Adlerian Parent Training

A Master’s Project

Presented to

The Faculty of Adler Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

By:

Mark Canney

Chair: Marina Bluvshtein

Reader: Lisa Venable

March 22, 2017
Abstract

Individual Psychology has a rich tradition of parent education that stretching back to the parent training centers established by Adler himself. In life, we seek training for many of the endeavors upon which we embark. Yet, what task is more important than the upbringing of our children? Rudolf Dreikurs pointed out that a misbehaving child is a discouraged child. Therefore, the fundamental task of the parent is to establish courage in children so they may face the multitude of challenges they will face in life. This paper examines approaches of Adlerian inspired parent training programs and will conclude with a brief discussion of how Adler's can be propagated in this modern age.
Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MOVEMENT TOWARD COOPERATION</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE PROBLEM</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT IS ACTIVE PARENTING?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTIVE PARENTING GOALS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSITIVE DISCIPLINE: AN ANSWER TO CRITICS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSITIVE DISCIPLINE GOALS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARENT ENCOURAGEMENT PROGRAM</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE CRUCIAL C’S</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MULTICULTURAL APPLICABILITY</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A NEW WAVE OF PARENT TRAINING</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adlerian Parent Training

Movement toward Cooperation

Evidence demonstrates the natural movement of individuals toward the cooperative forming of communities. According to Hamlin, Wynn, Bloom and Mahajan (2011) infants as young as four months of age show a preference toward those who exhibit prosocial behavior as opposed to antisocial conduct (Hamlin et al., 2011). This was demonstrated by observing four-month-old infants selectively reaching for helpers who exhibited behaviors such as sharing and helping others complete a task as opposed to those who displayed antisocial behaviors such as hording or disrupting tasks. The infants preferred the company of the cooperative individuals. Four and five-month-old infants uniformly preferred individuals who acted kindly towards others regardless of the target status. However, infants as young as eight months of age showed a preference for not only those who acted in prosocial ways towards others, but also for those who acted negatively towards those who displayed antisocial behaviors. Basically, infants will reach towards those who have acted positively towards others (whether directly or by correcting negative behavior of others) and will avoid those who have acted negatively towards others.

There is considerable advantage in the ability to make social discernments. More can be achieved through helping others, yet becoming involved with others opens oneself to being harmed or cheated. Naturally, it becomes advantageous to remember behaviors as well as to be motivated to interact with individuals based on those actions. Infants have an innate desire to survive and quickly learn that adults respond to crying. The infant can perceive her survival is tied up in a relationship with others as she senses her needs are met when the adult engages. This particular social awareness is what creates our striving to belong and find a place amongst others. Crying is the first step towards survival. It is from here; the cooperative dance begins as
the parent helps the infant discover her courage and the infant searches for ways it can effectively have her needs met.

In the latter half of the infant’s first year, he or she is able to make social judgements based on more than the idea of, “if helpful, then positive; if unhelpful, then negative” (Hamlin et al., 2011). The context in which the behavior is performed begins to take meaningful shape as well. For example, studies performed by Behne, Carpenter, Call and Tomasello (2005) show that infants as young as nine months old are able to understand goal-directed behavior. The researchers demonstrated an infant’s ability to distinguish someone who tries, but is unable to give them a treat from one who intentionally withholds a treat. The former is preferred. This is the beginning of the infant’s subjective interpretation of the world and his place in it. The infant creates a goal and begins to move toward that goal. As the infant grows and develops, these goals morph and change based on the infant’s subjective interpretation of his actions and the result of those actions. The family community multiplies the infant’s knowledge base as he is able to observe the movement of others and the measure of success obtained by them. Behne et al.’s research helps understand from a developmental perspective, the point when the infant begins to differentiate himself as a unique individual with his own goals and his own exceptional creative path toward those goals.

