

CLINICAL CASE APPLICATIONS

Therapeutic Assessment With Children: Intervening With Parents “Behind the Mirror”

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All the steps in the model of therapeutic assessment used with children (TA–C) are designed to involve and impact the child’s parents. However, a distinctive process that parallels and accompanies the testing sessions with the child might be the most significant in helping parents shift their story of their child and family. In this process, parents are invited to observe their child’s testing sessions (in an adjacent room through a live video feed, through a 1-way mirror, or in the corner of the testing room) and process the experience with the assessor (either simultaneously in the case of the 2-assessor model or after the fact in the 1-assessor model). We discuss the development and evolution of what we have come to call the “behind the mirror” method. We describe the therapeutic intent of the method and delineate 13 techniques utilized to enlist parents as active collaborators. We illustrate each technique using the case study of a 10-year-old boy where the 2-assessor model and live video feed method were used. We also provide research findings from the case study that address the parents’ experience of the assessment and their changed view of their child.

Therapeutic assessment (TA), as developed by Finn and colleagues (Finn, 2007; Finn & Tonsager, 1997), is a relatively new and innovative form of psychological assessment. In addition to offering many of the benefits of a traditional assessment, TA serves as a collaborative, short-term intervention, guided by the client’s questions. Finn has outlined a semistructured, six-step, generic TA model. The steps include (a) relationship building and assessment question gathering, (b) standardized testing, (c) intervention, (d) summary and discussion, (e) written communication, and (f) follow-up. There are variations in the steps as applied to children, adolescents, adults, and couples. We focus here on the TA model as used with children (TA–C). TA–C seeks to provide children with a positive experience of assessment and family intervention. In addition, the model strives to provide parents with an accurate, compassionate, coherent, and useful understanding of their child and family, as well as new or renewed empathy for their child. In many ways, although the child is the major focus of the assessment, the parents are the major focus of the therapeutic efforts. The assessor supports the parents as they form a new story about their child and family. The goal is that the new story leads to new ways of interacting with the child and enhanced motivation to pursue and sustain positive change.

A comprehensive TA–C typically involves 8 to 10 sessions over a 2- to 3-month period, although briefer models and time

frames are possible. Assessors use a combination of assessment and intervention or therapy tools, many of which have been well featured in the literature. Interviews are conducted where parents and children work with the assessor, to cogenerate questions for the assessment (Tharinger, Finn, Wilkinson, & Schaber, 2007). Specific psychological testing instruments are selected to obtain information to address the assessment questions (Finn, 2007). Extended inquiry of the child’s testing responses (Handler, 2006) and play methods (Tharinger, Christopher, & Matson, 2011) are used to secure a thorough understanding of the child’s experiences. Parents observe their child’s testing sessions and the assessor either periodically checks in with the parents during the session or a second assessor or clinician attends to the parents as they observe, typically behind a one-way mirror or via live video feed (the focus of this article). A family intervention session (Tharinger, Finn, Austin, et al., 2008) typically is next, followed by a summary or discussion (feedback) session with the parents (Tharinger, Finn, Hersh, et al., 2008). Subsequently, a feedback session is provided for the child, accompanied by his or her parents, where an individualized fable especially written for the child) is presented (Tharinger, Finn, Wilkinson, et al., 2008). When possible, a follow-up session is conducted a few months after the assessment has been completed to support progress and address questions and challenges.

In this article, we specifically address the method of parents observing and processing the standardized testing of their child. This process has not yet been described in an in-depth manner in the literature. The parental observation piece is unique to TA–C; parents do not observe their child’s testing sessions in therapeutic assessment with adolescents (TA–A), as it is not viewed as developmentally appropriate (Tharinger, Finn, Gentry, &

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Matson, in press). We generally recommend the use of the TA-C model for children under 12, although individual characteristics of the child should be taken into account in choosing between the TA-C and TA-A models.

In our experience, inviting parents to observe and discuss their child's testing sessions in the moment or shortly thereafter is the most distinctive aspect of TA-C, and perhaps the most controversial. This format is in stark contrast to standard practice of assessing children, in which the assessor typically first interviews the parents, usually without the child, and then tests the child while the parents wait in an adjoining room. As Finn (2007) pointed out, young children might even be puzzled and confused when they are assessed with their parents in the waiting room. This is a scarier situation for most children, and is very different than their experience of being taken to medical appointments, where their parents almost always are close by. Finally, in the standard child assessment model, parents receive feedback only after the testing is complete; generally children are given no or little feedback.

Finn (2007) recognized that the standard practice of child assessment was a missed opportunity. Over the course of his early career, he came to realize the utility of parental observation during the child testing process. He first implemented this practice, in keeping with his training in family therapy, during play therapy sessions, by allowing parents to view the interaction between himself and their child. Usually the parents would sit in the corner of the playroom and observe. At the end of the therapy session, Finn would then discuss with the parents what they had observed. Finn subsequently began to integrate this practice into his model of TA-C (Finn, 1997). He noted that Fischer (1985/1994) had written about testing children while their parents watched. Thus, he began inviting parents to observe testing sessions from the corner of his office and then talked with the parents after each testing session. At that time, he ascertained their reactions, responded to their questions, and made small interventions in relation to the way they perceived their child. Thus, the one-assessor "parents in the corner of the room" method was born (and has since evolved, as discussed later, although it is still highly applicable).

From this experience, Finn became aware of the many benefits of inviting parents to observe their child's testing sessions. Parents were given a chance to discover for themselves answers to their questions about their child. They were helped to feel less inadequate when they saw the assessor struggling with some of the same problems they encountered with their child. Parents also seemed to benefit from the assessor's modeling of new ways of addressing their child's challenging or problem behaviors. Moreover, Finn came to see that parents' erroneous and sometimes highly distorted "stories" about their children could be addressed in several ways. The parents and assessor could observe small behavioral sequences of the child's and then discuss the parents' initial interpretation. Then the assessor could help the parents consider alternative interpretations. This kind of careful work was often necessary to effectively change parents' "stories" about their children, because the parents' existing schemas actually influenced their *perceptions* of the child. Parents would notice and interpret their children's behaviors to fit their existing stories and discount or fail to perceive information that did not fit. Holigrocki and his team (Holigrocki, Crain, Bohr, Young, & Bensman, 2009) incorporated a similar video analysis technique in their work with high-risk parents and their

children, and have found it effective in altering parents' attributions about their children.

Finn also discovered that parents' global attributions about their children were challenged when they observed their child's behavior to be contextually influenced; that is, to vary under different environments and conditions. By helping parents notice their child's problematic behaviors and hypothesize about what factors might influence such behaviors, Finn was able to introduce contextual and systemic thinking to parents. This served to alter their global negative attributions about their child. For example, instead of thinking, "Johnny is a bad boy," parents might come to think, "Johnny misbehaves when others are not giving him close attention and behaves well when he is very carefully attended to." Finn further found that parents reported that their participation provided a valuable experience and was a more efficient use of their time, as opposed to sitting in a waiting room. This feedback led Finn to regularly implement the practice of inviting parents to observe and discuss their children's testing sessions in relevant cases when practicing TA-C.

Although the observation method was originally conceived and practiced as parents watching in the corner of the room (Finn, 2007), it evolved into inviting parents to observe behind a one-way mirror (Tharinger et al., 2007). The one-way mirror setup likely is available in many practice and training settings; however, it is not common in independent practices, limiting its use by practitioners. In addition, even if available it has its limitations. In our experience, having used the behind-the-mirror methods in the Therapeutic Assessment Project (TAP), its efficacy is limited as the lighting needs to be very low, which can compromise effective face-to-face communications with the parents. In addition, parents and assessors must talk quietly. Because some parents have strong emotional reactions when observing their child's testing sessions, we want them to feel free to express themselves without having to worry about their child overhearing the conversation.

