Skills Training for Working with Intense Teens in Residential Treatment

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Abstract

Adlerian parent education courses teach parents skills to help children and adolescents become independent, confident, capable adults. While children are in residential treatment settings, youth care workers take on the role of the parent. It is important to train both the parents and the youth care workers to produce the best outcomes. Several research studies were reviewed to support the positive outcome of Adlerian parent education programs. An experiential project was developed specifically to train youth care workers on the same concepts presented in Adlerian parent education courses. The information and examples were modified to fit the treatment setting. Participants of the youth care worker training received valuable skills to help them with current issues of concern, and tools to help them excel in their jobs. Incorporation of these skills into the current program will provide students with a smooth transition home, and continued success in their lives.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ..................................................................................................................2  
Table of Contents ..................................................................................................3  
Introduction ..........................................................................................................4  
  Introduction to the Problem ..................................................................................4  
  Statement of the Problem ...................................................................................5  
  Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................5  
  Significance of the Study ....................................................................................5  
  Definition of Terms ..............................................................................................5  
Literature Review ...................................................................................................7  
  Summary .............................................................................................................13  
Methodology ..........................................................................................................13  
  Design of the Project ..........................................................................................14  
  Target Population ...............................................................................................14  
  Project Development .........................................................................................14  
Description of Project Implemented ....................................................................15  
Summary of Outcome ............................................................................................16  
  Personal Evaluation of the Project .....................................................................16  
  Participants Evaluation of the Project ...............................................................17  
  How Project Could be Improved Based on Outcome ..........................................17  
Future Plans for Use of the Project, Summary & Conclusion .............................18
Skills Training for Working with Intense Teens in Residential Treatment

Adlerian parent education courses teach parents skills such as how to run family meetings, how to use encouragement to build self-esteem, and how to use logical discipline. These skills help at-risk, dependent adolescents become independent and capable adults (Bettner & Lew, 1990). Research has shown that utilization of Adlerian principles produces desirable changes in the behavior of children (Berrett, 1975). While adolescents reside in residential treatment, youth care workers play the role of the parents. Therefore, it is equally important for youth care workers to be trained on the same concepts as the parents to achieve the best outcome for the child.

Introduction to the Problem

An abundance of research studies strongly support Adlerian parent education programs (Burnett, 1988). When children are taken out of the home and placed in residential treatment facilities, parent education is an important component of treatment. Research also indicates that many families have high levels of risk and low levels of parenting skills at the time of admission (Griffith et al., 2009). Parent training is very effective at generating more positive perceptions of the child’s behavior, and more authoritative parenting (Farooq, Jeffeerson, & Fleming, 2005).

Many youth care workers have not had training in Adlerian parent education. Adlerian techniques provide staff members with an understanding of students’ behavior and misbehavior. It teaches staff members solutions to everyday problems. Staff members learn how to create cooperation within the group. Incorporating Adlerian techniques into residential programming produces responsible, caring, and likeable adolescents (Lew & Bettner, 2000). The resulting change in atmosphere also reduces the stress level of youth care workers and provides higher job satisfaction.
Statement of the Problem

Most current Adlerian parent education courses are geared toward parents in the home environment. While youth care workers are parenting adolescents in treatment, it is important to design an Adlerian parent education program geared toward this setting, with specific examples that directly relate to life in residential treatment. Only one research study relating to the use of Adlerian parent education training in an adolescent day hospital was found (Snow, Kern, & Penick, 1997).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to illustrate the effectiveness of Adlerian parent education programs by increasing the use of the democratic parenting style and producing strong parent-child relationships. Youth care workers in residential treatment settings will benefit from learning Adlerian parenting skills for use with the student population with whom they work. Adlerian parenting skills are highly beneficial to anyone working with children.

Significance of the Study

All of the studies examined showed Adlerian parent education courses to be highly effective. Overall, Adlerian methods were more effective than any other parent education courses reviewed. By the time children are placed in residential treatment, the situation is critical. Training both youth care workers and parents on Adlerian skills will provide the best opportunity for future success.

Definition of Terms

Birth order: How the child sees his or her place in the family. Adlerian birth order positions include only, oldest, second, middle, and youngest.
**Authoritarian:** A parenting style that provides rules and guidelines. These parents expect rules to be obeyed without explanation. They often yell to make children listen, and use punishment and rewards.

