

Education and Therapy: A Model of Levels of Family Involvement

In an article first published in 1995, William Doherty addresses the issue of how to distinguish between education and therapy when working with families. He recognizes that in the field of parent and family education, intellectual awareness and feelings cannot be separated. An effective educational group is often emotionally therapeutic; likewise, therapy frequently involves some cognitive learning. He therefore places the two concepts on a continuum, which he divides into five levels of intensity and involvement with families.

Level One - Minimal Emphasis on Family

At this level, the same information is provided to all families. Parents are expected to cooperate and support the professionals. This level of involvement is often found in hospitals, schools and other organizations that deal with children and work with parents but that are not necessarily family-focussed.

Level Two - Information and Advice

Doherty classifies speakers' presentations and one-time workshops at Level Two. The speaker provides information, usually geared to the needs of the audience and often in an interactive format that invites questions, opinions and discussion. This format has the advantage of reaching many people at once. This is a low-risk environment where the emphasis is on content and people do not usually discuss their feelings in any depth. Such events may stimulate parents to seek further opportunities to explore their parenting style; however, on their own, they rarely result in meaningful change.

Level Three - Feelings and Support

At Level Three, the facilitator provides information and initiates activities related to knowledge and skills, as in Level Two. In addition, the facilitator encourages participants to share their personal feelings and stories relevant to the topics discussed. This level of work typically occurs in ongoing groups or parenting "courses" where mutual support and trust has time to grow. Participants talk about the stresses of everyday family life, but the facilitator does not probe for traumatic personal experiences. For example, if a group member reveals past abuse, the facilitator acknowledges the disclosure in a caring way and offers an appropriate referral, but healing the abuse does not become the focus of the group.

Doherty calls Level Three "the optimal level of intensity for most ongoing parent and family education activities." He notes, however, a drawback associated with Level Three: certain parents have intense needs that cannot be handled in such a group. When people come to a parenting group expecting to focus on prevention, they may not be ready or willing to take on more deep-rooted problems. Some group members may resent the time spent on one person's problems. Others may feel threatened or frightened by the intensity of the feelings that surface. In either case, the facilitator at Level Three must find a balance between, on the one hand, encouraging people to express their feelings and, on the other, establishing limits to the depth of self-disclosure.

Level Four - Brief Focussed Intervention

At Level Four, the facilitator does all the things that are included in Levels Two and Three, but in addition, there is a planned intervention, based on an assessment and a clear contract with parents to engage in more intensive work. Parents come to the group to change an already identified problem with their parenting. These are groups with particular situations, for example, conflict with an ex-spouse about parenting styles, having children with special needs, a history of family violence, involvement with child protection or mental health services. The focus is on problem-solving about issues related to parenting, not on marital disputes or mental health problems of the adults involved. Group members understand from the beginning that they will spend considerable time exploring individual parents' issues, with the expectation that everyone will get a turn.

Doherty observes that professionals in the field of parent and family education are increasingly being asked to work with families that have more intense needs. The boundaries between Levels Three and Four have a tendency to get blurred when complex family dynamics and other issues get added to questions about parenting. Doherty emphasizes that Level Four work in a parenting group should stay brief. If the interventions suggested are not helping the family resolve its problems, the facilitator should make a referral for further counselling. Work at Level Four requires close collaboration with family therapists and other professionals, as well as with the families.

Level Five - Family Therapy

Level Five goes beyond what can be called parent and family education. The therapist and the family contract to explore whatever issues are necessary to get to the heart of the problem. The therapist will work with the family through intense personal distress, interpersonal conflict and ambivalence or resistance to change. Families know, when they see a therapist, that this is not an educational program, though they may indeed learn things as they go along. Special skills and training are required to work at this level.

Adapted from an article by William Doherty, "Boundaries between Parent and Family Education and Family Therapy: The Levels of Family Involvement Model," first published in *Family Relations*. 1995, 44, 353-357. Reprinted in Bredehoft and Walchinski, (2003) (Eds.) *Family Life Education: Integrating Theory and Practice*. Minneapolis: National Council on Family Relations.