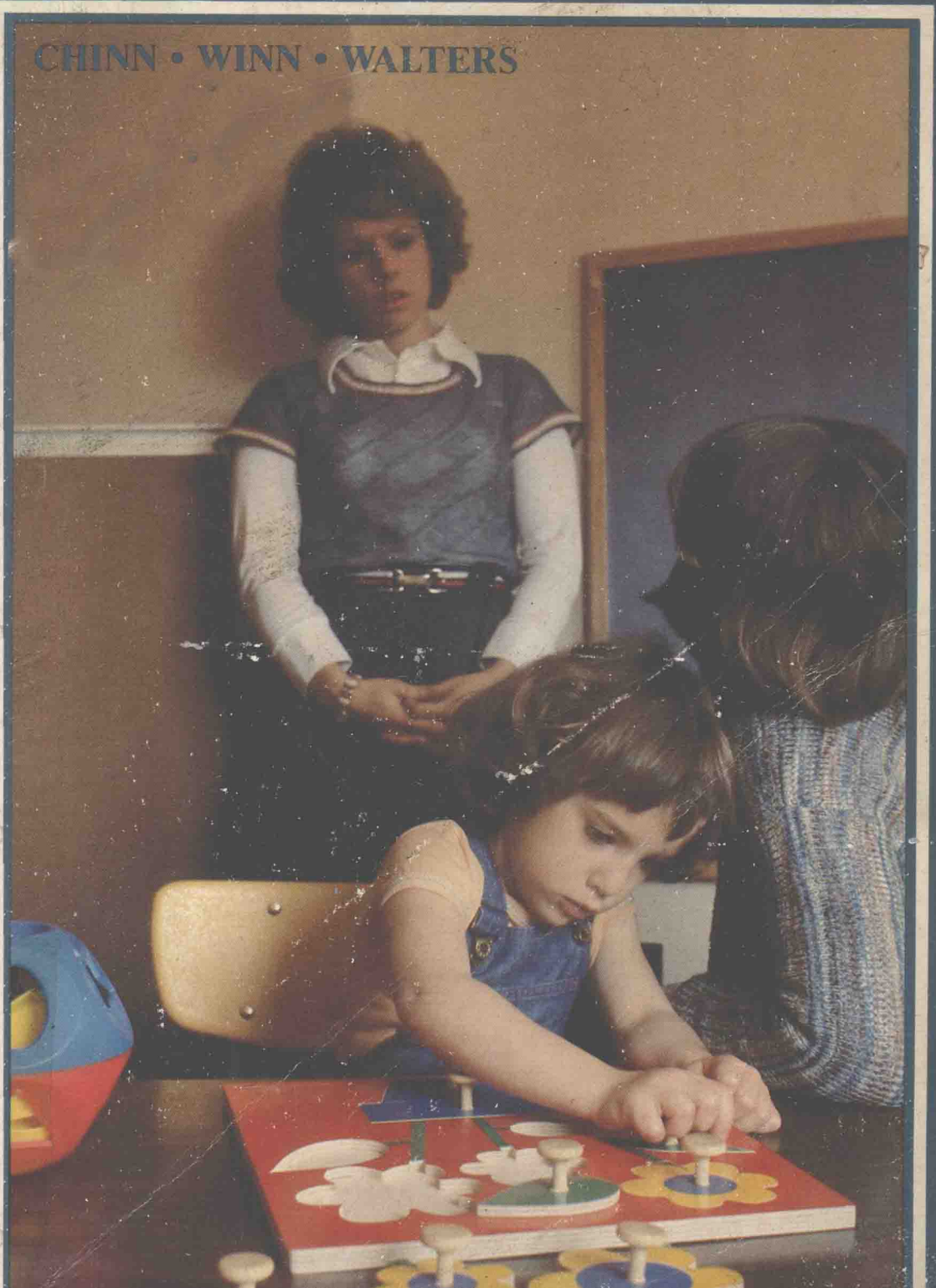
TWO-WAY TALKING WITH PARENTS OF SPECIAL CHILDREN

A PROCESS OF POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

CHINN • WINN • WALTERS



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A PROCESS OF POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

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FOREWORD

The birth of a child is a dramatic event that usually embodies the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of the parents. It is an event that activates a series of required experiences if the child is to attain meaningful adulthood. The experiences are not isolated; they are dynamically interrelated into a progressively evolving life cycle.