**Democratic:** A parenting style that provides rules and guidelines in a manner of mutual respect. These parents offer support, teach responsibility by showing respect, and offer children opportunities to make their own decisions.

**Permissive:** A parenting style that is nonresponsive and lenient. These parents rarely discipline, are nurturing and communicative, and act more as friends than parents.

**Uninvolved:** A parenting style in which the parent meets the child’s basic needs, but is otherwise detached from the child’s life.

**Four goals of misbehavior:** Children use attention, power, revenge, and displaying inadequacy to meet their need to belong.

**Reflective Listening:** A communication technique that helps the child feel heard and respected.

**I-messages:** A communication technique that communicates respect and tells how the person feels without blaming or labeling.

**Encouragement:** A gift that helps children to feel capable, worthwhile, and noticed.

**Praise:** A reward that is earned that teaches children how to please others.

**Discipline:** A technique that guides students in making decisions and becoming responsible. The consequence fits the behavior and shows respect for the child.

**Punishment:** A technique that teaches children to fear adults. Punishment hurts the relationship, and stimulates revenge.

**Natural consequences:** Consequences in which the lesson is learned naturally; adults do not need to do anything.
Logical consequences: Consequences that need to be created. They must match the behavior and they must allow the child to learn from their mistakes.

Literature Review

Several research studies explored the effectiveness of Adlerian parent education programs. Some studies also suggested the implementation and effectiveness of incorporating specific activities into Adlerian parent education programs. Preferences for parent education, the relationship between parenting style and personality/lifestyle traits are discussed.

One study researched a 10-week experience in a Mother’s Study Group based on the principles from the book, *Children the Challenge*, by Rudolf Dreikurs. It evaluated the mothers’ attitudes and behaviors, and the children’s attitudes. The study emphasized how parental behavior utilizing Adlerian principles produced desirable changes in the behavior of their children (Berrett, 1975).

Parents who participated in a different Adlerian Mother Study Group scored the highest in household happiness when compared to a Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) Group, and a Behavior Modification Group. All three groups showed significant influence on maternal happiness, as well as an attitude change resulting in a significantly more liberal attitude toward the freedom of children (Schultz, Nystul & Law, 1980). In a different study of these three groups, The PET group yielded the best results in regards to encouraging the child to be independent by stating his or her views and accepting responsibility for the task. The Behavior Modification Group did not fall far behind in these areas. The author speculates that the Adlerian Mother Study Group fell short in this study due to not implementing role-paying and practicing skills during group meetings, as did the other groups (Schultz & Nystul, 1980). These results show the importance of implementing these components into parent education courses.
In another study, 5 behavioral, 9 Adlerian, and 8 Parent-Effectiveness Training (PET) groups were evaluated to determine the most effective outcomes for parents. The research found that the Adlerian parenting programs showed significantly better outcomes. The behavioral and PET approaches received highly critical reviews, though many reported significant results. In terms of process and outcome, Adlerian groups yielded the best results (Krebs, 1986).

The Adlerian-based parent education program STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) showed significant success rates in four different studies. One study evaluated two models of Adlerian parent education programs: parent study groups and STEP. The aim of both groups was to teach parents principles such as: the four goals of misbehavior; understanding that a misbehaving child is discouraged; replacing reward and punishment with natural and logical consequences; and learning to hold family councils. Some of the instruments used include the Child Behavior Checklist and the Parental Attitude Research Instrument. The research studies preferred the Adlerian parent study group to STEP (Burnett, 1988). Considering the similarities in the material, it may be speculated that the instructor’s teaching style had an impact on the results.

Another study researched the effects of a nine-week course in STEP on parental attitudes. The Attitude toward the Freedom of Children Scale and the revised Parent Attitude Research Instrument were administered to 28 Australian mothers. Fourteen mothers attended the STEP course, while the other 14 were placed on a waiting list for STEP. The results of the study showed that the mothers who participated in the STEP course were more democratic in their child rearing attitudes, significantly lowered their negative verbal interactions with their children, and significantly lowered their level of strictness with their children (Nystul, 1982).
A third study of STEP was conducted to determine the success rates of the Adlerian parent education program among adolescents in the day hospitalization treatment program and when interacting with their families. The results indicated that the STEP program had a significantly positive effect on the overall level of treatment provided to adolescents. The high success rate correlates with changes being made in the home environment, and is congruent with the structured, supportive and encouraging environment the adolescent experienced while in treatment. Adolescents whose parents did not participate in STEP had lower success rates, as their home environments had not changed during the treatment process (Snow, Kern, & Penick, 1997). This is the only research article found that studied the use of an Adlerian parent education program among youth care workers.