Fortunately, an additional method has been developed that can be easily implemented in training, research, and practice sites; the use of a live video feed. With this method, originally used by Finn in training cases and adopted by TAP, an unobtrusive video camera is set up, with the child's knowledge, in the room where the child is being tested. This camera is used to stream video of the child's testing session to an adjacent room, where the parents watch the session in real time on a video monitor. In our experience, the live video feed method, as compared with parents observing from behind a one-way mirror, allows parents a more comfortable and engaging setting from which to observe and process their child's testing sessions. This processing can occur either simultaneously when a second assessor is in the room with the parents (referred to as the two-assessor method), or afterward, with follow-up consultations between the sole assessor and the parents (referred to as the one-assessor model).

When using the one-assessor model, similar to the method of the parents being in the corner of the room, the assessor checks in with the parents at the end of the session (and perhaps also during breaks) and consults with them about their observations, reactions, interpretations, and questions. Parents are encouraged to take notes about what they observe and track questions they wish to raise with the assessor after the session. In the two-assessor method, a second assessor sits and talks with the parents as they watch the live video feed of their child's testing

sessions in real time. Thus, the second assessor converses with the observing parents “in the moment” throughout the entire session rather than only at the conclusion of the session or at breaks.

In our experience, the two-assessor model offers unique advantages, as the work with the parents is ongoing and is experienced in the moment. This practice advances the collaborative experience of the parents and helps them digest the information their child is providing through the tests and creative methods. Although it requires the time, expense, and coordination of two assessors, the extra time is somewhat offset by not needing time after the sessions to check in with and consult with the parents. However, we feel the one-assessor model can be sufficient to promote new understanding and change. This is exemplified well in a recent case study presented in this journal by Smith, Nicholas, Handler, and Nash (2011). For financial reasons, the two-assessor model might be most feasible in training settings, where two students or a supervisor and student can pair up to conduct an assessment. In private practice, it might be wise to use two assessors with families that are particularly vulnerable or rigid in their distorted perceptions of their child; otherwise, in our experience, the one-assessor model suffices.

Another possibility in the one-assessor model is to video the child testing sessions and then review portions of the video with the parents at another time. Using this variation, the parents do not observe in the corner of the room, behind the mirror, or in an adjacent room by use of a live video feed. Rather, they watch selected sections from the child’s sessions with the assessor after the fact. This method might have appeal for some assessors and families due to time constraints, parents’ schedules, and so on. This version also might be useful as a way to titrate the material to which the parents are being exposed (discussed more fully later under “Considerations for Implementation”).

When using the one-assessor or two-assessor method and any of the means of observation, the goal for the assessor or second assessor is to develop an alliance and maintain a collaborative stance with the parents. The assessor adopts the terms the parents use, actively and empathically listens to their concerns, and encourages their questions and comments about the assessment process and what they are learning. When working directly with the observing parents throughout, as is done in the two-assessor model, a second assessor has the chance to explain tests and methods as they are being used. When using the single-assessor model, the assessor provides this information at the beginning of the session or at breaks. In either method, the assessor invites the parents to take an active role in discussing their child’s responses and behavior, and to process their own feelings that arise in relation to what they are absorbing. The timing and perhaps intensity vary between the two methods, but both can be effective. In addition, the assessor and parents often problem-solve new ways of interacting with the child, many of which are being modeled by the other assessor who is testing the child or the assessor now talking with the parents at the end of the session. The assessor in either method also shares his or her insights about the testing process as it occurs, and illustrates these ideas in the moment (using the two-assessor method) or afterward with examples of the child’s actual behaviors during the testing sessions.

In addition, in both methods the assessor supports the parents as they reach new understandings or confirm their existing beliefs about their child. This process allows the assessor (in

either method) to ascertain parental readiness and resources for change, which in turn inform the subsequent steps of the TA–C, the family assessment session and the summary or discussion (feedback) session with the parents. Finally, the experience parents have observing their child and discussing the process and their reactions and interpretation sets the stage for planning the family session and planning and providing feedback.

Considerations for Implementation

As noted earlier, the practice of inviting parents to observe and process their child’s testing sessions is a distinctive and powerful, yet controversial feature of TA–C. Let us consider some of the commonly voiced objections that we have heard when providing initial training to assessment psychologists about TA–C. First, inviting parents to observe their child’s testing sessions (in the corner of the room, behind the mirror, or through the live or delayed and selective video feed method) might raise significant concerns for some assessment professionals, as test security is compromised to some extent. Although parents only view the testing materials briefly and are not given copies of the tests, it is true that parents come away from this process having a much better idea of how psychological tests work. We tend to view this as a positive “demystification” of the assessment process, which empowers parents. Nevertheless, some assessors might feel concerned and vulnerable about letting parents in on the “inner workings” of a psychological assessment of their children. We invite assessors with such concerns to experiment gradually with trying out this kind of parent involvement, so that they find out for themselves what results such changes yield. Our own experience is that assessors quickly find that such transparency increases parents’ trust in the assessment process. A third concern, which we acknowledge as valid, is that some parents can become highly emotionally distressed and overwhelmed when observing their child’s testing. If this happens, or if the assessor has reason to believe that a parent might be overwhelmed from observing their children’s reported distress (e.g., the child might discuss very traumatic experiences or relay difficult material about a parent), it is recommended that the assessor schedule separate meetings with the parents to review selected video clips that are chosen with the parents’ capacity in mind. It is never useful to overwhelm parents with material they cannot process within the holding environment of the assessor–parent relationship.

Other professionals might be concerned about the willingness of children to disclose pertinent information with their parents observing. We have found in TAP that most preadolescent children not only are willing to disclose, but with the support of the assessor working with them, children actually use their parents’ observing as an opportunity to communicate either directly to their parents (e.g., by talking directly to the camera) or indirectly through their responses to the tests and methods. In fact, it is so frequent that children send “messages” to their parents through their test responses or play that we have become quite interested in this phenomenon. In most instances, children appear to do this unconsciously, perhaps “testing” whether their parents are ready to understand what they are communicating. A child who is depressed, but whose parents have not been able to acknowledge this, might tell stories to picture-story cards that depict a depressed child whose situation almost exactly parallels that of the child and family. Or sometimes children tell stories, draw

pictures, or engage in fantasy play that reveals amazing insights about their parents, which the parents have previously not been able to recognize. We think children sense that their parents are supported by the assessor, and that this renews hope that their parents will be able to take in information that was too difficult for them to assimilate on their own.

In summary, the practice of having parents observe their children’s testing sessions does pose some risks and challenges for the child, parents, and assessor. However, in our mind, the risks are well worth the benefits. This practice is conducted in the spirit of collaborative empiricism as practiced in cognitive-behavioral therapy (Beck, 1995). The opportunity for parents to observe and discuss their reactions has also been found to positively affect the process and outcome of the therapeutic assessment in significant ways (Tharinger et al., 2007). Once again, assessors used to conducting assessments without a great deal of parental involvement might fear that doing so will lead to less effective assessments. We honor these concerns and urge assessors to move slowly in changing their practices and to make their own evaluation of the results of incorporating parents more actively as collaborators.