The individual develops a sense of self-worth and realizes her potential only when belonging and contributing to her group (Corsini, 1994). Parents thus play a crucial role in their children’s social-psychological development. Responding to the cry of an infant and meeting his needs shows the parent’s willingness to cooperate. Such is a signal towards the value of cooperatively contributing to the immediate community (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). The infant now has an experiential example of how to belong in a useful way. As Adler said, “We
are not determined by our experiences, but are self-determined by the meaning we give to them; and when we take particular experiences as the basis for our future life, we are almost certain to be misguided to some degree. Meanings are not determined by situations. We determine ourselves by the meanings we ascribe to situations” (Adler, 1932, p. 14).

The Adlerian approach teaches parents how to further develop this relationship. Individual Psychology communication practices can help parents create a cooperative and respectful atmosphere at home, and encourage the child to develop a sense of self, personal responsibility and social connection (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964). This has fascinating implications for parents. The dinner table is an appropriate illustration of this dynamic. A parent finds herself frustrated at her inability to illicit the word, “please” from a child. The child points at a piece of food it wants and with its limited linguistic ability vaguely pronounces its name. Often, the mother will respond, “Say please first.” At this point the interaction can be an opportunity to teach cooperation or allow the child to establish himself in opposition to the mother. If the mother makes a big deal of the situation and creates a power struggle by refusing to give the item without the word please the child may respond in any number of ways, however, none of which would lead the child towards cooperation.

The Behne et al. study demonstrates children have a preference for those who do not intentionally withhold rewards and they gravitate towards those who act kindly to them and others (Behne et al., 2005). The child, according to the Behne et al. (2005) study, knows the parent can easily give him the food without him saying “please”. All the mother can do is present the child with an opportunity to cooperate by asking, “Would you like to say please?” If the child does not say please the mother simply gives him the food and moves on. The mother need not worry the child will never learn manners if the word please is not insisted upon.
Eventually, the child will perceive without understanding all the social knowledge embedded in the word please, what it means, why we say it etc. and will begin to adopt it as his own as he sees others uses for the word in its proper context. However, demanding the word please leads to a different set of possible reactions. The child may very well say the word please but the evidence of these studies suggest that it is not for cooperation, but rather to get what he wants. More often than not, the child will perceive this as an opportunity to defeat the parent’s desires because his wishes for food were just defeated by the parent. Not only are the parent and child put in opposition to each other, the child now has a valuable piece of information as to how he must deal with his parent.

This is not defiance, or bad behavior, but rather an answer to the question of how do I engage; knowing that I need others, but must also protect myself from those who might take advantage and hurt me. The adult is not cooperating but rather controlling, so the child must respond accordingly to protect himself. The child must find a way to defeat those who oppose his desire for cooperation. The child is able to perceive the mother’s clear frustration at his lack of compliance. However, the child’s response has more to do with his lack of understanding concerning the cooperative value of the word please. What seems to be obstinacy on the part of the child is merely his way of protecting himself from a possible, uncooperative foe.

This dynamic is fundamentally at the root of all parent child struggles in their early years. Although the details may be different, the root of the conflict is the same; the adult has an expectation; if the child perceives its cooperative value the child will meet the expectation. If the child views the adult as an uncooperative foe and has identified a way of defeating that foe, the child will respond accordingly.
The Problem

Although cooperation and the establishment of belonging are natural to the child (Behne, et al., 2005), an equally natural awareness of his own inabilities and shortcomings can rapidly lead to discouragement and the development of uncooperative tricks to frustrate parents who the child feels are in opposition to his own will and wellbeing. As Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) discussed, a misbehaving child is a discouraged child. Adler (1924) explained, exaggerated sensitiveness is an expression of the feeling of inferiority. Adler’s concept of organ inferiority elucidates this dynamic. According to Adler, the child sets a goal, a fictitious goal of superiority which will transform his poverty into wealth, his subordination into dominance (Adler, 1914/2003). The dynamic may become tragic. The whole person of the child, biological and psychological, is reaching for the parent, seeking security and help; the infant child is asking, "will you work with me in this endeavor, my nature is to cooperate, is this giant who feeds me a friend or a foe?" As in adult relationships, much if not all hinges on the action based in answer to this question; a friend will be helped, but a foe must ultimately be defeated.