The fourth study was conducted on thirty-one married couples who participated in a study on the effectiveness of parenting courses on family relationships. Eight couples participated in either PET (Parent Effectiveness Training) or STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) with their spouses. The other twenty-three couples had only one member participate. The courses were both viewed as highly beneficial, with no preference expressed for the PET or STEP program. The success rate was viewed as equal among couples whether both members participated in the course or only one participated. Many couples also felt that their relationships improved after completing the course (Noller & Taylor, 1989).

Adlerian parenting skills are viewed as a beneficial training component to mothers who are participating in substance abuse treatment programs. The Partners in Parenting (PIP) program teaches behavioral approaches, child development, communication, guidance and discipline, and problem-solving skills to parents. The women who participated in PIP reported improved attitudes toward parenting strategies and reduced family conflict. They felt more confident in
their parenting roles (Knight, Bartholomew, & Simpson, 2007). Addressing parenting issues within the context of treatment is an effective method to treat the person as a whole being, versus only addressing the substance abuse.

Eighteen parent-child pairs participated in the study of the effectiveness of STP (Survival Training for Parents), an Adlerian parenting program that encourages positive parental attitudes, increases self-esteem, and reduces anxiety in preadolescent children. The STP program was presented in six 2½-hour sessions. The program was determined to be effective in improving parental attitudes, and in understanding both themselves and their children. The level of self-esteem among the preadolescents also increased (Huhn & Zimpfer, 1989).

An Adlerian-based parent education program, Active Parenting, was studied to evaluate the effects of parenting attitudes, parent-child relationship problems, and family system functioning. Parents who were trained in Active Parenting improved their attitudes toward physical punishment, seeing it as unnecessary, and parent-child relationship problems, viewing them as readily resolvable. These parents also developed more appropriate attitudes toward children as a result of the program. The program had a positive, but insignificant effect on family system functioning (Fashimpar, 2000).

Active Parenting Today and Active Parenting of Teens, both Adlerian-based parent education programs, were studied to measure the parents’ perception of their children’s behavior following the completion of the program. The results showed that parents saw a significantly positive change in their perceptions of child behaviors. Participants also reported an increase in positive interactions between the parents and children (Mullis, 1999).

Another study was completed to determine the impact of parent education groups on family environment. Ninety-three parents participated in this study. All of the participants
adapted a more democratic parenting style following completion of the group. They reported a significant change in the cohesion of their families. The authors concluded that “Behavior change in children can be accompanied by employing democratic principles.” (Campbell & Sutton, 1983).

Another study showed that over a six-week period, an Adlerian video-based parent education program was successful in generating more positive perceptions of the child’s behavior among African American parents. The program also generated more authoritative parenting perceptions vs. authoritarian or passive perceptions (Farooq, Jefferson, & Fleming).

A study examining parenting styles in relation to Individual Psychology’s model of parenting also showed successful results. This study linked current parenting style research to the Adlerian parenting model, Individual Psychology. The study offers suggestions for therapists and parent educators to present current research as supportive to classic Adlerian theory. The current research on parenting courses supports the Adlerian model as being highly effective. (Gfroerer, Kern, & Curlette, 2004).

Research suggests that the authoritative parenting style protects children from dangerous and risky behavior. A study was conducted to see the impact of Adlerian-based parenting classes on self-reported parental behavior. One-thousand-two-hundred-fifty participants in the United States and Canada who had completed an Adlerian parent education course were evaluated for this study. Researchers wanted to determine whether the Adlerian-based classes influenced parental behavior to adopt a more authoritative parenting style. Parents and guardians reported statistically significant changes in their children’s behavior. These newly authoritative parents were able to set clearer limits, increased their sense of positive connection, and decreased harshness (McVitte & Best, 2009).
In Israel, an innovative Adlerian parent education program was developed by the Ministry of Education, and conducted at 4 elementary schools. The course was taught to both parents and teachers, and was designed to change communication patterns, improve parent-child relationships, and transform the classroom culture. Results indicated that the program successfully improved both parenting and teaching skills (Prinz, Arkin, & Gelkoph, 2008). This study shows that the information taught in the course is helpful not only to parents, but also adults who work with children in other settings, such as schools.