“BEHIND THE MIRROR” TECHNIQUES

Much is happening as parents observe their child’s testing sessions. In the two-assessor model, each assessor has his or her distinct role. The assessor sitting with the parents either behind a one-way mirror or in an adjacent room looking at a video monitor is totally available to the parents and is constantly aware of the potential application of the techniques that will be introduced. In the one-assessor model, the assessor is actively engaged with the child while the parents observe (either from the corner of the room, behind the mirror, in the adjacent room watching a monitor, or at a later time with selected video clips). The assessor attends to the child and, at the same time, is considering the parents’ possible reactions and which material to possibly address with the parents when the time for a consultation comes. Both models have their challenges. In our experience, the two-assessor model allows for the most extensive benefits, but significant benefits also result from using the one-assessor model.

To help inform and train assessors in using this method, we have delineated 13 techniques that we use while working with parents. We now discuss these techniques, and provide illustration using an actual case from TAP. The case utilized the two-assessor model with live video feed to a monitor in an adjacent room. We begin by presenting basic information about the family and their goals for the assessment.

Case Background and Assessment Questions

The family gave additional consent and assent at the completion of the TA–C to allow us to write about their assessment experience in an article. Names and background information have been changed to protect the identity of the family. At the time of the assessment, David was a 10-year-old European American male living with his biological mother, his stepfather, his 14-year-old biological sister, and his maternal grandmother. David’s family was struggling financially; his mother and stepfather had multiple jobs and were living with David’s maternal grandmother to save money. David’s parents had divorced 5 years earlier, and his mother and stepfather had been married

approximately 1 year. David’s family was experiencing significant conflict among all family members, and the new marriage was fairly tenuous. David’s biological father lived in a distant state, and David had sporadic contact with him. David’s father had numerous and serious physical and mental ailments, was frequently unemployed, and was at times unable to financially support himself. David’s father was not invited to be part of this assessment because of his lack of legal rights (David’s mother had legal custody), his marginal role in David’s life, and geographic distance.

David’s mother sought services for him at a local community mental health clinic to address his disrespectful behavior and his difficulty managing emotions. She also hoped the family, as a whole, would make positive progress if David were more respectful. The clinic made her aware of the opportunity to participate in TAP while on the waiting list at the clinic, and she readily sought more information about the project. After receiving more information and reviewing the informed consent and assent, the mother, stepfather, and boy agreed to participate in the TA and the research component. The assessment team for the case consisted of Brad Gerber and Melissa Fisher, both advanced doctoral students in a professional psychology training program. Supervision was provided by the first author, Deborah J. Tharinger, Licensed Psychologist. Consultation was provided by the second author, Stephen E. Finn, Licensed Psychologist and the developer of TA. Brad worked primarily with the parents, observing and processing their child’s testing sessions with them. Melissa worked with the boy doing the testing activities, as well as with Brad and the parents in joint sessions (e.g., initial interview, family intervention session, and feedback sessions). Table 1 provides an overview of the steps of TA–C conducted with David and his family. Included in the description are the names of the sessions, the testing conducted, and the individuals in attendance.

In David’s case, the TA–C spanned nine sessions. We focus on the five sessions (Meetings 2–6) where one or both parents, accompanied by Brad, observed and discussed David’s testing sessions in an adjacent room through a live video feed. The four other sessions (the parent interview, family intervention session, parent summary and discussion session, and child feedback session) are not presented here as they did not involve the parents “behind the mirror,” but rather included the parents as direct participants. For readers wanting a full picture of the

TABLE 1.—Sessions of the therapeutic assessment for children with David.

| Session | Assessment | Attendees |
|-----------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| Initial interview | Interview assessment Questions generated | David, mother, stepfather |
| Testing 1 | Drawings | David, mother |
| Testing 2 | Drawings, Beck Depression Inventory | David, mother, stepfather |
| Testing 3 | Early Memories Procedure | David, mother |
| Testing 4 | Sentence completion, Thematic Apperception Test | David, mother, stepfather |
| Testing 5 | Rorschach | David, mother |
| Family intervention session | N/A | David, mother, stepfather |
| Parent feedback | N/A | Mother |
| Child feedback | N/A | David, mother, stepfather |

complete assessment, the case is further described in a chapter by Tharinger, Fisher, and Gerber (2012). The chapter includes details from the parent interviews, a full description of the family intervention session, excerpts from the parent feedback letter, and a summary of the feedback fable written for David.

Questions to guide David’s assessment were coconstructed with the mother and stepfather during their initial interview with Brad and Melissa. The use of parent-generated assessment questions increases their buy-in and encourages parents to develop curiosity about the child and the presenting problem, while also allowing the assessor to better understand the parents’ view of the child (Tharinger et al., 2007). The following are the parents’ assessment questions:

1. Is David sad? Is his heart torn up? Is he angry?
2. Why is David so aggressive and disrespectful?
3. Why does David not connect with me (mother)?
4. Why does it take a reward to get him to do something rather than just doing it out of love and respect (unless he’s doing it for other people, like his neighbors)?
5. How can I (mother) show my strength as a parent?
6. How did what he saw in my (mother’s) marriage to his father affect him?
7. How does he feel about his stepfather?

David was provided the opportunity to pose questions during the second session, in the presence of his parents. David proposed one question:

1. Why does everyone in the house accuse me of stuff, like if something is missing?

Description and Illustration of 13 Tasks

Table 2 summarizes 13 techniques that provide a helpful framework for working with parents “behind the mirror.” Although each technique is described separately, we acknowledge that they overlap and do not intend to suggest a linear process; in contrast, many techniques are often used at once and are used across the multiple observation sessions. No hierarchy is implied by their sequence. Although not unique to the practice of TA–C, these techniques function as a comprehensive guide

TABLE 2.—Techniques for working with observing parents.

| | |
|----|---|
| 1 | Educating parents about psychological tests and other assessment procedures |
| 2 | Fostering parents’ curiosity about their child and the assessment process, and helping them “step back” and look with new eyes |
| 3 | Helping parents notice similarities and differences in the child’s behavior in the problem situation and the assessment situation |
| 4 | Helping parents think about contextual and systemic influences on behavior |
| 5 | Modeling psychological mindedness and “looking below the surface” |
| 6 | Gathering information about how parents perceive their child |
| 7 | Consensually validating certain perceptions |
| 8 | Gently confronting other perceptions by asking parents to note data that conflicts with the existing story and by respectfully offering different interpretations of events |
| 9 | Observing parents’ reactions and their interactions with each other |
| 10 | Gathering relevant background information about the child and family |
| 11 | Emotionally supporting parents as they reach new understandings or are confirmed in their existing understandings |
| 12 | Assessing parental readiness for change |
| 13 | Fostering trust between parents and the assessor(s) |

to support the assessor using TA–C to work closely and collaboratively with parents to help them “see their child in new ways.” Although the method the parent is using to observe (i.e., corner of the room, behind a one-way mirror, live or delayed video feed) and the presence of a second assessor might greatly influence the nuances of how the techniques are utilized, much can be accomplished through any of the methods and models. We now illustrate the 13 techniques with excerpts from the TAP case just introduced, which used a two-assessor model and the live video feed method. Our intention is to illustrate the maximal use of the method reporting on a two-assessor case, and also to discuss how the method could be used with the one-assessor model.

Technique 1: Educating parents about psychological tests and other assessment procedures. As part of the TA–C process, parents are educated about the psychological tests and other assessment procedures used with their child, while they observe in the two-assessor model, and beforehand in the single-assessor model. This includes explaining the procedures involved in psychological testing, eliciting information from parents about prior knowledge and experiences with assessment, specifying the exact nature and intent of each test and method used, and allowing parents to reference the test materials while their child is assessed. The assessor also attempts to connect each selected test being used with an assessment question that has been asked and explains how the process or responses to this test might help inform the question and thus the understanding that the parent is seeking. This method, in our experience, helps to hold the parents’ attention and arouse their curiosity. Additionally, as Finn (2007) noted, curiosity is essential if parents are to begin to view their child in a new way.

