ABSTRACT: An existential approach to family psychotherapy should be cognizant of both individual human development and family life cycle growth. In Existential Family Therapy a family developmental challenge often occurs when the developmental progression needs of one family member challenge the pace of total family developmental progression. In such a situation intervention by the therapist should occur in a way that facilitates both individual and family developmental growth. Such interventions often best occur through the creative and controlled use of the family therapist's countertransference feelings in a way that helps the family accept and master its developmental challenges. Case material is provided to illustrate the described intervention approach.

A developmental approach to existential family therapy should recognize both the process of individual human development as well as the reciprocal and interlocking systems aspect of such growth in the family group as a whole (Andrews, 1974; Lantz, 1978). Such a framework should enhance the therapist's ability to integrate data from observation of the individual and the family unit of attention and should also help in finding a useful method to intervene effectively in the "presenting" problem of the family group. One useful way to organize such data is through the framework of the family life cycle.
Barnhill and Longo (1978) present six major family life cycle stages. Each stage includes old family methods of experiencing and creating a sense of meaning and purpose in life which often need to be replaced by new methods of experiencing and creating meaning. The Barnhill and Longo (1978) stages are: the unmarried young adult stage, the young married couple stage, the young child stage, the adolescent stage, the launching of children stage and the later adult stage. These six stages of family evolution suggest and outline natural periods of developmental challenge in which both the individual and the family unit must find new ways of discovering and experiencing a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Barnhill & Longo, 1978; Lantz, 1993).

A family life cycle model offers both framework for health individual growth and by implication, a framework for understanding the manifestations of individual growth that need to be accepted and encouraged by the family system as a whole. In recognizing that these six family life cycle stages include both individual, existential growth tasks and interlocking family system acceptance or encouragement tasks, it becomes possible to develop a more specific understanding of a family's existential and developmental problems (Lantz, 1974).

Marital and family therapists have consistently suggested that marital mate selection often includes a covert agreement between partners that they will not challenge the developmental pace, progression, or fixation of their spouse (Andrews, 1974; Lantz, 1978; Satir, 1967). In spite of this initial unconscious marital agreement, such an emotional contract can not easily be maintained throughout the family life cycle as it is in basic conflict with the natural developmental push of the living family system (Andrews, 1974; Lantz, 1978). During family life cycle transition periods, natural developmental processes often force a family subsystem to grow at a developmental pace which challenges the unconscious, covert, original family developmental agreement. The family system will then develop an existential, developmental problem (Lantz, 1978).

A common existential and developmental problem occurs when a child or adolescent begins to move beyond the developmental progression of her or his parents and creates a situation which forces the parents to speed up their own developmental progression. At times this developmental challenge will trigger the parental reaction of viewing the child or adolescent as "toxic." In this situation the parents will frequently give the developing child or adolescent the role of