STRUCTURED ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

FOR COUPLES AND FAMILIES

Luciano L'Abate
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Structured Enrichment Programs for Couples and Families

by

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Preface

For too long, most training of professionals working with families takes place within the context of dysfunctionality, crisis intervention, and therapy rather than in the context of *functionality* and problem *prevention.*

Structured enrichment (SE) provides a process by which family members can become more successful marital partners and parents by coming together to learn to increase and improve the frequency and quality of their interactions through novel face-to-face interactions.

Hopefully, this process will lead to the fulfillment of a secondary goal—the opportunity for family members to experience alternative ways of relating to each other. Most families do not spend time with each other. If and when they do, they usually watch TV without interacting, or bicker, or go their separate ways. There are few occasions when families get together constructively. When they do, they are likely to be involved in some activity, such as the evening meal or going to a ball game, so there is little chance to talk and to interact with each other at a creative level.

If, indeed, social support moderates stress, then the family should be or become the very support system that is available when its members are hurting or are in trouble. Consequently, another secondary goal of SE is to help family members develop a greater awareness of themselves and of each other.

This volume is the culmination of 18 years of work with students in a graduate course on structured enrichment (SE) and with mostly functional couples and families who were recruited from among the students themselves. Many of these families were also drawn from the under-

graduate school population, so that the student would receive experimental credit in a beginning psychology class when his or her family participated in an "experiment." Thus, graduate students would receive experience and credit for this work with families and undergraduate students would also receive credit while their families, or families of friends and neighbors who volunteered, would be enriched.

Graduate students would also receive credit for writing an enrichment program as part of the coursework. As a result, over the 16 years in which a class on family enrichment has been taught, these students, with the help of the first author, wrote approximately 70 SE programs.

Fifty programs were selected to be presented in this volume. They include Programs for the Family Life Cycle (premarital and marital programs, man-woman relationships, parenting, later stages of the family life cycle), General Purpose Programs (Introductory and intermediate programs, affective and cognitive programs, relational skill building), and Programs for Different Kinds of Families (non-traditional, dysfunctional).

The basic unit of SE is the exercise. A group of 3 to 10 exercises linked together by a common denominator of subtopic or content forms a lesson. A series of lessons around a major topic forms a program. During the creation of these programs, five distinct guidelines were followed (L'Abate, 1985): (a) ease of delivery, that is, individuals with personal rather than professional qualifications can administer these programs under supervision of a more experienced professional; (b) realistic relevance to family matters; (c) efficiency and cost-effectiveness by making it easy to train paraprofessional personnel in a relatively short time; (d) ethical and professional considerations concerning the manner of delivery, quality control, and content of each exercise; and finally (e) prescriptive specificity qualified by flexibility and versatility, that is, each program is selected to meet as much as possible the objectives stated by each family within the context of the enricher's judgment.

It should be noted that the delivery of each program is flexible. If a program does not seem to fit the family, it can be changed. If a lesson seems irrelevant to a family, it can be skipped. If a family seems to need specific types of exercises, these can be found in this volume and administered.

As a result, SE fulfills a variety of functions: (a) *diagnostic-evaluative* ("If you want to find out how a family works, try to change it through SE"); (b) *preventive-paratherapeutic,* through a psychoeducational rather than a therapeutic approach; (c) *didactic-propaedeutic,* in teaching not only families but also students how to work with families; and finally (d) *important considerations of research* (L'Abate, 1985) which are paramount when a new approach is being used.

As far as the didactic therapeutic function is concerned, the reader should bear in mind that, traditionally and institutionally, training in family therapy and family life education has been based on book learning,

"follow-the-guru," one-way mirrors, "bug-in-the-ear," "telephone-in-the-therapy-room," "sink-or-swim," "worship-at-the-feet-of-the-master," workshops, videotapes of either masters or beginners, and other gimmicky, chancy, and nonreplicable approaches. Structured enrichment, instead, owes its beginnings to the need to make relevant the training of potential family therapists and workers, starting with functional, "normal," and cooperative families, thus giving the trainee a feeling for normative qualities that are usually found in these families. Training in SE can be instantaneous, provided the trainee can read the manual in a nonmechanical and natural fashion. SE trainees need to possess personal rather than professional qualifications that would encourage and attract families to stay and finish a program.