We begin with an example from the first testing session with David where Brad introduced the use of drawings to the parents.

Assessor: What she’s doing now is she’s asking him to draw a picture of a person. So today she’s going to do a series of drawings with him. He’s going to draw a person, a house, a tree, and he’ll probably do a drawing of the family. And then she’s going to ask him a series of questions about his drawings. It’ll be interesting to see what he has to say. I think his drawings may help us understand some of his feelings about himself, his life, and his view of his family and dad—and start to gives us clues to answer your assessment questions. Hopefully we will learn about David’s emotional state and family connections.

Notice how Brad’s comments are intended to arouse curiosity in the parents; for example, “It’ll be interesting. . .” and “Hopefully we will learn about . . .”

This next example is from the second testing session when Melissa introduced the sentence completion measure to David. In TA–C, we typically construct an idiographic set of incomplete sentences designed to further our understanding of the specific child and inform the assessment questions. Selected sentence stems and responses are provided in Table 3. Note how the items relate to the assessment questions introduced earlier. In this example, Brad explained the sentence completion measure to David’s mother as she observed. Note the provision of the protocol to the mother and the specific connection to the parents’ assessment questions. In the single-assessor model, the protocol would have been provided and discussed before the session began or at a break between tests.

TABLE 3.—Selected items from sentence completion.

| | |
|----|---|
| 1 | I feel loved . . . <i>when my mom lets me do something cool and fun.</i> |
| 2 | I cry . . . <i>when someone in my family is hurt or I'm hurt.</i> |
| 3 | Sometimes I feel . . . <i>like running away because everyone gets mad at me for doing something that wasn't my fault.</i> |
| 4 | When I think about the times my mother and father argued . . . <i>I get sad.</i> |
| 5 | When I think about how my father lives so far away . . . <i>I'm sad.</i> |
| 6 | When I am sad . . . <i>I go up to my room or run away to the school to hang out.</i> |
| 7 | I find it hard to do what my parents ask me to . . . <i>because I'm either tired or lazy.</i> |
| 8 | My heart felt broken . . . <i>when my dad moved to Florida.</i> |
| 9 | I feel my mother is strong . . . <i>when she helps me when I am hurt.</i> |
| 10 | What I need most . . . <i>is a house with no arguing people.</i> |

Assessor: One of the things they're going to do today is complete sentences. Melissa will say the first part of a sentence and then David will be asked to finish the sentence with whatever he thinks of—to say it out loud. Here's a copy for each of you of the sentence stems.

Mother: You have one for us? These are really good questions.

Assessor: And we took the ideas for the sentence beginnings from the questions that you guys brought so that . . . I mean some of them are more general as well, and we also tried to implement some of the questions that you guys had into the separate questions to try to get at some of the things you were interested in. So we'll see how he responds.

By illuminating the connection to the parents' questions, Brad helped them feel included as true collaborators.

In the next example, Brad introduced the Rorschach to the mother and addressed her questions. Again, if using the single-assessor, the Rorschach would have been introduced in advance.

Mother: What are they doing now?

Assessor: Rorschach test. It's a series of inkblots.

Mother: Oh, I did that once! Do you understand these?

Assessor: It's generally a test to see what you see when you get an ambiguous picture. It will help us to see how David perceives his environment, how he looks at things.

Mother: Is there something that says what they actually are?

Assessor: Yes—there is a way to score it based on what a large number of people see in the cards. It's what they call a "normed" test.

Thus the first technique, educating parents about tests and their use, serves multiple purposes of explaining, building on the alliance, eliciting curiosity, and addressing queries. It also demystifies the tests, helps the parents feel less "one-down" to the assessor, involves them as active collaborators, and shows them the relevance of the tests to their assessment questions and to their lives. This method is used throughout the testing sessions as new tests are presented to the child. While the two-assessor model provides a seamless and sequential use of this technique, the single-assessor model also works well in introducing the tests to the parents.

Technique 2: Fostering parents' curiosity about their child and the assessment process, and helping them "step back" and look with new eyes. As stated earlier, David's parents inquired about his emotional state, the reason for his aggressiveness and disrespectful behavior, and his relationship with his mother and stepfather, among other things. In TA-C, throughout the testing process, the assessor returns to these questions, asking parents to create hypotheses about the child's behavior and emotional state; makes observations; and reflects on changes or

incongruencies that they notice. This dynamic reflective process is designed to help parents look critically and compassionately at their current story about their child's behavior and aims to facilitate the development of a more accurate and empathic belief set that the parents are helped to consider.

To illustrate this technique, we first provide an excerpt of the responses David provided during the Early Memories Procedure (EMP; Bruhn, 1992) in the third testing session. With adults, the EMP is typically administered in writing, but with children we have found it more useful to have them dictate their memories to the assessor. This not only frees children from any difficulties presented by their written language skills, but it provides an opportunity for the parents who are observing to hear the children's memories and responses to the assessor's probes. Following David's telling of each early memory, Melissa asked a set of standardized follow-up questions, to which he provided his answers.

First Early Memory

David: I remember when me, my sister, my mom, and my dad went to San Antonio and we had a lot of fun. We went to a restaurant and I had a slice of pizza and the ingredients made me barf. There was barf all over and my mom didn't have a change of clothes for me.

Assessor: What is the clearest part of the memory?

David: When I threw up.

Assessor: What is the strongest feeling in the memory? What thought or action is this connected with?

David: Sick, sad, throwing up.

Assessor: If you could change the memory in any way, what would that be?

David: Me not getting sick. Then we would have done more fun things.

Assessor: Your approximate age at the time of the memory?

David: 4 or 5 years old.

Second Early Memory

David: We went to the Gulf of Mexico to camp on the beach. We set up the tent and dad, mom, and my sister went swimming in the beach while I was sitting in a puddle playing in the sand. I was giving them a frown because I was only 3 and I thought there were monsters in the water.

Assessor: What is the clearest part of the memory?

David: Watching them play and swim in the water.

Assessor: What is the strongest feeling in the memory? What thought or action is this connected with?

David: I was feeling angry because I thought the sea monsters would eat them. I was angry at my family for going into the water, and they were trying to get me into the water.

Assessor: If you could change the memory in any way, what would that be?

David: For me to think there weren't sea monsters. I would've been able to play in the water.

Assessor: Your approximate age at the time of the memory?

David: 3 years old.

In the example, Brad was sitting with the mother watching this exchange, and he encouraged her to consider the themes present in David's responses, examining them in a new, more empathic light. If this case had been conducted by a single assessor, he or she might have chosen to ask the mother similar questions at the end of the testing session.

Assessor: It’s interesting that his first two memories were kind of spending time with the family.

Mother: Right, yeah.

Assessor: What do you think of that?

Mother: I think he misses doing family events. Do you notice in all the stories there’s something happening to him?

Assessor: That’s interesting, isn’t it? Well, what do you think of that?

Mother: I think he just had a very—you know, I think he just had a very dramatic life. A lot of bad things happened to him and not his sister.

In the next example, also during the EMP, Brad gently confronted the mother’s view of her son’s behavior as solely the result of a poor attitude and a desire to cause trouble and upset others. Brad used follow-up questioning to explore the mothers’ observation that David’s memories all have unhappy endings. As a result, the mother began to consider that David’s behavior might be tied to family context and sadness about past events.