One of the indispensable ingredients for successful experience engagement is the development of a communication system. It is a complex phenomenon—one that requires understanding and practice, a system all people need to continually strengthen. Lives can become more enriched and meaningful when communication is open, forthright, and congruent. This is not an easy task, but it does hold the potential for "unlocking the doors of development" in life's quest.

The birth of a "special child" or "child with a handicap" frequently presents an immediate threat to the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of parents. Suddenly they are confronted with seeking a new constellation of societal systems that will facilitate the growth and development of their offspring. The systems usually available may not prove useful, or may preclude service, because of the child's unique needs. High-risk factors are involved in this quest, and unless careful planning occurs, the process can lead to further pain and sorrow for both parent and child. Now, more than ever, communication becomes a critical component in the various potential growth experiences.

This book deals with how to develop more effective communication patterns in the socialization process of a "special child." Particular focus is given to communication in the triad of relationships existing among family, child, and school, and how it can be used more effectively to facilitate those interactions.

It was my privilege to share a portion of my career with two of the authors. During this time we had many opportunities to learn and practice the skills of more effective communication. Our successes served to strengthen the bonds of productive human relationships. Our failures made us painfully aware of how fragile and potentially damaging the system can also be. However, out of these shared experiences came a renewed trust and faith in each other, a new awareness of how

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strengthened communication can lead to accomplishment of even more significant tasks and goals. We did learn and are continuing to learn techniques for sending our own messages and for listening to what others say and do not say.

The authors have achieved a rich and balanced blend of theoretical and practical hints for implementation as it relates to the communication process involved with the "child with a handicap." The text contains vivid illustrative material to aid the reader in more fully understanding this mysterious and yet highly visible process. The book is a valuable resource for all people concerned with improving the quality of life.

Robert L. Erdman
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PREFACE

Communicating is what this book is about. The family can be considered as the training place where the child learns what relating to other people means and where he decides what is rewarding and what is not in such interactions. His personality is formed in this special training place. Family relationships provide the model for relationships with the world around him and the people in it, where the child forms his attitudes, based to a degree on the parents' attitudes toward him and how these attitudes are communicated.

All parents play this crucial role whether the child is normal or handicapped. The development of personality, attitudes, and communication processes is accomplished in every family, but in the family with a special child some of the conditions differ. Parents of special children must adapt their expectations and attitudes to the exceptionality of their child. They must learn to deal with conditions and cope with situations that parents of other children never encounter. This often places a strain upon the fabric of the family itself.

Every professional person who interacts with parents in relation to their special child has a responsibility to assist them in their frequently difficult task of helping their child. This requires understanding, professional skills, and, possibly most important, the ability to communicate in ways that are enhancing to all of the persons involved—the professional, the parents, and the child. It is our intention to describe and illustrate in many ways, including the illustration of our own communication, a process system that considers with care the persons involved and also accomplishes the goal of clear transmission of messages. This text includes information about "communication" and also about the dynamics of family systems, including families with a special child as a member. We will use the terms "special child" and "child with a handicap" interchangeably in keeping with our view of seeing the person first as a child and second as a child with a handicap. Certainly, they are "special" children. The communication process is presented within this philosophy also—first, as communication between persons, and second, illustrating communication with parents of special children and between professionals who are concerned with the child with a handicap.

The text is divided into three sections. Section I deals with the family as a system, the family of the special child, basic principles of communication and semantics, and other background factors that affect the communication process. Section II deals with the Two-Way Talking process. Finally, Section III puts the communication process into action.