The studies above show overwhelming support for the concepts taught in Adlerian parent education programs. Another study of 395 low-income, culturally diverse parents of elementary school children researched parent preferences, behaviors, and beliefs toward school-based parent education programs. Parents with higher levels of education were found to be generally more active in parent education events. Their beliefs about parenting most closely aligned to those taught in Adlerian-based parent education programs. Few racial differences in regards to parent education programs were noted (Wood & Baker, 1999).

Role playing and participating in activities during Adlerian parent education programs produced the best outcomes (Schultz & Nystul, 1980). The “most memorable observation” technique and “early recollections” are valuable activities to incorporate into Adlerian parent education courses. The most memorable observation employs autobiographical memory in the process of understanding the belief system of parents, and how the belief system relates to parenting style. A researcher examined various case studies, and determined the technique to be highly effective in creating an empathetic bond between the child and parent (Walton, 1998). By using early recollections shared by parents during Adlerian parent education courses, insight that explains the current thoughts and actions of the parents is achieved. The use of early
recollections is a successful tool to help parents abandon their former methods of parenting, and adopt more effective parent child-interactions (Mansager & Volk, 1995).

Understanding the relationship between personality lifestyle attributes, psychological birth order, and parenting style provides useful insight for therapists and parent educators. A study was conducted with 80 adolescents from the southeastern part of the United States and their parents to support this statement. The study found that Adlerian personality lifestyle attributes and psychological birth order are strongly intertwined with parenting style (Gfroerer et al., 2008).

**Summary**

A large pool of research supports Adlerian parent education courses as highly effective in producing desired change. Several models of the courses exist, but all teach like concepts, and hold similar values and belief systems. Reviewing these various sources supports the projected success of the experiential project of teaching the course to youth care workers.

**Methodology**

Youth care workers benefit from receiving training in Adlerian parenting techniques in working with at-risk youth in residential treatment. The use of examples of real events where the skills have been effectively used in the past, as well as the incorporation of true scenarios, gives staff members an opportunity to practice the new skills, provides a better understanding of the skills, and provides confidence to begin using them right away. Encouragement, follow-up training, as well as availability for daily consultation and feedback, helps build staff member’s confidence in utilizing the skills.

**Design of the project.** The project is designed in the form of a PowerPoint presentation with activities and case studies implemented throughout. Providing youth care workers an
opportunity to practice the skills learned during the training, results in participants feeling more confident in using the concepts with students. The case studies are designed to address common youth interactions that the staff members experience, and are based on actual situations that have occurred in residential treatment.

**Target population.** The skills taught during the training session are valuable to anyone who works with teenagers. This training was designed specifically for direct care staff members who work with at-risk youth in residential treatment settings. Parents of the youth are encouraged to participate in a similar Adlerian-based parent education program. Teaching youth care workers the same concepts taught to parents, facilitates easier transitions to home for both parents and their children.

**Project development.** Most Adlerian parent education programs are focused directly on parents. As youth care workers act as the children’s parents while they reside in residential treatment facilities, training them in the same Adlerian concepts taught to parents helps create a safe, loving, and encouraging environment while the children are away from their families. The concepts, however, need to be presented in a way that makes sense in a residential treatment environment where several unrelated young people with behavior issues are housed together as a result of not being able to function at home. Implementing role plays and practicing skills during training yields the best results, and provides staff members with confidence to implement the skills. (Schultz & Nystul, 1980).

**Description of Project Implemented**

The project was designed to equip staff with tools to provide a fun, safe, nurturing environment for the youth population they serve. The project illustrates that youth often view youth care workers as their favorite, highly animated toy (Glasser, 1998). The staff members are
shown that the intense child’s brain is less organized, faster, and more intense than an average child’s brain. The brain is looking for an energy match. Where the child’s energy match occurs is where the behavior will be repeated (Feigal, 2008). Youth care workers are taught to recognize their own parenting style, the parenting style with which they were raised, and their personality traits based on birth order. In addition, youth care workers learn the outcomes of each parenting style, and how to achieve the best results with the adolescents with whom they work.