The encouraged child will cooperate with his parents; the discouraged one will seek to defeat them. This is the fundamental dynamic between parents and children. Adlerian Scholars Sherman and Dinkmeyer point us towards the idea that encouragement is the most important technique in behavioral change (Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). An Adlerian definition of encouragement according to G.D. McKay (1976), is a comment which shows acceptance, emphasizes effort, and improvement, appreciates contributions, allows one to evaluate one’s own performance and finally instills faith and confidence (McKay, 1976). A survey of articles by Hitz and Driscoll (1989), concluded that children who receive praise have lower levels of self-confidence. However, students who received encouragement made mistakes, but took ownership
of them and learned from those mistakes without elevated levels of anxiety (Hitz & Driscoll, 1989). Encouragement compares to praise insofar as praise is an expression of another person’s opinion of one’s actions such as; good job, or nice work! Encouragement allows space for the actor to decide the value of his own actions.

The challenge parents and children face in relating to each other is primarily a knowledge problem. Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) understood, children are excellent observers, but horrible interpreters. Children are constantly asking through action, "how do I know if you are you my friend, my ally?" The parent seeks to answer this question in the affirmative by helping the child understand how to let two potentially conflicting parts of his nature work together; the tendency to cooperate and his desire to strive to overcome.

**What is Active Parenting?**

The theory of Individual Psychology was articulated by Alfred Adler and moved forward by Rudolf Dreikurs especially in his work *Children the Challenge*, which he co-authored with Vicki Soltz. It provides parents with a framework to establish their confidence in the cooperative social nature of children. It also equips them with the knowledge that all behavior has a goal and if that goal is understood, the parent, through encouraging action can begin to illuminate understanding in the child concerning the sustainability of that goal towards useful belonging in his community.

Active Parenting as created by Michael Popkin is a key to unlocking this deeply embedded psychic striving; as we will see the word *active* is critical in the description of this approach because much of child learning takes place through the actions of the parents and the movement elicited in the child. Although verbal processing is necessary and useful, Active Parenting helps parents learn the most effective time and place for verbal action (Popkin, 2014b).
Active Parenting provides a way for parents to see child behavior through a different filter. Instead of seeing mischief, the parent is encouraged to see the child’s natural desire to engage, master and improve his environment (Mullis, 1999). The active parent helps the child find encouragement towards establishing cooperation as means toward his desire for mastery.

**Active Parenting Goals**

Active Parenting has identified five key qualities that all children need to succeed in society; these include, but are not limited to: (a) responsibility, (b) cooperation, (c) respect, (d) courage, and (e) self-esteem (Popkin, 2014a). Responsibility, cooperation and respect are cornerstones of parenting as described by Rasmussen in *The Task, Challenges, and Obstacles of Parenting* (Rasmussen, 2014). Courage (arguably cooperation as well) is the cornerstone of Adlerian Psychology, which according to Popkin is defined as the confidence to take a known risk for a known purpose. Finally, there can be no courage without belief in the self, which is fundamental to the concept of self-esteem.

Responsibility is taught by allowing children to experience the consequences of their actions and as a result make better choices in the future. Responsibility equals choice plus consequences. Cooperation is learned by doing things with a spirit of mutual respect and participation with effective and purposeful communication. Courage is best fostered when the child has security in her community and believes she can recover from a failure. Self-esteem is developed through character building based actions, not self-talk hyperbole.

Another important aspect of active parenting is deciphering who owns responsibility for a given problem, parent, child or both. If the parent owns the problem, Active Parenting teaches an escalating disciplinary approach referred to as the FLAC Method. FLAC is an acronym for feelings, limits, alternatives and (logical) consequences. In addition, parents are instructed to
uses I-Messages, firm reminders, logical and natural consequences. When a child owns the problem, parents are taught skills to help the child negotiate the problem effectively (Popkin, 2014a).