The audience to whom the book is directed includes: (1) professional workers who are dealing with parents and families of children with handicaps; (2) persons in preparation programs in special education and related fields such as counseling, social work, guidance, nursing, and general education; (3) parents and families who want to improve their intrafamilial communication processes as well as enhance their positive interactions with the persons in the various professional fields relating to their child; and (4) persons who care.

The use of the pronoun "he" throughout the book needs to be clarified. All three authors are aware of the effect of male-oriented structures upon our thinking and behavior. We agreed, after discussion, that the practice of either "he or she" or of alternating between masculine and feminine pronouns interrupted the flow of our written communication. Therefore our decision was to use the masculine pronoun whenever the referent was a person whose sex was not specific—to the human being. Examples and illustrations include female persons and male persons. You will see throughout our honoring of all persons with all of their attributes, including femininity and masculinity.

In a different framework of "referents," persons who are referred to in case illustrations and dialogues are "real," but fictitious names have been used, honoring confidentiality.

There are some persons whose real names we very much want to mention, acknowledging their contributions to the development of this book.

We want to express appreciation to the authors whose work was influential in the formation of the process that we call Two-Way Talking. Particular appreciation is expressed to those who graciously granted permission to quote from their publications.

While we accept that we and our productions are the products of all the experience of our lives beginning with those within our own families, there are some persons, in addition to our very special parents, who stand out as being influential in our growing within this specific area. Norma Randolph contributed uniquely by serving as the catalyst for two of us to begin "self-enhancing" communication, initiating action that sent us to the sources for development of a process that has grown and evolved ever since. Within this same context, appreciation is expressed to Judy Buffmire who brought together the first groups in the Special Education Department of the University of Utah.

Robert L. Erdman, now Dean of the Graduate School of Education, University of Utah, provided a climate for positive communication and a model for professional growth for two of the authors and Robert C. Berg and Harvey Riche of North Texas State University for the third author. All three of us gratefully acknowledge the contributions of our students and clients whose feedback helped to shape the Two-Way Talking process—and us as well.

We would like to thank David E. Raske of California State University, Sacramento, for his helpful review of the manuscript for this text. We thank Gregg Farr and Kay Westbrook who assisted in the development of the Instructor's Manual and Appendix. Carol Dovidio, Irene Behning, and June Roybal deserve special thanks not only for their skilled secretarial services but for their personal devotion.

Finally, there are eleven persons of varying ages who have contributed most of all to the process and whom we love unconditionally. We dedicate this effort to them, our children: Kelleth, Jonathan, and Kristin Chinn; Michael, Edna, and John Stavros; Elaine, Robert, Robin, Tony, and Kathy Walters.

Philip C. Chinn
Joyce Winn
Robert H. Walters

TWO-WAY TALKING WITH PARENTS OF SPECIAL CHILDREN

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Section I

BACKGROUND FACTORS

This section of the book is devoted to consideration of some of the background factors affecting the communication process to be presented in Section II. If the communication process is to be effective, the user of the process needs to be aware of these background factors and to set the stage for communication in terms of them.

In Chapter 1, we will consider the family as an interactive system of relationships involving all members. A systems approach to understanding families and factors involved in the development of family systems will be presented.

Chapter 2 will extend family concepts to a consideration of special characteristics of families with special children. Important aspects of communications processes in general will be examined and related to the Two-Way Talking process in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, we will explore some of the ways in which meanings are conveyed in communication.

Section I is designed to set the stage for Section II. Awareness of the material in the first four chapters should prepare the special education teacher, counselor, or professional person to plan and initiate effective communication using Two-Way Talking.

1

THE FAMILY AS A SYSTEM

In this chapter we will consider the family as a system: the social context in which it functions and for what purposes it functions; how a family comes to be and what is involved; what happens when the family adds a new member with the birth of a child. We will briefly explain what we mean by "system" and how the systems approach applies to the family. We will look at some of the factors and processes that go into making a family, and finally, we will develop a model of family style as "open" or "closed."