Assessor: What do you think it’s like for a kid who always gets stuck on that negative part of something? Even if the overall thing is a pretty good memory, he’s still focused on that one part that’s not so good.

Mother: I think it’s pretty dramatic. I guess he’s got stuff wrapped up inside him, you know? I mean, it makes you feel bad as a family because it like starts off good and then something bad happens, and the last few ones that happened to him, he really suffered dramatically.

Assessor: Do you think it’s hard for him, to have all that stuff wrapped up inside?

Mother: Oh, yeah. I think he went through a lot for his first 5 or 6 years.

Thus, this second technique is designed to foster the parents’ curiosity and help them consider other views of their child. This technique also is used throughout the testing sessions as the parent begins to connect evidence that supports a revised view of their child. Although the opportunity in the two-assessor model is to gently probe the parent with small steps in the moment, the single-assessor method would also allow for ample discussion after the fact. The single assessor would be encouraged to take brief notes on what might be possible content to explore with the parents after the session or during a break.

Technique 3: Helping parents notice similarities and differences in the child’s behavior in the problem situation and the assessment situation. In using this technique, the assessor underscores similarities and differences between how the parents have described their child’s behavior in his or her natural everyday environment and what the assessor and parents are observing in the here and now, in the context of the testing session. The assessor uses the parents’ assessment questions as a basis for deciding which similarities and differences to elicit and subsequently highlight. By making key observations of the child’s responses and assessment findings as they occur during the testing session and eliciting parents’ related thoughts, the assessor encourages discussion of the similarities and differences that might be influenced by the immediate context. Thus, using Technique 3, an initial step can be taken in helping parents notice variation between the child’s behavior in the problem situation and the current testing session.

In the following example, Brad elicited the parents’ beliefs and feelings about what they saw via the video monitor and how

this compared to how David acted at home. Brad’s queries directly related to the parents’ questions about David’s mood, behavior, and relationship with them. This technique would readily apply when using the one-assessor model, with a check-in and discussion at the end or at a break.

During an early assessment session

Assessor: He seems to be engaged well with Melissa. He talks and is willing to share. Is he like this with other people?

Stepfather: Other people, yes. Yes, he is.

Assessor: Like with who?

Stepfather: Maybe, with the neighbors. He can be like that with us, too.

Mother: He has his moments.

Stepfather: He’ll pay attention, he’ll listen, but in the back of his mind, he just wants to go outside and play and do what he wants to do.

During a later testing session

Assessor: He’s being really helpful. Is he like this at home?

Mother: Not as much as he should! He was out there helping washing the car with neighbor’s son. But then he said, “Oh, I’ll help you tomorrow,” when I asked.

In both excerpts, Brad can be seen gently eliciting similarities and differences between the disrespectful and troublesome behaviors reported by the parents as seen at home, and what is occurring in front of them. This conversation would likely have been very similar using a single-assessor model, where the assessor follows up with parents after the session. One can also see the persistence of both parents’ negative “story” about David. They apparently dismiss his “good” behavior in session as a “cover” for what he really wants to do, showing their investment in their current negative view of David. They are strongly holding on to their schema, even in the presence of disconfirming information. Technique 4 demonstrates the next step in helping parents understand context, especially the family context, as a strong determinate of behavior and change.

Technique 4: Helping parents think about contextual and systemic influences on behavior. This technique builds on and expands the previous technique (similarities and differences). Using this technique, parents are encouraged by the assessor to notice changes in the child’s behavior as the assessment progresses and consider how changes in the context and system might be influencing the child. In the following example, Brad discussed with both parents the various contextual explanations that might contribute to their observation that David was showing improved listening behaviors at home.

Assessor: So you said it’s been getting better as far as listening to what you’re saying. What do you think has been different that his behavior has gotten better or a little bit better at least? What do you think has been different?

Mother: I think by letting him get something . . . giving him a chance to get something he enjoys, that he likes doing, spending some time with him. I think that’s what helps.

Assessor: Spending time with him. Having rewards.

Mother: Like being interested in something he likes. Showing some interest in what he likes. Not saying, “Oh that’s stupid.” Showing him we care.

Stepfather: In return he shows interest in what we want him to do.

Assessor: I’m going to keep coming back to relationship and rule. We have a saying we think is useful. “Rules without relationship equal

rebellion.” It sounds like you guys have really seen that happen. It sounds like you’re really making an effort to spend time with him.

Thus, Brad encouraged the parents to understand the positive effects of spending quality time with David on his cooperative behaviors. In this way, Brad assisted the parents in considering the influence of environmental factors such as positive family interactions on David’s compliance with his parents’ requests. As a result, the parents were able to consider that the more supportive and interested they were in David, the more likely it was that David would listen to them. Note also that Brad refrained from making his pithy interpretation (“Rules without relationship . . .”) until the parents themselves basically articulated this idea.

Later, in the same session, the parents spontaneously made a similar observation. Brad immediately encouraged the conversation, once again highlighting the importance of the context on David’s behavior, prompting further discussion.

Stepfather: Look how Melissa’s paying attention to David and observing him so closely.

Mother: She’s showing interest in him.

Assessor: What do you think that does for him when she really pays attention to him?

Mother: Raises his self-esteem high. Makes him feel good about himself, like he’s important. Like, “Oh wow, she thinks I’m important.”

Assessor: And the nice thing about this example is that it’s not anything extravagant—you don’t have to take him out and go mini-golfing or something. You can go up to his room and talk about how his day was or watch a movie with him. Or go outside and shoot targets with him. When he sees that you’re connected with him he just seems to feed off of that.

Mother: He does. Like I get from him that he doesn’t feel as anxious. Like he can breathe more easily.

Assessor: So you see the benefits of it, too. You see that he responds well to that.

Mother: Yeah, he’s not as stressed. Like he’ll come up and say to me, “Mom, let’s do something together.”

Stepfather: It’s interesting because—look at where Melissa has her focus. She’s there to provide him attention and to look at what he wants to show her.

Again, one can see that at this point in the assessment, David’s parents were beginning to shift their views of David and consider how paying attention to him, and thus changing the family context they provide, is key. Helping parents take a systemic rather than individual view is an overall goal of TA–C. Such a shift can generate hope in parents, by allowing them to see that they can have a positive influence on their child, something that is not possible if the child is seen as globally and pervasively “bad.” The technique of assisting parents in thinking about their child contextually and systemically is likely enhanced in a two-assessor model, as very small steps can be taken in the moment. However, it is our experience that the contextual differences can also be effectively addressed at the end of a session.

Technique 5: Modeling psychological mindedness and “looking below the surface.” As parents observe their child, the assessor dialogues with them to explore new insights about their child. In this way, the assessor models “looking below the surface” by helping parents uncover themes that might be present in the child’s response. In the next example, Brad and the mother

discussed the possible meaning of the words *torn* or *ripped* in several of David’s Rorschach responses, with Brad encouraging her to be curious about his language and its meaning. David’s responses and a transcript of the inquiry to Cards 1 and 2 are first provided for review.

Card 1 Response

An old rag.

Assessor: [Repeats response.]

David: Because it’s all torn apart and it’s all like ripped on the sides.

Assessor: Show me where in the blot you saw the rag.

David: The whole thing.

Assessor: It’s all torn apart; it’s ripped on the sides?

David: Like it’s all ripped and pieces are coming off. And it’s not like a perfect square, it’s like everywhere. It’s all twisty, and turned and bulgy.

Card 2 Response

A stained rag.

Assessor: [Repeats response.] Where do you see the stained rag?