**Positive Discipline: An Answer to Critics**

Positive Discipline developed by Dr. Jane Nelson provides a practical answer to a critique often leveled upon Dreikurs seminal work on parenting. The use of logical consequences as prescribed by Dreikurs has at worst been called manipulative and nothing more than a way of smuggling punishment in through the back door (Oryan & Gastil, 2013). Positive Discipline is in part an answer to this critique. It focuses on helping parents maintain a positive and encouraging mindset, because without such, logical consequences can easily descend into veiled punishments. Positive Discipline provides a framework for a parent to purposefully and creatively establish a child’s sense of belonging (Nelson, 1999).

**Positive Discipline Goals**

The goal is to teach children to become responsible, respectful, and resourceful. The first major tenet of Positive Discipline is that "effective discipline helps children feel a sense of connection, belonging and significance” (Nelsen, 1999 p.16). Misbehavior is filtered through the Adlerian premise that a misbehaving child is a discouraged child who has developed a mistaken view of how to achieve his goal of belonging. Belonging has been identified by Baumeister and Leary (1995) as a fundamental need and motivator in human behavior.

The premise, *people do better when they feel better*, is behind a tool called "positive time out" (Nelson, 1999). The purpose of positive time out is to help children as well as adults in times of conflict, to take time to cool off so as to be able to access the rational part of the brain. Calmness makes room for cooperation. Children are encouraged to find a space to which they
can go when they encounter frustration, or emotions they have difficulty handling (Nelsen & Wilkin, 2011). They are also advised to name their space as well as decorate and equip it with things that will help them relax. This non-punitive, democratic discipline strategy fosters a child's sense of belonging because it helps develop the child's private logic "I am valued and my ideas are important in solving conflicts at home and school" (Gfroerer, Nelsen & Kern, 2013).

Encouragement is the second Pillar of the Positive Discipline's approach to caring for children. Encouragement is a continuous process aimed at giving the child a sense of self-respect and a feeling of accomplishment (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964). Becoming an encourager often requires a paradigm shift on the part of the parent as it is not simply the act of giving praise or positive reinforcement. Rather, it is the ability to help the child identify his own level of satisfaction in his work and move forward with the effects of that satisfaction. The goal is to allow the child to determine the value of his own unique contribution. This is often best accomplished by focusing on the process rather than the result.

Through the encouragement process children feel connected and capable. These feelings develop into self-reliance and resiliency over time (Gfroerer et al., 2013). When children feel an internal sense of control in relation to their school work and perceive it is their effort that counts, children seem to be less likely to develop school-related anxieties and are better equipped to cope with school-related stress.

A third Pillar of Positive Discipline approach is the family meeting. Dreikurs and Soltz introduced the family meeting as a means of dealing with problems in the home. The effectiveness of coming together to solve problems hinges on the ability of the individuals to see issues as group challenges to be solved by working together (Gfroerer et al., 2013). Working through problems together leads to cohesiveness and belonging. Nelson identifies eight building
blocks for effective family meetings: Form a circle, practice compliments and appreciations, create an agenda, develop communication skills, learn about separate realities, recognize the four reasons people do what they do (Dreikurs's Goals of Misbehavior), practice role playing and brainstorming, focus on non-punitive solutions (Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn, 2000).

The family meeting fosters encouragement and cooperation, leading to a sense of social support demonstrating problem solving and conflict resolution can be practiced in a safe environment. Also, new coping strategies can be discovered in the company of others and cognitive restructuring occurs when children are in a supportive social environment. Lastly, children are able to experience through participation the strategies their parents use to cope with life's problems.

Responsibility, belonging and coping serve as the final pillars of the Positive Discipline Approach. Dreikurs and Soltz emphasized the importance of children establishing belonging through contribution by performing age appropriate jobs rather than finding their place through disruption and misbehavior. Making chores age appropriate as well as taking the time to train them in the task is critical, otherwise children will become frustrated, discouraged and miss the experiential connection between work and a feeling of contributive belonging. Positive discipline encourages strategies and brainstorming to help the work become more enjoyable such as singing songs or developing family traditions around the chores.

