

## **Evaluating Marital Relationship**

All couples who are raising an attachment disordered child have been wounded by the child and the manipulative and triangulating behaviors. Trust is often compromised, not just of the child, but of the parents of each other. There tends to be little time between crisis management to nurture their own relationship. The home is filled with chaos and anger. Parents stop liking themselves as well as each other.

Watch for non-verbal cues from the moment the family enters the office.

- Where does the child enter in relationship to the parents? First? Last? (The first person through the door is the boss.)
- Does one parent introduce the child before the other spouse?
- Where do they sit, together or apart?
- Do they touch? Does one move away from the other?
- Do they make loving eye contact? Avoid it?
- Do they listen or interrupt each other?
- Do they contradict each other? Do they argue with each other in front of the child?
- Do they raise their voice at each other?
- Are they blaming of each other.
- Which one takes the lead? Does one sit by passively?

One very effective and time efficient tool to begin to understand and address the marital dynamics that lead to affective or ineffective parenting styles is “Couple and Parent Scripting.” It can be done at the beginning of treatment if there is any suspicion that the marital relationship is a troubled one or if one or both of the parents’ history is part of the attachment problem in the family.

## **Couple and Parent Scripting**

An invaluable initial tool to assess the couple relationship and each parent’s view of themselves, their relationship and their parenting

role is one we call “Scripting”. The goal is to help parents find out what “script” it is they are following when they act and react in the ways they do with each other and with their children. Since people behave the way they behave because they think the way they think, examining what parents think and where and how they learned to think that way is an excellent way to begin exploring why they relate to each other and their children the way they do. Understanding how they behave and why is very useful before they can make meaningful changes in their relational and parenting style.

The key is identifying and exploring what “major messages” the parent received from his or her parents as a child and what “major messages” the parents gave each other and their children about their relationship. These messages color the way a person views himself/herself, his/her spouse, and his/her children. The views, in turn, affect the way the individual acts and reacts in different circumstances.

The process is very simple, though lengthy. It could easily take more than one session depending on how long each session lasts. (If the couple relationship is potentially hurtful or uneasy it might be best to sometimes do the exercises regarding their relationship separately initially.)

Each parent is given a legal pad of paper and a pen and asked to follow these instructions:

### **Relationship with Parents Scripting**

At the top of the paper on the left write your father’s name.

On the top right write your mother’s name.

Under each name write 5 or 6 adjectives for each parent.

Draw an arcing arrow from the father’s name to the mother’s.

On the arrow write the major loving (or not, as the case may be) message of why he stayed with his wife:

Examples: I love you and wish you were different.

I love you. I love you but wish you loved me as much as

children. I don't love but stay with you because of the

I don't love you but I need you.

I hate you but I am afraid to leave.

I love you, you make my life complete

Generally the message will have two parts stating the emotion they feel and either an "and" or a "but" in further explanation.

In parentheses, write what you wish the major message had been.

Draw an arcing arrow from the mother's name to the father's.

On it write the major message of why she stayed with your father.

In parentheses, write what you wish the major message had been.

Between the two names and about 6 lines down write your name or a nickname from about the time when you were

12.

Under your name write 5 or 6 six adjectives which described you about that age.

Draw an arrow from your father's to yours and write his major message to you as you were growing up.

Examples: I love you but wish you would try harder

I love you and everything you do is

wonderful.

I don't love you but I am married to your mother.

I love you but love your sister more.

In parentheses, write what you wish the major message had been.

Draw an arrow from your name to your father's and write your major message back to him.

Examples: I love you but wish you were around more.

I don't love you because you are mean to me.

I am afraid of you.

I love you, you are the best father in the

whole world.

In parentheses, write what you wish the major message had been.

Do the same two arrows connecting you and your mother.

Skip a few lines.

Write the title of your favorite childhood story book.

Write the name of a childhood hero.

Draw three tombstones, one for you, your father and your mother.

On each tombstone write their epitaph, the major message about their life.

In parentheses, write what you wish your tombstone would say.

Afterwards watch for similarities and dissimilarities between the messages each received from their parents. Explore gently with each whether they believe their reflections are accurate or are they giving themselves a less problematic childhood than they really had. Look for confirmation from the other spouse as to the accuracy of their memories. Watch for patterns to emerge which shows how one parent compensates for the other, how they might not be supportive of each other's parenting style due to the differences in the major messages they received growing up.

### **Couple and Parental Relationship Scripting**

Write your name today on the left side with 5 or 6 adjectives under it to describe you now.

Write the name of your spouse on the right side with 5 or 6 adjectives under it to describe her right now.

Draw an arrow to your spouse's name and write the major message on it which you give your spouse.

In parentheses, write what you wish the major message to be.

Draw an arrow from your spouse's name to yours and write on it the major message which you receive from your spouse.

In parentheses, write what you wish the major message to be.

Skip a few lines.

Write the name of each of your children in a line across the page with 5 or 6 adjectives to describe each under each name.

Draw arrows to and from each giving the major message which you give each child and major message you receive from each child.

In parentheses, write what you wish the major messages to be.

Discuss the results with them as a couple. This allows each to question the other about the truthfulness of their observations and revelations. What were the actions of their parents which told them these were the messages they gave and received with each other? Ask why and how they gave and received the messages they did with their parents. How did their parents treat/discipline them? How do these messages affect the way they parent today. Watch for the patterns which emerge between the major messages they gave and received as a child and the messages they give and receive now to each other and to their children. Are these healthy messages? Are they the ones they want to be remembered for? Do they need to change? If so, to what?

If they like the messages they are giving their children and the children are not giving them a like message back, what can be done? This question alone could be the basis of therapy for the child and family for many months. If they are able to acknowledge they are not giving the child a healthy and loving message, what can be done about that? What needs to happen? How do they need to behave differently? What beliefs and attitudes drive them to interact with their child and spouse the way they do?

Whether this serves as a foundation for determining the mental, emotional and behavioral health of the parents or another tool is found, it is essential that before any work is done to bond a child into his or her parents the parents are assessed for their capability to reciprocate that bond in a healthy manner.