David: The whole thing. It could be red paint on it with these red spots.

Assessor: Red paint?

David: Stained it. With a big ol’ hole in it.

Assessor: What makes it look like paint?

David: Because it could be red paint. And like if you put paint on something it doesn’t end up like a perfect circle. It splats.

Assessor: It splats?

David: Yeah.

Assessor: You said a big hole in it.

David: You can see right through it and you can see into the background of it.

Assessor: See straight through it to the background?

David: Yeah, here’s the red and it has that hole in it, so the hole would look . . . (Sigh)

Assessor: Oh, take your time.

David: Or it could just have a white spot on it.

Assessor: So it could just have a white spot. OK. So what is it that makes it look like a rag?

David: The same thing as that one, because it’s squiggly and not a perfect rectangle or square. It’s all ripped and stuff.

Assessor: Ripped?

David: Yeah, because there’s where it’s not straight.

In the following dialogue, notice that rather than providing the likely interpretation of such morbid responses as “torn” and “ripped,” Brad encouraged the mother to consider the implications of such responses for David’s emotional state.

Assessor: I heard a couple of torn rags, something that was broken. What would you guess that it means when someone sees that?

Mother: If I put myself in his shoes, that he’s not whole. Like being, maybe hurting inside, not complete. Not whole. Like it’s missing something. Torn apart.

Assessor: Do you see that in him at all? His perspective?

Mother: I have to agree. When you live in our situation . . . in our family it’s a fight, a constant battle. People think you get used to it. His stepfather thinks it’s chaos. David sounds kind of overwhelmed.

Assessor: He’s overwhelmed?

Mother: He might be. I kind of am!

Assessor: Do you see that perspective from him? Maybe not feeling whole?

Mother: I know he feels broken inside. It’s hard on a little boy. He’s very sensitive.

Brad: David is a sensitive boy—I think that awareness can help us understand some of his behaviors in a new way.

This exchange provides an excellent example of David’s mother shifting her view to become aware of how sensitive and broken her child is. This perspective is a significant departure from her original description of her son as strictly disrespectful with malevolent motives. This example demonstrates the power of this technique, modeling psychological mindedness and encouraging parents to look below the surface. This technique is used throughout the observation of the testing sessions and helps to weave compassion and empathy for the child and the creation of a new or renewed story about the child. By providing “scaffolding” to David’s mother so that she reached her own conclusions, Brad helped ensure that the new story about her child would be one that she would “own” and “accept.” The technique of assisting parents to think below the surface and to be psychologically minded is likely enhanced in a two-assessor model, as again very small steps can be taken in the moment. However, in our experience this technique also can be very effectively used at the end of a session or through selective viewing of video clips.

Technique 6: Gathering information about how parents perceive their child. This is a very basic technique where the assessor attends closely to parents’ description of their child to get an understanding of their current view and story about their child. This allows the assessor to get a sense of where the parents are at the beginning and what constitutes a change in their perceptions. In our experience, many of the parents’ current perceptions are obtained in the initial interview, which is designed to construct assessment questions and obtain background and contextual knowledge. Thus, there is likely little difference in using this technique in a two- or sole-assessor model. In the initial interview with David’s mother and stepfather, the assessment team could barely get a word in as the parents spoke incessantly about their view of David as disrespectful and oppositional. The parents showed a united front in their perceptions of how badly David was behaving. We conceptualized David as a scapegoated child (Slipp, 1990) and hypothesized that it was not going to be easy to foster a change in their story. We found, as the parents had taken ample time to share their view of David in the initial interview, they only needed to give brief reference back to their view as they observed the testing sessions to confirm their negative perception. In the following short example, while the mother observed during an early testing session, she reiterated her view of him. Note the extensive use of negative adjectives. This was typical of her early references to her son.

Mother: Yeah, David has his moments of being helpful to others, but the biggest, bad, worst of him is not being respectful. He’s not respectful to us.

Technique 7: Consensually validating certain perceptions. In this technique the assessor listens carefully to the comments made by the parents and looks for opportunities to validate certain perceptions. By validating certain parental perceptions, the assessor is able to both support the parents in their current beliefs and behaviors, as well as prepare the parents to hear other suggestions regarding their child that might not be completely

aligned with their current perceptions. Additionally, validating parental perceptions helps the assessor build on his or her therapeutic alignment with the parents. In the upcoming example in the first testing session, Brad discussed the implications of David’s drawing of a house with his parents.

Assessor: What do you think about the house he drew?

Stepfather: He wants a house with a solid foundation, I guess.

Assessor: That’s a really interesting point, what do you think about that—David wanting something with a solid foundation?

Stepfather: I think he drew that house because he feels our family is not a strong family, things could easily be blown away quick. I think he wants a solid family, a solid foundation, a solid house, and he seems to be insecure of the house. I think he feels insecure with us. We’re unstable.

Assessor: I think that’s a really incredible insight.

In this example, Brad probed the parents and asked them for their thoughts about David’s house drawing. Notice how Brad started with a very open-ended question to elicit the parents’ own ideas. Also note that, when the parents showed new insight, Brad “mirrored” their new way of thinking. As discussed by Tharinger, Finn, Hersh, et al. (2008), verifying certain parts of parents’ stories about their children allows them to take in new information without feeling overwhelmed by anxiety or resistant. Although again there is the appeal of the moment-to-moment fluidity when using the two-assessor model, with careful notes on what to possibly explore with parents after the session is completed or at a break, similar results can be obtained with one assessor.

Technique 8: Gently confronting other perceptions by asking parents to note data that conflict with their existing story or by respectfully offering different interpretations of events. Using this technique, after the assessor has a good sense of the parents’ current view of their child, he or she remains alert to information that might slightly differ from their dominant perspective. The assessor then skillfully refers to this information to encourage the parents to see things in a different way. Questions are asked to help the parents expand on their view. In the following example, David’s parents describe how he is real active.

Stepfather: You see how he’s real active? He’s always dropping something!

Assessor: Is he like that at home, like he’s always kind of moving around?

Stepfather and mother: Yeah.

Assessor: It’s interesting because he’s still able to focus even though he’s moving around.

Stepfather: Yeah, I see that. That’s a good point.

In this example, the assessor agreed with the parents that the child is active, but gently challenged them by pointing out that this activity level might not necessarily be negative and might not impede David’s ability to complete tasks successfully. By agreeing with the parents about the David’s energy level, the assessor was also able to gently provide additional information about his ability to focus that is not completely aligned with the parent’s perception of David. In general, this technique of joining and expanding with the parents at the same time assists them in considering new ways of looking at their child. Again,

with careful attention to what is to be followed up, the sole assessor also can use this technique well.

Technique 9: Observing parents' reactions and their interactions with each other. This technique, which is constant throughout the observation sessions in the two-assessor model, allows the assessor to gain insight about parental interaction patterns and dynamics that might be contributing to or influencing the child's current functioning. This information can be extremely useful in developing systemic hypotheses about the family context of the child's problems and it also informs the upcoming family intervention session or feedback in the summary and discussion session. Observing parental interactions also allows the assessor to understand the impact of hearing the information from the child's testing session on each of the parents and their resultant interactions. When using the one-assessor model, rich material is available from the parent consultations after the testing sessions, and it can be especially poignant to work with parents as they react to selected video clips. Examples given to illustrate Technique 4 are good narrative illustrations of David's parents interacting in a collaborative manner. As one might imagine, some parents might argue with each other about what they see as they observe their child's assessment sessions.