**Parent Encouragement Program**

The Parent Encouragement Program or, PEP was founded in 1982 by Linda Jessup (Jessup, 2015). Based on the work of Adler and Dreikurs PEP promotes understanding the reason for a child’s misbehavior, mutual respects between adults and children, shared responsibility, developing the children’s capabilities, fostering cooperation, social inclusiveness,
and giving back to one’s community. The PEP method focuses on the impact of a democratic approach to parenting rather than a permissive or authoritarian style. Such a methodology emphasizes firm kindness, sound boundaries, clear assertiveness that is neither intrusive nor restrictive, with disciplinary methods that are supportive, not punitive. Alison Gopnik said, “Parents should not aim to be "carpenters" who shape their children to turn out in a particular way, but instead "gardeners" who create a nurturing environment so that their children can flourish in unpredictable ways” (Winerman, 2017, para. 2).

The Crucial C’s

The Crucial Cs are a paradigm created by Amy Lew and Betty Lou Bettner to explain how Individual Psychology views the essential needs of the individual (Curlette & Granville, 2014). The Crucial Cs are useful in explaining how human behavior relates straightforwardly to the mistaken goals of child misbehavior. Lew and Bettner assert, in order to thrive and flourish, people must understand and master the crucial Cs (Bettner & Lew, 1989). The Crucial Cs are: connect, capable, count and courage.

We strive to connect; this begins in childhood as it is discovered that we need others to survive. As we age we are constantly searching for our place in relationships as well as our surrounding communities. We strive to feel capable. Childhood provides us with the opportunity to master the world around us. We develop feelings of inferiority in the face of ever increasing tasks as well as the realization that there are individuals more capable than us. As we grow, our knowledge and capabilities increase and we search for the places we can feel competent and independent. We also want to feel as if we count, our existence matters and are clever enough to make a difference. A child wants to feel as if he or she matters in a unique way. This striving continues into adulthood as we seek out relationships and opportunities
where we can make a mark that is uniquely ours. Finally, *courage* is the summation of our success with the first three Crucial Cs. A courageous person will find healthy and socially useful ways to connect, feel capable and count as an individual. The working out of these three attributes is always imperfect, so we must have the courage to fail. An individual who lacks courage gets caught up in unhealthy, destructive socially useless ways of connecting and feeling as if they count and are capable (Yang, Milliren & Blagen, 2010).

Bettner reminds us misbehavior is a symptom of the child’s discouragement at not having the Crucial Cs met in his life. Punishment therefore, does nothing to amend the misbehavior, rather, it provides a temporary hiatus and further discourages the child, or as Bettner would say, “How can we expect children to do better by making them feel worse.” Misbehavior then is a symptom of an unmet psychological need. It is analogues to the way the body will display the consequence of unmet biological requirements. Misbehavior is a child’s way of communicating what he cannot, displaying a lack of what he does not understand.

Lew and Bettner merge Dreikurs’ Mistaken Goals of Misbehavior with the Crucial Cs to create a resource that helps parents identify the need being made manifest in a child’s misbehavior and what to do about it (Bettner & Lew, 1996). Dreikurs’ mistaken goals serve to illustrate the problem and the Crucial Cs are the solution. Lew and Bettner provide suggestions on what particular beliefs and emotions may be attached to certain behaviors complimenting Dreikurs assertion that what is felt by the parent in reaction to the behavior is the best clue as to the child’s motives behind the behavior (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964). The Crucial Cs, specifically the first three serve as the path for the parent to take in order to meet the child’s needs. This in turn raises the child’s level of courage eventually eliminating the need for the misbehavior.
Multicultural Applicability

The purpose of Adlerian parenting is to prepare children to survive and thrive in the society in which they live, not in any particular social structure. The qualities necessary to survive and thrive in our high-tech multicultural society are very different from those in the autocratic periods in our history (Popkin, 2014a).