This book is organized to facilitate learning how to implement SE in as quick and responsible a fashion as possible. *Verbatim* instructions for direct delivery of each exercise are given. Consequently, experience and learning can be gradual and not anxiety-provoking, in contrast to other methods of training in family therapy.

To facilitate the application of these programs, the reader should note that, in addition to an author index, there are three different subject indices: a program index, a lesson index, and an exercise index. These are the three different units of SE, going from the general to the specific. Within the use of a particular program, one may want to add or substitute a specific lesson that is not contained in the original program. By the same token, within a lesson, one may want to add a specific exercise or set of exercises that may help a family better at that particular time. To help enrichers achieve these goals expeditiously, an Appendix is also included. This contains an *experimental* Family Profile Form. Completion of this form by family members will allow the enricher to identify from nine specific areas where there is conflict or disagreement in each family. For instance, if touching turns out to be the area of major disagreement among family members, the enrichers can call upon all of the exercises that involve touching in the Exercise Index. In this fashion, it will be possible to link, much more specifically than heretofore, evaluation with psychoeducational intervention.

As far as the SE programs are concerned, the organization of this book follows three major guidelines: (a) a developmental progression of programs along the family life cycle; (b) a complexity and sophistication dimension going from easy introductory to more difficult advanced programs; and (c) a specificity dimension, going from the most general for most families, to the most specific programs for special families. Of course, trainees should start enriching with the simplest programs and working with the most cooperative families. It is helpful if training takes place in groups or classes so that trainees learn to work with co-enrichers in pairs, with an additional support group to debrief and discuss inevitable issues that will come up in the course of SE. Some of these issues are

considered in the introductory chapters. However, they are no substitutes for direct confrontation of problems that will arise in enriching families.

It is unfortunate that the field of preventive, psychoeducational approaches which is the focus of this volume is not even considered a part of family therapy. Consequently, there are two separate and independent forms of training. Family therapy training takes place according to nonreplicable approaches referred to previously, while training in family life education and prevention is usually limited to training individuals who are not interested in family therapy. While SE is especially appropriate for individuals who want to work with families who may not be clinical but who may be at risk for future dysfunctionality, it is to be hoped that it can and will be used as a training approach for both fields. After all, well-functioning families are the common goal of all those involved with educating and treating families.

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Background and Rationale

CHAPTER ONE

Problem Prevention and Training for Family Life

The purpose of this introduction is to stress the need for broad, preventive approaches to family problems and the training of new professionals who will be able to institute these preventive approaches rather than therapeutic approaches.

We license plumbers, cab drivers, cosmetologists, and all sorts of servicemen, including, in some states, auto mechanics. We offer training and grant degrees in hundreds, perhaps thousands, of specialties. Yet, the most responsible jobs on earth require no training and no license. We accept the fact that we can match, marry, and dispatch without any standards or criteria by which to check our qualifications to become partners and parents. To be a partner and a parent in this day and age takes more than an able body. It takes preparation, responsibility, and commitment. It takes skills and attitudes that go beyond social class and intellectual level. People often need help to become responsive partners and effective parents (Hoopes, Fisher & Barlow, 1984; Kahn & Kamerman, 1982; L'Abate, 1983a).

In view of the increasing rates of divorce, illegitimacy, abuse, and murder and the mayhem that occurs in family life, we need to question the freedom we have allowed ourselves. What can we do to improve the quality of family life? We can do a lot. We have developed a technology for improving family life, but we need (a) delivery systems, (b) referral systems, and (c) incentive systems.

What incentives will make couples and families want to be trained so that they will be better equipped to handle the stresses and strains of family life? Where is this training to take place? Who will train the