

HOW SCHOOLS CAN GET CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF FAMILY TENSION

Families have an amazing ability to utilize strengths and maintain stability. When tension develops, families find ways to decrease it. Some families decrease their tension with the help of other systems. Schools can unknowingly get caught in the middle of the tension, even take on the tension for the family. This can create problems for both school and family. Examples include:

1. Parents who are so emotionally connected to their child that they believe schools are accusing them of being bad parents when their child acts out. Parents then often stand up for him or her against the school. In the process, the child is not held accountable for his or her own actions and the school takes on much of the tension. The focus then shifts away from difficult family issues.
2. Some families have pain and hurt so deep that they avoid it by focusing all their energy on their child and the school. Often, fighting is easier than facing pain. Again, family issues are avoided.
3. Sometimes, families struggle to show love to their children. One way they do show love is to “rescue” the child or show love through toughness instead of softness. For those who fear sharing their “soft side” with others, showing love by standing up for their child against someone is safer. The school often fits in perfectly.
4. Symptoms a child exhibits at school can sometimes bring a family together. The family rallies around the child, and other tensions decrease. Parents who may otherwise be distant or even angry with one another come together to address the problems of a “sick” child.

HOW SCHOOLS AND THERAPISTS CAN WORK TOGETHER (AND WHY WE NEED TO)

- Therapists are in a position to get to know parents and families on a deeper level. We have time to understand the bigger picture and help school personnel recognize if or how they are caught.
- Therapists are able to mediate between the family and school if necessary. We can be the “good guy” and help the family understand the symptoms and how they may be setting up the school.
- Schools provide invaluable information for therapists as we seek to understand the relationships and symptoms within different contexts.
- Unless systems work together and understand each other’s roles and responsibilities, the child can be caught in the middle, and symptoms continue.