Families across the cultural spectrum are more alike than they are different, which speaks to the wide cross cultural success of Active parenting. They all begin with the same basic purpose of parenting, struggle with how to provide the best balance of discipline and support, seek to strengthen their children's character, and look for ways to handle the day to day challenges of parenting (Popkin, 2014a). Success has been found not only in myriad of countries, but also in prisons, women’s shelters, foster homes, parents with disabilities, rich and poor alike.

The approach is successful because it is rooted in an evidence based comprehensive theoretical approach to the human psyche. Most important in the cross-cultural success of Adlerian based parent training is due to the inclusiveness inherent in the Theory of Individual Psychology. To find connection and belonging in the first community of the family is to discover that all communities are ultimately connected and the peace and prosperity of the world depends on such.

A New Wave of Parent Training

Adler’s tradition of parent training is alive and well; it has taken on a number of forms and several organizations have filtered his ideas through their own unique lens in an attempt to further democratize and distill his ideas. As a result, countless families have benefitted and the ideas of mutual respect have helped bring sanity and peace to adult child relationships the world
over. However, new parents, especially millennials face their own unique challenges that educators must find a way to overcome. Training takes time and time is a resource that seems to become scarcer with each generation. Millennial families face unique time constraints, parents are working longer hours and families are often comprised of a single parent (Pew Research Center, 2010). Faced with these limitations, it becomes far too easy to move into a survival mode mindset which leaves little to no room for education and training.

An answer to this problem is the convenient mobility of on demand information. Podcasting has created a way for time starved millennial parents to receive information on the go, but does listening to a podcast while in the car or on a pair of headphones while one does yardwork move us towards the goal of becoming better parents? Fortunately, the research says, yes. Morawska, Tometzki and Sanders (2014), showed that parents of children between the ages of two and ten who were concerned with their child’s emotional and behavioral adjustment were able to help their children make noticeable positive changes after listening to seven short parenting podcasts over the period of two weeks.

All of this demonstrates that, often, parents and children do not need therapy, that there is nothing wrong with them and, that they are not bad parents of bad children. We can see proof of what Adler and Dreikurs knew all along and devoted much of their lives towards communicating; parents simply need education, information and training (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964). With the correct knowledge, parents can create a home where peace and cooperation are the order of the day. In Adler’s Unlimited Universe Bluvshtein, Belangee and Haugen (2015) lay out the case for the usefulness of a virtual, or internet community as a support for one’s physical community; specifically showing its value as a pedagogic bulwark. The authors cite Hung and Yuen (2010) who reported stronger feelings of social connectedness among college students
when social networking sites are used in classes. Also, according to Daspit and D'Souza (2012), technology-enhanced learning environments do not diminish the role of the instructor.

The work of Bluvshtein and colleagues servers as a reservoir of courage for parents who are the real-time on the ground conduit for the creation of community. Parents must meet the uncertain task of raising their children with courage and the virtual world provides access to an unlimited community of knowledge and experience. The internet can be seen as an extension of our common sense, a light in the distance to keep our eyes from the destructive inner world of our private sense and perhaps even greater, and a signal that disrupts the mistaken assumptions of an insular community. It is truly a manifestation of Adler’s unlimited community ideal.

**Conclusion**

The family, whatever form it may take, is the child's foremost community and the first social context in which she will engage the challenges of life. Cooperation, being one of, if not the first of the child's perceived lessons will be her intuitive approach to solving those challenges. Therefore, children should never be categorized as disobedient, obstinate or as possessing mal-intent. Rather, their behavior should be seen as information, clues towards their own interpretation of themselves and their place in the world. Helping the child establish courage and the confidence that she can solve life's challenges in a way that is respectful to herself and others is the task of the parent and the only way to correct the mistakes of belonging that manifest as misbehavior. Encouragement towards cooperation is the lesson that Adler would have families learn.
References