This technique is based on the experienced interactions of the parents, not just the exchange of their words. In this case, the presence of the stepfather was very useful to our understanding of the mother and their interactions. The stepfather was surprisingly insightful into the possible underlying processes that affected his stepson's attitude and behavior. His attention and comments seemed to impress the mother and helped bring her along in her renewed understanding of her son. In addition, we also observed that the stepfather's presence seemed to have a calming and regulating effect on the mother. Her thought processes became more coherent and logical in his presence, and she seemed less overwhelmed. We became hopeful that the stepfather's presence would be a healing factor in the family and in David's development. At the same time, due to the stepfather's poor attendance and fluctuation in his commitment to his new family, we were concerned for the stability of David's future.

Technique 10: Gathering relevant background information about the child and family. Throughout the process of working with the parents as they observe their child's testing sessions, the assessor collects pertinent background information about the child and family that can help explain the family's current difficulties with the child or why the child behaves the way he or she does. Sometimes, this information would not have emerged without the responses to the testing to elicit it, or it would not have emerged in such a natural way. Relevant background information also helps the assessor gain a better understanding of the history, context, and circumstance that influences the child's behavior, as well as family interactions with the child. In the following example from the House-Tree-Person exercise, David's parents commented on his drawing of the house where his family lived when he was younger. David's stepfather used the opportunity created by David's drawings to offer information about how he was reared differently from David, and how this affected his relationship with his stepson. He shared his struggle to identify with David, but also noted that he felt sympathy for his stepson because of what David had experienced. Again, although the richness of "in the moment" conversation

is apparent, such discussion could also easily emerge through follow-up consultations with parents.

Stepfather: It seems like he remembers that house, where you used to live. He thinks about it a lot or why would he draw it? Maybe that moment in time, those years that he was living there, that was part of the greatest impact he had, like a lot of things that he saw. I mean, I don't know, I wasn't with you guys at that time.

Assessor: What do you think it's like for a kid his age to feel that?

Stepfather: It's kind of hard for me to imagine what he's going through. Because, because I was born here in Texas. We lived in Mexico City and my parents decided to come back when I was about 3½ years old. We lived here, in an apartment, and then in a house in less than 2 years. My dad saved money and we moved into a house and we lived there for like 20 years, so I don't know what it's like to be moving from place to place.

Mother: Okay, okay.

Stepfather: In my home, there was a stable, strong foundation. My dad was a loving, respectful person, you know. If I would put myself in his shoes, I would find it hard, you know, losing my father and moving here and there and trying to fit in. I didn't go through that.

This example illustrates the wealth of background information that is obtained as the parents react to their child's responses to the testing. Much is gained from this "in the moment" collection of data from the parents. This example also gives some insights into the parents' interaction with each other. When using the single-assessor model, the assessor is encouraged to seek opportunities for such discussions.

Technique 11: Emotionally supporting parents as they reach new understandings or are confirmed in their existing understandings. As parents actively participate in discussing their thoughts about their child's responses and behaviors with the observing assessor, they might start to gain new insight or confirm existing understandings about their child. When new insights are eye-opening, hard to handle, or emotionally laden, assessors are able to emotionally support the parents through the process by providing words of encouragement, normalizing problems, or offering clarification and encouraging insight about the new understanding. When existing understandings about their children are confirmed, assessors can commend them for understanding their children. Again, whereas the two-assessor model with "in the moment" conversations is ideal, follow-up consultations with the parents as in the one-assessor model will benefit greatly from the attention by the assessor to emotional support of the parents. In the following example, Brad and the mother further discussed their thoughts about David's answers to the EMP, when David described several dramatic situations in which he underwent a difficult experience (see example presented earlier to illustrate Technique 2). The conversation continues, with a bit of repeating.

Mother: I think it's pretty dramatic. I guess he's got stuff wrapped up inside him, you know? I mean, it makes you feel bad as a family because it like starts off good and then something bad happens, and the last few ones that happened to him, he really suffered dramatically.

Assessor: Do you think it's hard for him, to have all that stuff wrapped up inside?

Mother: Oh, yeah. I think he went through a lot for his first 5 or 6 years.

Assessor: He went through a lot.

Mother: But I didn't know he remembered the bad stuff so clearly. I didn't think it would stay with him. This is very upsetting—how can he remember stuff from when he so little? I had no idea.

Assessor: It's hard for you to see that he remembers suffering dramatically. It upsets you.

Mother: Yeah. I just wanted to think we all had moved on and could keep moving on.

Assessor: It's hard to see that David really was affected.

Mother: Yeah. Do you think all this, all he remembers, affects him now?

Assessor: That's a good question. I wonder.

Mother: Maybe with all the bad stuff he came to not count on us—not tell us, but not count on us. That could make him angry and disrespectful.

Assessor: That's possible. A lot of times kids can only hold their feelings and memories in for so long and they come out in behavior and attitude.

Mother: He's just had a lot of dramatic experiences—and they are still with him.

Assessor: That seems likely. It's upsetting but maybe also useful to understand that about him.

Mother: Yeah—I think so.

The continued conversation between the mother and Brad about David's early memories is a good example of how the assessor can emotionally support parents as they reach new understandings of their child, understanding that is often challenging but important to creating a new story. We believe that, without this degree of emotional support, parents will often resist new conceptualizations of their child to avoid feeling emotionally overwhelmed.

Technique 12: Assessing parental readiness for change. As parents reach new understandings by processing their reactions with the observing assessor, the assessor is more able to assess parents' readiness to change their view of their child. This is accomplished by observing parental reactions to information observed and discussed throughout the observation sessions. Both the “in the moment” conversations using the two-assessor model and the follow-up consultations in the one-assessor model are very capable of assessing parental readiness. The assessor then considers what type and intensity of feedback the parents are likely to be able to understand and value during the summary and discussion (feedback) session. The assessor aims to frame feedback in ways parents are able to handle and take in without feeling overwhelmed. In the upcoming example, the stepfather makes the connection that David can be helpful and have a positive attitude when he receives attention from people who care about him. He describes how he and the mother need to spend more time with him. Brad, believing that the parents are prepared to be gently pushed, continues this thought and makes explicit the belief that both seemed to be echoing: David is cooperative when he feels cared about.

Stepfather: Talking about this subject about connecting, I noticed that David connects better with the other family, our neighbors, because they give him attention, they give him the time. I think we should do that, you know we're the parents; we should give him the connection. Spend time with him. Honestly I feel like maybe I was too strict.

Mother: Yeah I was going to say that.

Stepfather: I mean just loosen up. You know and give him time and attention. That's what he wants I think. I mean he's not a bad kid. Once you give him attention and the time of day.

Assessor: And he'll return that to you. Like you said, he'll return that kindness you gave to him in terms of being cooperative. I think that's one of the main goals you guys came here with was: “He's not following rules, he's not returning what we're giving to him. We're giving him this house, we're giving him this space, he's not returning that to us.” I think you're starting to see that when you give him that physical time and physical attention that he's starting to return some of that to you. I think that's neat. Are you guys seeing that?

Stepfather: Yeah, I see that.

This example illustrated how David's parents grew in their understanding of his need for positive attention and the relation that it had to his behavior. Because Brad was aware of this growth, he would likely plan to include this information in the feedback session as it is probable that David's parents will be amenable to this idea, as they helped make the connection. In general, it is much more powerful when the parents weave together their new understanding than when the assessor attempts to do it for them. This is a key distinction between TA and traditional assessment.