The family is like a miniature society. It develops its own set of norms, values, and expectations for its members. It develops rules and procedures to regulate the behavior of its members in terms of those standards and to maintain the system itself. The basis for family style seems to be the family backgrounds and self-concepts of the founders of the family system and the accommodative relationship they develop. As they establish the marital relationship, make decisions about who is to do what, how and when, and work out together the patterns of interaction and communication, a basic orientation evolves. An "open" orientation is one in which growth of individual members, as well as growth of the system, is a major family goal. Differences and differentness among family members are accepted as normal and are used to enhance the system. Families with a "closed" orientation or style scene, in contrast, tend to be primarily devoted to maintaining the system's status quo. One result is that differences and differentness among family members are suppressed—they pose a threat to the status quo.

Entry of a new member—the birth of a child—into the family is an event that has considerable social, economic, and emotional impact on the existing system. How the family system adapts to the event and the new member permanently affects its subsequent operation as a unit—its family style. Even if the infant is a normal, healthy child, the adjustments required are significant. As we shall discuss in Chapter 2, the birth of a child with a handicap can have a devastating impact. The family adapts and incorporates its new member, and a relatively consistent pattern of functioning reemerges as the new family style. Outlines of the family's previous style can usually be seen in its new pattern. When other children are added, the style seems to change less with each new member. We come to see a consistent and persistent method of operation.

THE SYSTEMS APPROACH

The consistent and persistent patterns, which we perceive as a family's method of operation or style, lead us to regard the

family as a system. What we mean by the term "system" is similar to the dictionary definition: "a set or arrangement of things so related or connected as to form a unity or organic whole, which whole or unity is so organized as to preserve its integrity and to perpetuate itself." In our view, the persons in a family are so related and connected as to form a unit—an organic whole that is greater than the sum of its component parts.

The systems approach is a way of looking at the patterns of relationship and interaction among components so as to better understand the functions of the total unit. Using this approach, we not only want to observe the characteristics and actions of each component, we also want to focus attention on how each component acts *in relation* to other components in the system. We are most concerned with the *relationships* and *interactions* in the unit, so its function as a whole can be better understood. Applied to families, this means that we not only want to observe the characteristics and behavior of each family member, but also we want to focus attention on how family members relate to and interact with each other as a family.

Characteristics of systems

Almost any functional unit, from the universe to the atom, may be regarded as a system. There are common features of such units that have led to the development of the systems approach. These common features have become outlines for study of a system as well as definitive characteristics of systems.

All systems are purposive. The functions of any system appear related to achievement of certain objectives or goals. The *ultimate* purposes or goals of a system may be obscure or shrouded in mystery. More immediate goals are often obvious. Whether the system is vast as the universe, miniscule as an atom, or in between—like a family—purposiveness and order are apparent in its functions as a unit. Thus goal orientation or purposiveness is a characteristic common to all systems.

All systems have structure. The structure of a system is the pattern of interdependent relationships among components and the roles of each of the components as they interact. The structure of an atom, for example, is defined by the relationships among electrons, protons, and neutrons interacting in a specific space-time location. A family is structured by the interdependent roles and relationships among interacting family members.

All systems have rules. The dictionary defines rule as "a prescribed guide for conduct, action or usage." A synonym for "rule" is "law." A regular, repetitive pattern of action or interaction may be observed in a system. Over time, an observer may witness the same pattern on many occasions and infer that a rule exists. The abstract description of the pattern can be phrased in cause-effect terms: "If A happens, B always follows." This is the rule said to be "governing" the observed pattern. These are *descriptive* rules. In social systems there are *prescriptive* rules in operation as well. "Thou shalt not steal" is a prescriptive rule as is "All children in the State between the ages of six years and sixteen years shall be required to attend an approved educational institution for one hundred eighty (180) days each year." Prescriptive rules are designed to guide components of a system toward a desired outcome, while descriptive rules are abstract formulations by observers designed to account for regularities observed in the system. Thus the rules "governing" the universe are formulated by astronomers and physicists to account for their observations. Rules governing society are laws and regulations formulated to produce a certain kind of social order. In a family the rules may be descriptive and prescriptive. Riskin (1963) suggests that the family may be totally unaware of its own rules, even though the rules seem obvious to an observer.

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