have periods of unrestricted play. She clearly feels pressure to be a good girl, to behave better, and to be smart, but this pressure is causing stress. One way to release this stress is to allow her to play freely without a lot of rules and to be messy without fearing punishment. Involving yourselves with Danielle and her sister in some sort of unrestricted play that may be messy would teach her that she can have fun without getting into trouble, which, in turn, will allow her to hold on to a positive self-image.

### **Danielle's Question: Why do I get into trouble so much?**

As was mentioned before, Danielle's actions are based on her feelings rather than on a well thought out plan. These kinds of impulsive reactions often lead to trouble because she does not consider the consequences of a behavior. It is important for her to learn that she has to think about what her actions will cause before she acts. Unfortunately, the outcome of her behavior leads her to get into trouble, which conflicts with her view of herself as a smart and good girl. Rewarding positive behaviors, as opposed to punishing negative ones, and helping Danielle think through her actions, will serve to keep her from getting into trouble.

On difficult tasks, Danielle was reluctant to proceed when she became unsure of her answers. She sought validation and reassurance, but ultimately was very reluctant to continue when I told her I was unable to provide assistance, since it was a test. This tendency to shut down when the difficulty of the task increases may be seen as lack of effort, but I think it can be better understood in terms of her wanting to be correct and being fearful of being wrong. As I mentioned earlier, Danielle's self-image is tied very much to her intelligence and being wrong threatens this self-image. Helping her understand that it is acceptable to be wrong will build her self-esteem and confidence and allow her to be less afraid of failure and to take more chances instead of feeling too anxious to continue and potentially make a mistake.

In addition to some of the strategies already suggested, the invitation of working together in therapy still stands. I believe that Danielle and the family would experience improvement in just a short time in therapy. If this is an avenue you would still like to pursue, I would be more than happy to work with your family.

Thank you both again for allowing me to get to know your daughter and your selves on such a deep level. I hope this assessment has shed light on the questions you had about Danielle. Please do not hesitate to contact me about this letter or the assessment.

Sincerely,  
J.D. Smith, M.A.