Technique 13: Fostering trust between parents and the assessor(s). Throughout the work with the parents, as they observe and react to their child in the testing sessions, the observing assessor seeks to foster an alliance with the parents based on trust. By collaborating with the parents during the process, eliciting reactions from the parents, and interjecting new perspectives, the assessor comes to be seen as a trusted, expert consultant, who is respectful of the parents' views but helpful in suggesting new ways of thinking and being. This trust building occurs as the assessor approaches the parents with a nonjudgmental stance and repeatedly validates and empathizes with their concerns about their child as well as what they are learning about their child and themselves through the assessment. And again, the one-assessor model is well posed to build and foster trust throughout the follow-up consultations.

Fostering trust was demonstrated through many of the previous examples. In the following example, David's parents observed him responding to sentence prompts as part of the sentence completion exercise. Melissa had just asked David what he needed most and David replied that it was “a house without arguing.”

Stepfather: She asked him what do you need most. He said a house with no arguing.

Mother: Is that what he said?

Stepfather: Yeah.

Brad: That's pretty powerful.

Stepfather and Mother: Yeah

Brad: To me that sounds positive because he wants what you want, which to me is great. I mean, it hurts a little bit, but it also means that he's on the same page for you guys for what you all want. Everybody wants the same thing.

Mother: I guess so.

Brad: What did you think about the whole exercise?

Mother: Very good.

Stepfather: It's interesting. I liked the questions.

Building on the established trust, Brad empathically acknowledged that it might have been difficult for them to hear David say that he wanted a house with less arguing, but underscored the positive aspects of David's statement, in that it suggested that everyone in the family has similar wishes. In addition, Brad further demonstrated his respect for their point of view by once again eliciting their beliefs about the exercise and their son's responses.

Summary: Intervening With David's Parents "Behind the Mirror"

We have described and illustrated the two-assessor live video feed method of parent observation with a case from TAP, organized by the 13 techniques. We also have indicated how the techniques can be used with the one-assessor model. As hopefully is apparent, the techniques overlap and work together; they are not linear in nature, but rather transactional. We demonstrated that the assessor strives to build and maintain a trusting, supportive environment for the observing parents. This trust allows the assessor to naturally obtain current and background information about the child and family, in context. As the parents are educated about our tests and other child assessment methods, the assessor aims to encourage curiosity and psychological mindedness in the parents. The assessor observes and works with parent reactions and interactions, validates and confronts parental perceptions, and supports new parental understandings and shifts. Systemic and contextual thinking is encouraged, and the assessor becomes alert to how ready the parents are to engage in change. Their perceived readiness is key to planning the next steps of the TA-C; the family intervention session, parent summary and discussion (feedback) session, and the child feedback session (see Tharinger et al., 2012, for the carry through to the intervention and feedback sessions with this case).

Research Findings

For all TAP cases, we systematically collected pre and post quantitative research data, as well as qualitative data through interviews. Although we can speak to overall outcome and change for each case, the nature of the design does not enable us to determine the relative impact of the different steps of TA-C on outcome and change. That is, we cannot separate the impact of the initial interview, testing sessions, intervention session, and feedback sessions. Thus, our findings are limited in terms of quantifying the independent contribution of the "behind the mirror" process with parents. However, it is worth noting that across the TAP cases, when asked in interviews about what affected them the most across the process of the assessment, many parents indicated that it was the opportunity to observe their child, as was the case for David's mother (see later). Future research is needed to detect component effects of TA-C. With this limitation in mind, we share the mother's research findings. The stepfather did not complete postassessment research measures.

Our research findings across multiple measures and interviews indicated that the TA-C had a positive impact on the mother's perception of David. She reported that she was pleased with her experience of the assessment. The assessment process helped the mother to see David's sadness and develop empathy for him, in spite of her anger toward him, and led to improvements in her relationship with her son. Specifically, the mother

reported an increase in positive feelings toward David, a decrease in negative feelings, and improved overall family communication. On the Behavior Assessment System for Children, Second Edition (BASC-2; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2002), she indicated that David was showing significantly fewer overall behavioral problems, including fewer internalizing and externalizing symptoms. On the Parents' Experience of Assessment Survey (Austin, 2010), David's mother indicated that she had a positive, collaborative relationship with the assessment team. She further stated that she had learned new ways to work with David and that the assessment process had helped her develop an increased awareness of the systemic causes of David's behavior.

The mother highlighted the importance of the live video feed as the component of the TA-C that contributed most to her better understanding of David. The following narrative is a sample from the final research interview with the mother and is included here to describe the mother's experience of the assessment:

Interviewer: What about the assessment was most important in helping you come to a new understanding of David?

Mother: I think that the stories that he told to the inkblots. He described his feelings he had inside, the instances that happened to him, why he felt that way. And drawing the pictures, I think most of the pictures helped him describe his feelings about himself and the people and why he felt that way. That better described some surprising things about him.

Interviewer: OK. What surprised you the most about the assessment?

Mother: I was really surprised—it seemed like he focused a lot on negativity. Like a lot of his stories were negative.

Interviewer: So it was surprising to see that they were about negative things?

Mother: Well it seemed like everything, he made everything negative. You know that he—there's so much hurt, but I didn't realize the extent of hurt he was feeling. Especially the part, I guess, not belonging, feeling like he doesn't belong.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

TA-C strives to provide parents with an accurate, coherent, compassionate, and useful understanding of their child and family, new or renewed empathy for their child, and the motivation to make positive changes. These are the goals through all steps of TA-C, including initial interview, testing, intervention, and feedback sessions. Most distinctive to the child assessment process is the method used in TA-C of inviting parents to observe their child's testing sessions and communicating with parents as they observe their child's testing sessions in vivo or shortly thereafter. This method can be implemented by placing the parents in the corner of the testing room to observe and checking in with them afterward or at breaks, by inviting parents to observe and discuss behind a one-way mirror, or by locating parents in an adjacent room in front of a live video feed to observe and process. One- or two-assessor models can utilize these variations. We appreciate that most assessments in clinical practice will be conducted by a sole assessor. In our experience, the options of parents being in the corner of the room, behind an observing mirror, or watching a live video feed, immediately or delayed, with follow-up parent consultations with the sole assessor, can all be implemented to good results. The case presented here utilized the two-assessor model with live video feed, allowing us to represent perhaps the fullest use of the techniques. Future

research would do well to describe the effective use through one-assessor models.

We close by again acknowledging that the ideas presented in this article might be jarring and even threatening to some assessors. TA–C (like the TA model in general) represents a paradigm shift from traditional psychological assessment, where psychological tests are primarily seen as aiding in communicating about clients and planning and evaluating treatments. In TA, assessment serves these same purposes, but also is seen as a brief therapeutic intervention (Finn & Tonsager, 1997). Assessors not previously familiar with the TA model might find this to be quite a leap. TA–C goes a step further and conceptualizes psychological assessment of children as a potentially powerful family systems intervention (Finn, 1997). Our emphasis on working with parents, clearly reflected in this article, is grounded in our belief and experience that the best way to improve children’s lives is help their major caregivers and attachment figures develop an accurate, coherent, compassionate, and useful conceptualization of who their children are and how to bring out the best in them. For assessors used to focusing on children as individuals, this change in perspective could be disorienting and it might require the development of a number of skills (i.e., competence in adult or family therapy) that previously were not emphasized. To assist assessors in trying out the TA–C model, and specifically, the “behind the mirror” techniques, we emphasize that (1) it is wise to make changes slowly and see what happens, (2) it is quite reasonable to take only part of the techniques described here instead of trying to implement all at once, and (3) it is best if the techniques are adjusted to fit with each setting, client, and assessor. We encourage assessors to experiment with the methods of TA–C and explore the impact of bringing parents out of the waiting room and into the observing room.

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