

The Impossible, Triangulated Child

Family composition: Mother; Father; Tyler, an impossible, hyperactive 11-year-old boy; his 6-year-old brother

Tyler is described as defiant of his teacher, shoves his classmates, hits his younger brother, is emotional, is unmanageable at home, and, just in general, is an annoying child.

After appropriate introductions, Minuchin initiates the session by directing the parents to get Tyler's behavior under control as he is bouncing around the therapy room. The mother gives Tyler a directive for compliance, and the father softens the mother's directive, thereby undermining the mother's authority. Tyler continues to bounce around the office ignoring both parents. The pattern of directive/undermining repeats several times, and there is no change in Tyler's behavior.

Minuchin makes note of the family's repetitive, self-defeating interactions. Minuchin's next maneuver is to join with Tyler, and Minuchin is thereby able to produce a pleasant, compliant child. Minuchin can now reframe Tyler's symptoms as being a response to his situation rather than being internal to Tyler. Minuchin pursues tracking the parental relationship. He has already determined why two intelligent adults are unable to control an 11-year-old imp: because the father disqualifies mother's parental authority. But why do they do that? Minuchin seeks the answer by exploring the marital relationship.

Minuchin to parents: I'm wondering why Spencer responds differently here than at home. What do you do at home? Can you think together

because it is strange that he should listen to somebody he doesn't know but not obey his parents.

Mother to Minuchin: My husband and I frequently disagree. I'm stricter.

Mother to father: You don't back me up.

Father to Minuchin: Yes, I'm the culprit. I sometimes contradict her when she tries to impose discipline. But I work late, and when I come home I want to be with my children, and she wants them to go to bed.

Mother to father: But first you play golf, and then you come home late and want to play with the children.

Father to mother: So, if I have a good time at golf, I shouldn't have time with my children?

Mother to father: But I'm with them all the time, and I need some time alone.

Minuchin to mother: Do you think he exploits you?

Mother to Minuchin: Exploit? No, but he certainly doesn't support me.

Minuchin to father: How can you help your wife to relax?

Mother to Minuchin: I don't need his help!

Father to Minuchin: I can't help her, because she doesn't allow me to be a father. She is always criticizing my parenting.

Minuchin to father: How did she develop the idea that she needs to monitor you when you're with the children?

Father to Minuchin: Probably I goofed up more than once.

Minuchin to father: So you have a contract with your wife that she will overfunction while you goof off?

Father to Minuchin: it's a good contract from me, but it's not a good contract for her or the kids.

Mother to Minuchin: I don't trust him to go to public places. He's forgetful. He doesn't pay attention to the children.

Mother to father: You need to demonstrate that you're responsible!

Minuchin to mother: So you're frequently angry at him.

Minuchin to father: How can you help your tired wife?

Father to Minuchin: I try to discuss things with her. Usually the arguments are small: like, "Do you put jelly or peanut butter on the bread?"

Mother to father: No, the arguments are not small! You are too careless with the kids, and when I try to make you aware, you always walk away. We never resolve anything.

Minuchin to mother: It seems you are always on duty to oversee things in order to prevent disasters.

Mother to Minuchin. My husband is nasty. He tells me I'm stupid, and that I don't understand: that I'm deaf. He says that if I leave him, I'll end up in the street.

Father to Minuchin: She threatens to leave me, and I say that she won't be able to support herself and she'll end up in the street. She's depressed all the time. She doesn't see positives.

Minuchin to father: That's not depression. She may be responding to something you do.

Mother to father: You are not attentive. You're dismissive. You ignore me.

Father to Minuchin: I do a lot of ignoring. The children demand a lot of attention, and a lot of the time it's just easier playing golf.

Minuchin to father: Spencer has issues with respect. He must've learned that from you. When Spencer is disrespectful to his teacher, did he learn that from you?

Father to Minuchin: I suppose we're not like an ideal TV family that solves its problems. We don't. When there are problems, we yell and scream, and when Spencer is in school, he also yells and screams.

Mother to father: He's like you! He never admits he's wrong.

Minuchin to father: So, when you become silent and invisible and withdraw from the family into golf, she becomes a nag to get your attention. You have made her into a nag by withdrawing. But when she nags, you withdraw even further. It seems you have an escalating vicious cycle with each other. And it leaves your wife alone when you play golf. Do you spend any time together as a couple?

Mother to father: We really don't go out alone. I can't remember when we did in the last five years.

Minuchin to couple: When are you two romantic?

Father to Minuchin: *[looking puzzled as if the word is not in his vocabulary]* Romantic? Never!

Minuchin to couple: Candlelight, music, dinner out, the movies...?

Mother to Minuchin: He's usually too tired.

Minuchin to father: *[in a teasing way]*: So, your juices are dry?

Minuchin to mother: Is he an interesting guy? Is he attractive?

Mother to Minuchin: I just want there to be less conflict in the house. I stopped trying to change them. I've given up.

Minuchin to father: So now you go and play golf, and your wife is alone.

Father to Minuchin: We never spend time together.

Minuchin to father: Would you like to marry her?

Father to Minuchin: *[looking puzzled]* Would I like to marry----my wife?

Minuchin to father: Yes. You're not married now.

Minuchin to mother: When did you decide that your husband was unchangeable?

Mother to Minuchin: About six years ago when my youngest was born. It wasn't a conscious decision. I just got wrapped up and the children.

Minuchin to father: When did we decide to give up? I agree. When our youngest was born.

As the session drew to a close, there was an air of poignancy. The couple grew quiet, longing for the love they once had shared. They since they had lost their way. She, because of her preoccupation with the children, had neglected her husband; and he, because of his passivity and avoidance, he had rejected life.

Spencer, the identified patient, was not simply a hyperactive child. He is the product of his parents' conflicts that had spilled over onto him, with his mother being a bit harsh with him, as she viewed him as a stand-in for his father; and his father defending him as a way of undermining the wife who no longer seemed to care for him.

Minuchin points out that the parents must stop deflecting their marital conflict through Spencer and deal with each other directly. Only then can Spencer be freed from the dysfunctional triangle in which he is empowered by his father, who supports him by undermining his wife's parental authority.