Participants in the training learn that all behavior is goal-directed, and that students misbehave to move from a “felt minus” to a “perceived plus” emotional position (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1990). Teenagers highly value peer relationships and a sense of belonging (Curlette & Kern, 2010). Teenagers try to belong in four common ways: attention, power, revenge, and displaying inadequacy. By understanding these goals, youth care workers can help students meet their needs in useful ways, and guide students toward more productive behavior (Dinkmeyer, 1998).

Youth care workers learn how to communicate respect and encouragement through the use of reflective listening and I-messages. The value of encouragement is emphasized, as well as the distinction between encouragement and praise. Youth care workers learn that many problems can and should be solved by students. This empowers them to make their own decisions, and learn about their goals and values. To determine who should solve the problem, skills are taught to help determine who owns the problem (Dinkmeyer, 1998).

Many people were raised with views that punishment is an effective way to solve problems. Youth care workers learn the difference between discipline and punishment, and how to use discipline in a way that communicates respect and educates students, helps them become more responsible, and provides them with an opportunity to learn from the consequences of
misbehavior. Some consequences occur naturally, and staff members do not need to create consequences. For example, if a student misses breakfast, he or she will experience the natural consequence of being hungry during school. Other situations are best handled by creating a logical consequence that matches the behavior. An example of a logical consequence is if the student breaks something, he or she should either fix it or replace it. Natural and logical consequences help students learn responsibility (Dinkmeyer, 1998). Adlerian parent education training has been proven effective in improving participant’s attitudes, understanding themselves and their children, and increasing adolescent levels of self-esteem (Huhn & Zimpfer, 1989).

**Summary of Outcome**

Participants seemed engaged in the training. They asked questions and participated in the activities. They appeared to agree with the Adlerian concepts and valued the resources provided to help them succeed in their positions. If these tools are used consistently, the outcome will be a safe, encouraging, respectful environment where adolescents feel confident to use the tools they have learned and return to their home community with continued successes.

**Personal evaluation of the project.** The project went extremely well. I received many compliments. I truly believe in what was presented, and it showed in the presentation. The delivery took longer than I had anticipated, but this was due to practicing the concepts, giving feedback, and interacting with the participants of the training. In fact, after one hour, I let staff members know if they needed to leave, as this was the anticipated time period, they were more than welcome to do so. I let them know that I would be happy to meet with them at a later time to cover any concepts they had missed. It felt very good that the majority of the participants stayed for the duration of the presentation, and most of those who left did so because they had to work.
Participants’ evaluation of the project. The youth care workers found the concepts presented in the experiential project useful in working with the youth they serve. Specifically, staff members have been asking for tools to work with the attention-seeking adolescents. Participants expressed that they feel more confident in working with youth when they are displaying intense behaviors. Suggestions were made to allow additional time for the training, or subsequent trainings, as more material was covered than could comfortably fit into the allowed one-hour time frame. Several participants told me that the presentation was excellent, and that they learned a great deal. One participant stated that it was one of the best trainings she had ever seen. I later heard from others who did not attend that they heard it was wonderful. During the presentation, one participant mentioned that one of the case studies was a bit confusing, and he had to read it a few times to understand it.

How the project could be improved based on outcome. Research has shown that by incorporating early recollections into Adlerian parent education courses, parents are successful in abandoning their former methods, instead using a more effective means to interact with children (Mansager & Volk, 1995). By splitting the presentation into segments and training on specific portions at separate times, more time would be allotted to incorporate early recollections or expand on the concepts presented. Video segments could also be incorporated into the presentation. Additionally, modifying the confusing case study would help to clarify its points. Adding the importance of encouraging co-workers as well as youth would also be beneficial.

Future Plans for Use of the Project, Summary & Conclusion

The project will be used for annual staff trainings. The project may also be incorporated into initial training classes for new youth care workers. The opportunity to present the training at
the Minnesota Council of Child Caring Agency (MCCCA) annual youth worker conference also exists.

The project provides youth care workers with valuable tools that work with at-risk student populations. Participants learn about themselves to help them better understand adolescents. Working with intense children is not black and white in nature. Each student has different goals and values, and must be worked with accordingly. Encouragement is a crucial component of the work with all children, and is particularly crucial in the work with those in residential treatment.

Creating the experiential project was a wonderful experience. It is a valuable training tool for direct care staff. By helping youth care workers gain a democratic parenting style, the youth will progress through the residential treatment program with confidence, support, and encouragement.
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