

THE DYNAMICS AND SKILLS OF WORKING WITH ESD/SCP FAMILIES:
INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP INTERACTIONS

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The focus of this presentation will be on method - what the coordinator or staff member does in individual and group interactions with family members. Essential skills in communication, relationship, and group leadership will be described and illustrated. A special focus on dealing with difficult parents both individually and in groups will be included.

The structure of the “phases of work” in which the coordinator does preparatory work (tuning in), beginning (contracting) work, middle and ending and transitions will be discussed.

Participants will have an opportunity to share difficult moments in this important work with the “second” client – the student’s family. The presenter will lead the session using presentation, discussion and involving the “mutual aid” potential of this experienced group of coordinators. In addition to specific ideas about helpful interventions the “all-in-the-same-boat” phenomenon will help coordinators see the common nature of their issues across sites. This session will itself be a model of how to lead an effective support group with the presenter attempting to model the skills under the assumption that “more is caught than taught”.

Specific examples presented by the participants may include the following:

- Dealing with overly aggressive family members in individual and/or group contexts.
- Working with families and recognizing inter-cultural issues between the ESD/SVP staff member and parents (e.g., race, gender, socio-economic status). Helping family members deal with similar issues between them and the staff of the school (e.g., principal, teachers).
- Providing an effective structure for one-session meetings (e.g., information meeting designed to obtain parental consent for their children’s program involvement) or ongoing meetings to discuss program and/or problems.
- Engaging parents in volunteer roles.
- Helping family members and children to deal with the impact of traumatic events in the school or in the community.

THE PHASES OF WORK

1. PRELIMINARY PHASE

TUNING IN. An exercise in which the coordinator develops a tentative, preliminary empathy with the family member's feelings and concerns.

RESPONDING DIRECTLY TO INDIRECT COMMUNICATIONS. The skill of articulating a family member's thoughts and feelings in response to indirect communications.

2. BEGINNING PHASE

CLARIFYING PURPOSE. The skill of making a brief, opening statement, without jargon, which helps to clarify the purpose of the conference or group meeting.

CLARIFYING ROLE. The skill of describing in a brief, non-jargonized manner, the kind of help the coordinator can provide.

REACHING FOR FEEDBACK. The skill of encouraging family members to explain their perception of the program and the areas in which they may wish to receive help for themselves or their children.

CLARIFYING MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS. Developing an agreement on what the family members may expect of the coordinator as well as defining the family member's obligations.

DISCUSSING AUTHORITY ISSUES. Dealing with any issues, raised directly or indirectly, which concern the authority of the coordinator.

3. MIDDLE (WORK) PHASE

SESSIONAL TUNING IN. The skill of developing a tentative, preliminary empathy for issues which may emerge at the start of a specific session (e.g., the impact of a traumatic event in a family member's life; issues left over from the previous session; the family member's potential reactions to difficult information the coordinator must share).

SESSIONAL CONTRACTING. A collection of skills designed to determine the issues or concerns facing family members in a particular individual or group session. These may include: remaining tentative at the start of the session while listening for indirect cues.

ELABORATING SKILLS. The skills required for helping family members to tell their story (e.g., listening, containment, questioning, reaching inside of silences).

EMPATHIC SKILLS. The skills which address the emotional content of the family member's experiences (e.g., reaching for feelings; acknowledging feelings; articulating the family member member's feelings).

SHARING COORDINATOR'S FEELINGS. The skill of sharing appropriate coordinator affect. Boundaries need to be respected so that the sharing of affect is professional and responsive to the needs of the family members.

DEMAND FOR WORK. A facilitative confrontation in which the coordinator asks family members to engage in the work agreed upon in the contracting stage. Specific skills can include confronting denial, reaching inside of a silence, directly raising a taboo issue, challenging the "illusion of work", etc.

PROVIDING DATA. The skill of providing relevant, unavailable information which family members need to deal with the task at hand. Data can include facts, values, beliefs, etc. Data should be provided in a manner which leaves it open to challenge.

SESSIONAL ENDINGS AND TRANSITIONS. The skills involved in bringing a session to a close. These skills may include summarizing, evaluating progress and discussion of transition issues (e.g., the family member's next step; how to deal with "door knob" communications).

IDENTIFYING NEXT STEPS. The skills involved in helping family members to identify the next steps they need to follow (e.g., where a family member can get ongoing support).

PUBLICATIONS

1. Shulman, Lawrence. *The Skills of Helping Individuals Families, Groups and Communities*, 7th Edition, Cengage publishers, 2011.
2. Shulman, Lawrence. *Interactional Supervision*, 3rd edition. National Association of Social Family members, Silver Springs, Maryland, 2010. (1-800-227-3590)
3. Shulman, Lawrence. *Supervision*. In, *The Encyclopedia of Social Work*. National Association of Social Family members, Silver Springs, Maryland, 2008.
4. Shulman, Lawrence. *The Dynamics and Skills of Group Counseling*. Cengage Publishers, 2010.